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Sheep in Woolf's Clothing: Virginia Woolf's Ovine Ontology in *To the Lighthouse*

by Donnie Secreast



Abstract

This article analyzes writing from both Virginia Woolf's fiction and memoirs to investigate how the author's recurrent use of images of horned ungulates—nonhuman animals like sheep, antelope, and other artiodactyls—yields a sophisticated family hierarchy within her novel, *To the Lighthouse*. Using a vital materialist framework, the analysis traces Woolf's engagement with zoomorphism and artiodactyl imagery, revealing insights into the novel's power dynamics and uncovering a new dimension of Woolf's animal symbolism. Juxtaposing the recurring animal imagery in Woolf's fiction and journals with these animals' real-life analogues and their scientific descriptions reveals how Woolf's creative representations are informed by biological contexts. This approach is enhanced by placing the organisms within phylogenetic trees that illustrate their relationships between species. This article argues that Woolf's imaginative portrayal of animals is key to understanding her symbolic system, which functions not as a set of static metaphors but as a fluid, relational system that reconfigures the hierarchies and human–nonhuman entanglements within *To the Lighthouse*.

Keywords: new materialism, Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, ecocriticism



About the Author

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In her journals, Virginia Woolf reflects on the death of her beloved mother, Julia Stephen, writing: “There is my last sight of her; she was dying; I came to kiss her and as I crept out of the room she said: ‘Hold yourself straight, my little goat’” (2020, 4,951). This moment from 1895 marks not only Woolf’s touching farewell to her mother, but it also exhibits a formative collision of grief, physicality, and language. Woolf “creeps” away, and her mother Julia, with a final maternal command, encourages her to find emotional endurance—and she uses Woolf’s childhood sobriquet, “Goat,” which had been the family’s nickname for her. Those final words from her mother and the use of her intimate pet name echoes curiously in *To the Lighthouse*, where the protagonists’ family name, “Ramsay,” reanimates the language of hooved and horned animals. While Woolf resisted simplistic biographical readings of her novel, she acknowledged that the character of Mrs. Ramsay was infused with an essence of Julia. This article argues that Woolf’s transformation of private memory into ovine and ungulate-related imagery produces a zoomorphic ontology within the novel—one that challenges human exceptionalism and engages the reader in a system of being that takes nonhumans seriously. Using a new materialist framework, I argue that Woolf’s symbolic use of goats, sheep, and other (polled and horned) ungulates contributes to a broader posthuman reading of the Ramsay family and the novel’s ethics of interspecies entanglement.

Woolf’s stylistically inventive masterpiece, *To the Lighthouse*—and its groundbreaking “Time Passes” section in particular—has been the subject of a plethora of scholarship that scrutinizes the effects of the author’s foregrounding and narration of nonhuman organisms, objects, and “things.” Critics investigate Woolf’s depictions of the kind of “*thing-power*” that vital materialist Jane Bennett describes as advantageous for “calling to mind a childhood sense of the world as filled with all sorts of animate beings, some human, some not, some organic, some not. It draws attention to an efficacy of

objects in excess of the human meanings, designs, or purposes they express or serve” (2010, 20).¹ Woolf’s interest in nonhuman, nonliving subjects and objects is certainly not only constrained to the “Time Passes” section of her novel, and this article takes scenes from both the first and last sections of *To the Lighthouse*—“The Window” and “The Lighthouse”—as its primary focus. However, one element that permeates all sections of her novel is Woolf’s foundational association of horned and tusked ungulates with her human characters—depicted in her protagonists’ family name of the “Ramsays.” At a foundational level, Woolf’s use of charactonym supplies a fine, but powerful disruption to traditional Euro-American ontological frameworks that subtly decenters humans to explore a more relational, multi-species system.² What begins in this article as an “ovine ontology”—anchored in familial and autobiographical symbolism—expands, through Woolf’s mingling of rams, goats, boars, and antelope, into a more capacious “ungulate ontology,” one that resists taxonomic fixity and invites misrecognition as a generative narrative and ontological strategy.

To better understand the implications of the ungulate ontology in *To the Lighthouse*, this article draws upon work from new materialist thinkers such as Samantha Frost and Diana Coole (2010); Bennett’s concept of “vibrant matter” that ultimately explores the possibilities afforded by an attunement to slightly more horizontal ontologies (and an awareness of their ethical hazards) (2010, 10–13); and animal studies scholar Cary Wolfe, who brings attention to a world with more “jagged ontologies” that attend to how biological specificity can help combat the Euro-American philosophical penchant for reductionist thinking—that has historically abided the violent instrumentalization of both humans and nonhumans (2020, 144). A tracing of Woolf’s own uneven, ungulate-centric ontological framework invites readers to attend to complexity and dynamism, asking them simultaneously to think literally, physically, and metaphorically about human-nonhuman relationships—particularly about the relationships between humans, sheep, boar, and other horned and tusked, and hooved or flippered animals. Woolf’s mingling of humans, nonhumans, and a habit of slipperiness in distinguishing between (what we might like to think of as) fixed, stable entities and species precipitates a renegotiation of how Euro-Americans typically perceive and talk about these organisms and our relationships to them. The results of Woolf’s theorizing in *To the Lighthouse* resonate with what Frost and Coole outline as the stakes of new materialist thought itself, where “radical reconsiderations” of matter have the potential to challenge some of the most basic (and insidious) assumptions about humans, human superiority, and agency. This kind of “radical reprisal” might help us “rethink humans’ material practices in how we labor on, exploit, and interact with nature” (2010, 4). Woolf’s rethinking of a human-dominated hierarchy that instead privileges goats, sheep, and other ungulates

disturbs neatly-bound, static definitions of both humans—and our all-too-often rigid gender roles—and animals. The effects produce a dynamic reading experience that invites us to attune differently to our own ever-changing and chimeric more-than-human world.

This article traces Woolf's ungulate ontology, exploring her depictions of ontological importance that flows not from humans—but from sheep. Her exploratory system of relationships diverges from traditional Euro-American ontological frameworks that predominantly reflect humanistic hierarchies—and typically value hetero-normative, masculine subjects as superior to all others. Her work ultimately gestures towards the possibilities that could emerge from imagining more inclusive—and perhaps whimsical—ontological frameworks that expand our sense of what can be achieved in the pursuit of more sustainable and livable modes of being. In contrast to an anthropocentric hierarchy that assigns the greatest ontological importance to humans, followed by animals that resemble us, then plants, and lastly the so-called inanimate world—land, air, and water—Woolf's ontology encompasses a far more uneven and surprising range of beings. Her framework includes various ungulates—goats, boars, pigs, antelope—and, if one is willing to squint at phylogenetic trees and the morphological echoes they contain, even sea lions and walruses.

The first section of this article, “Hog in the Spotlight,” explores the gendered human and nonhuman power dynamics at work in the iconic boar's skull scene from “The Window” section of *To the Lighthouse*. Here, I follow the implications of Woolf's mixing and blending of sheep and rams, pigs and boars, and her introduction of antelopes into the broader ungulate ontology. It is in this scene that I identify one of Woolf's most essential narrative tools for naming and mapping her ontology: the generative misidentification or misperception of certain animals and their species-specific body parts. Woolf shows the youngest Ramsay children, James and Cam, misidentifying the tusks of a taxidermied wild boar's head as horns—because horns, unlike tusks, are more familiar to them as “rams” themselves. I then follow this line of thinking in the subsequent section, “The Walrus and the Philosopher,” where I further scrutinize the implications of the generative confusion between tusks and horns in order to better apprehend Woolf's commingling of humans, rams, sea lions, and walruses. In the final section of this article, “The Black Sheep Antelope,” I examine Cam Ramsay's recollection of the boar's head episode with James and their mother in their childhood nursery as an adult. In this section, I explore how Cam has internalized certain echoes from this sequence, particularly where Mrs. Ramsay introduced her to the ontologically distinct—yet analogously powerful—ungulates, the antelope. I trace how Cam has assumed antelope as her animal avatar, and her adoption of the striking ungulate allows her an

avenue of resistance to both the rigid human hierarchies and sheep hierarchies that were thrust upon her as a child and metaphorical female ewe. This article's exploration of an ungulate ontology gestures towards the generativity in the ontological inquiry posited by artists and writers—like Woolf, whose novel proves to be a rich site for cultivating readers' attunement to specificity and for challenging us to imagine new ways of relating to both ourselves and each other as we continue to story the future of our more-than-human world.

Hog in the Spotlight

One of Woolf's most conspicuous moments of slippage—where characters misperceive the biological specificity of certain animals—appears in a scene in which the family's matriarch, Mrs. Ramsay, mediates a conflict between her two youngest children, James and Cam, as they repeatedly confuse the tusks of a wild boar's head with horns.³ In the following sequence, Mrs. Ramsay's children are at a standstill over what to do with the “horned” skull mounted in their shared bedroom at the family's summer home. Cam, the daughter and second youngest, is afraid of the skull—a boar's head with protruding “horns.” Cam's fear of the skull contrasts with her brother James's total fascination with it. James, the youngest Ramsay child, does not want anyone to move the frightening object. The children's nanny explains to Mrs. Ramsay why her children are not asleep, long after their bedtime:

It was nailed fast, Mildred said, and Cam couldn't go to sleep with it in the room, and James screamed if she touched it. Then Cam must go to sleep (it had great horns said Cam)—must go to sleep and dream of lovely palaces, said Mrs. Ramsay, sitting down on the bed by her side. She could see the horns, Cam said, all over the room. It was true. Wherever they put the light (and James could not sleep without a light) there was always a shadow somewhere. (Woolf [1927] 2005, 116)

Cam shows an awareness of the peculiarity of the horns that this skull possesses. They are different from the horned creatures from whence her family name comes. This precocious level of awareness and recognition of difference may come from the fact that boars do not possess horns at all; rather, this skull's protrusions are tusks.⁴ Perhaps it is simply a fear of the unknown or that Cam's only other reference for unusually-horned creatures conjures up demonic imagery, evoking connotations of the devil—after all, horned animals are also generally cloven-hoofed ones as well.⁵ Cam describes feeling trapped by the horned entity and targeted by its presence. The horns follow her “all over the room,” and there is “always a shadow.” This eternal shadow shows Woolf observing how the manipulation of light affects our experience of objects, and in this case, it is a vaguely menacing one. This nursery scene can be interpreted in a number of ways—one

might discern that there is either a single horned creature that follows Cam about the room, or that even, perhaps, that there are a number of horned beasts in the room disrupting her sleep.

Whether the discomfort caused by the pig skull stems from its tusks being mistaken for ovine-like horns or from some other feature, Mrs. Ramsay privately acknowledges that it unsettles her as well. However, this acknowledgement does not stop her from insisting that her daughter ignore her feelings and thereby yield to her brother's caprices. Despite her young children's respective age difference, Mrs. Ramsay demands logic from her daughter: "But think, Cam, it's only an old pig," said Mrs. Ramsay, 'a nice black pig like the pigs at the farm.' But Cam thought it was a horrid thing, branching at her all over the room" (Woolf [1927] 2005, 116). By calling the boar's skull a "pig," Mrs. Ramsay tries to downplay the unnerving effects that the object has on Cam—in spite of the fact that she herself also experiences these disturbing effects, as do the family's hired housekeepers featured in the "Time Passes" section of the novel. Instead of the object simply appearing as an inconsequential decoration secured to a wall, Woolf describes it more like a creature that is not so much dead, as it is a harder-to-qualify entity, one that is hollow, skinless, and replete with strange bony protrusions emerging from its face. Further in defiance of its lifelessness, this ostensibly-dead entity moves—the boar's skull projects an omnipresence into all corners of the children's room. Nevertheless, Mrs. Ramsay tries to familiarize it and rehabilitate the monstrosity into something knowable and recognizable: the quintessential, hornless, farmyard animal—the pig.

While the scene's misidentification of a boar's tusks for horns may evoke a devil figure and suggest a more overt biblical source for Cam's childlike fear, it also opens up space to read Mrs. Ramsay as a more expansive figure of domestication. Perhaps if Mrs. Ramsay had attended to the biological specificity here and corrected Cam's misapprehension of tusks as horns, she could have diffused Cam's fear; however, she chose to de-fang—or de-horn—the taxidermied beast instead by conflating it with its softer, domesticated relative: "an old pig." Graham Fraser (2020) also finds a connection between Woolf's treatment of objects and domesticity, observing that

Woolf's capacity to "see the strangeness of [things] only when habit has ceased to immerse us in them" is to see them in a de-domesticated, uncanny light. The de-domestication in *To the Lighthouse* could not be more literal: the objects are scattered within a physically collapsing home, a scattering which also emancipates the object-creatures from their habitual existence as time (*heimlich*) human accessories. (87)

While Fraser's analysis does not address the boar's skull explicitly, his articulation of de-domestication resonates with Mrs. Ramsay's role in this scene.⁶ First, she is a maternal

figure of domesticity herself, but she also embodies a masculinized domesticator here, too—as a herdsman or shepherd of nonhuman animals. While one might still describe the boar’s skull in this scene as functioning as wall decor, or, per Fraser, as a “human accessory,” Mrs. Ramsay still has to contend with the skull’s glimmers of vitality and confront the very real discomfort it induces for both her and Cam. In the nursery, Mrs. Ramsay attempts to suppress the skull’s wildness to encourage her daughter to sleep, not just by softening its appearance, but by inviting a deeper misperception: no longer just a confusion of body parts (tusks mistaken for horns), but a wholesale reclassification—encouraging Cam to conflate a wild boar with “the pigs at the farm.”

By giving the horns (or mislabeled tusks) of this mounted skull such enormous influence over characters—both male and female—Woolf also draws attention to the power of objects and other registers of being that remain overlooked in Euro-American societies writ large. In Bennett’s theorization of the agentic capacities of nonhuman organisms and entities, she describes vital materialism as a philosophical project that explores alternatives to the prevalent anthropocentric, settler-colonial ontological hierarchy, and she is particularly interested in alternatives that might create space for an “order of things” where “the difference between subjects and objects minimize, but the materiality of all things is elevated” (2010, 12–13). Woolf shows correlations of agentic capacity between various life forms, but sometimes she makes these arguments by highlighting perceived, or culturally-instilled, differences. Woolf often shows Mrs. Ramsay as presenting a difference between men and women, and she teaches her daughters that they are not the rams in the flock. Instead, she imparts to her daughters that it is important to revere men and to defer to them, for they are the powerful rams of the world. Frederick Turner (2001) notes how the two children actually embody two separate viewpoints of the world themselves:

Cam, Mrs. Ramsay’s fierce and imaginative little girl, finds the skull terrifying, won’t sleep with it in the room, and wants it taken down. James, her little boy, resembles his father in his rigid, blue-eyed, philosopher’s integrity, his ruthless determination to face up to the terrible truth of things. He insists that the skull remain where it is: he will not allow a mere girl to evade the harsh light of reality. (220)

Turner picks up on James’s imposition of his will over his sister’s and the privileging of the male child over the female in this scene. What Turner does not attend to, though, is Mrs. Ramsay’s pronounced favoritism of the boy. While Mrs. Ramsay claims her own likeness to her son, Turner astutely observes a connecting thread between James and his philosopher father here, too. In this scene, Mrs. Ramsay teaches Cam to accept her (presumed) place within the hierarchy of the flock of lambs that comprises the Ramsay family. As Mrs. Ramsay negotiates with her kids about how to handle their dispute, she

uses the more scientific phrase “boar’s skull” with James—even though he is younger than Cam—but Mrs. Ramsay calls the skull a “nice black pig” when talking to her daughter. Diverging from Turner’s interpretation of the nursery scene where James purely exemplifies his father’s point of view, my reading of this section points to the possibility that James likes the skull because the tusks, misperceived as horns remind him of the real, but metaphorical horns he will one day possess as a full-grown adult male ram.

When Mrs. Ramsay’s attempt to calm Cam by minimizing her fears and downplaying the skull’s unsettling presence does not work, she switches tactics: she invokes other horned creatures in a hypnotic speech to lull Cam to sleep. First, though, Mrs. Ramsay delivers a sort of compromise between her two kids’ wishes for what they would like done with the mounted skull. Instead of removing it for Cam, or leaving it be for James, Mrs. Ramsay completely wraps the object in her shawl, leaving what can only look like a knit boxing glove protruding from the wall of the nursery—an undoubtedly less unnerving sight for a young child. Once she has finished muffling the beast,

[Mrs. Ramsay] came back to Cam and laid her head almost flat on the pillow beside Cam’s and said how lovely it looked now; how the fairies would love it [...] was like a beautiful mountain such as she had seen abroad, with valleys and flowers and bells ringing and birds singing and little goats and antelopes and...Cam was repeating after her how it was like a mountain [...] and there were little antelopes, and her eyes were opening and shutting, and Mrs. Ramsay went on speaking still more monotonously and more rhythmically [...] how she must shut her eyes and go to sleep and dream of mountains and valleys and stars falling and parrots and antelopes and gardens and everything lovely... (Woolf [1927] 2005, 117)

Mrs. Ramsay tries to counteract the dark magic of the boar’s skull with more whimsical visions of nature and wonder. Mrs. Ramsay turns a specter of death in a cramped room populated with omnipresent horns, and shared by the company of her brother and nanny, into an expansive space: a mountain that sustains an abundance of life. In addition to the flowers and birds, we have two more horned animals featured in this idyllic mountainside: goats and antelopes. Mrs. Ramsay again acts much like a shepherd here herself insofar as she tries to lead her daughter into a new mode of thought. Sheep are flock creatures that follow an internal hierarchy, following behind a group’s main leader—generally the male ram.⁷ Mrs. Ramsay is training her daughter and subtly indoctrinating her with her own ontology of horned animals. In terms of most powerful, sheep are at the top, but “horned” creatures with tusks (like boars) retain a serious power of their own. Mrs. Ramsay shepherds Cam into a peaceful sleep by invoking these other horned creatures as well. Mrs. Ramsay leads her away from the fear of one kind of horned

creature into the safety and familiarity of others, partially through making her daughter repeat the horned creatures' names after her.

Even beyond their surname, the Ramsays reveal themselves to be a family of rams in other ways—particularly in the way they embody and enforce a distinct gender ideology. Cam, cast by her mother as a sheep herself, internalizes the lesson Mrs. Ramsay provides about the benevolence of certain horned creatures in relation to others, but then, in teaching her daughter, Mrs. Ramsay reveals another facet of her own ovine nature. Mrs. Ramsay leads her lambs to slumber in the nursery scene, but some other curious moments in this passage support this claim. First, beyond simply having Mrs. Ramsay behave like the leader of a flock, Woolf describes her as only able to lay “her head almost flat on the pillow beside Cam’s” ([1927] 2005, 117). On the one hand, failing to place her head fully on the pillow could be a sign of Mrs. Ramsay’s attentiveness to appearance—perhaps she does not want to disturb the hairstyle she might have fashioned prior to the elaborate dinner party from whence she has just come. On the other hand, maybe the reader is getting a discreet nod from Woolf to a set of horns that Mrs. Ramsay possesses. Second, and perhaps more concretely, throughout the novel, there is an emphasis on Mrs. Ramsay’s shawl, and the shawl featured in this scene that is wrapped around the offending boar’s head in particular draws attention to how Woolf highlights this specific article of clothing throughout the rest of the novel. Often, shawls are fabricated out of wool, which is a material that comes from sheep and goats. The final crucial element that codes Mrs. Ramsay as a sheep is ultimately her own deference to the male sheep in the room—little James Ramsay, although he is not a mature ram yet, he certainly wields a considerable amount of influence in the dynamics of this room.

Evidence outside of Woolf’s own familial nickname as basis for the appearance of an ovine ontology hierarchizing a family of sheep comes from Britain’s own governmental history. In her new materialist treatment of *To the Lighthouse*, Chih-chien Hsieh (2017) elucidates the history and context of shawls during and prior to Woolf’s lifetime. Hsieh points to how

[The Treaty of Amritsar of 1846] required Gulab Singh to acknowledge “the supremacy of the British Government” and to “present annually to the British Government one horse, twelve shawl goats of approved breed (six male and six female) and three pairs of Kashmir shawls.” From the terms of this treaty we discover that, besides the three pairs of genuine Kashmir shawls, it is in the raw materiality of the Kashmir fabric—the “twelve shawl goats,” six male and six female—that lie the real concerns of the British Empire. (519)

Clearly, the British Government itself was concerned with establishing a hierarchy between countries—with themselves at the top. Hsieh’s scholarship goes in depth into

the history of the shawl and its cachet in the world of women's fashion in Britain and France especially. It is worth noting that, while my version of *To the Lighthouse* does not overtly state that the shawl Mrs. Ramsay wraps around the boar's skull is cashmere, Hsieh consistently refers to the shawl in this scene as being made of cashmere. Hsieh reveals to us yet another reason why goats and sheep would be on Woolf's mind. Hsieh's work highlights how the British Government's violent usurpation and forced concessions could motivate an author to want to inspire sympathy in her readers, not only for the people of Kashmir, but also for the male and female goats pilfered from the region. Woolf keeps goats on the minds of her readers by keeping ram-like animals constantly at the forefront of her story through the Ramsay family name and these other more inconspicuous means.

The Walrus and the Philosopher

While the previous section focused on how Mrs. Ramsay manages her daughter's fear by softening the boar's threatening tusks into the familiar horns of domesticated animals, this next moment of cross-species slippage shifts focus to the patriarch of the Ramsay flock. In a subtle echo of the nursery scene, one understated yet peculiar moment links the boar's "branching" at Cam to an earlier scene in which Mr. Ramsay—perhaps the assumed ram of the family—"branches" at James with a sprig from the garden.⁸ Though the boar's skull only figuratively gestures, Mr. Ramsay's literal use of a branch to prod his son hints at a similarly animalistic impulse, cloaked in a brief moment of paternal playfulness.

This gesture momentarily suggests an affable side to Mr. Ramsay, who is otherwise known for his lack of self-awareness and social grace—perhaps his boorishness—with both family and guests. Yet that good humor quickly dissipates: he offhandedly repeats his belief that the weather will prevent the much-anticipated trip to the lighthouse, disappointing James and irritating Mrs. Ramsay. Sensing the tension, Mr. Ramsay momentarily becomes self-aware, retreating awkwardly from the interaction. Woolf narrates this with vivid animalistic imagery:

Already ashamed of that petulance, of the gesticulation of the hands when charging at the head of his troops, Mr. Ramsay rather sheepishly prodded his son's bare legs once more, and then, as if he had her leave for it, with a movement which oddly reminded his wife of the great sea lion at the Zoo tumbling backwards after swallowing his fish and walloping off so that the water in the tank washes from side to side, he dived into the evening air ([1927] 2005, 36)

While continuously oblivious to his son's animosity towards him, Mr. Ramsay does realize how he persists in exasperating his wife. Mr. Ramsay recognizes how he is

“charging”—a very animal-like movement—at the head of his troops. This passage contains a bit of ambiguity as to whether Mr. Ramsay means that he is leading a charge, as in militaristic sense, or if he is performing the very ovine-like movement of charging. Woolf allows for this type of play within her sentences, and perhaps here, Mr. Ramsay, the ram, charges at another ram, Mrs. Ramsay. If we take Woolf to imply the latter, then we see how Mr. Ramsay’s “sheepish” last prods of his sons’ legs appear even more like a defeat for him, a ram who has lost a standoff with a more powerful ovine.

However, for Mr. Ramsay, the humiliation of losing a ram standoff does not end there. Mrs. Ramsay goes on to further compare her husband to a sea mammal. Mrs. Ramsay often sees her husband acting in his own self-interest and out of a pathetic need for sympathy—especially from the women in the novel. Once Mrs. Ramsay provides him with it, she suddenly envisions him like an attraction at a zoo: once the featured animal does its trick—in this case, take her sympathy—he is free to go back to his own limited existence. This article submits that Mrs. Ramsay is only “oddly reminded” of a sea lion by her husband because, just as Cam mislabels the boar tusks as horns, and Mrs. Ramsay softens the tusked-boars into their softer, domesticated relatives, the family’s matriarch enacts yet another moment of playful, ontological instability by blurring the boundary between sea lions and their tusked relatives: walruses. Mrs. Ramsay is not the only one to consider walrus-like creatures to be odd. In a 2015 interview, reporter Laura Geggel spoke with ecologists researching walrus morphology:

“We have a really good fossil record for walruses, and we see them gradually change from these sea-lion-looking animals to the really weird-looking, giant-tusked modern walrus,” said Morgan Churchill “This new fossil that’s described, it just slots in really nicely into one of these small gaps that we see.” (“Ancient Walrus”)

Evidence of pinnipeds’ gradual changes or branching off from the sea lion variety to a walrus kind illustrates the easy slippage between the two animals. In relation to the evolution of sea lions into walruses, it is certain that Woolf would have had access to scientific texts—like Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*—due to her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, who took an interest in her education (Hussey 2005, iv–lxviii). This introduction of pinnipeds intimates another node of Woolf’s zoomorphic ontology—and it indicates both Woolf’s sense of humor and signals a level of sincerity in her consideration of animals and how they manifest in literature.

While Mrs. Ramsay may have momentarily seen her husband as a sheepish sea lion, Cam detects a more recognizable ovine nature in her father. After many years and a spate of familial deaths, Mr. Ramsay and his two youngest children finally make the much-anticipated trek to the lighthouse. Like many angst-ridden teens who are not overly fond

of their fathers, Cam and James do not want to accompany him on this trip. Nevertheless, in a moment of sympathy, Cam relinquishes some of her criticisms of Mr. Ramsay, observing:

He read, she thought, as if he were guiding something, or wheedling a large flock of sheep, or pushing his way up and up a single narrow path; and sometimes he went fast and straight, and broke his way through the bramble, and sometimes it seemed a branch struck at him, a bramble blinded him, but he was not going to let himself be beaten by that; on he went, tossing over page after page. (Woolf [1927] 2005, 193)

In her assessment of her father's reading style, Cam senses a ram-like quality to it. In this passage, Woolf draws the reader's attention to so much non-human animalistic movement: Mr. Ramsay is "wheedling," "pushing," bee-lining and tearing through hedges. Rather than acting as a follower in a flock, Cam shows Mr. Ramsay was finally acting the part of the ram in charge of his herd. He reads resolutely here, but not in an ill-humored way, as the carefully chosen verb "wheedling" carries the connotation of corralling through coaxing, through charming his herd.

Mr. Ramsay, as a ram, might show some tenderness in his "wheedling," but his tenacity is also apparent to Cam. There is a certain dogged, or pigheaded, subtext to how Cam describes his "pushing up and up a single narrow path." To push up a hillside—or scale a mountain goat-like—implies a certain amount of assertiveness, and perhaps this quality has often tipped into arrogance and become a part of what has made Mr. Ramsay obnoxious to his family members at times. Further evidence of Mr. Ramsay's likeness to a ram comes from the continued antagonistic relationship that has persisted with his son. Throughout this final section of Woolf's novel, James continually refers to his father as tyrannical, but his own behavior and efforts to control his sister implicate James as displaying similar ram-like qualities. James still wants to lock horns with his dad, still sees him as an adversary. Additionally, Cam picks up on how Mr. Ramsay does not get deterred by brambles that "branch" at him, revealing yet another connection to James.

In the first section of Woolf's novel, she depicts horns (or tusks) that branch at Cam as a child in the nursery, and later in this same section James's father playfully branches at him. In the final section, we now see a ram-like Mr. Ramsay being branched by brambles in Cam's imagination. All of these instances reveal a kind of image-based ontological hierarchy of horned creatures within Woolf's novel. In another interpretation of Woolf's images of the cashmere shawl and boar's skull, critic Lee M. Whitehead (1972) asserts that

[these] elements are not signs, they are symbols; the meaning of any one image at any moment does not lie in a direct correspondence or a direct

opposition, it lies in what Wittgenstein might have called “family resemblances” it shares with other images. Its reverberations call the other images to mind although their literal import might be aslant or askew or even in direct contradiction to its own literal meaning; the meaning of each is a function of the meaning of the entire family. (407)

Whitehead describes how these kinds of image-based slant rhymes appear all throughout Woolf’s text. He distinguishes how these depictions are not mere signs, not one-to-one emblems with occult meanings; they are symbols with greater import that reveal a broader association that “reverberates” through the tangible and intangible in Woolf’s writing. There are reverberations throughout *To the Lighthouse* with the tree imagery in the novel and the various forms of branching, and then, of course, there are the reverberations of the horned animals with their tusked correlates. Seeing the horned creatures signified in one member of the Ramsay family reveals striking implications and ovine associations for all of them.⁹ Woolf’s imagination of animals is key to understanding her use of symbols not as static metaphors, but as facilitating a fluid, relational system that reshapes how we understand her presentation of hierarchies and human-nonhuman entanglement.

The Black Sheep Antelope

Woolf delicately stages her dynamic, relational system in the figure of Cam Ramsay, who, as the family’s “black sheep,” both inherits and unsettles her family’s ovine ontology, but ultimately comes to inhabit a new, antelope-shaped node in Woolf’s expanding ungulate network. Cam picks up on the ovine qualities in her family during the long-anticipated journey to the lighthouse. She herself has become like a good sheep in the Ramsay flock; she allows herself to be cajoled and led along by her father. Readers re-encountering Cam as she enters into young adulthood discover that she has not fully relinquished her ovine ontology of the world—and that the specter of the “horned” boar still asserts its influence on her. During the last dregs of the long-awaited voyage to the lighthouse, Cam reflects:

But as, just before sleep, things simplify themselves so that only one of all the myriad details has power to assert itself, so, she felt, looking drowsily at the island, all those paths and terraces and bedrooms were fading and disappearing, and nothing was left but a pale blue censer swinging rhythmically this way and that across her mind. It was a hanging garden; it was a valley, full of birds, and flowers, and antelopes...She was falling asleep. (Woolf [1927] 2005, 207)

Cam’s own sheep-like qualities emerge distinctly in this passage. Like any good lamb, she bows to an assertion of power and allows rams—like Mr. Ramsay, Mrs. Ramsay, and James—to prevail over her own will. Her susceptibility to “details” that assert themselves echoes the earlier nursery scene, where she permitted the power of the boar’s

skull to dominate her, and allowed James, a budding ram, to assert his power over her wishes as well.

Clearly, Cam has internalized the lessons from the late Mrs. Ramsay about her place in the flock's hierarchy of relations—but she also flirts with other possibilities for her standing within, or adjacent to, that order. As Cam acquiesces to sleep while on the boat, the woolen-shawl-wrapped boar's skull stays with her. Her mother had once transformed the pig's head into a mystical mountain, and Cam now transmutes it into a dreamscape valley filled with “birds, and flowers, and antelopes.” Her affinity for antelopes—graceful, agile, horned but not identically herd-bound to the all-too-familiar sheep she knows—represents a symbolic variation rather than a total departure from the Ramsay flock. Cam's ontological position shifts, yet it remains tethered to Woolf's ungulate world.

Rather than stepping fully outside of her family's animal system, Cam's antelope-ness signals a slantwise expansion of it, and her alternative embodiment resonates with what Cary Wolfe might call a “jagged ontology,” where symbolic and biological specificity rupture clean categories without rejecting relation altogether. Virginia Woolf's playful taxonomic blurrings of animals force us to attend to both the continuities between different lifeforms as well as the sometimes subtle—and sometimes significant—distinctions between them. Wolfe (2020) describes his belief in the immense value

In a metatheoretical context ... [of insisting] on these distinctions, for the importance, at this precise moment, of developing a robust, interdisciplinary anti-reductionism, a side project of which (but a central strategic goal of which) involves doing our part to bring an end to the hegemony of the neo-Darwinian paradigm ... I would insist on the importance of working hard to theorize an anti-reductionist anti-reductionisms. (144)

Woolf's invitations to readers to attune closely to the sophistication and dynamism of humans and nonhumans move us towards just this kind of anti-reductionist thought that Cary Wolfe describes. Woolf allows Cam to remain lamb-like but also become something else: antelope-like, errant, improvisational. Just as the author blends pigs and boars, sea lions and walruses, rams and sheep, she grants Cam a hybrid form that both participates in and disrupts the symbolic order—an imaginative leap that signals the ethical and ontological complexity of Woolf's more-than-human world.

Conclusion

Beyond the pet name “Goat” that Woolf’s family bestowed upon her, and beyond the profusion of horned and hooved creatures in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf’s own reflections on writing suggest that her imagination of animals and ontological thinking were never separate projects. Just as this article opened with Woolf’s recollection of her mother’s parting words—“Hold yourself straight, my little goat”—we return now to her autobiographical writing to glimpse the larger pattern she saw running through both life and literature. In a particularly revealing moment from her memoirs, Woolf describes the deep pleasure she takes in discovering the connections that structure her art:

Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. (2020, 4,945)

This “philosophy” of interconnection and being—conceived as a pattern behind the “wool”—echoes throughout her novel, where goats, sheep, rams, and antelopes emerge not simply as metaphors, but as felt nodes in a material and symbolic system that challenges traditional anthropocentric hierarchies. Woolf’s symbolic world is not haphazard, but patterned: an ontology of wool and horns that entangles her characters—and her readers—in a textured and capacious understanding of the interrelation of life and art. With Woolf’s ungulate ontology, *To the Lighthouse* offers both a method and a vision: to read not for static metaphors or meaning, but for reverberation, misrecognition, and imaginative possibility.

Notes

¹ See Leanna Lostoski’s (2016) and Graham Fraser’s (2020) criticism exploring how Woolf’s work is in dialogue with Bennett’s vital materialism. Lostoski’s analysis mainly focuses on the “Time Passes” section and *Mrs. Dalloway*. Fraser’s work also persuasively analyzes “Time Passes,” putting it into conversation with Woolf’s stories “The Lady in the Looking Glass” and “Solid Objects.” See also Derek Ryan’s *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory: Sex, Animal, Life* (2013) for an expansive discussion of Woolf’s work in relation to new materialist thought—particularly his work in chapter five that engages with ideas from Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, and Gilles Deleuze.

² Scholarship from Veronika Krajickova (2021) and Louise Westling (1999) provide brilliant explorations of the ontological and ecological thought that emerges from Woolf’s oeuvres. Krajickova’s work brilliantly illuminates the “ontoethics” Woolf’s fiction and memoir supply by investigating how her philosophical contributions parallel those from Alfred North Whitehead’s organicist ontology. While Krajickova does investigate moments from *To the Lighthouse*, she devotes a substantial portion of her analysis to Woolf’s final novel, *Between the Acts*. Westling’s work similarly provides an important exploration of Woolf’s expressions of human-nonhuman

relationships. Westling examines Woolf's resistance to (and sometimes outright satirizing of) traditional Western philosophical viewpoints by putting Woolf's own theorizing in conversation with Maurice Merleau-Ponty philosophical work (1999, 859–862).

³ Although they might be outwardly similar to the layperson, horns and tusks are anatomically distinct structures. Horns are made of keratin and grow from the frontal bones of the skull, while tusks are elongated teeth—usually incisors—that protrude from the mouth and are composed of dentin. They differ in composition, point of origin, and function. See Nasoori's "Tusks" (2020) and McMillan and Harris's "Integument" chapter in *An Atlas of Comparative Vertebrate Histology* (2018).

⁴ In the 2005 Harcourt edition of *To the Lighthouse*, this scene definitively refers to the relic as a boar's skull; however, in reference to this same scene, two of the scholars my work engages with, including Chih-chien Hsieh (2017) and Frederick Turner (2001), refer to the skull as belonging to that of a different animal. Hsieh refers to the boar's skull as a "bull's skull" and Turner refers to it as "the skull of a ram." While these writers could be working with different versions of Woolf's text or simply misremembering this scene, this article finds it salient to point out that either one of these alternative skulls featuring bony protrusions could variously support observations made in this essay.

⁵ Broadly, biologists refer to hooved animals as ungulates, but not all ungulates are artiodactyls, and not all artiodactyls have horns. These descriptions mainly suggest the number of toes these organisms have, which often take the form of hooves, and correlate with the weight distribution between the digits. Biologists also differentiate between animals with and without horns and organisms with other similar, but distinct structures like antlers and tusks. Many animals possess horns, but do not have hooves, for example: rhinoceroses and certain reptiles. And many exhibit the inverse, having hooves, but no horns; these include certain equids, suids, and hippos. For further information see Donald R. Prothero and Scott E. Foss (2007). See also: Michelle Spaulding, et al. (2009) and Alina Bradford and Scott Dutfield (2018).

⁶ While this article's primary objects of analysis are Woolf's "The Window" and "The Lighthouse" sections of *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf's depiction of Mrs. Ramsay's shawl loosening from the boar's skull ([1927] 2005, 137–144) in the "Time Passes" section does supply an exciting exemplification of the dead, taxidermied boar skull's persistent liveliness. Again, while Fraser's (2020) analysis does not explicitly center on the boar's skull, his description of the "Time Passes" section of Woolf's novel as showing objects' "ruinous, beautiful transition to an ahuman afterlife" (88) certainly articulates the skull's vital materialism that I see at work in this section as well.

⁷ Zoologists R. Terry Bowyer, David M. Leslie, Jr., and Janet L. Rachlow (2000) note that for the majority of the year, the ewes, along with their lambs and yearlings, herd separately from rams, and the dominance between rams is established prior to rutting season. See *Ecology and Management of Large Mammals in North America*, pp. 499–505.

⁸ The scene I reference here occurs in "The Window" section of *To the Lighthouse*, and it is later echoed in the final section "The Lighthouse." Here Woolf describes how Mr. Ramsay pays his wife and son a visit while out for a walk and that "...as his turn came round again, at the window he bent quizzically and whimsically to tickle James's bare calf with a sprig of something..." ([1927] 2005, 34).

⁹ Beyond the immediate Ramsay family, Woolf also assigns animal-like qualities to the other guests staying at the Ramsay's summer home who are not members of the family. As other potential ontological nodes, Woolf describes Augustus Carmichael as possessing very cat-like physical and behavioral features (13), and she ascribes Charles Tansley a certain animality, telling readers that the Ramsay children describe him as "a miserable specimen" and "brute" (11). Additionally, interesting linguistic resonances emerge between Woolf's larger focus on "boars"

and “pigs” and how she features Mrs. Ramsay further characterizing Tansley as “an awful prig” and “insufferable bore” (16).

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