We Perished Each Alone: "The Castaway" and To the Light-house*

IN HER DIARY for 14 May 1925, Virginia Woolf first referred to her plans for To the Lighthouse: "This is going to be fairly short; to have father's character done complete in it; & mother's; & St. Ives; & childhood . . . . But the centre is father's character, sitting in a boat, reciting We perished, each alone, while he crushes a dying mackerel."¹ As the novel progressed, developing into a "far wider, slower book,"² these initial plans were altered. Woolf recognized that while the image of the dying mackerel might incarnate her own anger, it was an inappropriate symbol for her father, who hated to see fish killed.³ Thus all images of piscatorial mayhem were transferred to Macalister's son, who uses the mackerel for bait. More important, Woolf's mother moves to the center of the novel, and critics have generally agreed that if anyone's character is "done complete" in To the Lighthouse it is Julia's and not Leslie Stephen's. What remains of Woolf's conception, however, is the allusion to Cowper's "The Castaway" and the image of her father "sitting in a boat, reciting We perished, each alone." Yet, as important as "The Castaway" was for Woolf, no one has yet considered in any detail the reasons, either aesthetic or biographical, why she should have looked to Cowper to provide the central poetic leitmotif of the entire novel.

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² Diary, III, p. 37.
The answer, I suggest, is inextricably linked with Woolf's early reading of Cowper (guided by her father), as well as with her understanding of her father's character, which in To the Lighthouse assumes a strangely Cowperian cast. There can be little question that Woolf's portrayal of Leslie Stephen reveals deeply conflicted, even hostile, attitudes towards her father and that her far more sympathetic portraits of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe pay eloquent homage to her mother, as well as to Woolf's own Paterian commitment to the life of art. Yet despite the consensus that Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe articulate Woolf's central concerns in To the Lighthouse, such interpretations overlook the vestiges of the original plan that Woolf had laid out for the novel, locating Mr. Ramsay at the center of the work. It is worth reconsidering whether Mr. Ramsay does not occupy a location far closer to the heart of the novel than has usually been assumed and whether one cannot detect strong traces of Woolf's residual, albeit reluctant, sympathy with her father's plight. It may also be useful to inquire whether the nearly ubiquitous presence of Cowperian images of isolation and inundation do not color the narrative far more darkly than has previously been supposed, and whether they do not call into question the adequacy of those epiphanic "daily miracles" which presumably provide comprehensibility to an otherwise transitory existence and lend form to the narrative itself.

Woolf is the most poetic of novelists, and it has become a critical commonplace that the development of her narratives depends more heavily upon carefully woven patterns of metaphor, symbol, and imagery than upon the more conventional devices of characterization and plot. Cowper's lines form part of this pattern, as Woolf so clearly points out: "like the bass gently accompanying a tune," the symbolic burden provided by Cowper's poem "now and then [runs] up unexpectedly into the melody." And yet unlike many of those references (to Shakespeare, Tennyson, Scott, the Brothers Grimm, or De Quincey) which provide allusive "resonance" in this particularly "bookish" novel, but which are often rather casually introduced, Woolf draws our attention to the symbolic centrality of her quotation from Cowper.

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5 Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse (Harcourt Brace and World, 1927), p. 87. All further references to this edition are listed parenthetically in the text.
When we first re-encounter Mr. Ramsay after his wife’s death, he is so preoccupied with his ruminations on “The Castaway” that he ignores Lily’s greeting. “And he shook his head at her, and strode on (‘Alone’ she heard him say, ‘Perished’ she heard him say) and like everything else this strange morning the words became symbols, wrote themselves all over the grey-green walls” (219).

But why “The Castaway?” We may wonder why Woolf should have placed such emphasis on a minor poem, highly regarded by students of eighteenth-century literature, but less familiar to her beloved common reader than “The Charge of the Light Brigade” or even The Antiquary; and why this particular poem should have come to mind when Woolf first conceived the shape of To the Lighthouse. Since To the Lighthouse is in some ways Woolf’s most personal fictional statement, the answer, I would suggest, is at least partially autobiographical. As Quentin Bell points out, Cowper was one of the authors that Woolf read late at night during the summer of 1897, a time when the pain of her mother’s death, still so sharp and immediate, was to be intensified by the death of Virginia’s sister Stella.6 It is perhaps only natural, then, that when it came time to recollect and memorialize her mother in To the Lighthouse, Woolf should have thought of Cowper as the poet with the closest ties to her own personal tragedy and of “The Castaway” as a poem with intimate links to recollections of her mother.

It is Leslie, not Julia Stephen, who is most closely associated with William Cowper, however. Woolf remarks that “many of the great English poems seem to me inseparable from my father; I hear in them not only his voice, but in some sort his teaching and belief.”7 Here, perhaps, is a stronger clue to Woolf’s preoccupation with Cowper’s works. For they are inseparable from her early memories of her own education under the guidance of her father, the nineteenth century’s greatest eighteenth-century critic, one who nourished her with large portions of eighteenth-century history, biography and literature from his own library shelves. There can be little doubt that Leslie Stephen introduced his daughter at an early age to the works of Cowper, or that a shared interest in this rather odd poet formed a strong link between

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them.8 In a letter to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf remarks, “I am sometimes pleased to think that I read English literature when I was young; I like to think of myself as tapping at my father’s study door, saying very loud and clear ‘Can I have another volume, father? I’ve finished this one.’ Then he would be very pleased and say ‘gracious child, how you gobble’ . . . and get up and take it down it may have been the 6th or 7th volume of Gibbon’s complete works, or Spedding’s Bacon, or Cowper’s Letters.”9 One finds a far more important reference to Cowper in Woolf’s *Diary*, for 18 May 1897: “I have now got Carlyle’s French Revolution—the 5th volume of Macaulay being restored to its place. In this way I shall become surfeited with history. Already I am an expert upon William Cowper.”10

Woolf’s early reading apparently focused on Cowper’s shorter poems and on his correspondence. Cowper’s letters, second only to those of Horace Walpole as the epistolary masterpiece of the later eighteenth century, exerted a strong influence on Woolf’s imagination. She pays tribute to her reading in *Jacob’s Room* (1922), in which Jacob compares his own weak epistolary efforts with Cowper’s accomplishments. But in *The Voyage Out* (1915), Woolf reveals a more ambiguous and perhaps more personal response to Cowper. Like Woolf herself, Rachel Vinrace has been assigned Cowper’s letters by her father, and at first she finds them boring. But then, as she sits drowsing in her stateroom, Rachel discovers that Cowper’s letters have seeped into her consciousness: “Inextricably mixed in dreamy confusion, her mind seemed to enter into communion, to be delightfully expanded and combined with the spirit of the sea, with the spirit of Beethoven, Op. 112, even with the spirit of poor William Cowper there at Olney.”11

To those familiar with his bizarre and tragic story, Woolf’s allusion to the “spirit of poor William Cowper” evokes recollections of his melancholy and despair, feelings characteristic of Rachel as she lies “curled up at the bottom of the sea,” waiting for death. This image

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9 *Letters*, IV, p. 27.


cluster, including allusions to Cowper and invocations of drowning and despair, emerges fully developed in To the Lighthouse.\textsuperscript{12} Indeed, Cowper seems to have been very much on Woolf’s mind as she worked on the novel. Woolf reveals that in 1927 she was reading Cowper’s most famous poem, The Task, while correcting proofs of To the Lighthouse.\textsuperscript{13} And it was in 1927 as well that Woolf published her essay on “Cowper and Lady Austen,” which reveals her deep sympathy with Cowper’s strange and pathetic tale. “One night in February 1773,” writes Woolf, “the enemy rose; it smote once and for ever. An awful voice called out to Cowper in a dream. It proclaimed that he was damned, that he was outcast, and he fell prostrate before it . . . . Nobody . . . understood the terrific import of the dream. Nobody realized why he was unique; why he was singled out from all mankind and stood alone in his damnation.”\textsuperscript{14} Modern readers have dismissed Cowper’s belief in his own damnation as the fruit of evangelical excess. But there is no such dismissal in “Cowper and Lady Austen,” in which Woolf’s judicious quotations from his letters reveal the depth of her empathy for Cowper’s condition. Thus, “No man upon earth is more sensible of the unprofitableness of a life like mine or groans more heavily under the burthen; but this too is vanity, because it is in vain; my groans will not bring the remedy, because there is no remedy for me.”\textsuperscript{15} As a reader, Woolf is particularly sensitive to the idiosyncratic failure and gratuitous isolation of Cowper’s unique dilemma, and it is not surprising that with Cowper in mind she turned to “The Castaway” (1799), a poem which effectively serves as Cowper’s spiritual will and testament.

“The Castaway” tells the true story of a young seaman washed overboard and drowned on one of Anson’s mid-eighteenth-century voyages of exploration.

Obscurest night involv’d the sky,
The Atlantic billows roared,
When such a destin’d wretch as I,
Wash’d headlong from on board,
Of friends, of hope, of all bereft,
His floating home for ever left.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{12} The Voyage Out, p. 341.
\textsuperscript{13} See Letters, III, p. 333.
Like Cowper’s own friends and acquaintances, who did all they could to reassure him of God’s love and their own, the young sailor’s mates throw out “the cask, the coop, the floated cord” in an effort to save him. But the ship is driven with such velocity that all effectual aid is prevented. With clear but tragic perception, the sailor realizes that if the ship returns to rescue him, all on board must die:

Nor, cruel as it seem’d, could he
Their haste himself condemn,
Aware that flight, in such a sea,
Alone could rescue them.

It is the great irony of Cowper’s life that this fervent evangelical, who preached God’s mercy to all mankind, should have excluded himself from the Divine equation. In unmistakably autobiographical terms Cowper speaks of his despair born of the belief that in his own peculiar case, God had forever cut him off from Divine mercy.

No voice divine the storm allay’d,
No light propitious shone;
When snatch’d from all effectual aid,
We perish’d each alone:
But I beneath a rougher sea,
And whelm’d in deeper gulphs than he.

Indeed so powerful is Cowper’s story, symbolically embedded in “The Castaway,” that in a variety of significant ways it serves as a literary precursor to Woolf’s portrait of Mr. Ramsay, a soul who seems similarly tortured by his own fears of failure and isolation. The association of Ramsay, his real-life model Leslie Stephen, and William Cowper came easily, since Stephen, like his daughter, was deeply drawn to Cowper’s history. Stephen’s fascination with this peculiar poet is revealed even in *The Dictionary of National Biography*. While Stephen often dispenses with dukes, generals, and other notables in a column or two, his entry on Cowper runs to several pages. Moreover, in his essay on “Cowper and Rousseau,” published in *The Cornhill Magazine* (1875), Stephen treats the question of Cowper’s madness with surprising tact (given Stephen’s militant agnosticism), denying that religion could be blamed for Cowper’s mania. “It would be truer to say,” Stephen argues, “that when Cowper’s intellect was once unhinged, he found a congenial

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expression for the tortures of his soul in the imagery provided by the sternest of Christian sects.” 17 Stephen may even have had a kind of intuitive understanding of Cowper’s religious difficulties, since he himself was the son of Claphamite evangelicals, a religious group with close links to Cowper’s own religious circle.18 In any case, Stephen betrays deep sympathy for Cowper’s plight and great sensitivity to his poetic language. “A religious belief which does not provide language for the darkest moods of the human mind,” Stephen writes, “for profound melancholy, torturing remorse and gloomy foreboding, is a religion not calculated to lay a powerful grasp upon the imagination of mankind.”19

Profound melancholy, torturing remorse, and gloomy foreboding were emotions Stephen knew only too well, an unhappiness emphasized in Woolf’s portrait of Mr. Ramsay. Indeed it is not the joking, affectionate father (a view of Stephen which Woolf elaborates elsewhere) who appears in his daughter’s novel, but the tyrannical and lachrymose “great Victorian” whose excesses were magnified by the death of Woolf’s mother in 1895. For Leslie Stephen, the time following the death of his wife, Julia, were years of emotional dependence and self-pity strangely out of keeping with the fierce stoicism of his intellectual life. But it is this dependence and self-pity that so dominate Woolf’s portrait of her father in To the Lighthouse. Like Ramsay, who rather melodramatically sees himself as the captain of some doomed expedition, “the leader of a forlorn hope” (55-56), Stephen’s insistent fatalism was quite familiar to friends such as Thomas Hardy, who concluded that “a tragic atmosphere encircled Leslie Stephen’s History.”20 Ramsay is bedeviled by his inability to get to R, to prove his lasting value as a philosopher, a feature of his character drawn straight from the example of Leslie Stephen, who was also convinced that he was not a genius, that his work would not survive. “Only a good second class mind,” he complained. “Had I—as I often reflect—no pretext for calling myself a failure . . . ?”21

Indeed, like Cowper, Stephen suffered from the certain confidence that he was doomed to oblivion and, by virtue of some private megrim of imagination, convinced himself that he was cut off from communion

20 Cited in Leslie Stephen, p. 113.
21 Cited in Leslie Stephen, p. 133.
with his fellows, "as if dying to express sympathy, but suffering under some terrible curse which prevent[ed] his saying any but caustic things, and showing antipathy instead." Critics have briefly noted parallels between Cowper's account of nautical heroism in "The Castaway" and Ramsay's own heroic fantasies, but no one has yet observed just how closely Cowper's spiritual despair (articulated in "The Castaway") approximates the self-absorption and self-pity of Mr. Ramsay, or the extent to which Woolf's allusions to "The Castaway" remind us that behind the portrait of her father lies the history of William Cowper as a kind of biographical precursor.

Like "poor William Cowper there at Olney," Stephen suffered from private terrors, incommunicable (if nonetheless irritating and baffling) to his friends and family. This pathetic self-indulgence was felt with special poignancy by his daughter, Virginia, who condemns her father for "the self-dramatization, the attitudinizing, the histrionic element, the breast beating, the groaning, which played so large a part, so disgusting a part in these scenes." Without his wife, Stephen became as one shut off entirely from the healing influence of social intercourse. In the words of his daughter, "at the age of sixty-five he was almost completely isolated, imprisoned." This is the portrait rendered almost literally in the characterization of Mr. Ramsay, a man tyrannical to others but cursed by his sense of isolation and failure. It is little wonder, then, that Woolf's original idea for To the Lighthouse should have linked the characterization of Mr. Ramsay with lines from Cowper, the poet with whom he had so much in common.

One may speculate that Woolf's description of her father's intellectual isolation, as he stands "on his little ledge facing the dark of human ignorance" while "the sea eats away the ground we stand on" (68), owes something to her reading of Cowper's letters, in which he writes: "At two miles' distance on the coast is a solitary pillar of rock, that the crumbling cliff has left at the high water-mark. I have visited it twice, and have found it an emblem of myself. Torn from my natural connexions, I stand alone and expect the storm that shall displace me."24

Like Cowper, Ramsay is a man torn from his "natural connections," and there is a pathetic self-reflexiveness about the final lines of "The Castaway" that seems equally suited to the characterization of Ramsay

22 Cited in Leslie Stephen, p. 143.
23 Moments of Being, pp. 125-126.
24 Letters and Prose Writings, IV, p. 450.
herself. While Cowper expresses the greatest sympathy for the drowning sailor, his lines focus not on the poor lad’s fate, but on the fate of the poet himself, welmed in “deeper gulphs” and drowned beneath a “routher sea,” lines that seem to speak directly to Mr. Ramsay’s situation. As DiBattista remarks, “Ramsay, like the other survivors of ‘Time Passes,’ is an emotional castaway whose sole remaining delight is ‘to trace’ the semblance of his grief ‘in another’s case.’”25 Like Cowper, whose enjoyment of nature and the simple pleasures of gardening were compromised by the knowledge of his own irrevocable damnation—“Nature revives again, but a soul once slain, lives no more,” he writes—Ramsay’s domestic tranquility is always tempered by his own private vision of imminent catastrophe.26 “Here stopping for one moment by the stone urn which held the geraniums, he saw, but now far, far away, like children picking up shells, divinely innocent and occupied with little trifles at their feet and somehow entirely defenseless against a doom which he perceived, his wife and son . . .” (53).

In her portrait of Mr. Ramsay on his way to the Lighthouse, Woolf merges allusion to “The Castaway” and her knowledge of Cowper’s biography with recollections of her father’s behavior in order to deepen that pathos and tragic self-absorption which come to mark Mr. Ramsay’s character. As he sits in the bottom of the boat thumbing the pages of a small volume which might well be a copy of Cowper’s poems, he is inspired by the sight of the house onshore and the memory of Mrs. Ramsay to mutter, “But I beneath a rougher sea” (247). To himself, Mr. Ramsay seems “very old and bowed.” He acts “instantly his part—the part of a desolate man, widowed, bereft; and so called up before him in hosts people sympathising with him; staged for himself as he sat in the boat a little drama which required of him decrepitude and exhaustion and sorrow.” Once again he “said gently and mournfully

But I beneath a rougher sea
Was welmed in deeper gulphs than he,

so that the mournful words were heard quite clearly by them all” (248).

Woolf’s choice of these particular “mournful words” borrowed from Cowper’s even more lugubrious poem grows out of a complex of personal recollections which naturally linked her characterization of her father with her own reading of “The Castaway.” But the words “alone”

25 Virginia Woolf's Major Novels, pp. 102-103.
and "perished" also come to symbolize a more generalized sense of foreboding, dread even, which is reinforced by Woolf's reiteration of Cowperian images of shipwreck and drowning. Martin Price remarks that in To the Lighthouse "Cosmic indifference, with its counterpart of human instability, provides the ground for most of the action of the novel."27 In perhaps his most famous hymn Cowper admits that "God moves in a mysterious way," a sentiment whose implicit irony was not lost on Virginia Woolf. With a fatalism that reminds one of Cowper, Woolf describes a world in which the movements of God appear both mysterious and capricious: "It seemed now as if, touched by human penitence and all its toil, divine goodness had parted the curtain and displayed behind it, single, distinct, the hare erect; the wave falling; the boat rocking, which, did we deserve them, should be ours always. But alas, divine goodness, twitching the cord, draws the curtain; it does not please him; he covers his treasures in a drench of hail, and so breaks them, so confuses them that it seems impossible that their calm should ever return or that we should ever compose from their fragments a perfect whole or read in the littered pieces the clear words of truth" (193).

The difficulty of composing a "perfect whole" from the fragments of experience is the fundamental problem faced by every major character in To the Lighthouse. Readers have quite rightly celebrated such moments as Ramsay's reconciliation with his children, Lily's completion of her picture, the near-eucharistic fulfillment of the dinner party as evidence that such perfection can be realized. But as Woolf's description of the casualty of things suggests, nature is not necessarily sympathetic to our efforts to find meaning and harmony. While such moments may "partake of eternity," as Mrs. Ramsay believes, Woolf also reminds us that they are moments only, brief intervals of grace before "divine goodness" twitches the cord, plunging all into darkness and confusion once again. Modern critics have largely focused their attention on Woolf's praise of the artist who, like Prospero, can bring concord out of strife, raise form from confusion. They see the novel's conclusion as comic and essentially benign. DiBattista argues, for example, "That we perish each alone is an inviolable, 'profound' truth that is absorbed by the novel's essentially feminine, comic surface."28 Clearly, such arguments minimize, even trivialize, those "profound" truths, as well as that pes-


28 Virginia Woolf's Major Novels, p. 105.
simism which is also evident in the novel. And it is worth asking whether the novel’s “comic surface” submerges Woolf’s darker impulses quite so successfully as DiBattista would have it.

Perhaps more poignantly than any other work of modern fiction, To the Lighthouse dramatizes the essential fragility of a Paterian metaphysic based on ecstatic moments of being. Woolf herself acknowledged the implicit ambiguity of her position when she described the novel as “a new—by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?” 29 “Elegy” is perhaps too strong a word. As Leon Edel remarks, Woolf often substitutes the “pathos of things lost” for “tragic depth.” 30 But while the novel is too vibrant, too celebratory to be called tragic, we distort Woolf’s achievement in To the Lighthouse if we ignore the deep sadness that informs her vision (she remarks that after To the Lighthouse, she was “nearer suicide, seriously, than since 1913”), or that darkness of tone that subtly permeates the narrative. 31

Nothing contributes more to this brooding atmosphere than Woolf’s use of water imagery. “The sea,” she writes, “is to be heard all through it.” And as Jean Guiguet observes, the “sound of the sea in the background” links the “themes of death, solitude and memory.” 32 Indeed, Woolf’s remarks on the Greek sense of tragedy might well serve as a commentary on her own: “With the sound of the sea in their ears . . . they are even more aware than we of a ruthless fate. There is a sadness at the back of life which they do not attempt to mitigate.” 33 Images of water are ubiquitous in To the Lighthouse. “Water, the sea, the waves; in these symbols, the meanings, moods and varieties of [Woolf’s] experience find their synthesis, their point of repose.” 34 Yet, just as there has been no critical unanimity regarding the symbolic

29 Diary, III, p. 34.


31 Diary, IV, p. 253.

32 Diary, Ill, p. 34; Virginia Woolf and her Works, p. 249.


34 Roger Poole, The Unknown Virginia Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 259. Poole provides the fullest review of Woolf’s use of water imagery both in her fiction and in her diaries.
significance of the Lighthouse, so critics have differed as to the meaning of water imagery in the novel. While some have discovered a "predictably Arnoldian" vision of "the sea that comprises our 'final destiny,'" others have emphasized water as symbol of acceptance and reconciliation, and the "act of immersion as surrender and transition."  

If one attends to the elegiac tone which emerges from Woolf's invocation of waves and water, however, it is not merely the echo of Matthew Arnold which one hears, but that of William Cowper, not only the Sophoclean "note of sadness" but a more immediate and slightly frantic fear of solitary inundation. At times, the imagery of immersion seems less to suggest some ritual act of baptism than to remind us of the dangers of drowning. In Mrs. Dalloway, for example, Woolf links the solitary isolation of madness with images of drowning, describing Septimus Smith as a "drowned sailor, on the shore of the world." In To the Lighthouse images of drowning multiply. There are obvious hazards to be avoided in drawing neat parallels between authorial biography and the novel itself. But the temptation seems irresistible when we note that Woolf's Diary for the period when she was composing To the Lighthouse reveals that her dreams were filled with morbid images of waves: "Wave crashes. I wish I were dead I've only a few years to live, I hope. I can't face this horror any more. (This is the wave spreading out over me.) This goes on several times, with varieties of horror. Then, at the crisis, instead of the pain remaining intense, it becomes rather vague. I doze. I wake with a start. The wave again The irrational pain; the sense of failure . . . ." 

Even Mrs. Ramsay, the liveliest and most optimistic character in the novel, succumbs to fantasies of drowning. Tired of the wrangling with Mr. Bankes at the dinner table, she feels just like the sailor who "not without weariness sees the wind fill his sail and yet hardly wants to be off again and thinks how, had the ship sunk, he would have whirled round and round and found rest on the floor of the sea" (127). Woolf's imagery here echoes her own descriptions of Julia Stephen, who "ultimately sank, like an exhausted swimmer deeper and deeper into the

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15 Virginia Woolf's Major Novels, pp. 84-85; Norman Friedman, Form and Meaning in Fiction (University of Georgia Press, 1975), p. 349. Both DiBattista and Friedman argue against the tragic interpretations of water imagery in the novel. For DiBattista, drowning is a form of "reabsorption into nature" (92). Friedman agrees that water imagery symbolizes a kind of rebirth, "a transition from one state to another" (355).

16 Diary, Ill, p. 110.

37 Vogler remarks that "it is because she has so dark a sense of life that she must constantly assert her energies against the forces of death and decay." (Twentieth Century Interpretations, p. 16).
water.” It is less the expectation of watery repose than the fear of inundation which controls Woolf’s water imagery here and at significant junctures throughout the novel. By the same token, this recurring fear of pain, failure and watery death links the central symbols of To the Lighthouse with “The Castaway,” perhaps the most memorable poetic account of drowning in the language.

It is significant that Woolf shifts the location of the novel from the safe and protective St. Ives of her childhood to the Hebrides, to an island which is literally “cut off” from the mainland by the sea and whose metaphoric insularity communicated to the characters in a variety of ways. The reiterated image of “the flood” that threatens them all carries with it both a topographical and a metaphysical specificity. No one is immune from a certain lurking uneasiness. Mr. Ramsay hopes that his eight children will “stem the flood a bit” because on “an evening like this . . . the little island seemed pathetically small, half swallowed up in the sea” (103). The Ramsays and their guests sit at table “conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there” (147). It falls to Mrs. Ramsay to link them, but since she feels herself to be “drowning . . . in seas of fire” (138), she must depend upon Lily Briscoe to rescue poor Tansley, awash in his own ineptitude. Of course, the moment ends too quickly. The Ramsays depart; the house is deserted; and “a downpouring of immense darkness began. Nothing, it seemed, could survive that flood” (189). Always the question lingers, “Will you fade? Will you perish?” The only answer—“we remain”—seems ironic at best, as Prue, Andrew, and Mrs. Ramsay perish in parentheses (195).

To the Lighthouse reveals a persistent tension between the struggle to find permanence and form and a kind of malign entropy, most clearly imaged, perhaps, in the gradual deterioration of the summer house itself. Mrs. Ramsay struggles heroically against this sense of flux and deliquescence. She longs for a “summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability” (96). And as she thinks of her life with Mr. Ramsay, she calls to mind such moments of safety, “but for the most part, oddly enough, she must admit that she felt this thing that she called life terrible, hostile” (92). At times “the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach . . . beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts,” but

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38 Moments of Being, p. 39.

39 David Daiches observes the “uncharacteristic vagueness in Woolf’s use of setting. Unlike the precise geographical detail of Mrs. Dalloway, setting here is symbolic.” (Virginia Woolf [New Directions, 1942], pp. 83-84).
then "suddenly and unexpectedly" the beating of the waves conveys "no such kindly meaning, but like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life, made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea, and warned her whose day had slipped past in one quick doing after another that it was all ephemeral as a rainbow—this sound which had been obscured and concealed under the other sounds suddenly thundered hollow in her ears and made her look up with an impulse of terror" (27-28). As Martin Price observes, "The sound of the waves, like the stroke of the lighthouse beam, has a double aspect; it may comfort or chill, as it marks one's participation in life and absorption in prospects and intentions or as it marks one's isolation and sense of vertiginous loss and separation." 40

As an artist who feels most deeply the impulse to bring form and order out of the flux of experience, it falls finally to Lily Briscoe to stem the tide. As she looks at Mrs. Ramsay and James sitting in the window, Lily thinks "how life, from being made up of little separate incidents which one lived one by one, became curled and whole like a wave which bore one with it and threw one down with it, there with a dash on the beach" (73). For Lily, as for Mrs. Ramsay, the image of the wave is ambiguous. The wave both attracts and repels; it promises comfort, offers a short, seductive moment of triumph, and then delivers destruction. Throughout the novel Lily is like one suspended on a board above deep water. And as she stands trying to finish her painting, she incarnates the struggle to bring form out of chaos even as she articulates the pain shared but often unexpressed by others in the novel. "Heaven be praised, no one had heard her cry that ignominious cry, stop pain, stop She had obviously not taken leave of her senses. No one had seen her step off her strip of board into the waters of annihilation" (269). For the moment, at least, Lily is saved. She has her vision; she completes her picture. Indeed the scope of Lily's achievement is magnified by Woolf's careful enumeration of the odds against such a triumph in a world in which the "waters of annihilation" pose an everpresent danger.

From Wordsworth to Joyce, writers have sought a convincing poetic vocabulary to describe such "spots of time" or "epiphanies" as those which lie at the heart of Woolf's aesthetic. And as the manuscript of the novel reveals, Woolf made at least one false start before she arrived at her formulation of "little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark" (240). At first, Woolf had reverted to the

40 Forms of Life, p. 323.
imagery of the "high wave" to describe Lily's moment of vision, but later she crossed it out in favor of the imagery of light. One can only guess at Woolf's reasons for eliminating all references to waves in one of the most ecstatic passages in the novel, but one might argue that she certainly made the right choice, particularly given the ominous freight which wave imagery has to carry in *To the Lighthouse*.

While Cowperian images of death by water may be found throughout the novel, it is only in part three of *To the Lighthouse* that Mr. Ramsay actually recites "We perished each alone," whose evocation of tragic and apparently random dissolution serves to complete that symbolic pattern found in earlier sections of the novel. With morbid satisfaction, Ramsay muses that it is the duty of "women to keep house, and sit beside sleeping children indoors, while men are drowned, out there in the storm" (145). Macalister's lurid tale of shipwrecks past, the blowing of the breeze, even the speed of the boat, inspire Ramsay to cry aloud: "We perished," and then again "each alone." For Ramsay, Cowper's lines serve as a signature of sorrow, and his children are appalled at such self-indulgence. But just as Lily discovers the words "Perished, Alone" bubbling up unbidden in her consciousness, so Cam, quite against her will, finds herself echoing her father's refrain: "About here, she thought, dabbling her fingers in the water, a ship had sunk, and she murmured, dreamily half asleep, how we perished each alone" (284). Indeed, as if by a kind of spiritual alchemy, Cam discovers herself sharing her father's dream, and in some measure her reconciliation with her father arises from her acceptance of his tragic view of life. Without wishing to, Cam has moved into her father's orbit. "He was shabby, and simple, eating bread and cheese; and yet he was leading them on a great expedition where, for all she knew, they would be drowned" (305).

The imagery of drowning is equally familiar to James, who from the very beginning has connected his father with voyage and disaster. This man who has crushed his hopes for adventure by insisting that the weather would not be fine believes that "life is difficult; fact uncom-

promising; and [that on] the passage to that fabled land where our brightest hopes are extinguished, our frail barks founder in darkness" (11). Of course, such thoughts are far more complex than one would normally expect from a small boy; yet within Woolf's method of poetic

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41 For Woolf's revisions of the manuscript, see "Introduction," *To the Lighthouse: The Original Holograph Draft*, transcribed and ed. Susan Dick (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982) and MS. pp. 293-294.
reiteration and thematic lamination they provide further evidence of the centrality of drowning as a leitmotif in the novel. Like Cam, James develops a strange fellowship with his father, a sympathy born of their shared acceptance of impending disaster. James feels his animosity toward his father begin to melt in a recognition of the accuracy of Mr. Ramsay’s pessimistic assessment of the world and in his growing sympathy for his father’s overwhelming sense of isolation. “He looked very old. He looked, James thought . . . like some old stone lying on the sand; he looked as if he had become physically what was always at the back of both of their minds—that loneliness which was for both of them the truth about things” (301).

The recognition of the “truth about things” leads James to the further discovery that he is far more like his father than he had previously suspected. As James closes on the Lighthouse, that “stark tower on a bare rock . . . . It confirmed some obscure feeling of his about his own character. The old ladies, he thought, thinking of the garden at home, went dragging their chairs about on the lawn. Old Mrs. Beckwith, for example, was always saying how nice it was and how sweet it was and how they ought to be so proud and they ought to be so happy, but as a matter of fact, James thought, looking at the Lighthouse stood there on its rock, it’s like that” (302). For James, the symbolic valence of the Lighthouse has changed. It has become not a symbol of continuity or light or of dependable centrality (images so often associated with his mother); it has become a symbol of isolation and insularity. “He looked at his father reading fiercely with his legs curled tight. They shared that knowledge ‘We are driving before a gale—we must sink’ he began saying to himself, half aloud, exactly as his father had said it” (302).

Here, as the novel nears its conclusion, Woolf seems to ratify Ramsay’s pessimism, as his children, once so hostile, come to share his certainty of inundation. The irony of James’s conclusion, of course, is that they do not sink; for the moment at least their frail barks do not founder. Mr. Ramsay’s iteration of “We perished, each alone” ironically serves as a catalyst for that spiritual transformation by which James, Cam and their father overcome their individual isolation and achieve a momentary harmony. By reaching the Lighthouse they have temporarily avoided that disaster so confidently predicted by Ramsay, but more importantly they have survived the perils of shipwreck in a much different sense. Ramsay, usually so tyrannical and so aloof, says those magic words, “Well done,” which reestablish communion with his son. He offers Cam a ginger nut, and suddenly “They both wanted to say, Ask us anything and we will give it to you.” But Ramsay does not “ask them
anything. He sat and looked at the island and he might be thinking, We perished, each alone, or he might be thinking, I have reached it. I have found it; but he said nothing” (308). This scene, so filled with bemusement and uncertainty, subtly enacts one of the central tensions in the novel. Ramsay’s runic inscrutability may conceal some inward glow of triumph not unlike Lily’s. Or it may serve as an omen of shipwrecks yet to come. As with those other moments of being when objects and events seem magically to coalesce into meaning, Ramsay’s silence as he basks in the warmth of his children’s affection may imply that perhaps we can survive the flood. Or, for the moment, he may simply be willing to forego the pleasures of predicting catastrophe.

The conclusion of the novel, with Lily’s joyous completion of her painting, strongly suggests that indeed art does possess power to fix the moment, to slow the momentum of mortality. And yet one is left with a curious feeling of incompleteness, as if those moments of triumph which shine forth at intervals throughout the novel do not quite balance the pain and sorrow which surround them. In one of the first reviews of To the Lighthouse, Louis Kronenberger complained that the novel ends on “a meaningless minor note which conveys the feeling that one has not quite arrived somewhere.”42 To adapt the metaphor, the final section of the novel is indeed written in a minor key as those who survive try as best they can to adjust to their individual disasters and the catastrophic loss of Mrs. Ramsay. The muted conclusion of To the Lighthouse may be traced to other sources, however, and it is worth considering whether the ambiguity of Woolf’s conclusion does not owe something to her original plan for the book with its focus on Mr. Ramsay reciting “We perished, each alone.” Certainly Woolf altered those plans to an extensive degree, but one can still detect their outlines quite clearly in part three of the novel as the emphasis falls on Mr. Ramsay, whose characterization relies on heavy doses of Cowperian imagery and allusion.

In any case, there can be little question that the association of Stephen, Ramsay and Cowper figures prominently in the original gestation of the novel, or that Cowper’s influence may be felt as a kind of brooding presence in the book. Indeed, Woolf’s own summary of the plight of William Cowper might well serve as commentary on the ambiguous conclusion of To the Lighthouse: “If you are damned, if you are solitary, if you are cut off from God and man,” she writes, “what does human

kindness avail?" The answer might be "everything" or "nothing." Like the dinner party, like the completion of Lily's painting, Mr. Ramsay's reconciliation with his children provides a brief "summoning together" (96), a shining interval of apparent safety. Yet despite such moments of serenity and form, Woolf never allows one entirely to forget that such moments are like casks, coops and floated cords thrown to shipwrecked sailors. While they may have been granted a moment's respite from the waves, the time must come when they, too, will perish, each alone.