

Reading Virginia Woolf Logically: Resolute Approaches to *The Voyage Out* and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

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Abstract This article argues for a “resolute reading” of Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out*, akin to Cora Diamond and James Conant’s reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. The resolute approach to the *Tractatus* contends that we should embrace Wittgenstein’s assertion that the *Tractatus* is finally nonsense. Accordingly, the *Tractatus* acts as a kind of therapy, enabling us to dispense with certain types of philosophical, linguistic, and analytical claims. I argue that Woolf’s *The Voyage Out* takes a similar approach to the nineteenth-century novel, fully investing in the conventions of the *bildungsroman* and the marriage plot only to ruthlessly dispense with them. Both works use a particular kind of modernist therapeutic pedagogy reliant on logic and form.

Keywords nonsense, logic, modernism, therapy, silence, pedagogy

For he talks nonsense, and he statements makes,
Forever his own vow of silence breaks:
Ethics, aesthetics, talks of day and night,
And calls things good or bad, and wrong or right.
Julian Bell, “An Epistle”

A logical puzzle: a logician uses logic to undermine the efficacy of logic. A pedagogical paradox: a teacher teaches that teaching is futile. A literary

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lesson: a novelist writes a novel to show that novels are nonsense. Have we fallen down Lewis Carroll's famous rabbit hole? Perhaps. Yet it is this apparently illogical logic that animates Ludwig Wittgenstein and Virginia Woolf in their modernist works, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* ([1922] 1974) and *The Voyage Out* ([1915] 1992).¹ Julian Bell, Woolf's nephew and an undergraduate at Cambridge during Wittgenstein's tenure, lampooned Wittgenstein's notorious paradoxes in the satirical poem cited in my epigraph. Knowing that in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein, the master logician, claimed to have solved all of the problems of philosophy by setting out "the logic of our language" (Wittgenstein [1922] 1974, preface: 4.003), Bell ([1930] 2008: 175) found the document itself self-contradictory ("calls things good or bad") and Wittgenstein's pedagogy hypocritical ("Forever his own vow of silence breaks"). Further, Bell presciently locates a performative contradiction in Wittgenstein's approach to nonsense that has dogged the *Tractatus* for the past near century—if Wittgenstein claims only logical statements could have sense, shouldn't most of the propositions of his own *Tractatus* be similarly consigned to the rubbish bin of nonsense? Bell parodies Wittgenstein's assertion that discussion of the "Good" or aesthetics must be silly nonsense, contending, "If all such statements nonsense are alone, / Why are they even sillier than his own?" (175). Building on Bell's poem, this article nonetheless takes seriously the claim that the *Tractatus* itself may be nonsense and proposes a thought experiment: What if we read Woolf's first novel, often considered merely confused juvenilia, to be a similar kind of nonsense? What might this nonsense aim to teach its readers?

While Julian Bell knew Wittgenstein from Cambridge, there is no evidence that Woolf and Wittgenstein ever met or that they carefully read each other's work. Yet they moved in proximate social, intellectual, and academic circles, and Woolf knew enough about Wittgenstein to gossip in a letter that Julian was "worsted" in a debate about Wittgenstein with her friend Maynard Keynes (Monk 1991: 257). Woolf derived much of her philosophical education from her years of living among her Bloomsbury circle, a number of whom were members of the Cambridge "Apostles," a philosophical group which also eagerly claimed Wittgenstein as an honorary member. Their closeness is crystallized in their "friendships" with "Bertie" Bertrand Russell, a sometimes antagonist to both. In Ann Banfield's (2006: 9) seminal work on Russell and modernism, she has argued that one can "take the rise of Wittgenstein's influence as a kind of cut-off point for the philosophical background of Bloomsbury" because "Bloomsbury's preoccupation with epistemological questions thus places it squarely within the period of Russell

1. For details on the historical and biographical relationship between Wittgenstein and Woolf, see Rosenbaum 1995, Pohlhaus and Detloff 2016.

which ends with Wittgenstein's ascendancy." Another way of looking at this same time period is to see that both Wittgenstein and Woolf completed their first works in Russell's wake and, in part, in response to his logic and his role as a father of analytic philosophy (along with others such as Gottlob Frege and G. E. Moore). When Woolf ([1924] 1988: 421) famously proclaimed, in 1924, that "on or about December 1910 human character changed," in addition to changes in government and art, she may have had in mind Russell and Alfred North Whitehead's publication of the first volume of *Principia Mathematica* in December 1910, setting out proofs for the logical basis of all mathematics.² I have written elsewhere about the stylistic and linguistic vagueness that many modernist writers proudly enlisted to fend off the mathematical and scientific precision embraced in the early decades of twentieth-century intellectual thought.³ In this article, I build on that argument to show that Wittgenstein and Woolf enlisted "nonsense," as a denunciation and a category, to break with logical forms in philosophy and literature.

In the following pages, I will argue for a "resolute reading" of *The Voyage Out*, akin to James Conant and Cora Diamond's (2004) reading of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. The resolute approach to the *Tractatus* controversially contends that we embrace Wittgenstein's assertion that the propositions of the *Tractatus* are finally nonsense; but only after fully understanding and endorsing its claims can we finally comprehend why. Unlike most traditional readings of the *Tractatus*, which I will outline shortly, resolute or austere readings refuse to distinguish among logically distinct categories of nonsense in Wittgenstein's early work, arguing that even the propositions of the *Tractatus* itself are, finally, nonsense.⁴ The *Tractatus* then, in keeping with Wittgenstein's later work, acts as a kind of "clarification" or therapy, enabling us to dispense with certain types of philosophical, linguistic, and analytical claims. I argue that Woolf's *The Voyage Out* takes a similar approach to the nineteenth-century novel, fully investing in the conventions of both the *bildungsroman* and the marriage plot only to ruthlessly dispense with them. "Nonsense," an insult initially aimed at the vapid chatter of Clarissa Dalloway, grows to encompass first Rachel Vinrace's education, then her approach to religion, and finally her understanding of self, love, marriage, and, importantly, novels. Woolf undermines even the reader's instinct to mourn for Rachel, leaving us unset-

2. For discussion, see Banfield 2006 (10).

3. For an overview of the small but significant body of scholarship on Woolf and twentieth-century philosophy, see Quigley 2015 (190–91) and Ryan 2012. For debate about the origin of Ramsay's name, see Banfield 2006 (188).

4. G. E. M. Anscombe gives the standard reading, "The best-known thesis of the *Tractatus* . . . 'metaphysical' statements are nonsensical, and . . . the only sayable things are propositions of natural science" (Anscombe 1971: 150). Resolute readings find this statement nonsense.

tled as to whether Rachel's death was a needless tragedy or an escape from relentless socialization. I believe, that is, if you end up crying for Rachel's death at the end of the book, as I did on my first reading, you have missed some of the point of Woolf's trenchant literary critique. Woolf's depiction of Rachel's death is like Wittgenstein's throwing away the ladder at the end of the *Tractatus*: both act as therapeutic moves to clear away old approaches to philosophy and fiction. Moreover, both texts encourage a reinvestment in ordinary language and experience rather than a reaching beyond; they ask us to declare "nonsense!" and to see anew the world around us.

These seemingly disparate texts both hinge on form to work, and they both bet on readers' familiarity with formal conventions to undermine those very conventions. A resolute reading of the *Tractatus* allows us to see it not as the climax of logic but as a critique of it; similarly, a resolute reading of *The Voyage Out* shows Woolf as the modernist critiquing the logic of development at work in the inherited literary forms she knew so well. Moreover, both works build up a symbol for their formal structuring—a ladder or staircase—and then destroy it, illustrating the work they pedagogically aim to accomplish. The resolute or austere approaches to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* help us recognize something new in the logic and form of Woolf's *The Voyage Out*. A resolute approach to *The Voyage Out* justifies Woolf's (1975: 383) self-assessment of her first novel in a 1909 letter: "My boldness terrifies me."

1. Why Therapy?

The Voyage Out received respectful yet tepid critical reception when it appeared in 1915.⁵ Reviewers sensed the writer was up to something experimental in this novel, but exactly what she intended seemed a little lost. For example, here is the long-awaited *New York Times* review in 1920:

This English novel, by an English writer, gives promise in its opening chapters of much entertainment. Later, the reader is disappointed. That the author knows her London in its most interesting aspects—those in which members of Parliament and their coterie of relatives and friends are the active figures—there can be no doubt. But aside from a certain cleverness—which, being all in one key, palls on one after going through a hundred pages of it—there is little in this offering to make it stand out from the ruck of mediocre novels which make far less literary pretension.

As for the story itself, it is painfully lacking, both in coherency and narrative interest. (54)

5. For a more in-depth discussion of Woolf's response to this novel's reviews and her incapacitating illness when the reviews appeared, see Briggs 2005 (22–28) and Lee 1996 (321–22).

For Woolf, who had been conceiving, writing, and revising this novel for over a decade, this review would have been crushing.⁶ The writer criticized Woolf for her literary pretentiousness and showy “cleverness” and argued that the novel failed to provide the kind of lively “story” that a reader requires. In particular, the review highlights the palling or deadening effect that reading this novel yields over the course of a hundred pages: initial promise leads to incoherency. Just like Wittgenstein’s early reader Bell, Woolf’s eager audience felt the novel failed to satisfy its own expectations.

One way that critics have explained this incoherency is to turn to Woolf’s biography (a resolution similar to popular approaches to Wittgenstein). Louise DeSalvo and others have recorded the difficulty that the young writer, then Virginia Stephen, had in writing and revising *Melymbrosia*, the original version of her first novel.⁷ DeSalvo (2002: xxvi–xxvii) writes that Woolf, an incest survivor,

used her writing to try to understand her life, and the world about her, and to repair the rift in her own psyche, and to express these insights to others. Although she killed off her heroine in this, her very first completed novel, and although its creation was attended by bouts of mental illness and despair, in the long run, the writing of *Melymbrosia* helped her to stay alive, to become that writer, Virginia Woolf.

Christine Froula (1986: 63), building on DeSalvo’s work, similarly notes that although “Rachel’s death records the failure of Woolf’s imaginative project in *The Voyage Out*,” it also shows “the very great odds that Woolf herself conquered in forging her own powerful artistic authority.”⁸ While I find these two approaches useful, and anyone working on *The Voyage Out* builds on DeSalvo’s foundational work with the *Melymbrosia* drafts, I would like to flip the patient/doctor dynamic and see Woolf as writing from a position of power rather than of weakness.⁹ What if, instead of (or in addition to?) reading *The Voyage Out* as a record of Woolf’s own therapy, we see it as performing a kind of therapy for us as readers? Resolute readings of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* and Wittgenstein’s philosophical therapy will help us do this.

6. There is some dispute about when to date the beginnings of *The Voyage Out*, though sometime around 1907–8 seems generally agreed upon. See Briggs 2005 (4) and Foley 2015 (14).

7. Woolf finished the novel after marrying Leonard Woolf in 1912; for clarity’s sake I will use the name she published the novel under, Virginia Woolf, throughout this essay.

8. Susan Stanford Friedman (1996: 119) uses the term *writing cure* to describe the novel, while Suzanne Raitt (2010), in “Virginia Woolf’s Early Novels,” strikes this common note as well, reading *The Voyage Out* as thinly veiled autobiography.

9. David Bradshaw (2015: 61) similarly questions the accepted idea that Woolf’s mental illness and fear toned down the revolutionary nature of *The Voyage Out*, arguing that “if we compare the published texts of *The Voyage Out* with DeSalvo’s edition of the *Melymbrosia* drafts it soon becomes clear that Woolf grew more bold as she worked on her novel, not the reverse.”

Traditionally, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* has been read in one of two main ways, which, for shorthand and following Conant (2002: 374), I'll call the "positivist" and the "ineffability" readings; the distinction between these readings and resolute readings hinges on the understanding of nonsense.¹⁰ The positivist reading, initiated by Russell in his unwelcome introduction, read the *Tractatus* as a foundational document of the logical positivist tradition, what has been called the "sacred text" of the Vienna Circle, where Wittgenstein seeks, through his seven main propositions, to develop a "picture theory of language," setting strict boundaries on what can and cannot be said in a meaningful fashion. The ineffability reading, in contrast, while acknowledging that the *Tractatus* does set out the limits of language, nonetheless highlights that Wittgenstein's text points to what is beyond the limits of language, emphasizing that there is much that can be shown but not said.¹¹ Both readings (arguably) criticize ordinary language, whether for philosophy (where it is blamed for the nonsense of metaphysics) or for its inherent limits in describing the ineffable.

Instead, the resolute reading that has gained in popularity, especially among literary critics in recent years, and holds sway in both Ben Ware's *Dialectic of the Ladder* (2015) and in Michael LeMahieu and Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé's *Wittgenstein and Modernism* (2017) collection, emphasizes Wittgenstein's "framing" of the project (in letters and in his preface and conclusion) and his insistence that the propositions of the *Tractatus* themselves are nonsense. Three interrelated aspects of the resolute reading are key for my approach to *The Voyage Out*: Wittgenstein's ideas of nonsense, therapy, and ethics. First, the resolute reading argues that Wittgenstein ([1922] 1974: 6.54) is utterly sincere when he states, "My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as nonsensical [*unsinnig*]." ¹² All of the propositions are nonsense: those that seem to draw strict limits

10. I will not here debate the "correct" reading of the *Tractatus* because, to quote Martha Nussbaum (1995: 732), "we would never get started with Woolf if we once tried to get agreement about Wittgenstein." For debate about the resolute reading, please see Crary and Read 2000, Read and Lavery 2011. Nordmann (2005: 12–13) provides an introductory overview of the argument against the resolute reading.

11. Among literary scholars, the positivist reading is how both Michael North (1999) and Pamela Caughie (1998) read the *Tractatus*; whereas the ineffability reading is in Ray Monk's (1991) definitive Wittgenstein biography and Marjorie Perloff's (1996) *Wittgenstein's Ladder*.

12. For the importance of the "frame," see Diamond 2000 (151). Conant 1991 is another foundational document for austere readings. For examples and analysis of this kind of approach, see LeMahieu 2006, Zumhagen-Yekplé 2012, and Ware 2011. The translation by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness, cited here, amends that by C. K. Ogden and F. P. Ramsey, which translated *unsinnig* as "senseless." See Wittgenstein (1922) 2018 for a comparative edition that includes the original and both translations, and Bronzo 2012 for a clear overview of the differences in how critics read what Wittgenstein classifies as *unsinnig*.

around logical language and those that seem to point beyond the limits of language such as, “There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical” (6.522). Philosophy, according to this reading, is not a theory of meaning (as the positivists and ineffability readers would argue) but an activity: in particular a therapeutic or, in the words of the *Tractatus*, clarifying activity through which one rids oneself of misconceptions and preconceptions.¹³ The form of the *Tractatus*, what has been called this “funny looking book,” is key to this reading, in that although its careful logical structure (1.0, 1.1, 1.2, etc.) convinces one that one is moving upward toward some logical goal, the end result is to undermine exactly such structure (Conant 2002: 377). “Thus,” as Conant writes, “what happens to us as readers of the *Tractatus*—assuming the work succeeds in its aim—is that we are drawn into an illusion of occupying a certain sort of perspective” (422), but the perspective proves to be only an illusion. The *Tractatus* offers us “philosophical temptations” (457), which, and here enters the ethical part, it teaches us to overcome. Zumhagen-Yekplé (2012: 431n4) argues that the ethical movement of the “mock-doctrine” of the *Tractatus* is that it forces “a shift in its readers’ worldview.” In a 1919 letter to Ludwig von Ficker, Wittgenstein (1971: 14n2) provided a kind of “key to the work,” writing, “My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have *not* written.” What is not within this document but is the most important part, the “ethical” component of it, is its “primary aim,” which is, according to Eli Friedlander, “to open us to our own experience—as revealed through everyday language—by leading us beyond the dichotomy of facticity and transcendence, away from the urge to transcend the limits of language and toward a recognition that our ordinary dealing with things has a significance that is at once linguistically meaningful and ethically valuable” (Zumhagen-Yekplé 2012: 435).¹⁴

That the *Tractatus*, a complex logical text, might actually reject logical positivism, metaphysics, and notions of ineffability, leading readers back to “ordinary dealings” through “everyday language,” might seem odd, but it is in keeping with Wittgenstein’s posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations*. This desire to discard previous methodologies and conventions is crystallized in Wittgenstein’s ([1922] 1974: 6.54) infamous ladder proposition: “My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it).”

13. “The object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a theory but an activity” (Wittgenstein [1922] 1974: 4.112). See Conant and Diamond 2004.

14. Conant (2002: 424) adds that “the illusion that the *Tractatus* seeks to explode, above all, is that we can run up against the limits of language.”

2. Genre and Nonsense

“Sir Walter Elliot, of Kellynch Hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the *Baronetage*” (Austen [1818] 2011: 33). So begins *Persuasion*, the Jane Austen novel that Clarissa and Richard Dalloway read out to Rachel Vinrace, believing it will persuade our young innocent heroine that Austen is the “greatest female writer we possess” (Woolf [1915] 1992: 53) and, simultaneously, that the marriage plot is the plot for her. Though Rachel initially presents her distaste for Austen—she is “so like a tight plait”—and declares, “I shall never marry” (49, 51)—by the second half of the novel she is as engaged as Anne Elliot or Austen’s other happy heroines. Rachel’s story seems as though it will be one of both education and marriage, but instead this plait (like Rachel’s own hair, which is described as hanging down her back through much of the novel) fails to hold. Jed Esty (2007: 77) notes that this is one of the most important questions about the novel: “Why does the novel initiate a trajectory of apparent self-determination, spiritual enlargement, or at least social adjustment for its protagonist, Rachel Vinrace, only to close down those possibilities in a long spiral of illness . . . ?”

One answer seems to be that Woolf is showing us that the marriage plot is nonsense for Rachel, but she shows it to us, just as the *Tractatus* does, from the inside out, so that we invest in Rachel’s education and romance only to have our expectations cruelly checked. The novel begins with a mother’s tears on leaving her children and then focuses on young Rachel, indicating where the maternal and readerly energy should now reside. If other characters initially find Rachel lacking—“Ah! She’s not like her mother” her uncle ruefully mutters—and even Helen, Rachel’s surrogate mother figure, is similarly skeptical of Rachel’s depth, drawing “gloomy” conclusions that Rachel is merely “an unlicked girl, no doubt prolific of confidences” (Woolf [1915] 1992: 8, 16), Rachel defies their assumptions. She isn’t a sentimental character; in fact, she refuses to confide in her aunt the way she predicted. Helen starts to find Rachel a source of some intrigue, deciding to determine “what Rachel *did* do with herself” (25). Indeed, this is how the novel lures us in, with Helen, to follow Rachel’s maturation. Through her intimacy with first her aunt, then a growing circle of acquaintances, and, finally, Terence Hewett, Rachel appears to grow and become socialized, developing from her initial belief that other people are merely “symbols” to embracing the idea of love with another, even if only fitfully. This change is crystallized through the transformation of her initial belief that “to feel anything strongly was to create an abyss between oneself and others” to her thought that, just by sitting next to Terence, “the divisions disappeared, and it seemed as if the world were

once more solid and entire, and, as if, in some strange way, they had grown larger and stronger” (29, 286). Through these momentary connections between Rachel and Terence, *The Voyage Out* seems to promise more of a traditional courtship plot than any other novel that Woolf would write. Yet Rachel’s sudden death upends this: *The Voyage Out* is, as Jane de Gay (2006: 23) has noted, “a courtship novel at odds with the genre.”

Woolf’s usage of the term *nonsense* itself to discuss literature and love highlights the possibility that *The Voyage Out* instructs us that much of what Rachel is taught to believe and that we ourselves expect to read is nonsense.¹⁵ Whereas the Dalloways seem initially worldly and wise to Rachel, once they have left, Helen immediately mocks them, both for her chatter and for his reprehensible yet ludicrous (Helen can barely keep herself from laughing) attempt to seduce our heroine. “I never heard such nonsense!” Helen exclaims, “Chitter-chatter-chitter-chatter—fish and the Greek alphabet” (Woolf [1915] 1992: 73). The Dalloways’ beloved Austen is implicated in this nonsense, and Woolf aims the word *nonsense* as well at Terence’s realization that he is in love (“He shut the gate and ran swinging from side to side down the hill shouting any nonsense that came into his head,” and he wonders why he is always “talking nonsense aloud to myself . . . about Rachel, about Rachel” [172]); Helen uses it to discredit Rachel’s religious beliefs (“Nonsense,” [Helen lectures Rachel,] “You’re not a Christian. You’ve never thought what you are” [132]); and, finally, Rachel herself uses it to dismiss Terence’s writing in contrast to her own music (“Think of novels and plays and histories,” she commands him, “They’re sheer nonsense!” [276]). Woolf implies that novels, like the one we are reading, are somehow nonsensical, just as her heroine’s bildungsroman devolves from apparent character formation into what Esty (2007: 79) calls “ego dissolution.” We are trapped as readers, at this moment, in a version of the liar’s paradox that I mentioned in the beginning of my essay. When a character in a novel proclaims that novels are nonsense, do we believe the character or the novel? More specifically, how do we answer the self-referential logical conundrum that a novel tells us novels are nonsense?¹⁶

15. “Nonsense” may connect, in particular, to philosophy (and arguably even to Wittgenstein’s philosophy) for Woolf. In *To the Lighthouse* ([1927] 1992: 40–41), Mr. Ramsay, the philosopher based, in part, on Woolf’s father, Leslie Stephen, repeatedly calls his own work “some nonsense.” Given that Ramsay may or may not also refer to the name of Wittgenstein’s interlocutor, the philosopher Frank Ramsey, and Woolf knew enough about Wittgenstein’s ideas to discuss her nephew’s debating about him in her letters, it is possible that the word *nonsense* connects to philosophical logic and argument for Woolf.

16. Wittgenstein ([1922] 1974: 3.332) answers this in the *Tractatus*: “No proposition can say anything about itself” — unless this is nonsense.

Molly Hite (2010: 525) has argued that what makes reading *The Voyage Out* challenging is the sense that we do not know who to believe owing to Woolf's lack of "tonal cues" in key scenes, including "Rachel's reaction to Richard Dalloway's kiss; the two dream sequences—the first following on that kiss, the second when Rachel is in the coma that leads to her death; the trip into the interior of Santa Marina; and the characterization of Evelyn Murgatroyd." This lack of tonal cues means that even as we are cheering for Terence and Rachel's marriage, we are not sure that we are doing it because the two characters form a good match, or because the inevitable push of the marriage plot leads us in that direction. And if we are rooting against Terence, we're not exactly sure that is right either. Even Rachel's death, which surely should be wrong, is conveyed in aqueous images that suggest Rachel's return to her natural element, recalling the moments in which Rachel seems happiest, in what Hite calls her "parallel universe of unmediated contact with the real" (529). Indeed, Rachel's final presented thoughts, although juxtaposed to Terence's grief, are not themselves tragic or sad: "Terence was the greatest effort. . . . She did not wish to remember; it troubled her when people tried to disturb her loneliness; she wished to be alone. She wished for nothing else in the world" (Woolf [1915] 1992: 328). Rachel's return to the undisturbed isolation of her mind seems a partial victory over Terence's controlling intrusions. "Splendid! Splendid!," "profound happiness," "wonderful," "exultation" (352–53)—such diction accompanies Woolf's characters' return to their "pattern" of living on the last pages of the book. Is this sad? It is so hard to know whether we are meant to mourn that this wondering itself becomes itself the subject of the book. It, like the *Tractatus*, "forces a shift in our world view": Why did we expect for Rachel to become socialized or to marry? (Zumhagen-Yekplé 2012: 440). Is that what a heroine needs to do? Is that what novels need to conclude?

Woolf's novel does not ask these questions outright but incites them through form, and through its replacement of Rachel's projected development with silence—in the 1920 American edition Woolf called *The Voyage Out* "the short season between two silences" (Briggs 2005: 25). Just as Wittgenstein stated that he remained "silent" about the most important part of the *Tractatus*, the ethical part, so also Woolf emphasizes the importance of silence to her novel. Indeed, Terence proclaims his desire to write a novel about silence, in what is perhaps the most well-known line from this little-read first Woolf novel: "I want to write a novel about Silence," Terence confesses to Rachel, "the things people don't say. But the difficulty is immense" (Woolf [1915] 1992: 204). While other critics have pointed to this passage as a possible metaphor for Woolf's novel, and its Wittgensteinian reverberations are acute, I want to highlight Terence's next point. Woolf writes: "'However, you don't

care,’ he continued. He looked at her almost severely. ‘Nobody cares. All you read a novel for is to see what sort of person the writer is, and, if you know him, which of his friends he’s put in. As for the novel itself, the whole conception, the way one’s seen the thing, felt about it, made it stand in relation to other things, not one in a million cares for that’” (204). My reading urges us to take Terence’s point seriously—not to think about “what sort of person” Woolf was and her life experiences while writing her first novel, but instead to think about “the whole conception” of *The Voyage Out* and how it might “stand in relation” to the literary tradition, forcing us to revise our expectations of character and development. While Woolf (1975: 446) is “silent” about the ramifications for rethinking the novel form within the pages of the novel itself, she confirms this formal revolution in an early letter to Clive Bell in 1910, writing, “I should say that my great change was of courage, or conceit; and that I had given up adventuring after other people’s forms.” In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf moves from “adventuring after other” novelists’ forms to upending them, showing us where traditional forms fail to capture life’s possibilities.

3. Discarded Ladders and Ruined Staircases: The Return to Ordinary Experience

I will conclude, in true nonsense tradition, with a thought connecting forks and fingers to modernism’s pedagogy. Woolf ([1924] 1988: 434) famously expressed her frustration with literary conventions in her manifesto, “Character in Fiction,” writing:

The literary convention of the time is so artificial—you have to talk about the weather and nothing but the weather throughout the entire visit—that, naturally, the feeble are tempted to outrage, and the strong are led to destroy the very foundations and rules of literary society. Signs of this are everywhere apparent. Grammar is violated; syntax disintegrated; as a boy staying with an aunt for the weekend rolls in the geranium bed out of sheer desperation as the solemnities of the Sabbath wear on. The more adult writers do not, of course, indulge in such wanton exhibitions of spleen. Their sincerity is desperate, and their courage tremendous; it is only that they do not know which to use, a fork or their fingers.

Woolf’s modernism is not, especially as early as *The Voyage Out*, like James Joyce’s and T. S. Eliot’s play with grammar and syntax; she does, however, create in Rachel a character whose resistance to convention is marked by her attitude to forks and fingers. Whereas we first meet Rachel “severely” arranging the forks in unhappy anticipation of her aunt and uncle’s arrival, Woolf (1915] 1992: 7) seems to mark Rachel’s inability to be socialized with her fascination with her own fingers. Although her musician’s fingers, “square-

tipped and nervous,” are what first marks Hewett’s attraction to her, her own fingers lure her into thought: she begins to “raise her first finger and to let it fall on the arm of her chair,” fascinated by “the unspeakable queerness of the fact that she should be sitting in an arm chair, in the morning, in the middle of the world” (195, 114). She sits “perfectly still.” “Life, what was that?” she wonders, until “she was overcome with awe that things should exist at all . . . She forgot that she had any fingers to raise” (114; ellipsis in original). This proto-“moment of being,” a feeling of wonder at her own existence, is rooted in her own body, specifically in “an arm-chair, in the morning, in the middle of the world” (114).¹⁷ Rachel likes to rub “her fingers in the earth” and strike her fingers on piano keys (196). Rachel’s story that is not fully written (but hinted at) is a voyage of understanding her own everyday experience, her body’s place in the world, her emotional responses to her aunts, her desires and feelings. If a therapeutic reading of the *Tractatus* aims “to open us to our own experience — as it is revealed through language” (Friedlander 2001: 16), then Woolf’s novel suggests that those moments might be lost in artificial novels focused on the “foundations and rules of literary society.”¹⁸

The way that both Woolf’s and Wittgenstein’s texts teach the reader — this therapeutic pedagogy, which allows us to learn through performing or embracing ideas which finally appear nonsensical — seems a particularly modernist kind of writing, which yokes an early twentieth-century desire *to make it new* to Freudian therapy.¹⁹ If stereotypical modernist writing like that of Joyce, Ezra Pound, or Eliot (or even the later more experimental Woolf) aims to *blast* away the past, Woolf and Wittgenstein construct their arguments more subtly, yet to similar ends.²⁰ While no one would confuse Rachel’s decorous life story with *Ulysses*, and Wittgenstein’s logical formalism seems closer to Russell’s *Principia* than to Pound’s *Cantos*, both texts, according to a resolute reading, use form to undermine formal convention, aiming to show,

17. For Woolf’s (1985: 70–73) “moments of being” as foundational to creativity, see “A Sketch of the Past”: “I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. . . . 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.”

18. For the importance of ordinary experience to Woolf, see Olson 2009.

19. Both Woolf and Wittgenstein knew Sigmund Freud’s methods intimately, Woolf having set the type by hand for Freud’s English translation and Wittgenstein imbibing his older sister Gretl’s enthusiasm of his fellow fin-de-siècle Viennese so well as to once describe himself as a “disciple of Freud” and to lecture on him, this parallel inventor of “similes” (Monk 1991: 356–57). For Woolf and the Hogarth Press as the English publishers of the International Psycho-Analytical Library and Freud’s *Collected Papers*, see Bahun 2012.

20. Blum 2017 has demonstrated that the vogue for therapy and self-help and literary modernism coincided, and that their opposite reputations are not quite as distinct as we may have always thought.

logically, where the past has misled and misrepresented the present. Both also might be considered a form of satire, but a particularly labyrinthine kind, revealing its satirical stripes when and only when the reader has believed and followed the text's own logic; then, the therapy reveals itself for what it is.

Stanley Cavell (1996: 380), the explicator of later Wittgenstein, claims that therapy may indeed be a point of convergence for philosophy and literature: "Differences in the work philosophy does and the work that art does need not be slighted if it turns out that they cross paths, even to some extent share paths—for example, where they contest the ground on which the life of another is to be examined, call it the ground of therapy." As I understand this, Cavell suggests that, for all of their differences, where they reenvision what work their disciplines need to do, philosophy and literature may resemble each other. Both texts, stemming in part from their authors' own experiences of trauma (of mental illness, of war), share a therapeutic path where they wish readers to rethink what seems logical or necessary. Woolf's novel in fact performs a kind of philosophical trick, just as Wittgenstein's philosophy requires a kind of novelistic journey—both help readers question conventional notions about the way "the life of another" may be examined in philosophy or literature. A resolute reading of the *Tractatus* may even show us that *The Voyage Out* is indeed a kind of bildungsroman, but one focused on the reader's own development. Like the *Tractatus*, Woolf's novel teaches us to rid ourselves, as the *Tractatus* asks, of "nonsensical propositions," which lead us to abstract theorizing (Is this a coming-of-age novel? Is this a marriage plot?) and away from understanding Rachel's ordinary experience.²¹

Indeed, the "ruined staircase"—Woolf's ([1915] 1992: 275) repeated image for Rachel's piano playing—acts as an apt metaphor for the therapeutic model of both the *Tractatus* and *The Voyage Out*: "Rachel said nothing. Up and up the steep spiral of a very late Beethoven sonata she climbed, like a person ascending a ruined staircase, energetically at first, then more laboriously advancing her feet until she could go no higher and returned with a run to begin at the very bottom again." The image in this scene refers to Rachel's piano playing, which keeps stalling because of Terence's interruptions: "Here am I, the best musician in South America, not to speak of Europe or Asia," she modestly declares, "and I can't play a note because of you in the room interrupting me every other second" (276). Yet the ruined staircase, where Rachel finds herself stranded, is also an image for both the *Tractatus* and *The Voyage Out*: while they seem to encourage building, construction, and

21. For a useful overview of the history of the bildungsroman and, in particular, the term in modernist scholarship, see Boes 2006.

transcendence, in fact both texts, finally, are skeptical about the desire to go beyond the here and now.

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