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# MFS Queer Mrs. Ramsay, or Virginia Woolf's Geomorphic Family

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Benjamin Bagocius

**Abstract:** Widely regarded as a prototypical Victorian woman, Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* might also be read as embodying a surprisingly queer subjectivity. Drawing from the geological sciences and queer vitalist thought, I attend to Woolf's language for limning Mrs. Ramsay less gendered as a woman and more queered as a subject of lights and darks in motion. Woolf's father Leslie Stephen uses a similar lexicon to describe mountains in his acclaimed mountaineering tracts. Woolf borrows Stephen's mountaineering vocabulary to narrate queer subjectivities as more geological than gendered and thus loosens subjectivities from heteropatriarchal orthodoxy.

Scholars and mountaineers from the Victorian era to today regard Leslie Stephen, Virginia Woolf's father, as one of the English language's most exacting and accomplished writers on mountaineering. His monumental *The Playground of Europe*, Stephen's account of trekking across the Alps, is still considered "a mountaineering classic" (Siskin) in the field of Alpinist literature. From Stephen's first visit to Grossglockner—Austria's highest peak—in 1855, to his role as president of the Alpine Club ten years later, to his final ascent of the

Alps in 1893, Stephen penned accounts of the body and soul in the mountains for a range of journals, including *Fraser's Magazine*, the *Alpine Journal*, and *Cornhill Magazine*.<sup>1</sup> “Whatever his posthumous reputation in the general literary world,” scholar Alex Siskin writes, “Stephen remains a giant in that of climbing.”

Stephen's reputation for writing about human and mountain intimacies on Victorian pages gains literary afterlife in his daughter's modernist masterwork *To the Lighthouse*. Scholars have long noted the ways Woolf turns to memories of her mother, Julia Stephen, to limn one of modernism's most famous Victorian women, Mrs. Ramsay. Woolf writes in her memoirs that she works closely with her “mother's memory by writing about her in *To the Lighthouse*” (“A Sketch of the Past” 108). What has received considerably less attention are the ways in which Woolf's “writing about her” mother draws from her memory of her father as well. In this essay, I explain how Woolf works with “[Stephen's] memory” in her penning of Mrs. Ramsay, because “he too obsessed me for years.” Particularly, this essay shows how Stephen's description of mountains inspires Woolf's reframing of human subjectivity—especially women's—beyond orthodoxies of gender. This essay proposes that Stephen's tracts about mountains shape Woolf's narration of what might be called Mrs. Ramsay's queer geological subjectivity, or the ways Woolf borrows a mountaineer's perception of matter as geological contours, lines, lights, and darks, to craft the figure of Mrs. Ramsay, who is as much geological as she is gendered.

In proposing that a strand of Woolfian literary character derives from mountaineering lexicons of line, shape, and color, I do not deny that her aesthetic also borrows from postimpressionist art. Much scholarship explores the ways Woolf draws from theories of postimpressionist art articulated by writers such as Clive Bell, Roger Fry, and others to revise literary subjectivity as a matter of formal shape and degrees of light. For example, Angela Leighton explains that “Woolf's own attitudes to writing largely draw on Bell's and Fry's definitions of form, and thus constantly hover round metaphors drawn from the visual arts: ‘lines and colours’, ‘forms and relations of forms’” (126). Yet when we look at Woolf's sense of literary character through mountaineering's vocabularies for form and color as well, scholars gain at least three avenues for further research. First, we expand the archive from which Woolf drew material to write her queer characters, thus broadening our understanding of the rich range of discursive fields Woolf's literary art synthesizes to reconceptualize the body beyond heteropatriarchal orthodoxies. Second, we perceive how Victorian mountaineering tracts such as Stephen's

are forerunners to postimpressionist art theorists' attention to form through vocabularies of line, light, and shape. Finally, we see the ways in which modernist feminist approaches to patriarchal entitlement and women's agency are not only antagonistic to, but also inspired by, Victorian discourses (in this case, mountaineering).

Stephen describes Alpine peaks, for instance, as surprising subjects of shapeshifting color and form. From famous peaks such as Mont Blanc to perhaps the lesser known but equally magisterial Jungfrau, Faulhorn, Wetterhorn, and more, peaks tend to resemble to Stephen a "pyramid above pyramid" (342) composed of "emphatic lights" and "the darkest shadow," a "chaos of grand forms" characterized by nearly oceanic fluidity, a "flowing sweep of the loftiest crest." In the Alps, Stephen witnesses geological geometry in motion: a mountain is "a vast cone, with its apex pointing away from us" (310). The mountainscape, Stephen notes, "seemed to be suddenly cut out from the world beneath; night was within its borders and the twilight still all around," leaving the peaks standing in "imperishable majesty" (355) as grand as the "Pyramids or a Gothic cathedral." An Alpine peak, translated as a "pyramid of darkness" (310) before being turned into a "glowing mass of magical light" (342), nevertheless holds "night" within its materiality, its "borders," as it shapeshifts among intensifying darks and lights. "These views" (377) atop the mountainscape, Stephen continues, "have a marvelously stimulating effect upon the imagination"; they coax one to "look round," to notice more about material reality in a different way. "From below" the mountain, Stephen recalls "everything is seen in a kind of distorted perspective . . . The true proportions reveal themselves as you ascend" (379). Mountaineering invites the climber to notice nuances of color, angle, and their changing interrelation, to allow him or her to behold reality—"true proportions"—from another point of view, literally, and thus to expand their knowledge of what material reality is.

Woolf's corpus, too, is famous for its drive to shift perspective, to "look round" (377) and thus expand the reality one sees, guiding one to perceive what Woolf calls "this, the essential thing" ("Modern Fiction" 149), the "true and enduring" (148), "life itself" (151), a "truth or reality" (149) that would otherwise remain hidden from view.<sup>2</sup> It is as if Woolf's narrator in *To the Lighthouse* adopts a mountaineer's perspective to see a "truth or reality" about Mrs. Ramsay, for instance, that generally remains obscured: she is at least as much geomorphic presence as she is a woman. Stephen writes that Mont Blanc, for instance, emits lights and darks, a "pyramid of darkness" (310) in the "twilight," after it appears "cut out from the world." Mrs.

Ramsay, alone in the drawing room, becomes an angular “wedge-shaped core of darkness” (*TL* 62), apart from the world of caretaking, after the children go to bed and she is released from mothering and hostessing to “be herself.” Cut out from the world, Mrs. Ramsay experiences her subjectivity as a “wedge-shaped core of darkness” shifting into radiance, “beautiful like that light” (63); she “became . . . that light.” Mrs. Ramsay’s subjectivity is less oriented toward an identity as a woman and more experienced as geological. Her subjectivity is darks, lights, and a geometric shape that shifts and soars: it “could go anywhere,” a freewheeling darkness recalling Woolf’s intent to write at the level of what she calls life’s “uncircumscribed spirit” (“Modern Fiction” 150). The term “wedge” connotes a part of something larger.<sup>3</sup> I propose that Mrs. Ramsay is a part, or a wedge, of geological expanse. Geomorphized as a mountain peak, a “core of darkness,” Mrs. Ramsay, “having shed . . . attachments” (62)—perhaps from identity—“becomes,” like Stephen’s shifting mountainscape, “free for the strangest adventures.” Like Stephen’s experience atop the peaks, Mrs. Ramsay’s “horizon seemed to her limitless.” Both Mrs. Ramsay’s “limitless” perception and her subjectivity read as queer, of mixed lights and darks; her body becomes an experience of geological substance: “This core of darkness could go anywhere, for no one saw it. They could not stop it.” Mrs. Ramsay seems to have secret reserves of shifting lights and darks in her subjectivity—much like one of Stephen’s mountains hiding its secrets for climbers—that evade surveillance from the casual onlooker. Mrs. Ramsay’s queer, geomorphic subjectivity, like the Alpine mountainscape’s, fathoms in this moment no sociopolitical restrictions on her agency.

We might say Woolf anthropomorphizes Stephen’s Mont Blanc as Mrs. Ramsay. We could also say that Woolf geomorphizes Mrs. Ramsay by limning her subjectivity less gendered as a woman and more geological as kaleidoscopic lights and darks shifting in silence, properties shared by Stephen’s Alpine peaks. Thus Mrs. Ramsay’s body is composed, like mountains, of the substance of lights, darks, and change. I call this subjectivity geological corporeality. Geological corporeality names the ways in which the elemental interaction of shape, light, and darkness finds elaboration as the human body. Geological corporeality identifies Woolf’s narration of the ways these elemental agencies infuse the human body. This infusion registers at a queer level of subjectivity because logics of heteropatriarchy cannot completely interrupt geological corporeality’s existence.

A curious and moving photograph of Julia Stephen standing silently as a wedge-shaped core of darkness in the Alps supports this

queer geological view of Mrs. Ramsay. The photograph was taken in 1889, when Julia accompanied her husband Leslie to the Swiss Alps. The couple left their children—and their gendered roles as mother and father—in London to visit Grindelwald, an Alpine village. Several photographs of this trip survive. One photograph stands out for the ways its formal features recall Woolf's narrations of Mrs. Ramsay's character. The photograph centralizes Julia standing in the Alps. She wears a dark cloak, and snow-covered Alpine peaks soar in the background. The peaks' pyramidal shapes align with Julia's wedge or pyramidal shape. Both Julia and the peaks appear as pyramids of luminosity and darkness. Standing in the middle of the photograph, Julia looks central to this mountain community, flanked to the left by her husband, the experienced mountaineer, and huddled closely to deceased climbers marked by gravestones (Figure 1). One of the gravestones toward which Julia seems oriented resembles the shape of a lighthouse. Indeed, the lighthouse-gravestone could be considered a kind of miniature peak as it stands amid peaks. Later I explain how the lighthouse in Woolf's novel functions as a Stephensian Mont Blanc, both as destination and always-already part of the characters' subjectivity. Suffice it to say here that both Julia and Mrs. Ramsay, as cores of darkness, turn to face the lighthouse, conjuring an intimate association between the women, the stone, and the light.

Julia stands apart from Leslie; her presence indicates both relation and enigma. Her figure's centrality unifies disparate and sacred shapes, lines and contours of mountains, lights and darks. Stephen stands underneath a church canopy to the left, observing Julia while she stands as the core of darkness in this luminous mountain sanctuary. Catherine W. Hollis remarks that, in this photograph, Stephen "observes" Julia "gathering her own impressions. But her mental privacy is preserved. . . . it is not for us to know what she is thinking" (*Leslie Stephen* 49). As a core of darkness, Julia's subjectivity is both central and indeterminable. In the context of the mountainscape, Julia's subjectivity as an enigmatic, dark shape is more evident than any gendered roles she may assume as woman, wife, or mother. Her face is more luminous than gendered, and her clothing appears more as a geological "pyramid of darkness" than as gendered dress. One wonders whether Julia may have sensed her body as a vessel of geologic presence as much as Stephen—as we shall see—sensed his. These photographs, Hollis writes, "would later prove a great comfort to Leslie after Julia's death" (47). Woolf likely knew about this photograph of her mother as a dark pyramid enveloped in a mountain sanctuary of light, since both her father and sister Vanessa

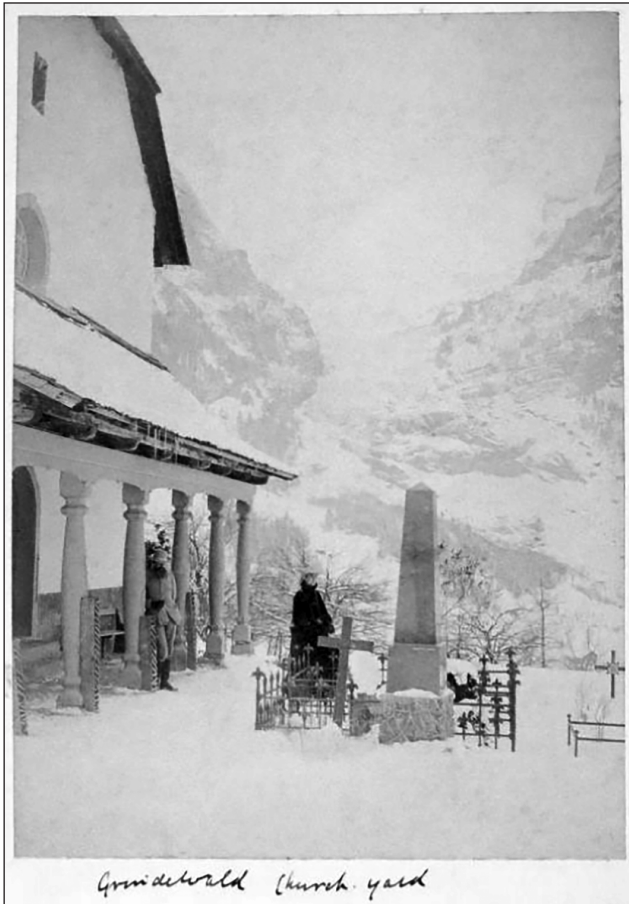


Figure 1. Julia and Leslie Stephen, Leslie Stephen photograph album, Mortimer Rare Book Collection, MRBC MS 00005, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA. Public domain.

Bell treasured the photographs from this trip.<sup>4</sup> Woolf may have used the shapes, hues, and positioning of her mother in the mountainscape to queer the subjectivity of Mrs. Ramsay from a woman to a geomorphic presence.

I borrow the concept of geomorphism to describe Mrs. Ramsay from the geological sciences. Geologist Marcia Bjornerud argues that we are well practiced in anthropomorphizing the Earth. Less practiced is an understanding of the ways inorganic matter constitutes

human bodies. Bjornerud calls on us to “‘geomorphize’ ourselves” (6) and “rediscover the history of the Earth imprinted on us.” The human body, then, is as geological as it is biological. We are the “progeny” of the Earth, Bjornerud writes. Human beings are the Earth’s “youngest children in a generations-old dynasty,” a “[rich] and [deep] family saga.” Scholars of queer vitalism, including philosophers such as Elizabeth Grosz and Claire Colebrook, anthropologist Vicki Kirby, and geographer Kathryn Yusoff, remark that this “family saga” is queer, furthered just as much by human subjects who are mixed embodiments of shifting matter and geological motion as they are gendered subjects of heterosexual reproduction. Yusoff writes that queer vitalism “suggests a more temporally distributed and materially mixed model of subjectivity” (389) than binary-gender models do. What Bjornerud posits as Earth’s geological imprint on the human body is Yusoff’s “temporally distributed and materially mixed model of subjectivity.” Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, one of modernism’s most memorable family sagas, experiments not only with family’s heterosexually reproductive aspects but also its geological ones. To be sure, Alpinist language plays a role in Woolf’s other experimental novels, such as *Orlando* (1928) and *The Waves* (1931). But neither novel infuses mountains into a sustained story of family as overtly as *To the Lighthouse*. Thus, *To the Lighthouse* is Woolf’s most extended exploration of how the figure of a mountain queers the substance of family, shifting its defining feature from heterosexual reproduction to elaborations of the body’s capacity to absorb and transmit geological elements of lights and darks. *To the Lighthouse* experiments with the idea that bodies are queer expressions of geological properties of rock and light. Perceiving bodies as more geological than gendered destabilizes orthodoxies of embodiment.<sup>5</sup>

Woolf narrates Mrs. Ramsay’s geological subjectivity as part of her feminist project to develop a discourse of corporeal freedom not completely dictated by or derived from patriarchal entitlement. As announced in *Three Guineas*, Woolf devotes her art to “finding new words” (170) and “creating new methods” that avoid fully “repeating” heteropatriarchal “words and following” heteropatriarchal “methods” for narrating subjectivity. Woolf develops geological corporeality to create subjectivities in which bodies act and move outside of heteropatriarchal determinism. I believe she does so to emphasize a fundamental—“true and enduring” (“Modern Fiction” 149)—geological strand of agency inhering in the body on which patriarchal orthodoxy cannot fully impose itself.



Today's queer vitalism is the most recent iteration in a lineage of thought about geomorphic bodies with which both Stephen's and Woolf's work engage. Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830) was the first systematization of Earth's changing geological record in the English language. Lyell proposed that the Earth was far more ancient than anyone had imagined it, and that it continued to shift and change in the present. Charles Darwin considered the theory of evolution "as a conscious contribution to Lyellian historical geography" (M. J. S. Hodge qtd. in Bartholomew 263). Darwin, in addition to his groundbreaking work in evolution, was also an expert on rocks. He provided "one of the first detailed explanations for the diversity of igneous rocks" (Pearson 49). As Michael Bartholomew explains, Darwin understood his "theory of species origination" (262) as "an extension . . . of Lyell's own work" and hoped to complete the "programme for a naturalistic explanation of earth history, organic and inorganic, that Lyell's *Principles* had launched." Darwin furthered the view that, because organic life co-evolved with geological forces, organic and inorganic bodies share properties, especially the capacity to change and evolve.

Both Stephen and Woolf admired Darwin's bold writings about the body. Darwin and Stephen were intellectual associates, and scholars consider Stephen's *The Science of Ethics* (1882) one of the earliest contributions to ethical philosophy that built on Darwin's ideas of natural selection. Woolf, too, valued Darwinian thought so much that when she returned to the wreckage of her home in Tavistock Square, destroyed by World War II bombing, to retrieve valuable items, they included volumes of Darwin's work and her diaries. Woolf's writing, Gillian Beer finds, "is full of Darwinian echoes and Darwinian references" (16), including ideas about the entwinement of geology with biology. Together, Lyell, Darwin, Stephen, Woolf, and today's queer vitalists throw open the idea that to understand the fullness of human subjectivity we must geomorphize, or consider ourselves progeny of a queer geological family whose existence is determined as much by geological properties as by sociopolitical constructions.

Thanks to scholarship by Beer as well as by others such as Laura Doyle, Woolf's application of Darwinian thought to rethink subjectivity is widely studied. Less examined are the ways Woolf draws from her father's mountaineering lexicon to reimagine subjectivity as more geological than heteropatriarchal. Mountaineering has long been associated with masculinism, but I find that Woolf's narration of Mrs. Ramsay follows a reparative thread in her father's mountaineering tracts that queers, or undoes, gender identity.<sup>6</sup> Stephen's mountain-

ering tract wields language for corporeal fluidity, the absorption of the body by vast powers of the earth, and ever-changing perspectives.<sup>7</sup> Woolf narrates a Mrs. Ramsay who, though subjected to heteropatriarchal epistemologies of wife and mother, is nonetheless subjected to a more fundamental ontology less susceptible to patriarchy: geological expanse and elemental interaction.

Tracing the ways mountaineering's lexicons surface in Woolf's writing of subjectivity is an exciting frontier opened by scholars such as Hollis and Abbie Garrington. These scholars study what Hollis calls Woolf's "return to Stephen's Alpine legacy" ("Virginia Woolf" 184). They find explicit focuses on mountaineering in Woolf's little-known texts such as letters, diary entries, and the late short story "The Symbol" (1941), published months before Woolf's death, about a woman vacationing at a mountain resort who witnesses a climbing accident.<sup>8</sup> Garrington's work shows us how "Woolf's mountainous imagination is perhaps simply the latest iteration of her longstanding interest in finding new forms for the proper expression of psychological experience" (82), or the "exploration of the mind." I would add that Woolf also turns to mountaineering to find new forms for the proper expression of the body. This essay contributes to conversations about "Alpine Woolf" (81) by investigating the ways mountaineering's vocabulary for perceiving geological properties—lights and darks as constitutive of matter and bodies—surfaces earlier than generally understood in Woolf's writing. Woolf applies mountaineering's findings not only in later stories such as "The Symbol" but also in earlier modernist reimaginings of Victorian women such as Mrs. Ramsay to narrate their queer corporeality.

Woolf seems attracted to the language of mountaineering because, like Woolfian spiritual reality, mountains conjure what Alpinist writer Fergus Fleming has called "lawlessness" (51). Mountains escape from "the control of a central authority." They therefore stand as figures through which Woolf rewrites physicality outside of what she calls familiar "convention and ceremony" ("Montaigne" 60). Narrations of mountains' soaring peaks and irregular shapes from antiquity to her father's work express realities of geological whimsy that exceed masculinist imposition.<sup>9</sup> Mountains conjure new ideas about embodiment as existing simultaneously in the past, present, and future. Woolf deploys the figure of the mountain to create Mrs. Ramsay's subjectivity as inherently queer and nearly eternal, loosened from masculinist ideas even about mortality, by writing bodies at the level of an inborn—and what I am calling a geological—"Liberty" (*Three Guineas* 170) inhering in all "men and women" bodily, "in their persons."

## Woolf and Wonders of Embodiment

Though Woolf is generally known for tracing the workings of mind, she is equally fascinated with the mysteries of embodiment. Woolf scholars such as Doyle and Louise Westling point out that Woolf's interest in the physical world aligns with a Victorian and modernist philosophical tradition that is just as phenomenological as it is metaphysical. The strand of Woolf's narration of Mrs. Ramsay I trace here places her in a rich conversation with materialist philosophies. This philosophical tradition might be said to begin with the Stoics; it extends across Aristotle's writings on form and Spinoza's writings about the infusion of God in all matter, moves onward to natural philosophy through Darwin's study of matter's inborn agency and intelligence as natural selection, and continues toward the turn of the twenty-first century with Gilbert Simondon's and Raymond Ruyer's phenomenological thought on ceaseless beginnings constitutive of all organic and inorganic matter at the atomic level.<sup>10</sup>

Woolf's fascination with embodiment aligns with her father's interests. Stephen's corpus places him in the materialist tradition of studying corporeal dimensions of ontology rather than only questing after a disembodied Concept or Truth. In fact, Stephen challenges metaphysical branches of thought for what he considers their overwrought idolization of thought, or a "Heaven of Ideas" (Lackey 80), at the expense of embodied knowledge. Historian Kevin Morrison explains that, as a mountaineer, Stephen places value on physical experience as knowledge. Morrison finds that Stephen is one of materialist philosophy's Victorian champions who posited that "imaginative powers come from, and sublime experience is generated by, physical contact with the material world" (499). Stephen's writing, in Morrison's account, shows a "desire to move beyond perceptual models that privilege the mind above human corporeality" (510). Siskin observes, too, that "Stephen's mountaineering pursuits . . . played" ("Peaks") a central "role in helping him become a writer." Indeed, by climbing mountains, Stephen believes he expands knowledge, contributes to literacy, and reduces ignorance. "No one," Stephen writes, "can decipher the natural writing on the face of the snow-slope or a precipice who has not wandered amongst their recesses, and learnt by slow experience what is indicated by marks which an ignorant observer would scarcely notice" (362). The mountainscape offers its "writing," its "marks" to the climber's exertion, not to the distant philosopher's or inactive observer's mind. Through the climber's physical exertion, their body learns to decipher geology's "natural writing,"

and thus the climber gains knowledge that the mountainscape offers about what it means to be embodied. Stephen's philosophical essay "What is Materialism?" (1886), Hollis observes, considers "material substance that resists the mind's reduction of it to pure idea" (*Leslie Stephen* 41). Knowledge for Stephen is not only a matter of mind; it is also a matter of body. According to Hollis, Stephen proposes that knowledge "comes to us through our senses; our idea of the world intermingles with our physical bodies."

Though Woolf, too, is enthralled by physicality, she is less enamored by the ways in which her father writes about it. Considering her father's writing, Woolf concedes that Stephen "is not a writer for whom I have a natural taste" ("A Sketch of the Past" 115). Yet she admires the physicality evoked in his work, for "when I read his books," she continues, "I find . . . a strong mind; a healthy out of door, moor striding mind." Woolf was familiar with her father's writing on mountaineering. She writes that Stephen regarded *The Playground of Europe's* chapter "Sunset on Mont Blanc" as "in his opinion the best thing he ever wrote" (Woolf qtd. in Hollis, "Virginia Woolf" 186). Hollis proposes in "Virginia Woolf as Mountaineer" that "we can assume Woolf read—out of curiosity, if nothing else—" her father's writings on mountaineering. Katherine C. Hill acknowledges that while Stephen "was a maddening figure, and an oppressive one . . . he was in important ways an enabling figure" (106) for Woolf, "too, and we cannot understand the full force of Virginia's reactions to him—both negative and positive—unless we acknowledge some of his good points." Woolf is just as interested in her father as a writer as a person, for she acknowledges "some of his good points"—as well as, to her, his bad ones—as a writer. She finds a "disparity, so obvious in his books, between the critical and the imaginative power. Give him a thought to analyse . . . and he is . . . a model of acuteness, clarity, and impartiality. Give him a character to explain, and he is (to me) so crude, so elementary, so conventional that a child with a box of chalks could make a more subtle portrait" ("A Sketch of the Past" 146). Though Stephen's writing may be unable to explain character, his writing about ideas demonstrates laudable clarity in Woolf's eyes.

Due to Woolf's acuteness in studying character, she may have studied her father as a character in his mountaineering tracts.<sup>11</sup> Reading about her father's sense of subjectivity in his own texts, Woolf perhaps notices that Stephen, even if unwittingly, destabilizes his gendered body in ways she would borrow for her own literary creations of subjectivity. Stephen observes that mountains and human bodies intermingle and thus share properties. When mountaineering, Ste-

phen experiences his body not as a fixed form but as an open-ended vessel of geological “forces eternally acting and reacting upon each other” (296). On Mont Blanc’s summit, Stephen asks, “Where does Mont Blanc end, and where do I begin?” Mont Blanc’s form, like his own, is fluid. Both the forms of mountain and self are ongoing questions. Beginnings and endings between mountains and properties of the body open and flow. Experiencing his body as intermingling with eternal “forces” atop the mountain, Stephen’s language recalls the queer geology of Yusoff, who points out a “model of subjectivity” (389) that is “temporally distributed and materially mixed.” While the colloquialism “to move mountains” connotes a nearly impossible feat, mountains, Stephen finds, move. He applies the language of geometry, line, light, and mass to narrate mountains’ flight. For example, Stephen describes “the noble form of the Wetterhorn” (375) as a peak with a “lofty snow-crowned pyramid rising in such light and yet massive lines from its huge basement of perpendicular cliffs” that give the peak “the appearance of a sharp-pointed cone.” The Wetterhorn ascends as geometric shapes and lines of light. Stephen thus understands his merging with the mountain not as a metaphysical question, but rather as an embodied experience. “No metaphysician has hitherto succeeded in answering” (296) his question, because Stephen experiences the question about his subjectivity more phenomenologically than conceptually. Contemplating metaphysically, instead of expending bodily effort to climb, minimizes both mountain and body, distorting the body’s intimate relationship with geology as well as the body’s fluid properties. The body is not only ideological, a matter of mind, but also elemental, a matter of geology.

Agnostic, Stephen nonetheless uses spiritual language—the language of radical transformation and freedom—to describe geological corporeality. He experiences himself more as an unwitting embodiment of mountain spirit than as a man. With “every step of [the] ascent” (374), Stephen writes, “one is quietly absorbing” (375) the mountain “Spirit” (371) and its “beauty” (375), he finds, “even when one is not directly making it a subject of contemplation.” The idea of gender is nowhere in this scene; what appears instead is the body’s infusion of mountain spirit and beauty. We have seen that, for Stephen, the body’s materiality is open to change, to geomorphize into a mountain. Similarly, the substance of “Spirit” and “beauty” are so wayward that they transfigure to become primary substances of bodies. An elaboration of mountain, spirit, and beauty corporealize as his body. Stephen’s body manifests this spirit more as a physical, even physiological, experience, than as a philosophy to contemplate.

The capacity to absorb and dilate these “mysterious forces throughout ages of indefinable antiquity” (57) that “raised and carved and modelled” matter, constitutes his body. Stephen describes this “quiet absorption” of “mysterious forces” less as a gendered and more as a spiritual experience, for “the mountain Spirit” (371) eternally inhabits the “sacred place” (341) of a peak’s “sanctuary” through which he climbs.

What makes Stephen’s release from gender so remarkable is that most scholars study mountaineering through lenses of hypermasculinity and conquest. Fleming, for example, notes that climbers such as Stephen “enjoyed . . . the joy of physical conquest” (54). It is true that middle-class Victorian men such as Stephen flocked to the Alps to secure manliness within rhetorics of nation building and imperial enterprise. Historian Peter H. Hansen asserts that “mountaineering was invented at the intersection of contemporary definitions of middle-class gentility and status, gender, and national identity” (301) and thus was central in institutionalizing “imperial cultures” and “imperial exploration.” Mountaineering, through this lens, leans closer to political hegemony than to queer refiguring of bodies.

But limiting mountaineering to masculinism oversimplifies this complex pursuit and hurries too quickly past the queer descriptions of those who enjoyed it. Though categories of gender largely provide Stephen with the opportunity to climb mountains, he paradoxically describes the experience as a destabilization of maleness. Indeed, the field of mountaineering is rife with the destabilization of gender norms. Although the Alpine Club institutionalized mountaineering as masculinist by barring women from becoming members until 1974, women were often informally welcomed into expeditions. As Kate Siber explains, “These wild areas afforded rare freedom in a time of stifling social constraints. In coed expeditions, women climbed and slept alongside men, a practice that would have been unthinkable in the valleys and cities. In the late 1800s, women even led men on expeditions without guides, which had been customary earlier in the century.” While Stephen’s tracts do not describe coed expeditions, his writing about gender may nonetheless have been impacted by the fact of coed expeditions in his climbing community. Through climbing, Stephen destabilizes maleness by geomorphizing his body as he absorbs both the mountain and its spirit. Stephen describes the mountain at first in gendered terms as a “He” (296): “He,” the mountain, “is part of the great machinery in which my physical frame is inextricably involved. . . . The whole universe, from the stars and the planets to the mountains and the insects which creep about their

roots, is,” as we have observed, “but a network of forces eternally acting and reacting upon each other.” The maleness, or “he,” of both mountain and climber recedes in importance, indicated by the sentence’s syntax. Stephen’s sentence leads us away from “he” and toward a different subject: “forces eternally acting and reacting.” In Stephen’s syntax, mountaineering diminishes maleness and extends the interrelationality of disparate elements as a chief feature of subjectivity. Infused with geological properties of interactive, eternal dynamics released even from orthodoxies of time, Stephen experiences queer embodiment.

Woolf draws out this queer thread, which she may have noticed peeking out in her father’s writing about himself, in *To the Lighthouse*. Stephen in the photograph atop the peaks gazing at Julia becomes aestheticized. What begins as Woolf satirizing Mr. Ramsay’s masculinist climb from A to R ends with Mr. Ramsay’s deliverance from masculinist ideology into a queered experience of his own subjectivity and a queer perception of his wife. After a patriarchal tirade directed at Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay goes off alone to climb an intellectual mountain and arrive at a “perfectly clear understanding of the problem which now engaged the energies of his splendid mind” (33). But Mr. Ramsay’s masculinist insistence on mastery at the bottom of the mountain of ideas transforms into an experience of perceptual freedom from dictates of “understanding” once he reaches the summit. In the mountains, he surrenders so-called Truth to revel in a queer connection with his wife and son. “For if thought . . . is like the alphabet . . . ranged in twenty-six letters all in order,” the narrator tells us, “then his splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q.” As Mr. Ramsay journeys across spaces he has already traversed, namely, his mind’s masculinist logic from A to Q, he lives in a gendered world: “he perceived . . . his wife and son, together, in a window.” Roped into his masculinist ideology, they “needed his protection” (33–34).

As Mr. Ramsay exerts himself to reach the unreachable R up the epistemological mountain of ideas—“he braced himself. He clenched himself” (34)—gender categories fade in importance. He enters an experience beyond masculinist hierarchy and gender binaries. Woolf narrates his exertion toward a deeper bodily reality as a mountain climb: “now that the snow has begun to fall and the mountain top is covered in mist,” Mr. Ramsay “would find some crag of rock, and there . . . he would die standing. He would never reach R” (35). Like Stephen atop Mont Blanc, Mr. Ramsay’s heroic impulse is checked

by the realization that he is small, for “if you look from a mountain top down the long wastes of the ages,” one sees that the “very stone one kicks with one’s boot will outlast” male accomplishments, even Shakespeare’s, let alone those of a man such as Mr. Ramsay unable to reach R. As the mountain gets bigger, masculinism fades. When Mr. Ramsay awakens after imaginatively falling asleep on the mountain-top, his resurrected subjectivity is more queer than male. He begins as a masculinist “fine figure of a soldier” (36), but atop the imaginary mountain he sheds his masculinism, “puts his armour off.”

This shedding of masculinism allows Mr. Ramsay to perceive bodies as geological. In place of the mountain, Mr. Ramsay sees Mrs. Ramsay, suggesting that the two—mountain and Mrs. Ramsay—share a unity. Mrs. Ramsay becomes, in Mr. Ramsay’s perception, an “unfamiliar” (36) form in a landscape of change and motion: the “snow has begun to fall” (35) amid “the mist.” This moment recalls the photograph of Stephen observing Julia in Grindelwald. In Stephen’s writing, the figure for subjectivity is the shapeshifting continuum between Mont Blanc and his body. In the photograph, Stephen beholds Julia as part of the “network of forces eternally acting and reacting upon each other” (296), as a geomorphic shape as fluid as the Wetterhorn. Similarly, Mr. Ramsay perceives Mrs. Ramsay as fluid expanse: his “wife and son, who very distant at first, gradually come closer and closer, till lips and book and head are clearly before him, though still lovely and unfamiliar” (36). Like Stephen letting go of gender categories, Mr. Ramsay drops masculinist “armour” and gains fluidity in the ways he perceives bodies. Both Stephen in the photograph and Mr. Ramsay may behold “wife” no longer as a gendered form but as “lovely and unfamiliar,” as surprising as witnessing a peak’s strange contours and colors. Before the ascent, Mr. Ramsay aims for a metaphysical truth. But atop the summit, he sheds masculinist logic, even if only momentarily, a release that opens his perception beyond masculinism. Mr. Ramsay releases the masculinist knowledge of R to gain a sense of connection when he perceives the form of Mrs. Ramsay not exactly as “wife and mother” but rather as “unfamiliar,” queer, outside patriarchal orthodoxy, like the contours of mountain.

The narrator of *To the Lighthouse* follows Mr. Ramsay’s queer perception of Mrs. Ramsay. To be sure, Mrs. Ramsay exists on one plane of reality as a gendered “she,” either enacting what Annis Pratt identifies as “the Prototypical Mother” (417)—the nurturing Angel of the House—or embodying the other extreme, the “Devouring Female” with a mania to discipline others’ sexual lives into heteropatriarchy. But knitting in the drawing room, “cut out from the world”



(Stephen 310) like Stephen's Mont Blanc, Mrs. Ramsay embodies a queer reality. Woolf refers to her as an ungendered "core of darkness" (62), whose range of motion becomes so vast ("this core of darkness could go anywhere"; "no one . . . could . . . stop it") that Woolf deploys a spiritual vocabulary, echoing Stephen's spiritual vocabulary as well as recalling religious imagery of the church in the Grindelwald photograph. Mrs. Ramsay "push[es] aside the thick leather curtain of a church in Rome" to behold something so mysterious it evades description. In an identity-based epistemology, Mrs. Ramsay as a woman would likely not be permitted to reach a secret curtain in a Roman cathedral to experience spiritual mystery. But on a deeper geological level, Mrs. Ramsay is released into a mountainous shape of darkness that surprises so much it nearly evades representation ("no one saw it" and thus "they could not stop it"), recalling Stephen's idea that geological forces are more absorbed than willed into subjectivity. Mrs. Ramsay's subjectivity—like Stephen's atop Mont Blanc and Mont Blanc itself—soars beyond gendered terms without an act of will. Mrs. Ramsay inhabits a geological presence not only within grand Alpine peaks but also in a ramshackle drawing room. In Woolf's world, adventuring beyond the edge of gender identity into geological corporeality is not only a prerogative of male mountaineers, but also the birthright of women knitting at home.

In the mountains, Stephen awakens to hidden elements of material reality that become evident. As we shall see, Woolf uses this insight to narrate inner layers of Mrs. Ramsay. One of the most important things Stephen notices in the mountains is their interior vitality, which is part of their essence. "You begin to find out for the first time what the mountains really are" (378), Stephen writes; as you climb "you see the vast stores from which the great rivers of Europe are replenished, the monstrous crawling masses that are carving the mountains into shape, and the gigantic bulwarks that separate two great quarters of the world" (378–79). Qualities of both the outward shape and their interior nuances remain unknown to those who do not climb: "From below these wild regions are half invisible" (379); from below one cannot see "the great ridges" that "run hither and thither, having it all their own way" among "wild and untameable regions of rock or open grass or forest." Those who do not climb "fail to understand the massiveness of the mountain chains, and, therefore, the wonderful energy of the forces that have heaved the surface of the world into these distorted shapes" (380). Mountaineering, to Stephen, enables one to notice new and unfamiliar appearances—"distorted shapes"—and their secret, "vast stores" of interior dynamism.

Mrs. Ramsay resembles a mountain to the degree that she, too, manifests stores of interior vitality. We have seen the ways her form shifts across darks and lights as she absorbs these qualities from the lighthouse, much like Stephen's dark mountains blazing into radiance. Stephen observes that the peak "seems gradually to mould itself out of darkness . . . and then to light up with an ethereal fire" (158). In an experience Mrs. Ramsay describes as "this eternity" (63), she witnesses what Stephen might call another kind of peak "light up" (158): the lighthouse's "long steady stroke" (63) of light "was her stroke." Her body unites with moving light "stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight" (65); and the light "rolled in waves of pure lemon which curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and the ecstasy burst in her eyes and waves of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind." The water imagery flowing both on the surface ("the floor") and within ("the floor of her mind," "in her brain," and "in her eyes") recalls stores of water Stephen witnesses when climbing in the mountains. This scene also presents a queer copulation of light and Mrs. Ramsay, which, like Stephen and Mont Blanc, become one. Light enters and becomes Mrs. Ramsay's body: brain, eyes, the "floor of her mind," and the physical sensations such as bursting and delight. Geology finds expression as the motion she experiences, the fluidity coursing through her, the secret reserves surging within her, and the light she manifests.

Woolf's literary geomorphism does more than queer the body. Woolf also queers geology by giving it desire. Geological forces desire Mrs. Ramsay's body.<sup>12</sup> The light "strokes" her and thus moves into and as Mrs. Ramsay. Light in this passage needs Mrs. Ramsay to achieve its fullness of motion. Without Mrs. Ramsay's body, the light's range of motion would be smaller. The extent of its "stroking" and "rolling" would be shorter. Geology would have less substance (fewer eyes, brains, floors of mind, and physical sensations) were it not for Mrs. Ramsay's body. The novel's middle section, "Time Passes," disturbs readers not only because human beings exit the novel's reality, but also because geology itself appears emptier as human presence exits its reality. Without human bodies, geology has less matter with which to mix and move. Geology needs human bodies to achieve its fullness. The timeless substance Mrs. Ramsay shares with mountains—motion, darks, and lights—constitutes a deeper property of Mrs. Ramsay's physicality. This deeper corporeality is an ultimate truth or reality that Woolf calls "spirit" ("Modern Fiction" 149), a "life" that exists as part of the body. Like Stephen's geological corporeality and Mont

Blanc ablaze with radiance, Mrs. Ramsay's body elaborates the substance of geology in which she revels in freedom. Long considered the prototypical Angel of the House, Mrs. Ramsay demonstrates that this angel is at bottom queer, more a mixed embodiment of geology's moving lights and darks than woman.

### **To the Light: A Journey Beyond Epistemological Divisions**

Victorian womanhood shapes Mrs. Ramsay's experience, but never fully defines her subjectivity. Mrs. Ramsay's presence as an agent of queer geologies continues in the novel's final section, "The Lighthouse," after her gendered body dies. By extending Mrs. Ramsay's agency beyond her death, Woolf amplifies queer agency that exceeds gendered epistemologies and orthodoxies of time. Grosz posits that an "impersonal internal ordering principle of the universe" (56) is "immanent" in all matter and thus constitutes "vast causal networks that bring all things into connection with each other." What I have been calling geological corporeality is akin to Grosz's "impersonal internal ordering principle of the universe"; it runs through Mrs. Ramsay—the figure in *To the Lighthouse* who represents most explicitly "vast causal networks" among characters that enable "relations into new orders" (13)—and extends beyond heteropatriarchy to unfurl after her death as before it. I turn now to showing how Mrs. Ramsay's geomorphism expands both women's and men's subjectivities beyond heteropatriarchy. The persistence of her geological agency liberates, for instance, her son James's subjectivity from tired masculinism. In this section, I focus on the ways in which James, as progeny of a queer geological "family saga" (Bjornerud 6), inherits geological agency from his mother, a Darwinian inheritance that emerges years after her death and bridges his division from his father.

Woolf's description of Mrs. Ramsay's lasting geomorphic influence echoes Stephen's observations about mountains' agency. Stephen notices that the "fires" (310) that peaks radiate never go out; they only change form. Atop Mont Blanc, Stephen witnesses that the "lights went out" (312), making the peak appear "livid" and "swallowed up in the general shade of night." But the grandeur of Mont Blanc never fades; it only changes. When Mont Blanc seems to disappear, its other luminous substance comes to the fore, for the "magnificence of the scenery seemed to increase. We were between the day and the night. The western heavens were of the most brilliant blue with spaces of transparent green, whilst a few scattered cloudlets glowed as if with internal fire" as "the unbroken disc of the

full moon" appears, "totally unable to keep the darkness in order" (313), breaking up the night. In the mountains, the motion of light, shape, and color continues to surprise darkness into change after the substance of mountains seems extinguished. Mountains move in darkness to further changes of light. The substance of geology—in this case mountainous light in motion—bridges divisions: "we were between the day and the night." What had been divisions are now overtaken by unifiers: kaleidoscopic lights.

Stephen frames the mountainscape as "strangely wild scenery" (279). Framing is an activity that does not delimit mountains but is rather a technique to witness their wildness. Recalling the photograph of Julia, Woolf opens the novel by centralizing Mrs. Ramsay inside "the window" (3) frame with her son James. The novel's focus is on the strange wildness of Mrs. Ramsay not only as a Victorian mother, but also as a force of geological agency. Mrs. Ramsay's mountainous subjectivity is so wild it freewheels from her to James. Mrs. Ramsay's light floods through James and bonds him to her geological essence even though he may not recognize this invisible activity. We recall that both Stephen and Mrs. Ramsay experience geology immanent in their bodies even as they do "not directly mak[e] it a subject of contemplation" (Stephen 290). Geology works the same way for James's body. Like Stephen's body absorbing the mountain's spirit and Mrs. Ramsay's body elaborating lights and darks, James inherits geological radiance and motion by virtue of his proximity to his mother's wild splendor.

James's absorption of his mother's queer light and motion is his ontological condition. "The expedition" (3) to the lighthouse, James rejoices, is "bound to take place . . . after a night's darkness and a day's sail." The luminosity inhering in Mrs. Ramsay's body enters James's body in the form of the "day" that he looks forward to after the "darkness," emphasized by the "radiance" he absorbs "sitting on the floor" beside his mother. In the same way that Stephen's and Mrs. Ramsay's bodies become less gendered and more geomorphic, James inherits motion loosened from gender categories from his mother. Motion is James's primary orientation to life: the expedition to the lighthouse that Mrs. Ramsay sets up for him eventually happens, albeit not in the sequence James predicts ("after a night's darkness and a day's sail"). Mrs. Ramsay's darkness-radiance—the substance of geology that needs her to express itself and elaborate in James—moves James's body onward throughout his life. James orients his body toward his mother's light, the same quality of light as the lighthouse in the novel's final section. James is always interacting

with Mrs. Ramsay, whether during her mortal life or after it. James's childhood mobility expands into greater range through interaction with his mother's physicality, for she "went from the dining-room, holding James by the hand, since he would not go with the others" (8). James's range of motion grows through his bond with his mother's substance: in this case, her hand. Mrs. Ramsay's hand is a substance of geology that expands James's physical and imaginative mobility when he is otherwise stuck. James coheres as a character less through maleness and more through his orientation to be moved by geological presence, in this case a presence that takes the form of his mother.

James not only absorbs interactive motion from his mother, but also inherits the capacity to get stuck on masculinist orthodoxy like his father. Mr. Ramsay marches through A to Q, and James, similarly, tends to march through masculinist logics. James "had always kept" (184) the "old symbol" of phallogenic imagery since he was a child "of taking a knife and striking his father to the heart" for what James perceives as Mr. Ramsay's masculinist "secret conceit at his own accuracy of judgment" (4). This world of phallic insularity—penetrating knives and one's "own" narrow judgment—confines James's body and imagination to violent impulses. Mrs. Ramsay's geological sensibilities allow experiences beyond these impulses. On the opening pages, we read Mrs. Ramsay's language untethered to the tired linearity that preoccupies Mr. Ramsay. Mrs. Ramsay freestyles toward the light(house): "Yes," "of course," "but," "if" (3). The freewheeling form of the sentence parallels the type of motion commensurate with mountainscapes' wildness.

When James experiences his mother's ontology of light and motion years later, his body, like his father's atop the imaginative mountain, becomes more flexible. Mrs. Ramsay's substance continues to expand James's motion after her death, enabling him greater bodily and imaginative freedom, much as she herself experiences it. Though the material of Mrs. Ramsay's substance changes, its essence as motion and light remains constant. In "The Lighthouse," James is carried forward no longer by Mrs. Ramsay's hand, but rather by the substance of her motion and light, even if, recalling Stephen, he may not recognize this reality. Moving toward the light(house)—the substance of his mother—enables James to release himself from gendered constraints, like his father learns to do atop an imaginative mountain. James's physicality—what his eyes see—becomes enhanced by fluidity. Sailing with his father and sister, James observes the lighthouse not so much as a phallogenic object, but as a peak of fluidity resembling Stephen's mountains and a gravestone that resembles

a lighthouse in the photograph with Julia. The lighthouse's fluid shape recalls his mother's freedom in the drawing room when she embodies prismatic motion:

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 . . . 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. . . . In the evening . . . the light seemed to reach them in that airy sunny garden where they sat. (186)

Approaching the lighthouse, James moves toward the core—darkness-turned-radiance—of his mother. Just as the gravestones Julia stands among in the photograph signal death, they also evoke resurrection into the light(house). Mrs. Ramsay, as a vessel of geological light, resurrects. On one level of reality, her mortal body has died. On another level, Mrs. Ramsay's substance as shifting darks and lights, which James beholds in lighthouse form, persists. The lighthouse shares the same fluid substance as Mrs. Ramsay and mountains: "black and white" hues, as well as fluid rock. Woolf emphasizes the mountainous material of the lighthouse as rock: the lighthouse "was a stark tower on a bare rock" (203); "the Lighthouse stood there on its rock," seemingly fixed. But Woolf, like her father, recognizes in rock an enormous force of motion: fluidity acting like light. In a scene infused with geological vocabulary, the lighthouse appears atop "rocking waves" (206) which are "rolling and gambolling and slapping the rocks as if they were wild creatures who were perfectly free and tossed and tumbled and sported like this for ever" (207). As Woolf would have learned from reading Stephen, the substance of mountains tosses and tumbles forever as light does. Geological light and rock change forms. The lighthouse changes in James's perception, a change echoing Stephen's perception of the peaks. Both lighthouse and mountain peak are "sometimes hardly to be seen," and might be understood, like Mrs. Ramsay, to be swallowed by darkness. Yet just when the lighthouse—like the peak and Mrs. Ramsay—seems erased, its different quality of light blazes, touching and transforming James. In reaching the lighthouse, James reaches eternal geological substance: motion, light, and rock. He thus comes into touch with his mother's substance: fluidity, light, and rock. The lighthouse's "light . . . seemed to reach them." The light functions as a transfiguration of Mrs. Ramsay's hand that led James as a child and

expanded his range of motion. Mrs. Ramsay continues to bequeath her son the queer genetics of geology: the DNA of light. Light fades and flares, but never extinguishes. Mrs. Ramsay, an agent of light, directs bodies onward to more light, which happens to be their own inborn essence.

This journey toward shared light is a journey of healing. It restores people to experiences of their essences as light, experiences they were pulled from recognizing while under trances of masculinism. On this journey to experience both his mother's and his own luminous essence, James undergoes a release from heteropatriarchy's "old symbol[s]" (184), one of which is his heteropatriarchal perception of his father. James thus inherits from his mother a queer-feminist freedom from patriarchal perception. As James approaches the substance of geology—the lighthouse's rocks, his mother's light—epistemological divisions such as gender dissolve. James deepens his intimacy with his sister and heals the troubled relationship with his father. James wonders, with his sister Cam, "What was it" Mr. Ramsay "sought, so fixedly, so intently, so silently?" (207). James and his sister "watched" Mr. Ramsay "sitting bareheaded with his parcel on his knee . . . What do you want? they both wanted to ask. They both wanted to say, 'Ask us anything and we will give it you' . . . but he said nothing." Heteropatriarchal categories that have hardened James's perception of himself and his father melt. James comes to see his father in more ontological, "bare" terms, as Mrs. Ramsay sees herself, occupying a subjectivity more wildly tossing and tumbling than gendered. On reaching the novel's Mont Blanc—the lighthouse, that tower of shifting lights and darks—James sees his father more as an open-ended wonder than a patriarch, similarly to the ways Stephen learns to see himself as a fluid question atop Mont Blanc. James, approaching the lighthouse like Stephen approaching Mont Blanc, understands himself less as a man and more as a (genderless) seeker. James's male consciousness blends with his sister's consciousness. Gender distinctions between sister and brother become less important than a unifying wonder about their father's subjectivity, a wonder more akin to the ways Mr. Ramsay perceives the world after he lets go of an epistemological R.

Though Mrs. Ramsay's gendered body has died, the geological agents of light and motion coursing through her body persist. This strand of her agency continues its work through James's body and enables queer-feminist reimaginings of subjectivity for him, as he learns to move, imagine, and reach realities beyond masculinist logics that had confined him since childhood. The freedoms of Mrs. Ramsay's

queer ontology, Woolf shows, are not only available to bodies coded as female. James furthers his mother's queer subjectivity by accessing the properties of her geological vitalism. Though this vitalism might be interrupted by heteropatriarchy, it is never completely stopped by it.

While those on the boat experience Mrs. Ramsay's geological corporeality, the painter Lily Briscoe does so on land. In painting Mrs. Ramsay as geometric shapes and moving lines, Lily uses not only post-impressionist technique, but also mountaineering's repertoire. Lily translates into painting the shapes and hues Mrs. Ramsay uses to describe her subjectivity, and the shapes Stephen uses to describe mountains: lines, masses, lights, and darks. The novel's overtly queer subject, Lily readily connects to the queer geomorphism of the characters. Lily limns Mrs. Ramsay's subjectivity as a "shadow here and a light there" (52), since "in that corner" of the painting "it was bright," so "she felt the need of darkness" in another corner: "a light here required a shadow there" (53). This painting "of the relations of masses, of lights and shadows" is spiritual, one of "veneration" (52) not so different from Stephen's reverence of geological grandeur atop Mont Blanc. Lily recognizes the queer dimension to her veneration, for she corrects Mr. Banks when he says her painting represents gendered identities of "Mother and child." "But the picture was not of them, [Lily] said. Or, not in his sense," for "there were other senses too in which one might reverence" Mrs. Ramsay and James, "by a shadow here and a light there, for instance." In reverencing Mrs. Ramsay and James more as geological shapes and colors than gender roles, Lily echoes Mr. Ramsay's, Stephen's, and even James's geological perspectives. As such, Lily translates into art the queer subjectivities that Mrs. Ramsay experiences in the drawing room, that Mr. Ramsay experiences released from compulsion toward R, and that James experiences on the boat.

Ending the novel with a queer painter's "vision" (209) of queer geological bodies, Woolf opens avenues for what it means to see each other queerly. The appeal of expanding perspectives called to mountaineers as well. Building on Ann Banfield's observations, Hollis writes that for Stephen and many mountaineers, "a perspective is a 'point of view,' whether or not it is currently occupied by a perceiver" (*Leslie Stephen* 42). For instance, a perspective atop Mont Blanc "await[s] the arrival of a perceiver," Hollis writes; Stephen climbed "in pursuit of a previously unseen perception." The perspective atop the peaks exists whether anyone perceives it. Stephen "sets out to see" a reality that "no one has seen before." Both Lily as painter and Woolf as novelist work toward a "previously unseen perception" of human subjectivity



whose existence does not depend on anyone noticing it. Although it is easiest to perceive ourselves and others as gendered subjects of heteropatriarchy, Lily, Mr. Ramsay, Mrs. Ramsay, and ultimately Woolf urge us to make the effort to look toward a different “reality” (“Modern Fiction” 149), to see from a different perspective, to view each other as elaborations of a queer “life or spirit.” Painting Mrs. Ramsay as the shapes and hues Mrs. Ramsay applies to herself, Lily concludes the novel with a Woolfian “truth or reality” that our bodies are expressions of a shared geological agency. This agent might be queer to the degree that it seems to be a “hidden . . . pattern” (“A Sketch of the Past” 72)—“the thing itself,” “truth or reality” (“Modern Fiction” 149), “life or spirit”—that equalizes us regardless of heteropatriarchal hallucinations to divide and hierarchize. A gendered role, both one that we take on and one imposed on us, cannot override Woolf’s reality that we may at bottom be emanations of geological grandeur.

Perceiving this “truth or reality” of human subjectivity may be Lily’s hard-won “vision” (209). By deciding to place Lily’s vision as the novel’s final word, Woolf urges us to commit to sustained effort, to press through “extreme fatigue” like an artist or mountaineer, to do the hard work of re-seeing ourselves and each other not through heteropatriarchy’s distorted lenses, but through realities of rock and light. We will know we have arrived atop the summit—as Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, Stephen, and Lily know—when we perceive each other not as adversaries (patriarch versus feminist) but as geology’s revered progeny, a family of shifting lights and darks in motion.

### **“Arguing With Him”: Woolf’s Climb from Rage to Healing**

In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf describes dialoguing with her deceased father while penning *To the Lighthouse*. It makes sense, then, that she experiments in this novel with “new words” (*Three Guineas* 170) and “new methods” for narrating geological corporeality borrowed from her father’s writing on mountaineering. Writing the novel, Woolf exchanges language with Stephen, “arguing with him” (“A Sketch of the Past” 108). Through “arguing,” Woolf negotiates with his language, an exchange Woolf characterizes as “rage” that “alternated with love.” Woolf applies Stephen’s Alpinist language to feminist aims. By applying her father’s language to unlock more of a geologically infused than patriarchally determined subjectivity, Woolf works to heal from the “rage” the patriarch provokes. She aestheticizes his language to advance healing and love. She does so by laboring

to see the patriarch not in patriarchal terms but in geological ones: the patriarch is less a man than a geological presence of elemental darks and lights. In seeing him this way, Woolf detaches embodiment from masculinist possession and attaches it instead to a nobler, more beautiful reality in her novels: geological immensity.

In two short but moving passages from *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf narrates a moment of father-daughter and patriarch-woman artist healing through imagery of mountains. In one scene, Mrs. Ramsay enters the servants' quarters in a "spasm of irritation" (28) with the household because "none of them" (27) could "remember" "that windows should be open, and doors shut." In her room, Marie, the "Swiss girl" repeats "the mountains are so beautiful" (27–28) three times in one paragraph, a phrase that causes Mrs. Ramsay to pause. The intertwined language of beauty and mountains interrupts Mrs. Ramsay's anger. Mrs. Ramsay remembers Marie's "father was dying . . . He was leaving them fatherless" (28). Initially "scolding and demonstrating," suddenly "all had folded itself quietly about" Mrs. Ramsay. "She had stood there silent for there was nothing to be said." Marie's language for her father in the mountains calms Mrs. Ramsay's anger and shows her another possible emotional state: peace.

Later, the accoutrements of mountaineering—boots—heal a relationship for the New Woman artist from "ill-temper" (153) to "infinite pathos" (154) for the patriarch rendered human. Lily has returned to the Ramsay vacation home after the family's ten-year absence. As Lily sets up her canvas, Mr. Ramsay imposes his heteropatriarchal ideology of female subservience: "You shan't touch your canvas, he seemed to say, bearing down on her, till you've given me what I want of you" (150): sympathy. Lily will not bow down to heteropatriarchal imposition, but neither can she dismiss his underlying human need to be understood and recognized, even when expressed in a lamentably heteropatriarchal way. While not giving Mr. Ramsay sympathy, Lily reaches out to Mr. Ramsay on a different register, through the fundamental equipment of mountaineering: "What beautiful boots!" she exclaimed" (153). Lily expects to receive "one of his sudden roars of ill-temper, complete annihilation." But "instead, Mr. Ramsay smiled. His pall, his draperies, his infirmities fell from him," and, "at this completely inappropriate moment" (154), Lily becomes "so tormented with sympathy for him . . . she felt her eyes swell and tingle with tears. . . . He tied knots. He bought boots. There was no helping Mr. Ramsay on the journey he was going." Mountaineering basics allow the New Woman artist to reframe an exchange with the patriarch from resentment to compassion.

Woolf uses mountaineering discourse to engage with the memory of her father in a healing way, to fold quietly away the tensions that flare between ideologies—whether between two men such as Mr. Ramsay and James, or between women artists (Woolf and Lily) and the patriarch. “So much depends . . . upon distance” (191), Lily notes. By distancing herself from her own attachment to perceiving bodies as gendered, the woman artist creates an alternative way to perceive bodies. It is in this expansive space, as atop a mountain, that she begins to forge a re-seeing of subjectivity and heal. Woolf thus parallels Lily’s discoveries through painting with Stephen’s discoveries through climbing. On the novel’s concluding pages, Lily stands with a masculine figure, Augustus Carmichael, atop a peak, and finishes her painting: “[Carmichael] stood there as if he were spreading his hands over all the weakness and suffering of mankind; she thought he was surveying, tolerantly and compassionately, their final destiny. Now he has crowned the occasion, she thought, when his hand slowly fell, as if she had seen him let fall from his great height a wreath of violets and asphodels which, fluttering slowly, lay at length upon the earth” (208). Carmichael, divining atop this imaginative mountain, has been understood to be based on Thomas Hardy, a friend of Stephen’s. Yet this scene also resembles a paragraph Stephen wrote about himself in *The Playground of Europe*: “One felt as if some immortal being with no particular duties upon his hands, might be calmly sitting upon these desolate rocks and watching the little shadowy wrinkles of the plain, that were real mountain ranges, rise and fall through slow geological epochs” (94). Stephen’s masculine diviner atop a mountain conjures his own epiphany about peace.

Carmichael, perhaps as a stand-in for Stephen, accompanies Lily’s—and I would add Woolf’s—ascend to visionary peace. Despite mountaineering’s reputation for masculinism, Carmichael and Stephen are less men who deny women space atop the mountain as they are fellow geomorphic sojourners with a woman artist, whether Woolf or Lily, who are themselves geomorphic. Experiences of geomorphism are shared across gender lines, even dissolving them. The elemental (ontology) unites what ideology (epistemology) miscasts as divisions. The figure of mountains evoked by lights and darks places competing ideologies in new perspective and smaller importance. The quiet grandeur of mountains, Woolf finally shows, coaxes in an artist a perspectival shift from “hating” (*TL* 31) and “rage” (“A Sketch of the Past” 108) to a different, more peaceful vision. If healing is a willingness to see harsh divisions soften (human and mountain, patriarch and New Woman, life and death), then healing is possibly a shared motivation across Stephen’s mountaineering, Woolf’s characters, and her literary art.

## Notes

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1. For more on Stephen's specific climbs, see the appendix "Leslie Stephen's Climbing Resumé" (57) in Hollis's *Leslie Stephen as Mountaineer*.
2. In what might be understood as Woolf's modernist literature manifesto, "Modern Fiction," she urges literary artists to perceive new realities, for she is tired of "pages [filled in the customary way]" (149), of having to "provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest." Woolf's urge to perceive differently echoes her father atop the mountains: "Look within," Woolf suggests, "and life, it seems, is very far from being 'like this.'" She asks, "Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?" (150).
3. I thank Judith Brown for this interpretation of the Woolfian "wedge" in conversation.
4. One photograph from this trip shows Julia gazing out of a window at the Bear Hotel in Grindelwald and is described in a Smith College archival catalogue as Vanessa Bell's "favorite photograph of her mother" (qtd. in Hollis, *Leslie Stephen* 56).
5. Some readers might wonder why I explore Mrs. Ramsay rather than Orlando as representative of geomorphic subjectivity. After all, Orlando is seemingly immortal, living across eons of time, perhaps like a mountain. My essay is less interested in considering queer geological subjectivity as a supernatural fantasy requiring a tale of heroic proportions, as in *Orlando*, than in queer geological subjectivity as an everyday reality embodied by Victorian women such as Mrs. Ramsay. Additionally, through its focus on the Ramsay family, *To the Lighthouse* narrates bodies entwined within what Bjornerud calls a geological "family saga" (6) in a more pronounced manner than does *Orlando*.
6. This essay focuses on the ways Stephen's writing on mountains is surprisingly queer and impacts Woolf's writing of a queer Mrs. Ramsay. There

is exciting work to be done on the degree to which Victorian women mountaineering impacted literary modernism, and especially Woolf's. There were a number of Victorian women mountaineers, including Annie Smith Peck, Lucy Walker, Meta Brevoort, and, later, Sarah Katherine Richardson, Margaret Jackson, and Emily Hornby. For more on these outdoorswomen, see Brown and Roche. Though the present essay draws out queer threads of subjectivity in Stephen's writing and follows these threads in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, I invite future scholars to study the ways in which women mountaineers' ascents influenced modernist literature, including Woolf's.

7. I borrow the beautiful turns-of-phrase "absorption of the body by vast powers of the earth, and ever-changing perspectives" from an anonymous reviewer of the essay.
8. Garrington associates Woolfian mountains in "The Symbol" with masculinism. Woolf, according to Garrington, equates mountaineering with the masculinism of the Great War in which men die senseless deaths and undergo "youth wasted in war" (89). My essay follows a different, reparative thread to Woolf's application of mountaineering's vocabulary, finding in it an affirmation of life, beauty, and freedom from gender orthodoxies.
9. Fleming writes, "In mythology and religion [mountains] had divine significance: Noah's Ark landed on a mountain; Moses received the Commandments on a mountain; the classical gods dwelled on a mountain; and the Celts worshipped numerous mountain deities whose names can still be found on modern maps" (51).
10. For a detailed account of this rich materialist lineage, including its philosophical limits, see Elizabeth Grosz's *The Incorporal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism*.
11. In her memoir "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf writes, "I call him [Stephen] a strange character" (107), applying that most famous of literary elements—character—to write toward a fuller understanding of her father.
12. I thank Ryan Tracy for pointing out to me the queerness of geological desire in this passage.

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