Ode to a Witch

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I.

the spirit of re-creation which masters this earthly form
loves most the pivoting point where you are no longer yourself.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, “Sonnet XII” (157)

These three lines surely spoke to Mrs. Ramsay, even though she never picked up Rilke’s The Sonnets to Orpheus. Or, if she had, she might have skipped past the section while “zigzagging this way and that” through poetry, as she is so prone to doing in To the Lighthouse (119). During her nightly fireside reading rituals with her husband, she flips pages at random, slipping in and out of different texts and worlds: nineteenth-century poet Charles Elton’s “Luriana, Lurilee” is followed by a one-line interlude from Browne, and then pieces of Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 98.” Here, the concern is not to move chronologically, abiding by rules of literal understanding; rather, Mrs. Ramsay seeks the “essence” of the texts, letting their spirits ordain meaning (121).

Words and images, here, seem to have a kind of autonomous power, one independent of the reader. They need no interpreting; rather, they are imbued with a force of their own. This spirit of the text moves Mrs. Ramsay “backwards” and “upwards,” and “under,” pulling at the different parts of her mind, stretching her in many directions (119, 121). George Steiner would say she is reading “as if,” letting the meaning of the text—a meaning separate from that which we, the reader, might presume—take us over, allowing it to color and inform our “remembrance and [our] sense of the future,” pulling us both back and forth through time (34, 35). The text should incarnate some “presence of significant being” in us; we should allow it to inhabit us, to create in us (35).
Steiner suggests that we be a subordinate to the text’s own power, but also a kind of participant in the nature of its workings; we should be made “responsible” and “answerable” to the text’s calls, “as a host is to a guest” (35). Mrs. Ramsay is, indeed, subordinate to her texts, though Steiner does not suggest that such a process is devoid of pleasure. Rather, this covenant between “guest” and “host” raises the reader up in a climactic ascent. Mrs. Ramsay is pushed “on to the top” of a “summit” (121). And, though a play-thing for the forces that unfold in her reading, she seems also to participate in their making. Out of this climax comes something “suddenly entire . . . beautiful and reasonable, clear and complete”; she holds the product of the encounter in her hand, victorious (121). She and some force have been able to “celebrate [their] nuptials,” by the fireside, “in darkness,” or, as Virginia Woolf would say, having “incarnate[d]” a “presence of significant being” out of a cross-pollination of sensations (Room 103; Steiner 35).

Mr. Ramsay, sitting across from his wife, does not recognize her transcendent encounter with words, images, and this thing one might call the force. He does not register her making. Rather, he attributes Mrs. Ramsay’s ecstatic and sleepy stupor to “ignorance” and “simplicity”; he doubts if she even understands what she is reading (121). Little does he know that this moment is one of the many “pivoting points”—of conjuring and of creation—at which his wife has arrived that day and, I surmise, every day of her life. In this moment, as Rilke would say, Mrs. Ramsay is no longer herself.

The creative path seems, for Mrs. Ramsay, to be imbued with a sense of dark magic, both on the part of the force at hand and the mind that it plays with. All parts of her making—both process and product—go unseen, are unrecognizable to their human witness, Mr. Ramsay. And while the outcome of Mrs. Ramsay’s experience is, to her, tangible and definite—she “held it in her hands” and it was “complete”—the thing itself is inaccessible to the mind across from her, a mind like nearly all of our minds, which can capture the literal far better than the “essence” (121). The mind which does not read “as if.”

Such “essences” are at the crux of Virginia Woolf’s novel, an ever-complicating nexus of fleeting, generative images and the minds that try to make sense of them. At the novel’s core is a witch of sorts, a mother of countless children, male and female, mortal and omnipresent. Above all seeming contradictions, she is a human host of the force that others cannot see or touch. This is the simultaneously all-powerful and destructible Mrs. Ramsay. Not unlike the narrators of Woolf’s other novels, she is attuned to seemingly
supernatural and corporeal are presented to us at once. And that should give us hope.

II.

In spite of all the farmer’s work and worry,

He can’t reach down to where the seed is slowly

Transmuted into summer. The earth bestows.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, “Sonnet XII” (105)

“That sounds like a personal problem,” my writing teacher says. He is responding to a remark I have made in class about E. M. Foster’s _A Passage to India_, in which _the force_ is ever-present but, in the absence of a character like Mrs. Ramsay, can never be called on, grasped, and made generative by the individual. The novel is bereft of _witch_. Instead, set against the backdrop of the British Raj, English and Indians alike fumble in each other’s midst, not understanding, losing control. Mistakes are always being made; clumsiness and error reign; West and East slide past one another and refuse to be made sense of. The novel’s plot hinges on a false accusation made by a young British woman, Miss Adela Quested, implicating an Indian doctor, Aziz, in sexual assault. Such grave errors as these, which tear personal relationships asunder, are made all the darker against the landscape of India, which Forster seems to admire more than he does any human, always turning us back to the earth.

_A Passage to India_ opens and closes with Nature. In the first chapter, it is magisterial, imbued with divine power. Forster writes:

[W]hen the sky chooses, glory can rain into the Chandrapore bazaars or a benediction pass from horizon to horizon. The sky can do this because it is so strong and so enormous. Strength comes from the sun, infused in it daily; size from the prostrate earth. . . . League after league the earth lies flat, heaves a little, is flat again. Only in the south, where a group of fists and fingers are thrust up through the soil, is the endless expanse interrupted. These fists and fingers are the Marabar Hills, containing the extraordinary caves. (5-6)

Here, as much as the words on the pages that Mrs. Ramsay reads, elements of the earth seem to have an autonomous power, a force of their own. The sky alone chooses when to rain glory upon the bazaars; its relationships to the man-made are not influenced by human power, but rather by the sun and the
“prostrate earth.” In the novel’s opening section, Forster seems to be asking us never to forget the power of nature, its unique ability to turn the earthly divine. And yet, as all-powerful as these natural elements seem, they are also personified, brought down to a human scale: the earth “heaves” while mountains are “group[s] of fists and fingers.” The corporeal is interlocked with divine power, and yet no human can intervene. The Earth “bestows,” but, Forster seems to be saying, no individual can take what it gives and make something whole of it. The Earth’s charges are human, animal and inanimate already. There is no need to interpret them, to find their human “host.” There is no Mrs. Ramsay in India, nor, perhaps, is there a need for one.

The novel’s last words belong to the sky. In the closing scene of the book, recently united long-lost friends, one British and the other Indian, reluctantly say goodbye to one another as they ride on horseback through India. They are nameless in the scene, their individuality taken away to invoke a broader meaning: “Why can’t we be friends now?” one of them says. “It’s what I want. It’s what you want” (362).

Nature stops them. This all-seeing narrating voice, dictating to us from some higher realm, tells readers that the non-human forces at work—“the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House”—do not want them to be together (362). Just as the sky and the Marabar caves, in the novel’s first chapter, are personified, so, too, are the inanimate and animal, here, made human. They, “in their hundred voices,” answer the man’s question: “No, not yet” (362). This is a tentative conclusion that leaves the much larger question of “when” outside the frame of Forster’s work. The narrator leaves his readers behind—joining “the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House” in shared understanding, deriding us with his godly knowledge, his “religious truth[s]” (307).

But how insulting! Animals and buildings can dictate fate, can know more than I do, be actors and confronters of the force, more than I can! This is a personal problem indeed, one that Forster seems to know his Western reader will butt up against and resist, just as the human characters in his book do. Failure and understanding seem tangled in resistance.

Though images and impressions of the godly are always close by, hovering above the action of the novel, dictating the fate of its human players, they stand apart, stay separate. While a little repose may come in a scene near the end of the novel, when the Indian Professor Godbole seemingly “transcends human processes,” and “stands in the presence of God,” we are quickly made aware that the distance between human and divine—within the “host” of the individual—is once again vast (317). Godbole and God (note the names)
stand “at opposite ends of the same strip of carpet”; while the *individual human* and the *divine* inhabit the same space, a physical closeness is denied them (317). Sensual knowledge, the erotic pursuit of the ephemeral and divine, is unattainable.

III.

Plump apple, smooth banana, melon, peach
gooseberry . . . How all this affluence
speaks death and life into the mouth . . . I sense . . .

*What miracle is happening in your mouth?*

—Rainer Maria Rilke, “Sonnet XIII” (107)

In only one scene of *To the Lighthouse* are we given access to Mrs. Ramsay’s mind as she sits alone: a Mrs. Ramsay without form, without a role—no easy frame to contain her. As a mother of eight children and the backbone for a needy husband, Mrs. Ramsey perpetually needs to care for others and is usually given to us in the midst of action, caught in the “being and the doing” of maternal and domestic duties, even if her mind travels beyond these simultaneously self-assigned and socially ordained roles (62). She is always in the process of interacting with others: reading a story to her son, hosting a dinner party or taking a walk with her houseguest, Charles Tansley. Even while conjuring *the force* by the fireside that evening, she’ll be interrupted by her own insuppressible need to mother: the sound of Mr. Ramsay “slapping his thighs,” and his reason for doing so, will preoccupy her before she allows herself to delight in the makings of her own individual mind (119). But, in this central scene, this one-time occurrence, she sits “by herself, with herself,” ready for the “strangest adventures” (62).

Indeed, such adventures do confound our expectations. I seek Mrs. Ramsay freed from the social roles that I’d like to think oppress her; I want her gleefully unhinged from husband and child. In a wash of her “personal problems,” of presumptions—a resistance to something more complex—I seek access to the mind of a witch—a dark and fertile magician. And she does not disappoint.

Mrs. Ramsay not only has a summoning power, she is also imbued with a *transformative* power. She “sit[s] and look[s], sit[s] and look[s], with her work in her hands until she be[comes] the thing she look[s] at—that light, for example” (63). She is pushed towards a limitless, invisible, ego-less self, capa-
ble of merging with the inanimate. Personality dissolves when she is alone, without her inherent need to care. She becomes an abstraction, self-consciously identifying as “a wedge-shaped core of darkness” (62).

Our previous access to Mrs. Ramsay’s mind as she sits and reads shows us that the loss of the tangible and visible self, this unification with the inanimate—the “text” or the “light”—is indeed generative. It is a process by which the “fret[s]” and “hurr[ies]” of everyday life are shattered and can give way to ecstasies, to “irrational tenderness” towards the inanimate (63). However, though a generative process, it is also overwhelming and destructive and unchallengeable. Mrs. Ramsay’s encounter with texts erupted into ecstatic ascendance, but here, the moment climaxes in death. Her mind recites in hypnotic incantations, “It will end, it will end. . . . It will come, it will come. . . . We are in the hands of the Lord” (63). Though the transcendence of selfhood—the bindings of many selves—rises in triumph and exultation, it finishes with a moment of horror.

Here, Mrs. Ramsay’s abilities to summon and to transform are complicated by her limited powers of control. Though she is capable of both perceiving and being open to the forces—inanimate and earthly—to which no others, in the novel’s world, have access, they still overtake and overwhelm her. In effect, they push her under, perhaps into a kind of momentary Hades. She is reminded of her inevitable mortality: she will die. This particular process, one of control and divine knowledge dissolving into fear and limitation—suggests that Mrs. Ramsay is imbued with a double-consciousness: one open to both the forces of the living and the dead. One part of her reigns over the powers of the earth and calls upon them; the other is open to a force of the underworld. Death and abundance lock their hands inside her body, a body of many bodies: such is her “miracle.” She stands a little closer to God on the same carpet. Perhaps this should suggest that she is our Orpheus incarnate, a mortal granted godly powers—rising as a divine maker, lowering as a commoner among the dead.

IV.

In this immeasurable darkness, be the power that rounds your senses in their magic ring, the sense of their mysterious encounter.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, “Sonnet XXIX” (191)
Bernard, one of the seven narrators of *The Waves*, necessarily complicates notions of *the force* present in *A Passage to India* and *To the Lighthouse* by establishing the power of *the collective*. If Mrs. Ramsay has two consciences, perhaps Bernard has eight, fusing in the novel’s final pages all the presences that have spun the whole: six friends, a fallen hero, and Time. At the beginning of the novel, these forces are seemingly separate; the novel’s form designates them as distinctive entities. We are presented with the sun’s movement in italicized prose, followed then by separated, pseudo-interior monologues of six friends: such monologues are the workings of each mind, but always claimed by Woolf to be spoken aloud, a transmogrification of genres, of prose and plays and poetry.

Following the death of their collectively loved and carnally yearned-for friend, Percival, we start to lose sense of individual identities. By the last section of the novel, Bernard remains as a seemingly singular voice. But he, not unlike Mrs. Ramsay, has been experiencing, evaluating the “text” of the human psyche, reading it “as if.” His five friends, Percival, and Time have *created* in him an eight-bound self that causes him to give up his own ego, to house and adopt an *other*. A hallmark of his individuality, his penchant for “phrases,” is surrendered: “I have done with phrases. How much better is silence” (295). There is, now, “a gradual coming together, running into one, acceleration and unification”; Bernard adopts the encountering charges of the inanimate and the human around him—of a clock ticking, a woman sneezing, the creak of a door (294). He adopts the voice of Time, appropriating the tone of the omnipresent narrator who gives us accounts of the sun’s movement through a day in nine sections of the novel. In an exhaustive whirlwind of this renewal of the limitless self—made up of infinite, collective energies, a “magic ring” of forces (Rilke 191)—Bernard does not shy away from, but flings himself towards “Death” (*Waves* 297).

This flinging oneself towards what we might call *the force*, which I have evoked through Mrs. Ramsay, is both destructive and creative, rooted equally in the fleeting nature of the corporeal and the sense of “forever” in the sacramental. Bernard has indeed collapsed gender and genre, becoming one with fellow humans and objects—even the ephemeral patterns of time and space; he has let forces *create* within him, but in doing so, he loses his mortal self. He joins the ranks of the heroes, of myth, likening himself to Percival. He “ride[s] with [his] spear couched and [his] hair flying back like a young man’s, like Percival’s, when he galloped in India,” boldly riding like a warrior in the face of “Death” (297). For among the aggregate of forces, Bernard, too, encounters death, as Mrs. Ramsay does while she sits alone and “be[comes]
the thing[s] she look[s],” unhinged from her limitless self as she awakens to her own mortality (63). But, unlike Mrs. Ramsay, Bernard faces Death head on, and addresses him directly: “O Death!” he cries valiantly. He “fling[s] [him]self, unvanquished and unyielding” in the face of it (297). Here, he is without mortal limitation, stripped of the human fear of death, his own servitude and helplessness in the face of it dissolved. He joins the ranks of heroes, leaving the corporeal behind. Bernard is no Orpheus. He does not rise and fall, slipping in and out of divine power and mortal status. Having surrendered his eight-fold consciousness in pursuit of mythic ventures, of immortality, he has perhaps ascended among the gods. And while climactic and perhaps even sensational, his ascension can perhaps teach us less about being immortal, about employing dark magic, than can the character of Mrs. Ramsay.

V.

Does it really exist, Time, the Destroyer?
When will it crush the fortress on the peaceful height?
This heart, which belongs to the infinite gods forever,
When will the Demiurge violate it?

—Rainer Maria Rilke, “Sonnet XXVII” (187)

Mrs. Ramsay is reported dead to us amidst the force of Time. Woolf states it in a single sentence, in parentheses. Death may be something greater, then: something that has not yet been quite achieved, and is not necessarily finite. At least not for Mrs. Ramsay, who continues to inhabit the forces infused in time’s passing, and to cradle the human characters that remain past her death. In the second section of the novel, mothering and birth proliferate. In the wake of Mrs. Ramsay’s death, human agency is restored to the earth, but not with the same dominance and divine power that Forster gives it. Rather, the earth here is fertile, teeming with life: the “poppy seed itself and the carnation mate with the cabbage,” “the thistle thrust[s] itself between the tiles,” and “the broken glass and the china lie out on the lawn and be[come] tangled over with grass and wild berries” (138). All is chaos: strange species of plants are born, while the inanimate and the living intertwine. And yet such chaos, such loss of order, breeds new life and a mothering spirit. The restoration of the house, after all the time has passed, is compared now to a “laborious birth” (139). Woolf’s nature is lustful, erotic, and fertile, while
Forster’s is simplistic in its autonomy and power. Though perhaps personified, it does not pursue the corporeal. Forster’s earth does not generate; it dictates.

Mrs. Ramsay is infused in the rest of the novel, not just in nature but also in collective memory. Other characters are in constant pursuit of their lost mother, trying to conjure her. But they are more consumed with the material world—with production—than with witchcraft; they know not of Mrs. Ramsay’s entanglement with the earth’s spirit. Her spirit does not suffice for them; a vision must occur. Lily Briscoe, perhaps the novel’s Demiurge, belongs to the material world—to an ultimate goal of production. She is trying to reconstruct something whole out of a fragmented present, born out of a seed from the past. She seeks to complete a painting she started a decade earlier, at the start of the novel.

To help her with her painting, Lily conjures the image of Mrs. Ramsay so that she is beside her, seeming to sit with Lily on the beach. And though Lily has “her vision” and creates something representative of her experience, she is not capable of transforming—of hosting—the spirit she has summoned. Perhaps the spirit of Mrs. Ramsay cannot be captured or appropriated by another. Perhaps, indeed, Lily is no Bernard. Rather, Mrs. Ramsay stays whole, sitting beside Lily—a mere witness, and not a participant, to her presence—on the beach “making of the moment something permanent” (172). Mrs. Ramsay is still a maker: a motherly, erotic, and singular presence, even after death.

Standing in a wash of personal problems, I try to make whole a force that cannot be reduced into one shape. Mrs. Ramsay is human, though equally belonging to nature’s life force and divine power, unlike the separated friends in A Passage to India. She is a host of the collective, yet, unlike Bernard of The Waves, always autonomous and singular—a presence discernibly human—a fertile mother—even after her death. She is at once limited and limitless; afraid of mortality, though she herself is immortal. The synergy between that thing we might call the force and the human is harbored in Mrs. Ramsay’s ever-abundant womb of creation, of magic both erotic and dark.

“Oh, Mrs. Ramsay! . . . Mrs. Ramsay!” (Lighthouse 41).

you, strength and purpose of how many worlds!

—Rainer Maria Rilke, “Sonnet V” (143)