

# Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* and the Medieval Mystical Tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius

**Simone Celine Marshall**

## Introduction

Much scholarship has considered the mystical content of Virginia Woolf's writings. From the ethereal and other-worldly elements of her novels, to the influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Transcendentalism, to a correlation with the works of Plotinus, are among the many sources considered.<sup>1</sup> Indeed Woolf's writings do suggest that she was at times contemplating a kind of mysticism.<sup>2</sup> She uses the word, mysticism, on many occasions, in fiction and non-fiction situations, as well as many of the other tropes familiar to mysticism, such as references to vision and light. This article is positioned carefully as a contribution to scholarship on Woolf's mysticism, not intending to reject the work of others, but rather to contribute another facet to the argument. The focus here is on the works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, the sixth-century Syrian theologian and philosopher, and uses as a springboard the critical analysis of Charles M. Stang.<sup>3</sup>

Stang presents an innovative and thoughtful consideration of Pseudo-Dionysius and his works that, I believe, resonates extremely well with the works of Virginia Woolf. Pseudo-Dionysius, Stang argues, offers some important literary reasons for his pseudonymity that emphasise the attention of his readers on the mystical experiences of the apostle Paul. It is

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Simone Celine Marshall is Senior Lecturer at the University of Otago.

<sup>1</sup> Rosemary Luttrell, 'Virginia Woolf's Emersonian Metaphors of Sight in *To the Lighthouse*: Visionary Oscillation', *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2013), pp. 69-80; Donna J. Lazenby, *A Mystical Philosophy: Transcendence and Immanence in the Works of Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> Sally Minogue, 'Was it a Vision? Structuring Emptiness in *To The Lighthouse*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 21, no. 2 (1997-98), pp. 281-94.

<sup>3</sup> Charles M. Stang, *Apophysis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

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the focus on the literary devices of Pseudo-Dionysius that resonates so well with Woolf, as she, like Pseudo-Dionysius, appears to represent the act of writing as a mystical experience.

Woolf, as is commonly known, was very determinedly atheist, and, as many other scholars have noted, it seems somewhat incongruous that she would consider and incorporate mystical concepts that appear to be so heavily imbued with Christian theology into her writings.<sup>4</sup> But, again as others have noted, for Woolf there is no discrepancy: the mystical experience for her is quite removed from Christianity.<sup>5</sup> Woolf's knowledge of mysticism as a concept is likely drawn from her contemporaries: her aunt, Caroline Stephen, was an influential Quaker, Woolf read Bertrand Russell's *Mysticism and Logic*, and other writers and artists in her milieu wrote about and discussed mysticism.<sup>6</sup> There is no evidence that Woolf had read Evelyn Underhill's monumental work *Mysticism*, although it would have been readily available to her.<sup>7</sup> While, as Donna J. Lazenby notes, Woolf writes in her diary on 29 October, 1934, "I will read Plotinus," she does not follow up to confirm that she did indeed read the works of Plotinus.<sup>8</sup> Woolf does not appear to have been familiar with medieval Christian mysticism, despite her fiction displaying many instances that are easily correlated with this significant body of writing.

Paul Strohm makes a clear directive when he asserts that use of a theoretical approach to consider a text must always allow the text to say more than it knows.<sup>9</sup> This is an important measure of the success of a literary interpretation: if the theory reduces the possible meaning of a text, then it is the wrong theory for that text. In light of this, it makes sense to

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<sup>4</sup> Lorraine Sim, *Virginia Woolf: The Patterns of Ordinary Experience* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), p. 139; Pericles Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Martin Corner, 'Mysticism and Atheism in *To the Lighthouse*', *Studies in the Novel* vol. 13, no. 4 (1981), pp. 408-23; Kristina K. Groover, 'Body and Soul: Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*', *Renascence*, vol. 66, no. 3 (2014), pp. 217-230.

<sup>6</sup> Jui-hua Tseng, 'Walter Pater, the Stephens and Virginia Woolf's Mysticism', *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2004), pp. 203-26; Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954).

<sup>7</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (London: Methuen, 1911).

<sup>8</sup> Lazenby, *A Mystical Philosophy*, p. 71; Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (eds), *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* (London: Hogarth Press, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> Paul Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2000), p. xiv.

consider Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* alongside the Pseudo-Dionysian tradition of Christian mystical writing.<sup>10</sup> As far as modern scholarship has been able to discern, Woolf was not familiar with the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, although an edition of the complete works in Greek was published in 1857 and may have been accessible to her.<sup>11</sup> This approach brings to the fore elements of Virginia Woolf's writing that have remained under-examined by scholars, and, in line with Strohm, adds a further dimension to the text.

### A Structural Comparison

There are three particularly significant characteristics in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius that are extremely relevant to this argument. First, according to Stang, previous scholars of Pseudo-Dionysius have underestimated the significance of his pseudonym, frequently choosing to focus instead on whether he was a proponent of either Christian or Neo-Platonic beliefs.<sup>12</sup> For Stang, the pseudonym carries with it a feature that he describes as "telescoping time." By this, he means more than simply that by taking on the pseudonym of Dionysius the Areopagite, the sixth-century Syrian was encouraging his readers to cast themselves into the time period of St Paul in the first century CE. Rather, Pseudo-Dionysius was drawing his readers into a significant literary tradition of theological writing, in which time and distance are removed from the texts concerned, and concepts and events always happen in the now.<sup>13</sup>

Second, Pseudo-Dionysius' account of the mystical experience relies on apophatic and kataphatic reasoning in order to experience the divine. Michael Sells explains the process:

Any saying (even a negative saying) demands a correcting proposition, an unsaying. But that correcting proposition which unsays the previous

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<sup>10</sup> Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, ed. Sandra Kemp (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca* III (Paris: J. P. Migne, 1857).

<sup>12</sup> Christian Schäfer, *The Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Eric D. Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007); Sarah Klitenic Wear and John Dillon, *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist Tradition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); Andrew Louth, *Dionysius the Areopagite* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989); Alexander Golitzin, *Et Introibo Ad Altare Dei: The Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagita* (Thessalonikê: Patriarchikon Idrima Paterikôn Meletôn, 1994); Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), p. 58.

<sup>13</sup> Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (eds), *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

proposition is in itself a “saying” that must be “unsaid” in turn. It is in the tension between the two propositions that the discourse becomes meaningful. That tension is momentary. It must be continually re-earned by ever new linguistic acts of unsaying.<sup>14</sup>

Pseudo-Dionysius’ use of apophatic and kataphatic reasoning requires that one must “say” and “unsay”—for instance, what the divine is, and then what it is not—in a continual process, so that for a moment, in the tension between the “saying” and the “unsaying,” one may glimpse the divine.

Third, and perhaps most significantly for this article on Woolf, is Stang’s argument that for Pseudo-Dionysius, the mystical experience is not only a psychological and emotional experience, but a physiological one as well. Stang describes this as an apophatic anthropology, by which he means that one achieves a mystical experience through action, mentioning in particular, the act of writing.<sup>15</sup> It is Stang’s attention to the works of Pseudo-Dionysius as literature that provides such an appropriate correlation with Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse*, as it is the manner in which each author uses literary devices that seems to correspond so well. What Stang’s interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius’ works provides for this argument is a focus on the literary devices in play. This agrees so well with Woolf’s use of mystical concepts because self-conscious use of literary language is necessary for the writer and reader to come to some sort of comprehension of the divine, a concept that each claims is otherwise unknowable.

### **The Telescoping of Time and the Lighthouse**

Stang’s assessment of literary temporality in Pseudo-Dionysius is complex and valuable for a consideration of Woolf. According to Stang:

At the heart of [Pseudo-Dionysius’] account is the notion that pseudonymous writing involves a sense of kinship between the present author and the ancient seer under whose name he writes. Moreover, on the basis of this kinship, the pseudonymous author came to regard the seer’s past and his own present as “contemporaneous,” such that the pseudonymous writing became a way of “telescoping the past into the present.”<sup>16</sup>

Thus, when Pseudo-Dionysius explains the nature of truth in contrast to an untruth, he does so assuming that his definition of truth and untruth is valid

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Stang, *Apophasis and Pseudonymity*, pp. 153-96.

<sup>16</sup> Stang, *Apophasis and Pseudonymity*, p. 49.

for all time. He says:

For, when [truth] is correctly demonstrated in its essential nature, according to a law of truth, and has been established without flaw, every thing which is otherwise, and simulates the truth, will be convicted of being other than the reality, and dissimilar, and that which is seeming rather than real.<sup>17</sup>

Pseudo-Dionysius continues to discuss a range of instances in time, but always returns to the concept of truth remaining the same, regardless of the time period.<sup>18</sup> The author is not simply attempting to obscure his identity, pretending to have existed in a period much earlier. As Andrew Louth explains,

The tendency to telescope the past, so that the truth now is the truth affirmed at Nicaea, itself the truth of what had been believed and suffered for during the centuries when the Church had been persecuted, was something that awakened an echo in the whole Byzantine world in a far more precise way than it would today. And it is this conviction that underlies the pseudonymity adopted by our author.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, Cyril Mango argues that, for the Byzantines, “chronology was of no consequence: the apostles lived in timeless communion with ... the bishops of the patristic age.”<sup>20</sup> Stang is suggesting that Pseudo-Dionysius was tapping into a literary characteristic of early Christian writing, and thus the Neoplatonic concepts in Pseudo-Dionysius’ writings sit side-by-side with patristic writing without any difficulty. Ultimately, the device that Pseudo-Dionysius uses is a literary convention, recognizable to his readers, in which truth was regarded as atemporal.<sup>21</sup>

Virginia Woolf uses the metaphor of the telescope on occasions in *To The Lighthouse*, but it is unlikely she was attributing to it a meaning similar to that of Pseudo-Dionysius.<sup>22</sup> Rather, Woolf uses the much more

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<sup>17</sup> *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 98.

<sup>18</sup> *Pseudo-Dionysius*, pp. 99-100.

<sup>19</sup> Louth, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> Cyril Mango, ‘Saints’, in *The Byzantines*, ed. G. Cavallo (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 256.

<sup>21</sup> W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

<sup>22</sup> Two instances occur in Part Two of the novel, entitled ‘Time Passes’, where the telescope is a device used to remember past events: “She could see her now, stooping over her flowers; and faint and flickering, like a yellow beam or the circle at the end of a telescope, a lady in a grey cloak...” (p. 122) and “Once more, as she felt the tea warm in her, the telescope fitted itself to Mrs. McNab’s eyes, and in a ring of light she saw the old gentleman...” (p. 125).

dominant metaphor of the lighthouse in a manner that is reminiscent of Stang's "telescoping of time." For Woolf, the lighthouse is an atemporal entity that reaches into all aspects of the Ramsays' lives, and importantly, remains functioning even when the Ramsays are long since gone. If one considers the instances in which the lighthouse is referred to throughout the novel, it is possible to observe that it is used in a way that echoes Pseudo-Dionysius' use of his pseudonym, to collapse time so that truths, from whatever time period, may resonate with the reader.

James' relationship with his father, Mr Ramsay, is integrally related to not being able to visit the lighthouse, a circumstance for which he blamed his father. For James, the lighthouse represented the life he felt was withheld from him, due to his father's stern behaviour. The reality, of course, is that the weather was often inclement, preventing the journey, but for James, the lighthouse is a constant reminder of his father's repression. The constancy is the key element here, as the repressive environment that creates James' resentment towards his father in part one of the novel, 'The Window', continues to pervade James' relationship with his father in part three of the novel, 'The Lighthouse', set many years later, and remains even when they do finally visit the lighthouse. Here, the lighthouse is a symbol of a truth—in this case, of the damaged relationship between father and son—that exists regardless of time period. Further, the lighthouse emphasizes that the damaged relationship, occurring in James' childhood, continues within his psyche, as a truth, even when, in adulthood, James does finally visit the lighthouse. The visit does not eradicate the earlier damage; it remains an unchanging truth.<sup>23</sup> Mrs Ramsay is only too aware of the role of the lighthouse in James' psyche:

Turning, she looked across the bay, and there, sure enough, coming regularly across the waves first two quick strokes and then one long steady stroke, was the light of the Lighthouse. It had been lit. In a moment he would ask her, "Are we going to the Lighthouse?" And she would have to say, "No: not tomorrow; your father says not." Happily, Mildred came in to fetch them, and the bustle distracted them. But he kept looking back over his shoulder as Mildred carried him out, and she was certain that he was thinking, we are not going to the Lighthouse tomorrow; and she thought, he will remember that all his life.<sup>24</sup>

In another example, Mrs Ramsay sees so much of her marriage and family

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<sup>23</sup> Harvena Richter, *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 66.

<sup>24</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 54.

life illuminated by the lighthouse, in both positive and negative ways. Frequently her attention is drawn to the lighthouse, which has the effect on her of bringing her life and her relationships with the people around her into sharp relief. In the following example, Mrs Ramsay explains how at times she feels that she becomes the lighthouse light, intimately aware of how the light brings into focus features of her life that will remain unchanging over time:

pausing there she looked out to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke, for watching them in this mood always at this hour one could not help attaching oneself to one thing especially of the things one saw; and this thing, the long steady stroke, was her stroke. Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at—that light, for example. And it would lift up on it some little phrase or other which had been lying in her mind like that—“Children don’t forget, children don’t forget.”<sup>25</sup>

In a less sombre example, Mrs Ramsay reveals how the lighthouse can also bring to the fore moments of intense happiness, moments that are fleeting, but which are captured for eternity by the lighthouse:

She saw the light again. With some irony in her interrogation, for when one woke at all, one’s relations changed, she looked at the steady light, the pitiless, the remorseless, which was so much her, yet so little her, which had her at its beck and call (she woke in the night and saw it bent across their bed, stroking the floor), but for all that she thought, watching it with fascination, hypnotised, as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight, she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness, and it silvered the rough waves a little more brightly, as daylight faded, and the blue went out of the sea and it rolled in waves of pure lemon which curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and the ecstasy burst in her eyes and waves of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind and she felt, It is enough! It is enough!<sup>26</sup>

Woolf’s use of the lighthouse metaphor throughout the novel is understandably pervasive and alerts us to the fact that the lighthouse is the overseeing atemporal truth to all events that occur. In this way, the lighthouse collapses time in much the same way that Pseudo-Dionysius’ pseudonym does, because the lighthouse exists at all moments in the novel, and overshadows all events. In addition to this, the lighthouse intrudes on the Ramsay’s house at significant moments in the novel, and many of the

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<sup>25</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>26</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 57.

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characters take note of the lighthouse at various points in the novel, bringing it tangibly into their lives.

### **The Hierarchy of Ordinary to Extraordinary**

A feature that many scholars have noted is Woolf's frequent use of the ordinary and everyday things in life to spark a psychological connection with the extraordinary and unusual things in life.<sup>27</sup> Stang describes the techniques used by Pseudo-Dionysius in his writing, for effectively the same purpose. Pseudo-Dionysius advocates naming God in as many ways as possible, from the most ordinary to the most extraordinary, in order to attempt to come to know God:

In the *Mystical Theology*, Dionysius explains that contemplation of these names should follow a strict cyclical order: a progressive affirmation of the names most like the divine to those most unlike followed by a regressive negation of the names most unlike the divine to those most like. At the peak and valley of this cycle, Dionysius offers two further and complementary movements: (1) the negation of negation and (2) the contemplation of "entirely dissimilar names." The aim of this entire contemplative program—in which "saying" and "unsaying" are inextricably bound together—is to heighten the tension between divine immanence and transcendence to such a point that the "unimaginable presence" of God may break through all affirmations and negations and the "unknowing union" with "the unknown God" may descend.<sup>28</sup>

Later, Stang explains:

one begins by contemplation of the most fitting divine names and then "descend[s] from the above to the lowest." This contemplative descent from the one to the many mirrors the beneficent procession of the God beyond being into being and creation. Having contemplated all the conceptual and sensory divine names—and rounding the corner perhaps by contemplating God as a worm or a drunk—one then "ascend[s] from below to that which is above," denying in sequence each of the divine names just affirmed. This equally contemplative ascent from the many to the one mirrors creation's yearning to return to its source.<sup>29</sup>

The following example from Pseudo-Dionysius is lengthy, but details well the process by which the name of God is expressed in ascending and descending hierarchy, and why this process is necessary:

In the *Theological Outlines*, then, we celebrated the principal affirmative

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<sup>27</sup> Patricia Ondek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 59.

<sup>28</sup> Stang, *Apophysis and Pseudonymity*, pp. 117-118.

<sup>29</sup> Stang, *Apophysis and Pseudonymity*, p. 128.



expressions respecting God—how the Divine and good Nature is spoken of as One—how as Threefold—what is that within it which is spoken of as Paternity and Sonship—what the Divine name of “the Spirit” is meant to signify,—how from the immaterial and indivisible Good the Lights dwelling in the heart of Goodness sprang forth, and remained, in their branching forth, without departing from the coeternal abiding in Himself and in Themselves and in each other,—how the super-essential Jesus takes substance in veritable human nature—and whatever other things, made known by the Oracles, are celebrated throughout the *Theological Outlines*; and in the treatise concerning *Divine Names*, how He is named Good—how Being—how Life and Wisdom and Power—and whatever else belongs to the nomenclature of God. Further, in the *Symbolical Theology*, what are the Names transferred from objects of sense to things Divine?—what are the Divine forms?—what the Divine appearances, and parts and organs?—what the Divine places and ornaments?—what the angers?—what the griefs?—and the Divine wrath?—what the carousals, and the ensuing sicknesses?—what the oaths,—and what the curses?—what the sleepings, and what the awakings?—and all the other Divinely formed representations, which belong to the description of God, through symbols. And I imagine that you have comprehended, how the lowest are expressed in somewhat more words than the first. For, it was necessary that the *Theological Outlines*, and the unfolding of the *Divine Names* should be expressed in fewer words than the *Symbolic Theology*; since, in proportion as we ascend to the higher, in such a degree the expressions are circumscribed by the contemplations of the things intelligible. As even now, when entering into the gloom which is above mind, we shall find, not a little speaking, but a complete absence of speech, and absence of conception. In the other case, the discourse, in descending from the above to the lowest, is widened according to the descent, to a proportionate extent; but now, in ascending from below to that which is above, in proportion to the ascent, it is contracted, and after a complete ascent, it will become wholly voiceless, and will be wholly united to the unutterable. But, for what reason in short, you say, having attributed the Divine attributes from the foremost, do we begin the Divine abstraction from things lowest? Because it is necessary that they who place attributes on that which is above every attribute, should place the attributive affirmation from that which is more cognate to it; but that they who abstract, with regard to that which is above every abstraction, should make the abstraction from things which are further removed from it. Are not life and goodness more (cognate) than air and stone? and He is not given to debauch and to wrath, more (removed) than He is not expressed nor conceived.<sup>30</sup>

The process that Pseudo-Dionysius describes is similar to Woolf’s practice,

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<sup>30</sup> *Pseudo-Dionysius*, pp. 87-88.

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insofar as both are attempting to use language to explain something otherwise inexplicable. In both cases, they are using words that are acknowledged as inadequate, but which may provide a momentary glimpse of the thing they allude to. Stang indicates that Pseudo-Dionysius is aware that this process may never reach its intended goal, but the process must be undertaken:

[O]ne never ceases saying and unsaying. On the contrary, [Pseudo-Dionysius] wishes to heighten the tension by insisting that while one is bound to affirm and negate the divine names just as God reveals and conceals, still neither affirmations nor even negations are ever adequate and always miss their target.<sup>31</sup>

In an example from Woolf, Mr Tansley describes a moment of ecstasy in which he sees Mrs Ramsay:

He heard her quick step above; heard her voice cheerful, then low; looked at the mats, tea-caddies, glass shades; waited quite impatiently; looked forward eagerly to the walk home; determined to carry her bag; then heard her come out; shut a door; say they must keep the windows open and the doors shut, ask at the house for anything they wanted (she must be talking to a child) when, suddenly, in she came, stood for a moment silent (as if she had been pretending up there, and for a moment let herself be now), stood quite motionless for a moment against a picture of Queen Victoria wearing the blue ribbon of the Garter; when all at once he realised that it was this: it was this:—she was the most beautiful person he had ever seen.<sup>32</sup>

The example demonstrates not only Woolf's use of the ordinary – mats, tea-caddies, glass shades – to coalesce into the divine Mrs Ramsay, but shows Woolf's mastery of language to add a sense of urgency and breathlessness with the syntax of the sentence. The entire example comprises a single sentence, subordinate clauses layer upon each other, each an affirmation, yet simultaneously smothering or negating the previous, to result in the tension of saying and unsaying, through which Mr Tansley experiences a moment of epiphany that Mrs Ramsay is the most beautiful person he has ever seen.

In an example already presented, the syntax of Mrs Ramsay's sense of intense happiness revealed in the light of the lighthouse also creates a feeling of epiphany. Mrs Ramsay, in a single extended sentence, experiences a mystical moment in which the multi-layered descriptions of the light coalesce to give Mrs Ramsay a glimpse of the divine. Pseudo-Dionysius and Woolf have, in one sense, a different goal. For Pseudo-

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<sup>31</sup> Stang, *Apophysis and Pseudonymity*, p. 128.

<sup>32</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 11.

Dionysius, the goal is a vision of God. For Woolf, the goal is a vision of an inexplicable sense of the divine, but in a specifically non-Christian sense. In another sense, however, both writers use the same method to achieve their goals: by using literary language to attempt to reveal the divine.

### Writing as Asceticism

According to Dionysius, then, making appropriate use of language—specifically the divine names—will change the user. The perpetual affirmation (*kataphasis*) and negation (apophasis) of the divine names—along with the negation of negation and the contemplation of entirely dissimilar names—are, in Hadot's words, "spiritual exercises" that Dionysius recommends to the reader to transform him- or herself in pursuit of union with the unknown God.<sup>33</sup>

Stang describes the "spiritual exercises" (outlined first by Pierre Hadot) as apophatic anthropology.<sup>34</sup> What he means by this is that apophaticism is not only a psychological approach to understanding the divine, but is also a physical effort. This concept is not original to Stang, and is a characteristic of many medieval Christian writers of mystical texts.<sup>35</sup> The anonymously-authored fourteenth-century text *The Cloud of Unknowing*, for instance, identifies meditation as a physical act.<sup>36</sup> Stang identifies the act of writing in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius as an important means by which one can act to achieve a glimpse of the divine. It makes sense, then, that the act of writing be regarded as part of the method for achieving a mystical experience:

[I]t becomes clear that [for Pseudo-Dionysius] "mysticism" is as much, or more, about exercises for the transformation of the self as it is a description of the mystery of the divine. Thus "mysticism" becomes an important source for understanding theological anthropology and its implementation, that is, normative accounts of human subjectivity and the development of exercises meant to realize these new modes of selfhood... This opens up the question of whether and how writing serves as a spiritual exercise not only in the case of Dionysius, but also for Christian mysticism and religion more widely.<sup>37</sup>

For both Woolf and Pseudo-Dionysius, the act of writing is a performance that allows the writer the opportunity to achieve a moment of illumination.

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<sup>33</sup> Stang, *Apophasis and Pseudonymity*, p. 156.

<sup>34</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Exercices Spirituels et Philosophie Antique* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1981).

<sup>35</sup> Jean LeClercq, 'Influence and noninfluence of Dionysius in the Western Middle Ages', in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

<sup>36</sup> Patrick J. Gallacher (ed.), *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Kalamazoo: University of Western Michigan, 1997).

<sup>37</sup> Stang, *Apophasis and Pseudonymity*, p. 6.

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This is clear in Woolf, not only from the nature of her writing itself, and her copious notes and diaries concerning the act of writing, and also in her fiction. In *To The Lighthouse*, Woolf attributes the same function to the character of Lily Briscoe, through the medium of painting, as Lily paints a picture of Mrs Ramsay and James. It is no coincidence that Lily chooses to depict her subjects as a mother-and-child image, echoing a religious icon. For Lily, the painting is a struggle, one could even say it is a process of affirmation and negation, and it is through this struggle that she achieves moments of epiphany and illumination.

During the evening dinner hosted by Mrs Ramsay, Lily is nearly overwhelmed by the negative criticisms of Mr Tansley, but this suffering allows her to experience a momentary glimpse of her painting:

He was really, Lily Briscoe thought, in spite of his eyes, but then look at his nose, look at his hands, the most uncharming human being she had ever met. Then why did she mind what he said? Women can't write, women can't paint—what did that matter coming from him, since clearly it was not true to him but for some reason helpful to him, and that was why he said it? Why did her whole being bow, like corn under a wind, and erect itself again from this abasement only with a great and rather painful effort? She must make it once more. There's the sprig on the table-cloth; there's my painting; I must move the tree to the middle; that matters—nothing else.<sup>38</sup>

It is through the experience of suffering under the criticisms of Mr Tansley and her own self-doubt that Lily obtains a moment of illumination. While staring at the tablecloth, she captures momentarily a vision of her completed painting.<sup>39</sup> Lily's place in the novel is to demonstrate not so much the achievement of illumination, but the struggle and effort required to achieve it, not least in the face of opposition from the male characters in the novel.

It is true that Lily's character is important as a representation of Woolf's sister, Vanessa Bell, and the struggles that she endured as a painter, and that Lily signifies Woolf's frustrations with patriarchal society, but the most significant element of Lily's character for this argument is the act of struggling with an art form, rather than the ultimate goal of the struggle. The end of the novel reveals this:

There it was—her picture. Yes, 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. But what did that matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she

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<sup>38</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 76.

<sup>39</sup> Richter, *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage*, p. 66.

looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.<sup>40</sup>

Lily realises the painting is complete, but only after great effort, resulting in ‘extreme fatigue’, and despite the doubts that linger in her mind that the painting will hung in attics or destroyed. But completion of the painting becomes a less significant moment for the novel, as its completion is overshadowed by the difficulties it has caused Lily along the way, and despite the fact that the painting will not be admired or perhaps even viewed at all.<sup>41</sup> Lily’s experience echoes the the suggested programme of Pseudo-Dionysius. Stang says:

[W]e affirm and negate the divine names in perpetuity, [but not] to solve problems that arise when creatures speak of the uncreated. On the contrary, Dionysius draws attention to such insoluble problems precisely so that his readers might make use of the problems inherent in language in their efforts to invite the divine to break through language.<sup>42</sup>

Mr Ramsay is another clear choice for consideration of intellectual and psychological struggle, as he attempts to delve into a philosophical conundrum. His character is a dramatic contrast from Lily’s insofar as he is presented as one who is struggling, but in a willful and forceful manner. Lily’s struggle is part of an artistic process, an experience that she must undergo to finally achieve her goal, and conversely, the goal then becomes less important, while the process becomes a dominant characteristic of her enterprise. For Mr Ramsay, his philosophical inquiries are a struggle that he regards as an obstacle to intellectual understanding. The struggle for him symbolises his weaknesses and failings:

Here at least was Q. He dug his heels in at Q. Q he was sure of. Q he could demonstrate. If Q then is Q—R—. Here he knocked his pipe out, with two or three resonant taps on the handle of the urn, and proceeded. “Then R ...” He braced himself. He clenched himself. Qualities that would have saved a ship’s company exposed on a broiling sea with six biscuits and a flask of water—endurance and justice, foresight, devotion, skill, came to his help. R is then—what is R? A shutter, like the leathern eyelid of a lizard, flickered over the intensity of his gaze and obscured the letter R. In that flash of darkness he heard people saying—he was a failure—that R was beyond him. He would never reach R. On to R, once more. R—<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 192.

<sup>41</sup> Lucio P. Ruotolo, *The Interrupted Moment: A View of Virginia Woolf’s Novels* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), p. 118.

<sup>42</sup> Stang, *Apophysis and Pseudonymity*, p. 155.

<sup>43</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 29.

Here, Mr Ramsey returns again and again to an intellectual stumbling block, and by labelling it a stumbling block, it becomes so. Mr Ramsey's own fears and weaknesses about his intellectual abilities result in his inability to achieve a glimpse of the divine.

### **Conclusion**

Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* clearly accommodates a vast range of meanings and interpretations that have been ably argued by other scholars. This article offers a new contribution to these interpretations, by bringing into focus an under-explained facet of Woolf's use of mystical literature. While she may not have referred directly to mystical texts, and very likely had never read the works of Pseudo-Dionysius, her works nevertheless reflect a similar awareness of the value of literary language to express the otherwise inexpressible.

Stang proffers an investigation into the ways in which Pseudo-Dionysius' works highlight how integral an understanding of literary language is to comprehending the divine. It is a characteristic inscribed in Biblical texts: there is no denying the linguistic similarity of the beginning of Genesis and the beginning of the Gospel of St John, for instance: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," and "In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God." Exegesis and literary interpretation are vital tools for making sense of the divine, a concept that Pseudo-Dionysius believes cannot be understood by any other means:

because God outstrips all our categories of thought, language, and even being, we cannot say what God is, only what God is not. On this construal, apophasis is a linguistic protocol or a special "genre of discourse" that polices our speech about God, lest we misstep and utter the unutterable.<sup>44</sup>

Woolf's writings embody this concept: language is the fundamental means by which we understand the world around us, and literature offers us the opportunity to contemplate concepts and ideas that otherwise could not be conceived.

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<sup>44</sup> Stang, *Apophasis and Pseudonymity*, pp. 154-55.