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College Literature, Volume 52, Number 3, Summer 2025, pp. 356-389
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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CALM MODERNISM: VIRGINIA WOOLF, KAZIMIR MALEVICH, AND ETERNAL REST

BENJAMIN BAGOCIUS

Abstract: Critics have studied Virginia Woolf's literary aesthetics through lenses of Western European art movements such as Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. Woolf's aesthetic affinities with art movements from a Russian tradition such as Kazimir Malevich's Suprematism have gone unremarked. Both Malevich's painting *Black Square* (1915), his definitive representation of Suprematism, and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), her most painterly novel, apply figurations of darkness to indicate an infinite cosmos of restful nothingness as supreme reality or the essence of existence. Malevich's and Woolf's shared aesthetic thus reveals a calm modernism different from critical associations of modernism with heightened conflict. Yet Woolf might be said to add a feminist angle to this aesthetic she shares with Malevich. Mrs. Ramsay as a "core of darkness" is released from gendered labor into what she experiences as "this peace, this rest, this eternity." Woolf thus suggests that entwinement with cosmological peace may be a more fundamental feature of modernist subjectivity than confinement to a gendered socio-politics of struggle.

Keywords: *To The Lighthouse*, *Black Square*, Suprematism, mysticism, Russian art

CALM MODERNISM

Modernity is typically understood as a period defined by artistic, psychological, and sociopolitical tumult. Ezra Pound's famous injunction to the modernist artist to challenge convention and "make it new" carries on a discourse of contention characterizing much of his preceding generation's writing. Modernists were born into dynamic discourses for conflict shaped by writers and thinkers as diverse as Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud, for instance. Darwin's famous "struggle for life" in the natural world, Nietzsche's overcoming *Übermensch* in philosophy, Marx's call for proletariat revolution, and Freud's competing drives within the psyche could be seen collectively to portend the emergence of modernity as all-consuming struggle, perhaps horrifically exemplified in two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century (Darwin 1859, 61). Modernist artists and writers thus had an overwhelm of discourses of struggle that they adopted and repurposed for renderings of artistic, psychic, and sociopolitical upheaval. Indeed, a valuation of challenge and struggle may be considered a modernist convention.

Two iconic modernist artworks—Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927)—suggest a calmer alternative amid modernist orthodoxies of strife (see Figure 1). These artworks reveal a restful modernist sensibility that withdraws from sociopolitical and discursive patterns of tumult and calms rather into an experience we might call nothingness, or eternal rest and cosmological peace sensed in the self as supreme reality, or the *real* real, impervious to sociopolitical and linguistic turmoil.¹ I call this restful strand in Malevich's and Woolf's artworks "calm modernism." Calm modernism is both an artistic objective and formal move in their works to trace an inward existence of "rest" and "peace" unaffected by modernity's compulsions for "the fret, the hurry" (Woolf 1981, 62–63).

To render calm modernism, both Malevich's painting and Woolf's novel entwine ideas of rest with figurations of darkness. Malevich upholds *Black Square* as the definitive representation of his artistic orientation he calls Suprematism.² With Suprematism, Malevich indicates chief reality: nothingness, non-activity, nonbeing, non-object, what he calls "eternal rest" in his book *Suprematizm. Mir kak bespredmetnost', ili Vechnyi pokoi* (Suprematism. The World as Non-Objectivity, or Eternal Rest [1922]). The Bauhaus in Germany published

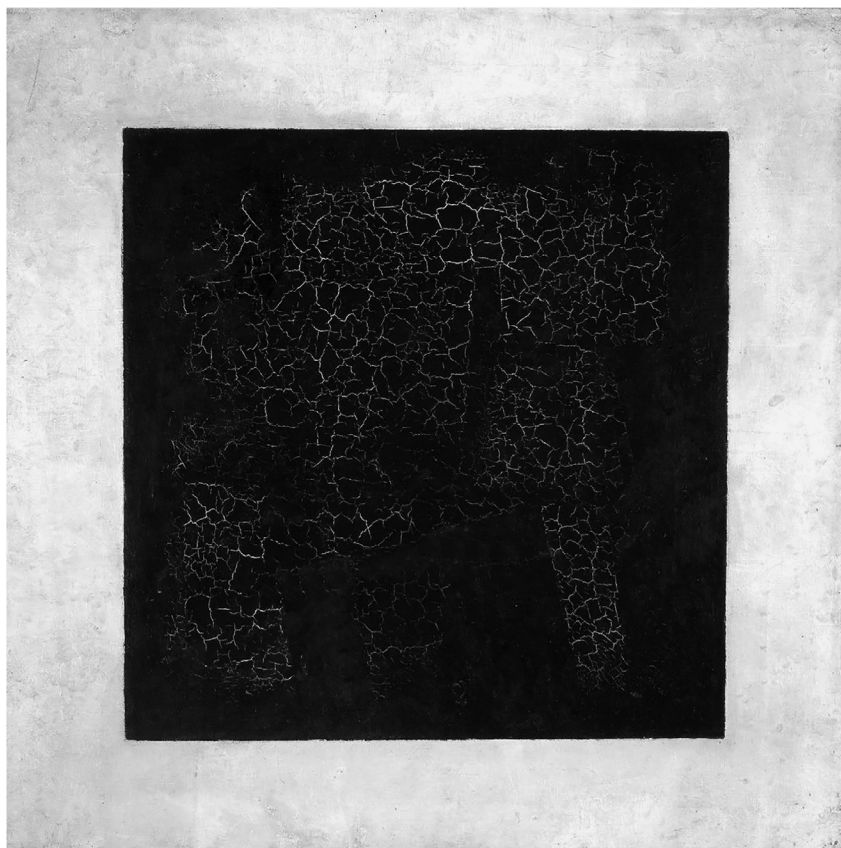


Figure 1. Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915, oil on linen, 79.5 cm x 79.5 cm, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

this text as *Die gegenstandslose Welt* (*The Non-Objective World*) in 1927, the same year Woolf published *To the Lighthouse*. A prolific writer, Malevich upholds *Black Square* as a prime example of “non-objective feeling” that demonstrates his “leaving ‘the world of will and idea’ as clutter that buries reality: eternal rest (1959, 8). Malevich calls this material, artistic, and psychic clutter the hallucination “in which I had lived and worked and the reality in which I had believed” before shifting his mind and artistic approach to “a blissful feeling of liberating non-objectivity,” restful nothingness (Malevich 1959, 8).

Black Square indicates supreme reality as eternal nothingness, cleared of materialities and discourses. Malevich describes “pure art” as “non-objectivity,” the presentation of nothingness (Malevich

quoted in Herbert 2000, 118). The only “thing” that exists in supreme reality is paradoxically a no thing, a nothing. Malevich writes, “a ‘nothing’ at the same time is a ‘thing’” (Malevich quoted in Sakhno 2021). The “thing” that emerges for Malevich when materials and discourses dissolve in importance is the existence of nothingness. *Black Square* invites painting beyond “objective representation”—or “verisimilitude”—which has come to be “the only thing admired” in art, and thus obscures what to him is primary reality: dark and restful nothingness underneath the frantic “accumulation of things,” both in typical paintings and in modern life (Malevich quoted in Herbert 2000, 118). According to art historian Irina Sakhno, *Black Square* indicates “Nothingness liberated.” “Rest and meditative contemplation,” Sakhno continues, “the infinity of space and the esoteric emptiness—the essence of total perfection—all of these are similar to the eternal ‘Nothingness’” that *Black Square* presents (Sakhno 2021). Likewise, Woolf applies figures of darkness to narrate restful nothingness when material pressures evaporate. Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* is a “core of darkness” who experiences “this rest, this peace, this eternity” released from material and discursive pressures (1981, 62). As a core of darkness, Mrs. Ramsay feels that “all the being and the doing” and “the vocal, evaporated,” and with them “the fret, the hurry, the stir” (62–63). Silent, unhurried darkness occupies a central position in both artworks to indicate calm modernism: a modern subject’s sense of eternal rest apart from sociopolitical conflict for which the modern era is better known.

Artist Susan Gallagher, in her cover illustration of the 1981 edition of *To the Lighthouse*, emphasizes Mrs. Ramsay’s orientation to black squares and her deliverance to peace (see Figure 2). Half of the illustration is black squares; the other half is Mrs. Ramsay, suggesting a symmetry between the two figures. In the image, Mrs. Ramsay places a hat on her head, perhaps on her way out to run an “errand in town; she had a letter to write; she would be ten minutes; she would put on her hat,” busy with “all the being and the doing” (Woolf 1981, 9). But in Gallagher’s illustration, the window—the black squares—invite Mrs. Ramsay to pause “the hurry, the stir” and allow herself a moment to gaze into a black square as if it might be a reflection of herself. In pausing to see a black square, Mrs. Ramsay pauses to see herself, a “core of darkness.” In what follows, we shall explore the novel’s several instances of Mrs. Ramsay gazing into dark windows and her instant deliverance from “the fret, the hurry” to “this rest, this eternity.”

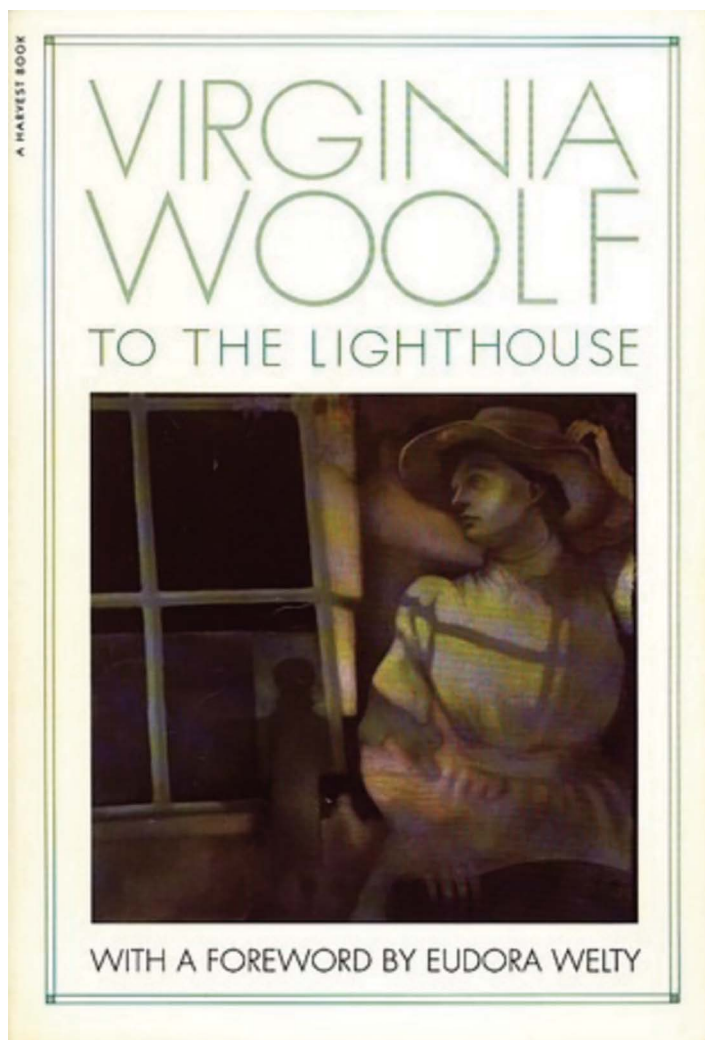


Figure 2. Cover illustration of *To the Lighthouse*, by Susan Gallagher, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1981.

Since Woolf scholarship tends to focus on her aesthetic relationship with British and Continental modernist paintings, Woolf's spiritual and achromatic affinities with visual artists from a Russian tradition, such as Malevich, have gone unexamined. One notable exception to this tendency is Alison Heney's consideration of *To the Lighthouse* through the lens of Wassily Kandinsky's abstract art, famous for reconceptualizing spirituality's relationship to artistic

form. Heney connects Kandinsky's approach to Woolf's in which "a spiritual *force* . . . guide[s] and connect[s] her characters." Heney writes, "The human being *constantly seeks* to find material form for the new value which lives in him in spiritual form" (2011, 19; emphasis added). For Heney, Kandinsky's and Woolf's spirituality suggests force and effort, aligning their spirituality with understandings of modernism as struggle. Yet an almost anti-modernist thread of surrender and effortlessness in Mrs. Ramsay's spiritual experience emerges when we study Woolf's figurations for darkness through the lens of *Black Square*. Through their shared centralization of darkness, modernism's two archetypal artworks reveal a calmer modernism in their turn away from strain and toward cosmological peace instead.

Darkness in Malevich's and Woolf's works suggests silent nothingness not as emptiness, but as superabundant richness, an infinite cosmological immensity of eternal rest that is invariable. Eternal nothingness is supreme existence, because infinite eternity is the most durable existence, more durable than sociopolitical ideologies and identities that ebb and flow according to the times. In dark nothingness, "nothing can be changed by anything else," Malevich explains, "since there is nothing that could change, or be changeable" (quoted in Sakhno 2021). As restful darkness, Mrs. Ramsay, too, feels her restful essence as a state of invariability. As "oneself," an ungendered state of oneness or unity, Mrs. Ramsay senses "a resting on a platform of stability," conjuring *Black Square's* restful nothingness, that "is immune from change, and shines out ([Mrs. Ramsay] glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral" and experiences "the feeling she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest" (Woolf 1981, 105). As Gallagher's cover illustration shows, a darkened square shape—a window with reflecting lights—indicates for Woolf (as it does for Malevich) an eternity that, unlike temporal ideologies and materialities, neither ages nor alters. "This core of darkness," Woolf writes, is immune from sociopolitical restriction: it "could go anywhere"; ideologies or materialities cannot impede its existence: "they could not stop it" (62). For both Malevich and Woolf, this sensation of unchanging rest presented as darkness is "the world as objectlessness" (Malevich quoted in Sakhno 2021), a state of existence "having shed its attachments" to "all the being and the doing" (Woolf 1981, 62). In its steadfast constancy impervious to sociopolitical activity, dark nothingness as primary existence felt

within the self is for Malevich and Woolf the foundational reality to which they orient their aesthetic of peace.

Objects hold curious places in both Malevich's and Woolf's art, sensitive as their works are to nothingness's immensity. To be sure, Malevich's painting both is and depicts an object, a black square. And yet for Malevich, the painting indicates not so much an object as the sense of nothingness. Thus, the painting's objecthood dissolves into its essence: nothingness. In Woolf scholarship, recent critical work influenced by new materialist studies centralizes objects, not nothingness, in her spiritual sensibilities. Elizabeth Anderson, for instance, writes that Woolf "interweaves the material with the ineffable." Anderson finds that objects "continually provid[e] a material anchor to Woolf's exploration of self-transcendence" (2020, 73). Woolf's objects serve as portals to the spiritual. Yet I follow a strand in her writing which suggests that these objects dissolve into their essences, as Mrs. Ramsay does, as nothingness. While we might read Mrs. Ramsay's consciousness as upholding a version of reality in which materiality is reinforced, I suggest instead that their materiality, like Mrs. Ramsay's, disappears into nothingness. Indeed, Mrs. Ramsay's spiritual experience as nothingness begins with her physically clearing away materials. She is "putting together some of the pictures [James] had cut out," as if preparing to put them away. Clearing these materials, she experiences materiality clearing away into dark nothingness: "the glittering, vocal, evaporated" and she becomes a "core of darkness," not materialized but "invisible to others" (Woolf 1981, 62).

One could argue, however, that when Mrs. Ramsay identifies as a "core of darkness" infused with "rest," she experiences a heightened sense of material objects. "If one was alone," Mrs. Ramsay feels, "one leant to things, inanimate things; . . . felt they expressed one; felt they became one, felt they knew one, in a sense were one" (Woolf 1981, 65). Among these objects, Mrs. Ramsay experiences "being oneself . . . a core of darkness." The repetition of "one" lexically weds the objects' oneness to her sense of "oneself . . . a core of darkness" (62). The repetitive syntax of "one" suggests that materiality dissolves into a unifying ("one") dark nothingness Mrs. Ramsay shares with them. In other words, Mrs. Ramsay feels these materials into a unifying dark nothingness of peace and eternity with her: "they became one"; she "sense[s]" they "were one" with the "oneself" she experiences as "darkness," "this peace, this eternity." For Mrs.

Ramsay, materiality may serve as a gateway to what might be called her nothingness-consciousness but eventually dissolves into nothingness itself. The materiality is ultimately less important than Mrs. Ramsay's feeling of their materiality dissolved into a unifying "darkness" that is "invisible to others," an ineffable experience she shares with or as them as "one" unified darkness.

Woolf infuses Malevich's restful nothingness with feminist purpose. She narrates this darkness as the core of a person who happens to be a woman, wife, and mother such as Mrs. Ramsay. These sociopolitical roles typically deprive women from reprieve in heteropatriarchy. Mrs. Ramsay gets little rest because of cultural programming that dictates that she as a woman attend to emotional and physical demands of children, husband, guests, and townspeople. "They came to her since she was a woman," Woolf writes, "all day long with this and that; one wanting this, another that." Characters, including Mrs. Ramsay, tend to organize their perception of her around the concept of "woman" and thus see her as an emotional "sponge" for their needs (Woolf 1981, 32). As a woman, Mrs. Ramsay is expected to make herself visible as available to others' needs. This visibility paradoxically renders her invisible as someone with her own needs and identity. Woolf carves out a space through which Mrs. Ramsay senses herself as a "core of darkness" whose underlying condition, like the condition *Black Square* represents, is a detachment from sociopolitical levels of reality Woolf critiques as non-real entities, "apparitions" (62). Instead, Mrs. Ramsay attaches to "freedom" "to be silent" in "this rest, this eternity" less as a woman or person and more as a "wedge of darkness" (62–63). As if infusing *Black Square* with feminist applicability, Woolf describes Mrs. Ramsay's sensation of becoming a dark shape that is "invisible to others" less in the sense of not mattering in the societal sphere, and more in the sense of freedom from that sphere (62).

Entering *To the Lighthouse* through its application of darkness reveals two modes of existence in the novel that interest Woolf: one mystical and one sociopolitical. Elizabeth Anderson finds that Mrs. Ramsay experiences mystical consciousness. Uniting with light from the lighthouse in the darkness of sunset, Mrs. Ramsay "enter[s] into an experience of interiority that presents a different mode of selfhood than we have seen in her interactions with her guests, children and husband" (Anderson 2020, 72). The other dimension of existence seems to be sociopolitical, what Alex Zwerdling calls in

Woolf's corpus "the real world" or "the life of society," "the whole range of external forces that may be said to influence our behavior: familial ideals, societal expectations, institutional demands, significant historical events or movements." These are "real" to Woolf, writes Zwerdling, "because we cannot wish [them] away, because [their] force must inevitably be taken into account" (1986, 4). On the level of sociopolitical materiality, or what Woolf in her memoir writing calls "the cotton wool of daily life," Zwerdling might be correct. But on a mystical register "hidden behind that cotton wool" of sociopolitics, Woolf narrates what she names the "real thing under appearances" (Woolf 1985, 72). This "real thing under appearances" is what I would call a mystical real of nonthinking, nonmaterial nothingness. It emerges in *To the Lighthouse* when we study the novel's figurations of darkness through the lens of *Black Square*.

When Mrs. Ramsay enters "behind the cotton wool" to the "beneath" place specified as a nearly non-signifiable "it" that "is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep," Mrs. Ramsay's experience suggests one need not "wish" the societal world away nor take it "inevitably . . . into account," as Zwerdling posits. The societal world momentarily evaporates on its own, Mrs. Ramsay finds, any time one rests "for a moment" "beneath" the societal "things you know us by" and enters into "a core of darkness," a sensation of existence infused with "freedom," "peace," a "resting" from "being and doing," like *Black Square* presents. For Woolf, when "we rise to the surface," or to the level of sociopolitical "cotton-wool," we are less in the real world because we are less in the "real thing," the no-thing, the "all dark" and "unfathomably deep" (Woolf 1981, 62). Woolf pens a register of existence that is less attached to sociopolitical categories of gender and time (i.e., Mrs. Ramsay as a Victorian woman, wife, and mother) and more attached to nothing, which Woolf calls an "invisible" existence of "freedom" (63). That is to say, as less a woman and more a no-thing, a "core of darkness," Mrs. Ramsay becomes "free for the strangest adventures," not normative temporal or heteropatriarchal ones (62). When human sociopolitics are viewed alongside infinite nothingness, the dark nothingness for Woolf emerges as the more significant reality. The existence of dark nothingness for Woolf is "the real thing under appearances," "behind the cotton wool" of modern sociopolitics that perhaps get more attention than they warrant as widely accepted and perceived but non-supreme realities.

THE INVISIBLE PAINTING IN *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*

Mrs. Ramsay is famously based upon Woolf's mother Julia Stephen, and Woolf writes in her memoir, "if one could give a sense of my mother's personality one would have to be an artist" (1985, 85). Woolf features a painter—Lily Briscoe—who paints a sense of Mrs. Ramsay by working with Malevichian shapes of darkness. Lily's approach to painting, like Malevich's, is abstract. She is less interested in representing material substantiality—Mrs. Ramsay as a woman or human being—and more interested in indicating Mrs. Ramsay's incorporeal qualities as "lights and shadows" (Woolf 1981, 53). Lily's representation of Mrs. Ramsay as "lights and shadows" echoes both Malevich's achromatic sensibilities and Mrs. Ramsay's understanding of herself as "darkness" and "light" as she sits in the drawing room uniting with the lighthouse's beams in the darkening evening as an experience of restful eternity (63). We might say that *Black Square* could be a portrait of Mrs. Ramsay. If *Black Square* were to come to life as a literary character, it would take the form of Mrs. Ramsay.

Tracing Woolf's artistic synergies with modernist painting beyond the Western European tradition opens fresh critical territory. When critics place Woolf's work in conversation with painters, they tend to focus on her engagement with British, French, and other continental painters and not with painters from a Russian tradition.³ For instance, Chantal Lacourarie notes the impact continental painters made on Woolf's literary aesthetics through her sister Vanessa Bell's development as a painter who "learned under John Singer Sargent, and Walter Sickert (himself a follower of Whistler and Degas)." Thus, both Bell's and Woolf's art is infused with aesthetics of continental "Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, a label which comprises loosely all modern movements born out of Impressionism, namely Cezanne and the subsequent Cubist artists, Fauvists, Expressionists, and such painters as Gauguin and Matisse" (Lacourarie 2002, 67). Given the popularity among critics to focus on Western European paintings' influence on Woolf's work, less has been written about overlaps between Woolf's and Malevich's shared achromatic aesthetics. This critical loophole might seem surprising given Woolf's admiration for Russian novelists and British Russophilia more generally that extended across and beyond the turn of the twentieth century.⁴ This critical oversight surprises, too,

because both Malevich and Woolf steeped themselves in visual art and writing with spiritual sensibilities and are considered premier modernists in their respective fields.

Perhaps critics have not placed Woolf's work in conversation with Malevich's art because Woolf's corpus does not mention Malevich. She references an abundance of other painters. Lacourarie points out that "Woolf's fictional writings teem with . . . both explicit and implicit references to real or imaginary pictures and artists" (2002, 69). Woolf features Rembrandt, Reynolds, Romney, Gainsborough, and Whistler throughout her corpus. The degree to which Woolf was familiar with Malevich's work is uncertain. Though Woolf's knowledge of Russian visual art may be unknown, she was an ardent admirer of Russian literature for its spiritual ethos. We will later explore the ways Russian novelists' narration of what Woolf calls "nothing" inspires her centralization of nothingness in *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf finds beauty and power in what might be called Russian novels' nothingness: "as we read these little [Russian] stories about nothing at all," Woolf writes, "the horizon widens; the soul gains an astonishing sense of freedom" (1984, 178), echoing Malevich's aesthetics of nothingness and Mrs. Ramsay's "horizon" which "seemed to her limitless"; "there was freedom" for Mrs. Ramsay as a "core of darkness" (Woolf 1981, 62). Though she does not write explicitly about Malevich, Woolf likely heard about his work, given his status as the "evangelist of abstraction," the cultural prevalence of British Russophilia, and her friendships with British experts in modernist visual art (Somerville 2011, 73). After all, the British cultural obsession not only with Russian "biography and life writings, but also social history, cultural critique, the theater, the Ballets Russes and the visual arts" extended from at least the 1870s to the 1930s (Davison 2020, 169, 168). Woolf's friends Roger Fry and Clive Bell invited Russian art commentator Boris von Anrep to guest curate the Russian contributions for the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition in London in 1913. Woolf hence would likely have been familiar with Russian modernist art, since twelve paintings by Russian artists were featured at the exhibition curated by Fry and Bell.

Even if Woolf had never heard of Malevich, she explains the ways painters infuse literary form in ways that go unremarked. Modernist painting secretly lives within modernist writing. "Were all modern paintings to be destroyed," Woolf writes, "a critic of the twenty-fifth century would be able to deduce from the works of Proust alone the existence of Matisse, Cezanne, Derain and Picasso; he would be

able to say with those books before him that painters of the highest originality and power must be covering canvas after canvas" (1948, 173). For Woolf, modernist paintings take literary form in modernist novels. We might imagine deducing "from the works of" Woolf and her usage of darkness to signify mystical peace "the existence of" Malevich's work within them. Given his valuation of nothingness, Malevich would likely appreciate the idea that his painting in Woolf's novel is invisible but present, like the essence of Mrs. Ramsay and like the existence of supreme reality, nothingness itself.

"I JUST SENSED": ON NOT TRYING

For Malevich, the artist honors a different sensibility than Pound's "make it new." Malevich feels called not to make anything, let alone nuance; the artist does little work. The little work he does is not new. *Black Square's* lack of objective representation (person, place, or thing) highlights the painting as less the artist's individual creation of artistic nuance and more an expression of the artist's surrender to sensing unaltering cosmic nothingness and nonbeing. Instead of being something that is made new, *Black Square* indicates the rest and non-effort of creating nothing: "I invented nothing," Malevich writes; "I just sensed night in myself . . . and it manifested itself in me as a black plane that formed a square" (quoted in Shatskikh 2012, 127). Different from Pound's assertion to "make," Malevich's "just sensed" suggests less than minimal effort on the artist's part. Night, not the artist, does any work there is to be had and "makes": "it [night] manifested itself in me" and "formed" neither newness nor nuance but ordinariness: "a square." Polish painter and contemporary of Malevich's, Mieczysław Szczuka notes that "the characteristic feature of Malevich's psychology is an abhorrence of the word 'construction,' applied to works of art" (quoted in Forgács 2019, 249). According to Malevich, the artist's job is not to construct, labor, or create, but instead to submit to sensing cosmic darkness, nothingness, the existence of nonobjective infinity. In this submission, Malevich senses the cosmos's work within the self and represents that work as *Black Square*. The cosmos's work is paradoxically the expression of rest felt within the self. *Black Square* is less important as a visual product and more important as an inward feeling of night, eternal darkness.

For Malevich, darkness indicates a sensed experience of rest that is achieved by loss, an artist's release of idea, objects, and action. Loss is experienced less in the sense of lack or despair and more

in the sense of expansion and freedom: a feeling of cosmological nothingness. For Malevich, this letting go of objects is a letting go of objective representation and color and a concomitant gain of “all kinds of other forms,” what he calls “something even more fundamental.” Because black and white are not colors, they suggest the space of “something even more fundamental” that lies buried under perceptions of color. Describing *Black Square*, Malevich writes, “The familiar recedes ever further and further into the background. . . . The contours of the objective world fade more and more and so it goes, step by step, until finally the world—‘everything we loved and by which we have lived’—becomes lost to sight. No more ‘likeness of reality,’ no idealistic images” as he “leav[es] ‘the world of will and idea’” (quoted in Herbert 2000, 118). The world Malevich presents in *Black Square* is one deprived of ego, human intent, or “will,” “lost to sight.” Art historian Aleksandra Shatskikh calls Malevich a “cosmic visionary,” a “mystic” whose *Black Square* “embodied the complete dissolving of his own being in the being of the Universe” (2012, 260, 273). Malevich’s dissolving of artistic will and his surrender to night conjures Mrs. Ramsay’s letting go of the familiar “being and the doing” and merging with cosmic “darkness.”

Echoing Malevich, Woolf describes her art as parting with commonly accepted ideas of reality. She is unsatisfied with orthodox requirements “to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability” (Woolf 1984, 149). Instead, Woolf centralizes the vocabulary of darkness to describe art that might find its motivations more from sensing within than taking inventory without. “For the moderns,” writes Woolf, “the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology. At once, therefore, the accent falls a little differently, the emphasis is upon something hitherto ignored; at once a different outline of form becomes necessary, difficult for us to grasp” (152). Woolf’s lexicon for an artist’s attention to darkness signifies, as Malevich does, rest on the artist’s part. The modernist “point of interest lies,” as in reclines, settles down. The “accent falls,” surrenders; the point of emphasis does not exert. What emerges for the modernist artist, then, is a form “difficult for us to grasp”—the exertion of “grasping” makes little sense in this resting release the artist experiences in darkness within. Woolf’s aversion to grasping in this state of artmaking echoes Malevich’s intent to clear away “things” in his work to bring forward a different and calmer reality of dark nothingness that demands no exertion and cannot be touched.

Woolf shares with Malevich the sense of a reality she feels more than activates and shapes. Malevich explains he is not “inventing” with his painting, only passively sensing the “night” he experiences, the black “something” “within myself” he feels. Malevich writes, “I understand the supremacy of pure feeling in creative art”; “the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling” (quoted in Herbert 2000, 117). For Malevich, “feeling” is a “thing.” Since “‘nothing’ is at the same time a ‘thing,’” we might say that “feeling” is “nothing.” *Black Square* in this regard is less a material product and more the feeling of no-thing—cosmic nothingness felt within. Woolf, too, emphasizes feeling over making as entryway to fundamental existence, dark eternity. “Although she [Mrs. Ramsay] continued to knit” a creative product—a stocking for the lighthouse keeper’s son—her feeling of darkness takes over both her consciousness and Woolf’s narrative. Both Woolf’s discourse about and Mrs. Ramsay’s attention to knitting a product give way to feeling: Mrs. Ramsay “felt herself” as darkness; she “must feel . . . it is all spreading”; “she felt herself” (Woolf 1981, 62); “felt an irrational tenderness” (63). For Woolf as a writer, art-making can be more about sensing than creating. She writes in her memoir that writing “is so instinctive that it seems given to me, not made by me” (Woolf 1985, 72). Woolf describes her creation of *To the Lighthouse* as “a great, apparently involuntary, rush. One thing burst into another. Blowing bubbles out of a pipe gives the feeling of the rapid crowd of ideas and scenes which blew out of my mind” (81).⁵ The ideas and scenes are active, blowing from her mind. Woolf as an artist, like Malevich and Mrs. Ramsay as mystical sensors, is more a receptive senser than active creator; “bubbles” give “the feeling.”

Lily’s mature artmaking, too, becomes more an experience of Malevichian surrender than will. However, Lily begins the novel as a Poundian artist intent on making. This intent makes her miserable and hinders her artistic vision. When Woolf introduces us to Lily, stress and conflict subsume her: “She often felt herself—struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage” and “clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast, which a thousand forces did their best to pluck from her” (Woolf 1981, 19). Artmaking here is more a sense of feeling struggle than feeling peace, more the activity of fending off attack and fighting “forces” than surrendering to the “vision” of dark nothingness.

In this state of Poundian making, Lily creates not so much art as anxiety. Even the materials of painting—color—produce anxiety.

Lily associates color with threat and pain, which is perhaps why she associates their product—a painting—with fear. She “kept a feeler on her surroundings lest someone should creep up”; she feels impending threat “with all her senses quickened, looking, straining, till the colour of the wall and the jacmanna beyond burnt into her eyes” (Woolf 1981, 17). Woolf aligns chromatics (“the colour”) with exhaustion and pain that fill art with strain that obscures reality (cosmic nothingness) rather than reveals it. This is the clutter that Malevich critiques as an “accumulation of things” that presents more anxiety than “pure art.” Lily as a developing artist associates color with a martialism that hierarchizes more than calms: “Beneath the colour,” Lily reflects, “there was the shape. She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked: it was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed. It was in that moment’s flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears” and “made this passage from conception to work . . . dreadful” (19). Color instigates for Lily ideas of attack and inadequacy. Part of this pain emerges from Lily’s tendency to understand color and shape as competing rather than complementary planes—“beneath the colour there was the shape”—because she misunderstands an artist’s work as engaging with ideas of dominance and submission, threat and defense. More peacefully, Malevich turns away from Lily-style color and hierarchical “command.” Instead, he places noncolor and shape together side by side. Two entities, black and square, unite as one *Black Square* indicating restful ease.

Jack Stewart underscores elements of threat and violence in Lily’s chromatic aesthetic. Stewart reflects on the ways “Lily arms herself” as she paints with colors. It is the “*dominance* of green on” Lily’s “palette that *incites* the blaze of red in her imagination,” and the “tendency of red” is “to *annihilate* green” (1985, 451; emphasis added). Presuming art to be martial, Lily applies color almost as a weapon; color is aggressive; it competes and conquers. In her reflection on the painter Walter Sickert, Woolf describes color as a fatiguing force akin to the strain Lily associates with color. “I flew from colour to colour” (1966, 235) Woolf describes, echoing Lily’s unpleasant “flight between the picture and her canvas.” Regarding Sickert’s painting, Woolf’s flies “from red to blue, from yellow to green. Colours went spirally through my body lighting a flare as if a rocket fell through the night and lit up greens and browns. . . . Colour warmed, thrilled, chafed, burnt, soothed, fed and finally exhausted me” (Woolf 1966,

235). For Woolf, color carries belligerence, defeat, and masculinity, invoked by the phallic, invasive imagery of “colours” moving “spirally through my body” like a phallic “rocket,” burning and painful.

Woolf, with Malevich, aligns achromaticity with rest. “For though the life of colour is a glorious life,” Woolf continues regarding Sickert’s work, “it is a short one. Soon the eye can hold no more; it shuts itself in sleep” (1966, 241). Woolf may be inclined to notice greater peace in achromaticity than chromaticity as both a writer and publisher of the printed page of black type on white paper. For Woolf, the life of color is excessively “glorious” to the point that the “eye can hold no more.” This excess is intense but “short.” Eventually color dissolves when the “eye . . . shuts itself in sleep” and enters the realm of rest and dark nothingness of the kind conjured by *Black Square*. Woolf dramatizes this eye-shutting-entrance-into-darkness-and-rest as Mrs. Ramsay’s final mortal appearance as she closes her eyes in the drawing room and enters a dimension of infinite love, as we shall explore.

Yet even when Lily experiences painting in Part 1 as predominantly an experience of struggle, her aesthetic hints at an underlying Malevichian, achromatic peace ready to surface. When William Banks looks at Lily’s painting, he wonders how the painting could represent mother and son. Lily replies that her painting makes “no attempt at likeness,” recalling Malevich’s aversion to verisimilitude (Woolf 1981, 52). Instead, she speaks to Mr. Banks in what might be called a Malevichian language of the “senses” of “shadow,” “the need of darkness,” and “light”: “But the picture was not of them, she said. Or, not in his sense. There were other senses too in which one might reverence them. By a shadow here and a light there, for instance. . . . A mother and child might be reduced to a shadow without irreverence. A light here required a shadow there” (52–53). Lily is not so much painting a gendered or material “them” —Mrs. Ramsay and James—as she is painting her “senses” of Mrs. Ramsay as an expanse beyond material, indicated by a “shadow here and a light there.” This painting of sense rather than object recalls *Black Square*. It is more a painting of Malevich’s sense of night within himself than an objective painting of himself, much like Mrs. Ramsay senses herself more as darkness than a human being. When Lily paints Mrs. Ramsay as light and shadow, she paints realistically to the degree that she paints Mrs. Ramsay’s essence as dark peace. Lily’s painting of Mrs. Ramsay as shadow is therefore not only a tribute, but also a portrait of the restful essence of self.

As the novel proceeds, Lily matures into a Malevichian modernist surrendering to rest. In the novel's final section, "The Lighthouse," Lily's more relaxed state carries her to complete her painting. Just like Malevich understands darkness as "eternal rest," Lily associates Mrs. Ramsay with shadow that calms. Painting ten years after she begins the painting as an experience of strain, Lily remembers watching Mrs. Ramsay: "There must have been a shadow" (Woolf 1981, 160). The memory of this shadow appearing with Mrs. Ramsay creates restful release for Lily in contrast to her earlier exertion to "get hold": "That woman . . . resolved everything into simplicity; made these angers, irritations fall off like old rags; she brought together this and that and then this" to create something endurable, lasting, "like a work of art." This "work of art" that enters Lily's mind via shadow allows Lily to rest while she paints: "She must rest for a moment," a pause during which Lily has a "revelation" that "in the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing . . . was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said," conjuring her earlier release of "the fret, the hurry, the stir" (161). Malevich and Woolf both centralize darkness in their rendering of restful stillness undergone as a spiritual experience, a "revelation" different from the mundane motion indicated by color depicting objects, "lemon-coloured sailing boats" like those the painter Pounceforte and his imitators use, for instance (113).

Lily, like Malevich and Woolf, feels calm in neither "commanding" nor inventing as she paints: "She was not inventing; she was only trying to smooth out something she had been given years ago folded up; something she had seen . . . of one thing falling where another had fallen, and so setting up an echo which chimed in the air and made it full of vibrations" (Woolf 1981, 199). The "smooth" activity and "falling" surrender in an environment of "air" is more peaceful than her earlier "struggling" and "forcing" in Part I, where she attempted to "command" instead of "only try[.]" Lily is more active here than Woolf perhaps, as she "smooths out something." Yet Lily's smoothing out is an activity of calming, embedded within two passive states: "not inventing," "only trying," suggesting a humble, even meager smoothing of a vague "something she had been given," which ultimately leads to "vibrations"—we might imagine them as bubbles blowing—which are more sensations than objects, not of the same material as paint or language.

By placing Lily's more restful approach to painting in the novel's final section, Woolf suggests that the modernist artist is one who

matures into greater surrender to peace and less striving to make. Lily moves away from a Poundian effort to “make it new” and toward a Malevichian calmness to “just sense.” Lily paints and Woolf writes to present “something” she cannot specify into discourse: vaguely called “the thing itself,” “this, the essential thing,” or “vibrations” across Woolf’s writing (Woolf 1984, 149). To specify the “something” would be to perpetuate an effortful approach to art from which Lily begins to detach; to specify would be to force linguistic exertion into a realm—fundamental nothingness—that knows neither exertion nor discourse. For Woolf, Malevich, and for the mature modernist Lily, art indicates more an invisible reality “given” to their senses rather than a material product they will into outer form.

On the novel’s concluding pages, color reignites anxiety in Lily, but it evaporates quickly. Lily gazes at her painting: “With all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed.” Lily experiences colors as exertion (“running”) and labor (“attempt”). But she quickly ditches her attempt at something and accepts nothingness, much like Malevich and Mrs. Ramsay do: “It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again” (Woolf 1981, 208). When Lily leaves the discourse of effortful color (“running up and across”) and accepts that her painting might appear to be nothing, so insignificant that it disappears into attics and near non-existence (like Mrs. Ramsay herself and like the blankness *Black Square* indicates), she gains renewal, “taking up her brush again . . . She drew a line there, in the centre” (209). Woolf is careful to name colors of earlier lines (“greens and blues”) but omits to name the final line’s color. The painting’s concluding, definitive mark is colorless, like *Black Square*.

In this colorless mark, Lily’s exertion ends, and she achieves visionary rest: “Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue. I have had my vision” (Woolf 1981, 209). Lily completes her painting as an experience of profound rest similar to Mrs. Ramsay’s peace in the drawing room as a “wedge of darkness” (62). After exertion evaporates, Lily recognizes a calmness associated with spiritual insight: a “vision.” Restful vision is more important to Woolf than creating a “make-it-new” painting, since Woolf’s syntax does not praise the painting’s ingenuity but rather the peaceful vision and release it indicates. Thus, Lily shares with Malevich the idea that art is valuable more as an experience of inward rest than as a nuanced

visual product. Woolf concludes her novel with Lily's release of effort as the ultimate modernist achievement. Woolf thereby suggests that struggle is a developmental state that the mature artist both learns to abandon and to surrender to peace. Like Mrs. Ramsay (and unlike populist mystics such as Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant, as we shall see), Lily does not publicize her spiritual vision. "She thought" it. The inward vision is more important, more real, than any material, discursive form. The novel begins with a squarish window framing Mrs. Ramsay who is a "core of darkness" and concludes with Lily's feeling of rest in befriending nothingness. The novel begins and ends with the shape, feeling, and silence of *Black Square*.

"VOCAL, EVAPORATED": FEMINIST SILENCE

Darkness is peaceful silence. Though Malevich creates discourse as a writer, *Black Square* creates no discourse. Likewise, Woolf discourses about Mrs. Ramsay's darkness, but Mrs. Ramsay remains silent about it: the "vocal, evaporated." Like *Black Square*'s release of "things" and unity with "eternal rest," Mrs. Ramsay as silent darkness is released from heteropatriarchal discursive patterns of attack and defense directed at women. A woman in the sociopolitical realm, Mrs. Ramsay must listen to mansplainers such as her husband and navigate how and whether to respond. For instance, regarding the family's finances, Mrs. Ramsay is "afraid . . . to tell" her husband "the truth . . . about the greenhouse roof and the expense it would be" because she predicts his irritation (Woolf 1981, 39). When she questions her husband's conclusion that "there wasn't the slightest possible chance that they could go to the Lighthouse tomorrow," he discursively attacks her: "Damn you" (31, 32). In a realm of discourse, Mrs. Ramsay must navigate language's heteropatriarchy, which is exhausting because it creates situations of defense and attack. But as a being of silent nothingness, Mrs. Ramsay is free. There is nothing Mrs. Ramsay must defend and nothing about her that heteropatriarchy can attack.

The novel's narrator, not Mrs. Ramsay, tells us she experiences mystical peace, a unification with darkness and a shedding of both discourse and being. Mrs. Ramsay, like *Black Square*, does not form discourse around darkness. When she articulates this experience, she ruptures her mystical peace; Mrs. Ramsay experiences annoyance, not rest. She vocalizes, "We are in the hands of the Lord," signifying more clichéd discourse than mystical silence (Woolf 1981,

63). As soon as she discourses about the experience, Mrs. Ramsay feels agitated and distanced from her essence. “But instantly she was annoyed with herself for saying that. Who had said it? Not she”; “the insincerity slipping in among the truths” brings the opposite of peace; the insincerity “roused her, annoyed her” (64). Light and darkness, in being nothingness, have neither “hands” nor gender, so there are no Lord’s hands into which Mrs. Ramsay could be placed. Language around mystical experience obscures primary reality, “being oneself,” which is the existence of nothingness as a “core of darkness, something invisible” and “silent” (62). Discourse articulates foreignness and inauthenticity about the self and buries “the truths” silent darkness reveals about reality. Discourse’s tendency to forward heteropatriarchal cliché (“Lord”) rather than felt essence explains why Woolf prefers to use vague rather than more specific language, such as “it,” “this, the essential thing,” and “the thing itself,” to describe supreme reality. She does not want the mind and senses to latch onto a cliché about “it,” “the essential thing,” supreme reality: dark nothingness.

When Mrs. Ramsay settles into silence again, she reunites with her essence as darkness and light experienced inwardly, in the “mind” and “heart”: she “met the [lighthouse’s] third stroke and it seemed to her like her own eyes meeting her own eyes, searching as she alone could search into her mind and her heart, purifying out of existence that lie” that “we are in the hands of the Lord” (Woolf 1981, 63). Though Mrs. Ramsay on a sociopolitical level of reality plays the role of mother, wife, and host, she does not surrender the mystical “unfathomably deep” (62) darkness and light “of eternity” (105) in which “she felt herself” (62) in the “mind” and “heart” (65). Indeed, the supremacy of her dark nothingness never leaves throughout the novel, for as we shall see she is a core of darkness whether she rests alone in the drawing room, hosts company in the dining room, sits with her husband in the reading room, or appears as a shadow and light after her death in both her son James’s and Lily’s memories.

Mrs. Ramsay’s silence about a mystical self as darkness is different from the era’s more popular and outspoken models for women’s mysticism. Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant were vocal mystical leaders and writers. But what might be called their populist mysticism delivered on podiums and publicized across newspapers was antithetical to what Woolf narrates in *To the Lighthouse* as an invisible, silent mysticism. In contrast to Mrs. Ramsay’s unseen and quiet “rest” and “peace,” Blavatsky’s mysticism, as articulated in her *The*

Key to Theosophy (1889), heralds labor, exertion, and public display. For Blavatsky, mysticism is a social movement that leads with verbs. Mysticism labors:

(1) To form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity without distinction or race, colour, or creed. (2) To promote the study of the world's religion and sciences, and to vindicate the importance of old Asiatic literature, namely, of the Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Zoroastrian philosophies. (3) To investigate the hidden mysteries of Nature under every aspect possible, and the psychic and spiritual powers latent in man especially. (Blavatsky quoted in Kane 1995, 329)

Blavatsky's mysticism is athletic: "To form," "to promote," "to vindicate," "to investigate" the "powers." Blavatsky defines mystical experience through vocabulary of work and force ("power"), features that contrast Mrs. Ramsay's version as nearly invisible and privately felt "peace," "rest," and "silence." In contrast to Blavatsky, Woolf chooses not to adopt a list form to narrate Mrs. Ramsay's spiritual experience, suggesting that the "spiritual powers" for Woolf are less about persuasive logic arranged to convince an audience and more about a sensation of darkness undergone internally and silently.

Annie Besant, Blavatsky's modernist successor, also promotes a loud version of mysticism. According to Woolf, Besant's discursive orientation of attack echoes Mr. Ramsay's "Damn you" to Mrs. Ramsay. Besant rouses public blame more than invites quiet surrender to nothingness of the kind Mrs. Ramsay experiences. Woolf recalls one of Besant's lectures at the 1917 Club, describing the speaker not as peaceful but as scolding. Besant "pitched into us for our maltreatment of India, she, apparently, being 'them' & not 'us,'" Woolf writes; "But I don't think she made her case very solid, though superficially it was all believable, & the 1917 Club applauded & agreed" (Woolf quoted in Kane 1995, 330). Like Mrs. Ramsay's annoyance at clichéd language for articulating mystical experience, Woolf finds Besant's mysticism clichéd, concerned with broadcasting polemics and rousing political division for public acclaim—the audience "applauded & agreed." Besant's mysticism contrasts with Mrs. Ramsay's peaceful merging with cosmological darkness that opens realities and freedoms beyond sociopolitical "being and doing." Mrs. Ramsay's expression of mysticism delivers "freedom" and "silence" in contrast to Besant's, which promotes public blaming and shaming. Woolf's lyrical prose to narrate Mrs. Ramsay's mysticism, in contrast to her caustic and sarcastic tone to describe Besant's version,

suggests that Woolf prefers Mrs. Ramsay's quiet, private mysticism to Besant's public one.

Woolf emphasizes the beauty she finds in Mrs. Ramsay's quiet mysticism by extending it to the quiet intimacy of a candlelit dining room by the sea rather than narrating it within a noisy public hall like Besant's. Mrs. Ramsay continues to feel—not broadcast for public approval—peace around black squares when the family and guests convene for dinner. As she “glanced at the window” in the dining room, which is “black,” she “had the feeling . . . of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures” (Woolf 1981, 105). As a black shape of darkness wearing a black dress and gazing into a black window, Mrs. Ramsay experiences what Malevich might call the invariable and unchanging, what Woolf identifies as “the thing . . . that endures.” Darkness is a feeling in which excess is released, and nothingness emerges as infinite peace. “Nothing need be said; nothing could be said,” distinguishing Mrs. Ramsay's silent mystical experience from Blavatsky's and Besant's vocal ones. “There it was,” Woolf continues, “all round them. It par-took, she felt . . . of eternity.” Gazing into the black window, Mrs. Ramsay experiences nothingness as a route to eternity: “nothing . . . nothing” (Woolf 1981, 105); the repetition of nothingness suggests its immensity. Nothingness in Woolf's syntax leads to a feeling of “eternity.” This sensed peace as a reality beyond language gleaned by looking at the black window echoes Malevich's philosophy of eternal rest. Woolf describes a spiritual experience through vague language: “the thing,” “nothing,” “there it was,” “It,” “eternity.” Instead of clarifying exactly what this spiritual “it” is, Woolf, like Malevich, emphasizes language's limits to describe this peace. Mrs. Ramsay “had the feeling,” “she felt” “the thing” rather than naming it more precisely. The unspoken peace Mrs. Ramsay feels takes precedence over precise discourse.

Relaxing into feeling rather than striving to vocalize, Mrs. Ramsay feels discourse and its associated divisions fade into insignificance: “Her husband was saying . . . the square root of one thousand two hundred and fifty-three. . . . What did it all mean? To this day she had no notion. A square root? What was that?” (Woolf 1981, 105). Through Mr. Ramsay, Woolf associates discourse less with clarity and more with near absurdity, for discourse divides and complicates (“square root” . . . “What was that?”) what might otherwise simplify into unity. Woolf, like Malevich, seems to prefer silent reflection over the divisiveness of discourse. Vocalizing (“her husband was saying”)

objects into rank and dividing units (numbers, square roots) that resemble “cotton wool” becomes less important than the felt sensation of underlying peace (“she felt”). Discursive division fades into insignificance—a “what?”—when placed beside the calm immensity of mystical nothingness. Differentiations matter in the divisive logic of material apprehension (“her husband was saying”) but less so in a more fundamental dimension of silent peace, the “eternity” “all round them.” For Malevich and Woolf, the “accumulation of things” such as right answers and units of division do not matter as much as the immense and quiet peace, the “eternity” and nothingness unifying “all round them.” Material details that separate, distinguish, and hierarchize in the modern age are less important from a mystical point of view than the infinite darkness into which those details dissolve into nothingness.

Ultimately, language leads not to answers to questions upholding material division but to an awareness of nothingness. While Mr. Ramsay recites poetry, Mrs. Ramsay looks out the window, a square whose “panes were black” like a black square. Mrs. Ramsay notices art doing work; people do nothing. Mrs. Ramsay hears “The words (she was looking at the window)” which “sounded as if they were floating like flowers on water out there, cut off from them all, as if no one had said them, but they had come into existence of themselves” (Woolf 1981, 110). Words for Woolf belong to the realm of darkness, since Mrs. Ramsay views them through the portal of a dark window. There are no human agents in the art of words—“as if no one had said them”; “they had come into existence of themselves.” As with Malevich, pure art (cosmology, night, rest) is the agent; the artist senses art’s agency and presents it as nothingness. As she peers into a dark window, Mrs. Ramsay notes that darkness exerts so that people need neither to discourse nor to create but to rest. Mrs. Ramsay feels “relief and pleasure” and again “a feeling of relief” while viewing—not speaking or producing—words floating in a black window (111). Art’s existence within dark nothingness is more important than decoding or interpreting it.

Practicing her mission in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) to narrate women’s untold stories of leadership, Woolf limns Mrs. Ramsay as an unheralded leader for the ways she role models mysticism as silent sensing rather than publicly discoursing and dividing like Blavatsky’s and Besant’s versions. Whereas Blavatsky ties mysticism to linear lists and verbs and Besant tethers hers to blame and acclaim, Mrs.

Ramsay attaches her mysticism to silent, dark nothingness. She ties her mysticism to nothing and is thus free.

BLACK AND WHITE: NOTHING AND EVERYTHING

We recall that *Black Square* emerges from Malevich's tiredness that art "had become obscured by the accumulation of 'things'" (Malevich quoted in Herbert 2000, 118). To represent reality, "the supremacy of pure feeling," paintings must be cleared of materials that obscure reality. Woolf famously admires Russian writers, and she does so because she finds their writing admirably about nothing, like *Black Square*. In her essay "The Russian Point of View," Woolf writes, "Nothing is solved, we feel; nothing is rightly held together; . . . there may be no answer to these questions" raised by Russian writers (1984, 177). In the grammar of Woolf's appreciation of Russian writing, nothingness holds the subject position. Woolf finds beauty and power in Russian novels' nothingness, which she experiences as a feeling ("we feel"). "As we read these little stories about nothing at all," Woolf continues, "the horizon widens; the soul gains an astonishing sense of freedom" (178). Like art historian Dmitri Sarabianov's idea of *Black Square* as "placing man before Nothing and Everything" (1990, 167), Russian novels' nothingness for Woolf becomes an everything, an all-ness. Woolf writes that in Russian novels, "the emphasis is laid upon such unexpected places that at first it seems as if there were no emphasis at all," evoking nothingness; "and then, as the eyes accustom themselves to twilight and discern the shapes of things," a darkened state and "shape" reminiscent of *Black Square*, "we see how complete the story is, how profound" (Woolf 1984, 152–53). Russian novels seem to be about nothing; thus, they are about everything, "complete."

In a letter to Roger Fry, Woolf expresses the wish that her writing indicate a feeling of both nothingness and all-ness. She makes nothingness the subject of *To the Lighthouse*: "I meant *nothing* by *The Lighthouse*," Woolf writes; "I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refused to think them out, & trusted that people would make [*The Lighthouse*] the deposit for their own emotions. . . . I can't imagine Symbolism except in this vague, generalized way. . . . Directly I'm told what a thing means, it becomes hateful to me" (quoted in Bell 1972, 129). Since "*The Lighthouse*" means "*nothing*," we might ponder another title for the novel: *To the Nothing*. Some

scholars such as Maxine Greene suggest the lighthouse could be “a phallic symbol” that is “threatening” (1994, 211). Phallic threat is more reason for Woolf to subsume both the phallus and its threat into nothing. The novel lyricizes a journey beyond gender and threat to nothingness, the ever-present “essential thing” of eternal peace.

Asserting that she “meant *nothing* by *The Lighthouse*,” Woolf centralizes nothingness in her novel just like her beloved Russian novelists do theirs. This approach suggests that the lighthouse (the novel, or the lighthouse, or both) indicates the possibility of meaning both nothing and everything. The lighthouse (the novel and the object) is a figure not so much for a material structure as for signifying a feeling of nothing, a “deposit for . . . emotions,” an empty vessel open to hold readers’ “own emotions.” What the lighthouse means is not one thing, but nothing in particular and therefore everything, “all sorts of feelings.” The lighthouse, like *Black Square*, is a figure for sensed nothingness and a receptacle for sensed everything.

Woolf describes the steadfast, silent lighthouse—in hues of restful black and white, of both nothing and everything—as a healing presence for modern addictions to tumult. As James journeys to the lighthouse with his father Mr. Ramsay and sister Cam, violence erupts in the young man’s mind. He rehearses an old memory of his father standing over him, carrying this memory “like a blade, a scimitar, smiting through the leaves and flowers even of that happy world and making it shrivel and fall” (Woolf 1981, 186). Woolf interrupts James’s addiction to attack thoughts with a passive black and white shape: the lighthouse. Sailing to the lighthouse, James gazes at it as a figure of darkness and white: “James looked at the Lighthouse. He could see the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see windows in it . . . So that was the Lighthouse, was it?” Malevichian squares (windows) and shades of black and white comprise the lighthouse and recall Mrs. Ramsay’s sense of reality as dark and light shapes, both a “long, steady stroke” of light and a “core of darkness” (63).

In gazing at the lighthouse as black and white, nothing and everything, James, even if unwittingly, sees his mother’s unchanging essence of darkness and light. The lighthouse, evoking Mrs. Ramsay’s eternal essence, seems eternal itself. Like nothingness, the lighthouse is not going anywhere: the lighthouse towers “stark and straight” and stands “barred,” its nothing-and-everything holding in place, encompassing all possible perceptions. James notices what we

might call the lighthouse-nothing as holding everything: “the other was also the Lighthouse,” James thinks; “For nothing was simply one thing. The other Lighthouse was true too. It was sometimes hardly to be seen across the bay. In the evening one looked up and saw the eye opening and shutting and the light seemed to reach them in that airy sunny garden where they sat” (Woolf 1981, 186). The “one thing” that the lighthouse-nothing is could be everything, the capacity for proliferation of meanings. This proliferation is more simple than chaotic, more restful than overwhelming. Woolf underscores not the labor of decoding different and individualized meanings, but one simple fact that there are many meanings. Meaning is therefore simple and singular without being reductive and dogmatic. Like *Black Square* and Mrs. Ramsay, the lighthouse and nothing are one, not many, thing; the one thing that both the lighthouse and nothingness are is everything.

This sailing scene’s capacity to carry every meaning includes its confluence of both darkness (“evening”) and light (“sunny”). As a nothing-is-everything symbol, the black-and-white lighthouse and the darkness-and-light Mrs. Ramsay (as we have learned in the drawing room scene) do the labor. The viewer (James) does little work, like others who receive revelations by doing little, such as Lily, Mrs. Ramsay, Woolf as literary artist, and Malevich as painter. James recalls that the lighthouse’s light “reach[es] them in that airy sunny garden where they sat” in the “evening.” James recollects not reaching but resting where he “sat.” The light, not James, does the work of “reach[ing] them.” The scene of merging (reaching them) takes place on a darkening evening. Since Mrs. Ramsay’s essence is both darkness and light, she is resurrected in James’s memory of darkness and light while he rests in a paradisaical “sunny garden” evoking Eden. This scene suggests that death—Mrs. Ramsay’s for instance—makes sense only in ideologies about reality that prioritize the material over the nonobjective, the graspable over the incorporeal. Death makes less sense as a concept through a mystical consciousness attaching to darkness and light like James’s on the sailboat and Mrs. Ramsay’s in the drawing room. In beholding the lighthouse as essentially darks and lights, James beholds, even if unknowingly, his mother’s essence as darks and lights at play after her death as before. We recall that Mrs. Ramsay feels closest to “being oneself” when she feels darkness, light, and peace, which are less mortal than eternal. In re-seeing the lighthouse, James re-sees his deceased and immortal mother, even if he remains unconscious of this re-seeing. His nonconsciousness

is the point. In being unaware that he sees his mother, James experiences Mrs. Ramsay's essence as she experiences it: as something "silent" and "invisible to others."

The mystical evocations of *Black Square* and *To the Lighthouse* meet in their shared application of darkness and light to indicate an eternity made evident to humans when they are willing to rest ("where they sat"). James inherits not only his mother's light and darkness, but also their accompanying sense of rest. Gazing at the black and white lighthouse, James beholds the essence of his mother undisturbed: darkness and light. He is thus resurrected, released from "the fret" and anxiety akin to the kind his mother had felt, and delivered to a paradisaal place like Mrs. Ramsay's drawing room in an "evening" that is "sunny," a darkness dwelling in light. James, thanks to his mother, might be said to dwell in the peace of *Black Square*.

In the next instant on the sailboat, James becomes upset, echoing the short-lived mystical moment his mother experienced years earlier knitting in the drawing room: "he became extremely sensitive to the presence of whoever might be in the room. It was his father now," in the boat with him; "The strain was acute" (Woolf 1981, 186). James's peace is gone, but so is his gaze on black and white. He has turned away from the lighthouse and sees—instead of darkness and light—Mr. Ramsay through the lens of heteropatriarchy ("his father"), accompanied by strain. But the lighthouse is still there "looming," suggesting that the experience of peace is always available when modernists choose its purview over ideologies of strain, such as heteropatriarchy.

"SHE HAD SAID NOTHING": SILENT NIGHT

Mrs. Ramsay feels peaceful silence around black squares. She embodies the unsayable presence of eternal darkness at rest in her final living moment in the novel. In the drawing room she knits and reads, falling "deeper and deeper . . . with her eyes closed," going into the "dark of her mind," when her husband joins her in the room. In the dark of her mind, Mrs. Ramsay inhabits a dark existence, "like a person in a light sleep" who "seemed to say that if he [Mr. Ramsay] wanted her to wake she would, she really would, but otherwise, might she go on sleeping just a little longer" (Woolf 1981, 121), entering nonthinking dark nothingness.

As Mrs. Ramsay dissolves into the "dark of her mind," Woolf inserts an idea of love into the novel. Woolf posits in this scene at

least two different concepts of love, one mystical and one heteropatriarchal. From a mystical point of view, Mrs. Ramsay as fundamentally dark nothingness embodies a cosmological love so beyond heteropatriarchal discourse there are no words for it. Mr. Ramsay, fluent in patriarchal discourse, has a different understanding of love. His love is conversant with the discourse of derision, even if in jest. He “could say things—she never could. . . . A heartless woman he called her; she never told him that she loved him” (Woolf 1981, 123). Mr. Ramsay scolding his wife recalls the earlier “Damn you” he directs at her. Ideas about love, from a heteropatriarchal point of view, continue the language of conflict and attack (“A heartless woman, he called her”). Sheldon Brivic studies Woolf’s critique of love, writing that *To the Lighthouse* explores the “damage that love does,” for it stems from “the unfairness of the gender and family systems that control love” (1994, 67). As such, “love always does some harm, and this harm grows more terrible as the strength of love increases. . . . The harmful effect of love . . . hinges on the interdependence of self and other,” such as Mr. Ramsay’s masculinist idea of love that expects a confirmation of his discourse about it from women (66).

Brivic’s study of love derives from a humanist understanding that situates love as a relationship between persons. Brivic defines love as “being good to someone” or “the wish to do good to people” (1994, 67). Yet the level of love in which Mrs. Ramsay dwells in this scene is more cosmological than human. It comes more from a perception of reality as nothingness than of reality as comprised of human selves. In Mrs. Ramsay’s silence regarding Mr. Ramsay’s terms of love, Woolf shifts ideas about both selfhood and love closer to mystical nothingness and farther from heteropatriarchal orthodoxy. The love Mrs. Ramsay forwards is less a discourse of control among gendered selves and more a consciousness of cosmological darkness where the idea of persons, of self and other, husband and wife, children and family to love or not to love, dissolves into nothingness, the “dark of her mind.” Mrs. Ramsay loves less from a human place and more from her sense of cosmological nothingness. To be sure, on one level of reality, the surface level of “cotton wool,” Mrs. Ramsay’s inability—or unwillingness—to articulate love is Woolf’s statement of Mrs. Ramsay’s critical subjection to heteropatriarchy that estranges her from her voice. And yet, from a mystical point of reference, Mrs. Ramsay’s silence about love *is* the cosmological love she embodies as dark nothingness.

Mr. Ramsay's worry about Mrs. Ramsay's lack of love because she does not articulate it mirrors contemporary critics' concerns about *Black Square*. These critics worried that along with Malevich's removal of "things" in art, love would disappear too. Malevich observes that "the critics and, along with them, the public sighed, 'Everything which we loved is lost. . . . Before us is nothing but a black square on a white background!'" (quoted in Herbert 2000, 117–18). According to Malevich, critics and the public love objects and things in art. With the removal of objects from art, that which makes people love art will be gone. The removal of objects from art is a removal of opportunities to love. What bothers Malevich about this approach to love is that it ties love to objects and materiality. This restriction of love to the material is a small idea of love that *Black Square* invites critics and the public to reconsider and widen. *Black Square* invites viewers to recognize how small an idea of love is that remains tethered to the corporeal, since reality as cosmic nothingness is vaster; there is so much nothingness to love, so much nothingness that *is* love. In his nonobjective art, Malevich wishes the public to expand the reach of their love beyond specific materialities and toward nothingness which holds everything. He wants critics and viewers to love not because they codify and rank materialities to love, but because, like Mrs. Ramsay and *Black Square*, all materialities are subsumed by default into nothingness, which *is* love.

Many critics could not understand *Black Square*'s deep-and-wide love. They insisted that to tie love to nothingness meant the disappearance of love. Alexandre Benois, at a speech delivered in 1916 at the Last Futurist Exhibition, charges that "Mr. Malevich speaks very plainly of the disappearance of the habit of the consciousness to see images in paintings. But do you know what this is? It is nothing less than a call for the disappearance of love, that fundamental principle that provides us with warmth and without which we would inevitably freeze to death and perish" (quoted in Drutt 2003, 253). Benois associates love not with abundance but with a threat for removal, which he understands as death. Mr. Ramsay's worry about Mrs. Ramsay's silence echoes Benoit's response. Like *Black Square*, Mrs. Ramsay's silence, her expression of nothingness, is confused as lovelessness. Discourse about love, both Mr. Ramsay and Benoit show, creates panic, a threat of deprivation.

For both Malevich and Woolf, to detach from the discourse of love and attach instead to eternal silence might be art's most loving gesture. Both artists are not content to restrict love to the object- and

discursive-world; to confine love to this dimension is to participate in misunderstanding love as bound to panic, attack, and division, as expressed by Mr. Ramsay and Benois. To sense rather than articulate love for both Malevich and Woolf is to draw away from patriarchal misunderstandings of love and to move closer toward the more loving existence: darkness, silence, rest, and peace. Woolf proclaims that just because Mrs. Ramsay does not form discourse around love does not mean she does not love him: "But it was not so—it was not so. It was only that she never could say what she felt" (Woolf 1981, 123). Like *Black Square*, Mrs. Ramsay is fundamentally an experience of cosmological feeling more than a subject of patriarchal clarity. Woolf suggests that dark eternity (Mrs. Ramsay is falling asleep) is a love so beyond comprehension, this love exists as feeling into darkness, not searching for discourse. Like *Black Square's* darkness and silence, Mrs. Ramsay does not speak this eternal love like a human being enwrapped in heteropatriarchal orthodoxy would be expected to. Woolf narrates Mrs. Ramsay falling asleep to the anxieties of patriarchal discourse and deepening her willingness to feel silent, eternal darkness that *is* love.

At this moment of her detachment from discourse and attachment to silent love, Mrs. Ramsay unites again with a black square. She stands and walks to the black square, the window at night: "Getting up, she stood at the window" to gaze at "the sea at night," endless, nonlinguistic dynamic expanse in a square. She "looked out of the window" at "night." On the level of "cotton wool," her words approach Mr. Ramsay's patriarchal love, his need to be confirmed. "Yes, you were right," Mrs. Ramsay confirms to her husband. "It's going to be wet tomorrow. You won't be able to go" to the lighthouse. And yet, she retains her mystical sense of love, which is silence. Though her husband wants her to tell him "that you love me," she "could not do it. She could not say it." Nothingness, which is love, neither does nor says. Mrs. Ramsay is a *Black Square* who does not, cannot, pander to heteropatriarchal misperceptions of love and instead in her silence about love expresses it. At the black window, Mrs. Ramsay communicates a silent and simple reality: cosmological love. And "though she had not said a word, he knew, of course he knew, that she loved him"; "she had not said it, yet he knew" (Woolf 1981, 124). Mr. Ramsay feels loved. However, Mrs. Ramsay's love, in encompassing all-ness at the cosmological level, includes Mr. Ramsay less by virtue of him being her husband, and more by virtue of his inclusion in the all-ness of dark nothingness that is love.

Like *Black Square*, Mrs. Ramsay communicates more on eternity's peaceful terms and less on (hu)mans' anxious ones. As unchanging eternity, Mrs.-Ramsay-as-*Black-Square* points to the ultimate reality, the ultimate nothingness: love. In the spirit of Mrs. Ramsay's tendency to unify all into "one" dark nothingness, Woolf suggests, finally, that we are all Mrs. Ramsays, dark shapes and streams of light. When we trace a black shape threading through Malevich's and Woolf's work amid the noisy contention of modernism, a modernist calm emerges: make nothing, lay down and rest (echoing Lily's motion with the paint brush in the novel's final pages), surrender to peace, leave the competition of discourse, and gain love: dark, spreading nothingness. For both artists, by doing nothing and painting nothingness (lights and darks), one gains everything: an awareness of eternity, peace, and infinite love.

Woolf's and Malevich's modernist works reanimate the ancient idea that we are more eternity than human beings. "There is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven," Woolf writes; there is no Mrs. Ramsay, Woolf, or Malevich. For Woolf as for Malevich, human beings do not exist; only art, which is mystical reality, exists: "We are the words; we are music; we are the thing itself" (Woolf 1985, 72). For Malevich, the "thing" is the existence of nonexistence. Woolf indicates that, like Mrs. Ramsay, we are neither Victorian, modernist, nor belong to any epistemology. We belong to eternity, darkness and light, everything and nothing. At our cores, like Mrs. Ramsay, we are *Black Square*: divine nothingness, immeasurable everything, eternal peace, and infinite love, existences more fundamental to what it means to be human than sociopolitical, material, or artistic creations. Perhaps this reminder of who and what we are is modernism's greatest gift to us.

NOTES

I thank my parents, Paul and Cindy Bagocius, for always believing in my writing, professor and friend Katherine Judith Anderson for providing invaluable feedback on drafts, professors Bianca Calabresi, Philip Church, Gertraud Gutzmann, and Monika Wagner for nurturing my love of Woolf's and Malevich's art works while I was an undergraduate at Kenyon College and Universität Hamburg, where the seeds of this essay grew over twenty-five years ago, and I also thank the anonymous reviewers.

¹ Studying Woolf's novel through the lens of Malevich's *Black Square* opens a strand of Woolfian nothingness, as will become clear, that is characterized less by emptiness, lack, or death and more by fullness, richness,

and resurrection. For a contrasting approach to Woolfian nothingness as “negation” associated with “nullity,” “personal loss,” “life-long struggle,” “melancholy and depression,” and “a literal or spiritual death,” please see Roberta Rubenstein (2008, 36–37).

- ² Though Malevich’s artistic corpus expresses a variety of color and shape, Aleksandra Shatskikh finds *Black Square* to be “the symbol of Kazimir Malevich’s art” (2012, 274). Malevich too centralizes *Black Square* in his philosophy of art, for he displayed the painting towering above his other paintings at *Black Square*’s premier at the Last Exhibition of Futurist Painting 0.10 in St. Petersburg (then known as Petrograd) in December 1915, positioning it in a room’s uppermost corner, as religious icons are positioned in Russian Orthodox churches to signify their symbolic gravity.
- ³ Malevich was born and raised in present-day Ukraine to parents of Polish origin. However, during Woolf’s generation, he was considered by many in the art world as a Russian painter, since Ukraine was part of the Russian Empire. Malevich also spent his adult life living and studying in Russia’s major cities of Moscow and Petrograd/Leningrad (present-day St. Petersburg).
- ⁴ For more on Woolf’s deep relationship with Russian literature, please see Rubenstein (2009) and Darya Protopova (2019).
- ⁵ Though Woolf describes writing *To the Lighthouse* as an experience of “feeling . . . ideas and scenes” that come to her in an “involuntary rush” (Woolf 1985, 72), the process from drafting to publication was perhaps more arduous. According to Mark Hussey and Peter Shillingsburg, Woolf’s revision process was extensive. “Woolf’s typical mode of composition,” Hussey and Shillingsbury note, “was to write in longhand, and then to type up the holograph draft, which she would then continue to revise in pen, and then retype from earlier typed and marked-up drafts. . . . In January 1927 she recorded that she had ‘been revising & retyping (some parts 3 times over)’” (n.d.). Despite the work involved in transforming a draft into book form, Woolf nonetheless describes her “ideas and scenes” for that book as “given to” her, “not made by” her (Woolf 1985, 72).

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