

From Stewardship to Co-Presence: Literary Form and Post-Christian-Ecological Imagination in Virginia Woolf, 1927–1941

Qiong Yu*

School of English and International Studies, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing 100089, China

*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1307000139>

Received: 24 July 2026; Accepted: 29 July 2026; Published: 02 August 2026

ABSTRACT

This study argues that Virginia Woolf's four novels (1927–1941) develop a “post-Christian ecological imagination” that responds to a formal problem in contemporary ecological theology: even its most relational versions—from Bauckham's “community of creation” to Keller's *creatio ex profundis*—rewrite the content of stewardship while preserving the human as reflective ethical agent at three formal levels: grammar, temporality, and affect. Woolf's late fiction reworks all three. At the level of grammar, the bracketed deaths in “Time Passes” demote the human from sentence-subject to subordinate clause. At the level of temporality, the cosmic interludes of *The Waves* and the prehistoric strata of *Between the Acts* embed human lives within nonhuman duration. At the level of affect, the olfactory narration of *Flush* and the “mirror scene” of *Between the Acts* relocate the subject of grief from the human onto objects, animals, and landscape. These three formal resources—decentered syntax, durational temporality, and non-anthropocentric grief—do not propose a new theological paradigm. Rather, they illuminate three formal problems that any non-anthropocentric ecological theology must confront if it is to move beyond human-centered models of care, responsibility, and mourning. By attending to Woolf's literary form, theology may expand its imaginative vocabulary for thinking creation beyond the privileged position of the human subject.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf; post-Christian ecological imagination ; stewardship ethics; ecological theology; Anthropocene; new materialism

INTRODUCTION

Confronted with the global crisis of the Anthropocene, the fundamental failure of science-based regulatory governance has prompted scholars to redirect their attention toward a deeper set of questions: the crisis is not, at its core, a problem of technological remediation, but rather one of reconceiving the place of the human within the natural world (David Kinsley 1995, pp. xvi–xvii). It was Lynn White, Jr. who first opened this line of inquiry in 1967, arguing that the deep roots of the contemporary ecological crisis are inseparable from their cultural and religious context. The Christian concept of human dominion over all creation, he contended, stands in a plausible relation of mutual reflection with the modern instrumentalization of nature—such that, as he put it, “since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious” (White 1967, p. 1207). White's diagnosis has generated a theological resonance that continues to this day. From the 1980s and 1990s onward, a growing body of scholarship has recognized that religion may serve not only as a cultural accomplice in ecological destruction but equally as a resource for reimagining the relationship between the human and the non-human (Berry 1988 ; Ruether 1992 ; Rockefeller 1992; Tucker 1994; Nasr 1996; Callicott 1989, 1997; Kinsley 1995). The mythological systems, ritual practices, moral frameworks, and ethical obligations closely bound up with religious traditions are deeply interwoven with the ways in which human beings conceptualize their relationship to the more-than-human world.

Yet the dominant theological response generated by this relational turn—stewardship ethics—while rewriting dominion as care and separation as co-presence, has nonetheless failed to dislodge a deeper structural presupposition: that the human being is the privileged ethical agent within creation, uniquely endowed with the capacity for moral reflection. Even in the most relationally oriented versions of this framework—such as Sallie McFague's cosmic body theology, Mark I. Wallace's Christian animism, and Richard Bauckham's "community of creation"—the formal logic of "the human as manager, witness, and reflective subject" is quietly preserved. This is not a matter of attitude but of structure: no amount of rhetoric about humility can alter the grammatical position of the human as the narrative subject of theological discourse. Clare Palmer observed as early as 1992 that stewardship ethics is "remains profoundly anthropocentric and unecological" (Palmer 1992, p. 84). Willis Jenkins's 2008 taxonomy of three paradigms in Christian environmental ethics (Ecojustice, Christian stewardship, Ecological spirituality) further demonstrates that this limitation is a formal constraint intrinsic to systematic theology as a genre, rather than a blind spot attributable to any individual theologian.¹ (Jenkins 2008, pp. 237-38)

The question thus becomes clear: what kinds of formal and imaginative resources are needed if ecological theology is to think, rather than merely assert, a creation not centered on the human? This study does not claim that literature can replace theology, nor that theological discourse is incapable of generating non-anthropocentric visions from within its own traditions. Rather, it argues that Woolf's later fiction offers a particularly powerful literary site in which the formal difficulties of non-anthropocentric ecological thought become visible. Through decentered syntax, durational temporality, and non-anthropocentric grief, Woolf's fiction shows that the displacement of the human cannot remain only a thematic or doctrinal claim; it must also be enacted at the level of grammar, narrative time, and affective structure. The study contends that Woolf offers a post-Christian ecological imagination: one that inherits the temporal structure of Christian narrative (creation, fall, and redemption) as well as its affective form of gift, rupture, and return, while redistributing agency away from the human and into a larger network composed of nonhuman life, matter, and time. It is neither an anti-Christian form of secular posthumanism nor a simple literary illustration of ecological theology. Rather, it provides theology with an imaginative substrate: through decentered grammar, nonhuman durational temporality, and grief that is no longer organized around the human, it enables "creation" to be narrated without presupposing the human as its center.

Because the argument turns on three terms that carry somewhat different meanings in literary studies and in theology, it is worth defining them at the outset in operational form. By *grammar* this study means the distribution of syntactic positions within a sentence or a narrative unit: which entities occupy the subject position, which are demoted to subordinate clauses, participial phrases, or parentheses, and which are permitted to govern verbs of action, perception, and judgement. By *temporality* it means the scale and shape of the narrative time within which events are made legible: whether a text organizes duration teleologically (as progress toward an end), cyclically (as return), or durationally (as rhythm without direction), and whether human biographical time frames nonhuman time or is itself framed by it. By *affect* it means the text's distribution of grief and its cognate emotions: who or what is constituted as a legitimate object of mourning, who is authorized to mourn, and whether the reader is positioned outside that grief as its spectator or inside it as one of its bearers. Each of the three is a formal rather than a thematic category. A text may assert the equality of human and nonhuman at the level of content while its grammar, its temporal scale, and its affective economy continue to reserve the central position for the human; it is precisely this gap between asserted content and enacted form that the analysis below is designed to make visible.

The first section traces the genealogy of ecological theology and shows that even its most relational versions have not displaced the position of "the human as ethical agent". This constitutes the central problem raised by the study as a whole. The second section acknowledges the theoretical value of posthumanism and new materialism, while also pointing out their insufficiency as conceptual tools when confronting the narrative structure of Christianity. It then proposes the concept of a post-Christian ecological imagination and locates it within Woolf's distinctive literary contribution. The third and fourth sections form the core of the textual analysis. They examine, in sequence, the bracketed syntax in *To the Lighthouse*, the cosmological interludes and Bernard's apophatic moment in *The Waves*, the olfactory narrative of *Flush*, and the collective landscape of *Between the Acts*. The fifth section brings these close readings together by identifying three formal contributions that Woolf offers to ecological theology: decentered syntax, durational temporality, and non-anthropocentric grief. The conclusion

argues that Woolf does not construct an ethics of “human care for nature”. Rather, on the basis of a post-Christian ecological imagination, she develops a more-than-human ethics in which human beings are jointly delimited by nature, animals, matter, and time.

The originality of this study lies less in placing Woolf within the field of ecological aesthetics—that work has been substantially advanced by Adkins, Scott, Ryan, and others—than in the methodological operation it performs across the boundary between literary and theological analysis. This study seeks to demonstrate what may be called formal theological criticism: a mode of reading that treats theological discourse as formally constituted, and treats literary form as theologically diagnostic. To say that theological discourse is formally constituted is to say that the grammatical positions a text assigns (who is the implicit subject? who is the addressee?), the temporal arc it deploys (is the rhythm linear, cyclical, durational?), and the affective configuration it sustains (where is grief permitted to land? whose suffering can the text register?) are not neutral vehicles for propositional content but themselves carry substantive theological commitments. To say that literary form is theologically diagnostic is to say that the formal experiments of imaginative literature can make visible what theological discourse, constrained by genre, has been unable to articulate—not because theologians failed to think it, but because their writing form would not let it be borne. This differs in emphasis from the established field of religion-and-literature studies, which has tended to identify religious themes within literary texts (Felch 2016) or to read modernist literature as a site of “secular sacred” experience (Lewis 2010). Formal theological criticism does not subordinate literature to theology, nor does it treat theology as a merely thematic reservoir for literary interpretation. Instead, it asks how literary form may disclose the formal assumptions, limits, and possibilities of theological discourse itself, treating literary texts not as illustrative material for theological interpretation but as diagnostic instruments for theological self-critique. The method asks of any theological–literary pair not “what does each say?” but “what does each form make sayable?” This study deploys the method on a single test case—the formal limits of stewardship ethics and the formal resources of Woolf’s late novels—but it is in principle exportable to any pairing in which content-level reform appears to leave structural commitments untouched. The contribution offered to religious studies is therefore methodological as well as substantive: it shows that the formal turn long established in literary studies can be applied, with discipline and without reduction, to the analysis of theological discourse itself.

STEWARDSHIP ETHICS AND ITS STRUCTURAL LIMITATIONS

Read in this register, The nineteenth-century British crisis of faith was not driven, as the conventional narrative often suggests, simply by the impact of science (represented above all by Darwinism) on the authority of the Bible. Long before this, a profound cross-pressure had already taken shape among the educated elites. On the one hand, scientific and historical criticism grounded in an “impersonal order” made traditional Christian doctrines increasingly difficult to believe. On the other hand, there emerged a strong moral and aesthetic revulsion against the atomization and vulgarization associated with utilitarianism and commercial-industrial society (Taylor 2007, pp. 377-92). Under this cross-pressure, thinkers such as Carlyle and Arnold acted as “bridge-builders”: they sought to discard the “old Hebrew garment”—doctrines such as miracles and special providence—while preserving the “sacred spirit” of Christianity (p. 379). Arnold’s concept of “Culture” in *Culture and Anarchy* exemplifies this effort: it was intended to fill the spiritual vacuum left by the decline of faith through “the best that has been thought and said in the world”² (Arnold 2006, p. 5). White’s 1967 argument can be properly understood only as an extension of this long process of secularization. When religion no longer functioned as the metaphysical guarantee of public order, its imaginative legacy concerning the relationship between human beings and nature continued to operate in more concealed forms. The idea of human “dominion” over all things did not disappear with the retreat of Christianity; rather, it was preserved in secularized and technocratic forms, even as Christian traces continued to permeate the cultural field, especially in what this study identifies as stewardship ethics.

To understand accurately the six decades of debate that followed White’s intervention, it is first necessary to situate the keyword “stewardship” within its semantic history. In *Stewardship & the Economy of God*, John H. Reumann notes that the Greek term corresponding to the English word “stewardship” in the New Testament is *oikonomia*. Its semantic trajectory extends from household management (*oikos*) to the governance of the city-state (*polis*), and is then elevated in the Stoic tradition into the idea of God’s ordering of the cosmos (*kosmos*).

The Old Testament offers almost no direct foundation for this concept; it is only in the New Testament, through Jesus' parables of stewardship and Paul's rhetoric of being "stewards of the mysteries of God" that the term acquires its distinctively Christian significance (Reumann 2014, pp. 5;16-17). In the patristic period, the use of *oikonomia* expanded dramatically. It came to describe the Incarnation, the internal differentiation of roles within the Trinity, and the distribution of sacramental grace, before being consolidated in the Middle Ages as the grand design through which God's purpose gradually unfolds in history. Reumann argues, however, that the meaning of "stewardship" commonly used in churches today is in fact a relatively recent development. It emerged chiefly as a rhetorical instrument within North American Protestantism from the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, when churches, no longer sustained by state funding, needed to raise money for missions and congregational life. Only in the 1960s and 1970s, under the influence of theologians such as Douglas John Hall, was it expanded to encompass globalization, social justice, and ecological responsibility (Hall 1982, pp. 52-53). In other words, stewardship ethics is not a purely theological concept sustained by an unbroken two-thousand-year tradition. Rather, it is a category that was retrospectively theologized within a modern fiscal-administrative context. This helps explain why its formal grammar remains so persistently centered on "the human being as entrusted agent."

In *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*, Douglas John Hall offers the most systematic internal critique of this recent semantic narrowing. Hall argues that North American churches reduced stewardship to a practical instrument for fundraising and congregational administration, thereby obscuring the revolutionary force embedded in the term within the biblical tradition. (Hall 1982, p. 6) On a longer historical scale, the Hellenistic devaluation of the material world and the Constantinian alliance between church and power together pushed the figure of the "servant-steward" to the margins. Hall proposes five well-known principles of expansion for modern stewardship theology: globalization, communalization, ecologization, politicization, and futurization. (p. 69) ³Proceeding from a theology of the cross, Hall insists that Christians "must never give up on this world too soon"—an inner theological impulse that later ecological theology would come to inherit. His "five principles" thus achieve a remarkable expansion at the level of content. At the level of form, however, the subject-position of "the human being as the ethical agent who bears these five responsibilities" remains entirely undisturbed. This makes Hall's theology an especially revealing example of the formal critique that this study seeks to develop.⁴

White's diagnosis provoked a vigorous debate that has continued for six decades, in which theologians have variously defended, revised, or radically reconstructed Christianity's understanding of nature. Broadly speaking, the major responses may be grouped into three trajectories. The first is a reformist theology of stewardship, represented by Bauckham, which emphasizes an internal biblical shift from "dominion" to the "community of creation". The second is relational/kinship theology, represented by McFague's panentheistic body theology and Wallace's Christian animism, which stresses the ontological kinship between human and nonhuman beings. The third is process and political theology, exemplified by Catherine Keller's "theology of the deep," which fundamentally rewrites the hierarchical metaphysics of *creatio ex nihilo*. These three trajectories have substantially rewritten the content of responsibility—from domination to care, and from separation to co-presence. Yet the structural position of "the human as ethical agent" has never been genuinely displaced. The following discussion examines, in turn, both their advances and their residual limitations.

In *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (2010), Richard Bauckham offers the most systematic critique of the stewardship paradigm from within biblical studies. Bauckham identifies two key flaws in the stewardship model. First, it is based almost exclusively on Genesis 1:26 and 1:28, while largely ignoring the richer traditions in Job, the Psalms, and the Gospels that present human beings as fellow creatures (Bauckham 2010, p. 11). Second, the stewardship model still casts humanity as an intermediary figure between God and creation, thereby preserving a hierarchical vertical structure (pp. 10–11). Bauckham's alternative is the "community of creation": human beings are fellow members within creation, rather than managers of it (p. 88). Yet even in Bauckham's account, the special position of humanity as the only member capable of reflecting on the community is quietly retained. Human beings are uniquely able to recognize themselves as part of the community of creation, and it is precisely this "unique recognition" that once again places them in a distinctive cognitive-ethical position. This is a subtle but crucial formal residue: the content is decentered, yet the narrative position remains centered.

Sallie McFague's *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*(1993) goes further. She explicitly moves beyond “the last remnants of anthropocentrism” and the “dominion paradigm”, imagining the universe as the body of God. For McFague, God does not govern the world from “outside” it; rather, God vibrates as the world. This means that the “absentee landlord” logic of stewardship ethics is fundamentally dismantled.⁵ Yet the human “vocation” remains that of “helping the earth to prosper” (McFague 1993, p. xi). The earth still requires “help”, and human beings are “commissioned” as stewards of the continuing life of the earth (p. 201). Beneath the panentheistic content, the narrative position of stewardship ethics—the human being as the ethical agent within creation—remains fully intact. McFague herself names this, near the end of the book, as the “special vocation” of human beings as stewards. She does not escape this grammar, because it is the deepest formal inheritance of the Christian creation narrative.

In *When God Was a Bird: Christianity, Animism, and the Re-Enchantment of the World*(2018), Mark I. Wallace proposes “Christian animism”: God, as bird, as dove, and as more-than-human Spirit, permeates creation (Wallace 2018, pp. 25–30). The enfleshment of the Holy Spirit occurs not only in Jesus, but also in doves, herons, and thrushes. Yet Wallace’s work still presupposes the position of the human as witness and speaker: it is the human being who “recognizes” the Holy Spirit in the thrush and who “rediscovers” the image of the bird-God. Beneath even the most radical non-anthropocentric rhetoric, the Christian reader remains the active subject of spiritual discernment.

Catherine Keller is the theologian who comes closest to genuinely unsettling this structure. In *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*(2003), Keller dismantles the “divine dominology” of creatio ex nihilo (Keller 2003, p. xvii) and proposes creatio ex profundis. Creation, in this account, does not emerge “from nothing” through the utterance of an omnipotent Father; rather, it arises from *tehom* (the “deep” the watery abyss) through the vibrating movement of *ruach*, or spirit (p. 9). In *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public*(2018), she further extends the critique of anthropocentrism into the panentheistic dimension of *transcendere*, arguing for an entangled, becoming, and anti-sovereign politics in which humans and nonhumans—animals, plants, climates, and elements—together constitute an entangled public (Keller 2018, pp. 5-6). What is at stake is no longer a model in which “stewards manage property,” but a shared struggle with the earth against planetary emergency. Yet even in Keller’s work, the speaking position of theological discourse itself is still occupied by “we”—that is, by a reflective theological community. Theology, as a discursive form, already presupposes that “we” are able to reflect on creation and the deep. This is not Keller’s personal failure; it is a formal limitation of systematic theology as a genre.⁶

Even in the most relational and potentially liberatory versions, whether the liberationist tradition of ecojustice, the mystical path of ecological spirituality, or the reformist kinship version of stewardship, the structural position of the human as “reflective ethical agent” remains undisplaced. Literature, therefore, cannot replace theology; nor can it provide doctrine. As Martha Nussbaum writes in *Love’s Knowledge*, “Style itself makes its claims, expresses its own sense of what matters. Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content” (Nussbaum 1990, p. 3). Yet literature can do what theology finds difficult to do: it can enact, rather than merely describe, a non-anthropocentric imagination of creation. It can allow the grammar of the sentence itself, the rhythm of the sentence, and the perspective of the narrative to carry out this decentering, rather than having the author’s argument merely assert it.

TOWARD A POST-CHRISTIAN ECOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

The structural limitation of stewardship ethics arises from the formal constraints of systematic theology as a genre: the position of “the human as reflective narrative subject” cannot be abolished from within theological discourse itself, and the imaginative substrate must therefore be borrowed from outside theology. Are there resources within contemporary theoretical genealogies that can be directly mobilized for this purpose? The “non-human turn” which has flourished over the past fifteen years, appears to be precisely such a candidate.

In the introduction to his edited volume *The Nonhuman Turn*(2015), Richard Grusin makes clear that this turn is not a teleological narrative of a “posthuman turn” moving from the human toward the posthuman. Rather, it is a retrospective ontological reconstruction: the human “has never been purely human,” but has always been

constituted through its inseparable entanglements with animals, affect, bodies, geophysical systems, materiality, and technology (Grusin 2015, p. vii). Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), drawing on Spinoza's conatus, Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage, and Latour's actant, reintroduces thing-power and vibrant matter into political theory. Bennett argues that all matter—from trash and electricity to stem cells—possesses an intrinsic vitality and the capacity to produce effects of its own (Bennett 2010, p. viii). In *Bodily Natures* (2010), Stacy Alaimo proposes the concept of trans-corporeality. She criticizes the late-twentieth-century “linguistic turn” for treating nature and the body as “blank slates” available for arbitrary inscription, and argues instead that human bodies are always engaged in material exchanges with the more-than-human world (Alaimo 2010, pp. 1–2). Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* argues that traditional humanism, epitomized by Leonardo da Vinci's “Vitruvian Man,” has in fact served the hegemonic interests of whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, and Eurocentrism (Braidotti 2013, pp. 23–24). Through the three dimensions of becoming-animal, becoming-earth, and becoming-machine, Braidotti advances a form of egalitarianism centered on zoe, or non-human vital life (p.60).

Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016) replaces epochal names centered on the human or capital with the “Chthulucene”, and calls for the cultivation of “response-ability” in the “thick present.” Her concept of sympoiesis challenges the self-enclosed model of autopoiesis: all organisms are mutually permeating holobionts. The slogan “Make Kin Not Babies” advocates the formation of cross-species “odd kin” (Haraway 2016, p. 2). Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, by contrast, proceeds from object-oriented ontology and defines “hyperobjects” as entities massively distributed in time and space relative to human beings, including global warming, all the nuclear materials on Earth, and the machinery of capitalism. Their features include viscosity, nonlocality, temporal undulation, phasing, and interobjectivity. Morton's claim that “the world has ended” does not refer to the physical destruction of the Earth, but to the collapse of the concepts of “world” and “nature” as stable backgrounds for human existence. Human beings are thereby forced into an ethical condition of weakness and “lameness” (Morton 2013, pp. 1–2). Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* extends this line of thought to one of the most underestimated forms of matter. He proposes “geophilia” to describe the ontological intimacy between stones and human beings, and uses “deep time” to set off the transience of human history (Cohen 2015, pp. 19;21).

It is worth noting that this turn is not isolated from religious and theological discourse. *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms* (2017), edited by Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein, brings together dialogues between theologians and new materialist theorists. It reflects on the long-standing “materiaphobia” within the Abrahamic traditions and explores the possibility of a “Christian materialism” (Keller and Rubenstein 2017, p. 5). This suggests that the path toward a post-Christian ecological imagination need not necessarily bypass religious traditions. Yet these resources have a structural inadequacy as tools when they confront the narrative structure of Christianity. New materialism is a form of “flat ontology”: its conceptual vocabulary presupposes a relational network that is ontologically “already equal”. It has no formal concept of “creation” as gift, no affective gravity of “fall” as rupture, and no narrative rhythm of “redemption” as return. It can deconstruct these concepts, but it cannot inherit them. Stewardship ethics is so deeply rooted precisely because it is embedded within this threefold narrative rhythm. The decentering operations of new materialism alone cannot replace the affective force provided by that narrative. What the ecological crisis requires is not only cognitive decentering, but also affective bearing: how can one feel grief of theological magnitude for the loss of nonhuman things? This is a formal problem that new materialism cannot generate from within itself.

On this basis, this study proposes the concept of a post-Christian ecological imagination: it inherits the temporal structure of Christian narrative—creation as gift, fall as rupture, and redemption as return—as well as its affective form, while redistributing agency away from the human and into a larger network of nonhuman life, matter, and time. Its “post-” does not signify negation, but rather a passage through: it has undergone the formal training of Christian narrative, yet no longer places the human being at the ethical center of that narrative. It differs from secular posthumanism in that it still carries the formal gravity and affective rhythm of the creation narrative, and can therefore enter into genuine imaginative contact with theology. It also differs from “crypto-Christian” writing in that it does not yield to any covert claim about the truth of the Incarnation. It uses these forms, but does not affirm their metaphysical referent. It is a mode of writing that preserves form while suspending substantive commitment.

Because this concept will carry substantial analytical weight in what follows, it may be stated as three criteria that must be satisfied simultaneously. First, *formal inheritance*: the text retains the narrative architecture of the Christian creation story—gift, rupture, and return—as a configuration of attention, together with the solemnity and rhythmic weight that this architecture confers. Second, *substantive suspension*: the text declines to affirm the metaphysical referent of that architecture; no Creator is posited, no Incarnation is claimed, and no eschatological guarantee is offered. Third, *non-anthropocentric redistribution*: the gravity thus inherited is reassigned to bearers other than the human, and reassigned at the levels of grammar, temporality, and affect rather than at the level of theme alone. These criteria also mark the concept's boundaries. A text that satisfies the first and the second but not the third is “secular sacred” writing in Lewis's sense, in which sacred experience migrates into art while the human remains its subject. A text that satisfies the second and the third but not the first is secular posthumanism: formally capable of decentering, but affectively too weightless to bear ecological grief. A text that satisfies the first and the third but not the second is theology, ecological theology included, and its writing will therefore remain governed by the generic constraints traced in Section 2. Only the simultaneous satisfaction of all three yields the formal position this study calls post-Christian, and it is by these criteria, rather than by modernist experimentation as such, that Woolf's late novels are identified as its exemplary case.

The validity of this concept must be tested through concrete literary cases. As Terry Eagleton shows in *Culture and the Death of God*, post-Christian attempts to fill the vacuum left by faith through “natural supernaturalism,” and to reconstruct nature from an exploited object into a vital subject, cannot be sustained if they remain at the level of “anaemic concepts”. Only “the adventure of poetry, not the closure of philosophy,” can “most truly reflect the human condition”: “It is thus the adventure of poetry, not the closure of philosophy, that most truly reflects the human condition” (Eagleton 2014, p. 97). Such an effort must therefore be transformed into “palpable form” within literary form. This demand for formalization is not accidental: only form can inherit the narrative rhythm of “creation–fall–redemption” as a configuration of attention while suspending its metaphysical referent. Only form can enact decentering through the displacement of grammar, rhythm, and perspective, rather than merely arguing for decentering. The latter inevitably falls into the pragmatic paradox of using a human subject to speak the decentering of the human.

This study argues that Virginia Woolf's four novels, written between 1927 and 1941, offer the most powerful literary exemplification of this imagination. To establish this claim, it is necessary to engage simultaneously with two bodies of scholarship that have developed independently but have not yet entered into sufficient dialogue. The first is the “spiritual turn” in Woolf studies over the past decade or more, which has systematically revealed the complex and profound formal inheritance linking Woolf to Christian culture, but has not connected this inheritance to the imaginative reconstruction demanded by ecological crisis. The second is the gradually maturing field of Woolfian ecocriticism, which has shown Woolf's formal engagement with the nonhuman world, but has not asked within what theological-literary formal genealogy this engagement acquires its historical gravity. This study is situated precisely at the intersection of these two lines of inquiry.

Mainstream literary history has long situated Woolf within the Bloomsbury lineage of “radical agnosticism,” taking as its classic evidence Woolf's famous response to T. S. Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism in 1927: “A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is. I mean, there's something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God” (Woolf 1975a: pp. 457-58). Yet the secularization thesis has been widely reconsidered, and the “spiritual turn” represents the result of this reconsideration within Woolf studies. In *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (2010), Pericles Lewis offers the important diagnosis of the “secular sacred,” arguing that modernists, including Woolf, transformed the novel itself into a site where readers could encounter sacred experience outside institutional religion. Anthony Domestico further observes that “modernism was the kind of literature that could be written—that had to be written—in a world emptied of God.....even committed atheists such as Woolf, looked to art to provide the ritualistic, aesthetic, and even spiritual values that religion had offered in the past” (Lewis 2010, p. 39). Christopher J. Knight, in turn, characterizes this relationship as “vexed”: it “register[s] itself neither as an affirmation nor a negation, but rather as a vexation” (Knight 2007, p. 43). This vexed structure of neither affirmation nor negation is precisely where the semantic center of gravity of the “post-Christian” lies.

The spiritual turn has concretized this “vexed” relation in two directions. In terms of formal inheritance, Stephanie Paulsell's *Religion Around Virginia Woolf* (2019) systematically challenges the traditional image of

Woolf as a purely secular writer. Paulsell argues that throughout her life Woolf used literary experimentation to assume functions once performed by religion: interpreting life, offering consolation, and sustaining community. The collective gaze prompted by the airplane crossing the sky in *Mrs Dalloway* and the spiritual illuminations of the six voices in *The Waves* are cases in point (Paulsell 2019, p. 8). Kristina K. Groover's edited volume *Religion, Secularism, and the Spiritual Paths of Virginia Woolf* (2019) approaches Woolf from multiple perspectives, including feminist theology, Quaker mysticism, the Victorian crisis of faith, and urban pilgrimage. It shows how Woolf's writing crosses the rigid oppositions between the sacred and the secular, faith and reason. Suzanne Hobson, in *Angels of Modernism* (2011), suggests that the repeated use by Woolf and other modernist writers of such "figural residues" as angels, apparitions, and presence is not a merely decorative metaphor, but a formal strategy through which post-Christian writing negotiates the sacred (Hobson 2011, p. 9).

In terms of genealogical reconstruction, Jane de Gay's *Virginia Woolf and Christian Culture* (2018) powerfully demonstrates that the juxtaposition of Mrs Ramsay with the Virgin Mary, as well as the formal echo between the darkness of the sixth to the ninth hours in "Time Passes" in *To the Lighthouse* and Christ's words "It is finished" are deliberate "formal choices" (de Gay 2018, p. 202). At the level of family genealogy, Woolf's own upbringing provides a paradigmatic case of the negative internalization of Christianity.⁷ De Gay and Paulsell both point out that, although Woolf rejected the doctrinal content of her evangelical Clapham Sect ancestry and its complicity with imperialism, she inherited its spirit of devotion to vocation and transformed it into an absolute commitment to writing. In *Three Guineas*, she even appropriates evangelical rhetoric concerning spiritual "chastity" and "poverty" in order to resist patriarchal assimilation. J. Ashley Foster's discussion of *Between the Acts* reveals that Woolf deeply internalized the Quaker "Inner Light," the ethic of the interconnectedness of all things, and pacifism. The "white light of truth" that represents a "work of genius" in *A Room of One's Own* resonates deeply with the Quaker tradition; the ten-minute scene of collective silence in *Between the Acts* can be read as a spontaneous silent Meeting for Worship (Foster 2014, p. 64).⁸

A more macro-level perspective situates the above scholarship within the conceptual structure of the secular imaginary. Drawing on Charles Taylor's framework in *A Secular Age*, David Sherman argues that, in the secular age, belief does not disappear but is transformed into an "option"; the logic of secularism must define itself through the very religion it rejects. The recurrent motif of "vicarious belief" in Woolf's fiction—where upper-class secularists project belief onto lower-class laborers or transgressive subjects—exposes the class character of belief within the process of secularization (Sherman 2016, p. 724).⁹ This perspective resonates with the methodology advocated in Susan M. Felch's edited volume *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Religion*: readings of modernist texts must remain alert to the hegemonic tendencies of secularization narratives themselves, and should attend to the ways in which embodied practices, rituals, affects, and forms of worship from religious traditions permeate ostensibly secular literary forms (Felch 2016, p. 15).

By this point, the spiritual turn has shown, from multiple dimensions—family genealogy, formal inheritance, and the paradoxical structure of the secular imaginary—that Woolf's relation to Christian culture is a complex entanglement that is formally residual yet substantively suspended. This is precisely the semantic center of the concept of the "post-Christian." Yet it is not enough simply to argue that Woolf "never fully escaped Christian forms" in order to establish her as a paradigmatic case. A further question must be asked: how are these formal residues redistributed, in her writing, onto the nonhuman world? It is at the frontier of this question that Woolf's late writing offers, on three levels, the most suitable conditions for moving the hypothesis into close textual analysis. First, at the level of family and cultural formation, the negative internalization of Christianity—a spiritual structure in which one no longer believes, yet remains shaped by Christian forms—made Woolf more sensitive than almost any of her contemporaries to both the possibilities and the burdens of formal residue.¹⁰ Second, at the level of formal experimentation, beginning with *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf systematically dismantled the realist form organized around the human as narrative center. The "moments of being" as moments in which the sense of subjectivity is traversed by an "other" beyond the self, are themselves an ontological experiment in passivity; their formal mechanism is inherently open to nonhuman subjects. Third, at the level of cosmological scale, the ten years of "Time Passes" the movement in *The Waves* from sunrise to sunset, and the arc in *Between the Acts* from prehistoric life to the shadow of modern war all show that the later Woolf became, the more insistently she placed human stories within temporal frameworks "far longer than the human." This is

precisely what Dipesh Chakrabarty, in *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021), calls a “planetary perspective.” To translate these three conditions into an operational mode of textual analysis, however, the theological-literary genealogy provided by the spiritual turn is not sufficient on its own. It must also be supplemented by the independent trajectory of Woolfian ecocriticism.

The ecocritical turn in Woolf studies began to mature around 2010 and has developed into a line of scholarship that runs parallel to the spiritual turn, though the two have rarely entered into sustained dialogue. Already in her youth (1903), Woolf displayed a profound receptivity to the life of nature: “We have become absorbed by the spirit of Nature... If you lie on the earth somewhere you hear a sound like a vast breath, as though it were the very inspiration of earth herself, & all the living” (Woolf 1990, p. 203). Christina Alt’s *Virginia Woolf and the Study of Nature* provides one of the most important historical and methodological foundations for reading Woolf from an ecological perspective today. Alt argues that Woolf was well acquainted with the paradigmatic shifts in the life sciences from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, and that she directly appropriated four scientific methods—taxonomy, laboratory biology, animal ethology, and ecology—as metaphors for literary creation and social critique. At the same time, Alt cautiously reminds us that Woolf’s admiration for the agricultural entomologist Eleanor Ormerod reflects an early twentieth-century ecology concerned with the scientific control of nature by human beings, rather than environmentalism in the contemporary sense (Alt 2010, p. 144).¹¹

Woolf’s own literary criticism already displays an ecocritical mode of reading. In her discussion of Chaucer, she praises a form of nature that is “uncompromising” and “untamed,” marked by “the hardness and the freshness of an actual presence.” What she values is precisely Chaucer’s refusal to make nature “a looking-glass for happy faces, or confessor of unhappy souls”; nature “was herself” (Woolf 2002, p. 13). She also praises Hardy as “a minute and skilled observer of Nature,” one who knows that rain falls differently on roots and arable land, and that wind sounds differently as it passes through the branches of different trees. More importantly, Hardy apprehends nature “as a force,” sensing in it “a spirit that can sympathize or mock or remain the indifferent spectator of human fortunes” (Woolf 1960, p. 223). These critical judgments are not merely expressions of literary taste; they anticipate the horizontal rather than hierarchical relations that would later structure Woolf’s own fiction.

In “Writing the Real: Virginia Woolf and an Ecology of Language”, L. Elizabeth Waller argues that Woolf develops an “ecological dialogue” that treats the human and the nonhuman on equal terms, and that she writes the “earth-text” through a distinctive “ecology of language” (Waller 2000, p. 137).¹² Bonnie Kime Scott’s *In the Hollow of the Wave: Virginia Woolf and Modernist Uses of Nature* (2012), the most systematic monograph along this line of inquiry, situates Woolf’s nature writing within the broader context of modernist uses of nature, and likewise operates largely within an ecofeminist and material ecocritical framework.

Leanna Lostoski’s “‘Imaginations of the Strangest Kind’: The Vital Materialism of Virginia Woolf” (2016) extends the category of the “nonhuman” from organic nature to inorganic matter and human-made objects. By introducing Bennett’s vital materialism, Lostoski shows that Woolf’s fiction can be read as a mode of writing that breaks down the boundary between life and matter. Derek Ryan’s *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory* (2013), in turn, systematically connects Woolf’s material writing with contemporary theorists of the material turn, including Deleuze and Karen Barad. This line of inquiry genuinely reaches the level of material ontology at which dialogue with the theological concept of “creation” becomes possible.

Peter Adkins’s doctoral dissertation, *Modernist Anthropocene Aesthetics*, submitted to the University of Kent in 2019, provides the conceptual foundation for the later edited volume *Virginia Woolf and the Anthropocene* (2024). Adkins argues that the early twentieth century was crucial not only in terms of environmental history, but also in the conceptualization of “planetary life” (Adkins 2024, p. 3). He focuses in particular on the literary representation of climate change in Orlando, arguing that Woolf thereby establishes a “material climatic ontology.” He also analyzes the radical aesthetics and ethics of “extinction” in late works such as *Between the Acts* (p. 20). Marlene Dirschauer’s *Modernist Waterscapes: Water, Imagination and Materiality in the Works of Virginia Woolf* approaches Woolf through the motif and materiality of water, showing how it “oscillates so productively between the metaphorical and the real, between imagination and materiality” (Dirschauer 2023, p. 2). Another doctoral dissertation, *Modernism on the Edge of the Anthropocene: Ecological Imaginaries in Forster, West, Warner, Woolf, and Eliot*, focuses on five British modernist writers of the interwar period and argues

that they responded, through aesthetic innovation, to the beginnings of early twentieth-century anthropogenic climate change. Its second chapter, which reads the “interludes” of *The Waves* in terms of “deep temporality” directly informs the present study. It shows that Woolf’s formal experimentation was already moving across multiple and deep geological temporalities, thereby forming an interdisciplinary resonance with Chakrabarty’s “planetary perspective”.

These formal genealogies acquire their historical density only when situated within the specific environmental, cultural, and political conditions of interwar Britain—a dimension that formalist readings of Woolf, including at times this study’s own, risk leaving implicit. The late 1920s and the 1930s in England were decades of intense contestation over the meaning of landscape. Prolonged agricultural depression, suburban expansion along new arterial roads, rural electrification, and the growth of motor tourism generated a preservationist politics whose institutional expression was the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, founded in 1926, and whose cultural expression David Matless has analysed as a contest between competing versions of landscape and Englishness, at once modernist-planning and organicist-nostalgic (Matless 1998, pp. 25–30). Raymond Williams’s account of the country-house tradition supplies the indispensable caution here: English writing about rural continuity has repeatedly converted the social relations of landed property into an image of timeless nature, so that the appearance of “the land itself” in a text is rarely innocent of class (Williams 1973, pp. 9–12). Woolf wrote her late fiction from within precisely this formation. Monk’s House at Rodmell placed her in the flood-prone Ouse valley as a member of the metropolitan intelligentsia acquiring rural property, and the pageant of *Between the Acts* is modelled on a genuinely popular interwar form—the village historical pageant—that was, in the same decade, being mobilized for explicitly nationalist ends. Jed Esty has described this broader turn in late modernism as an “anthropological” contraction, in which imperial decline redirected modernist energy toward the recovery of national-cultural wholeness (Esty 2004, pp. 2–8). Anna Snaith’s work on Woolf’s negotiation of public and private, and on the imperial coordinates of her writing, similarly resists any reading that would treat Woolf’s landscapes as politically weightless (Snaith 2000, pp. 1–5).

This context bears upon the present argument in two directions. On the one hand, it supplies the historical pressure that makes Woolf’s formal experiments legible as something other than aesthetic play: the aircraft over Pointz Hall, the mud and ferns beneath it, and the “orts, scraps and fragments” of the pageant belong to a moment in which rearmament, rural decline, and the approach of a second European war were experienced simultaneously, and in which the question of what would survive the human was not speculative. On the other hand, it constrains the claims that can responsibly be made. Woolf’s access to the durational rhythms of downland and river was materially underwritten by property, leisure, and the labour of others—a dependency that *Flush* registers with unusual candour in the figure of the maid Wilson, and that “Time Passes” registers in Mrs McNab. Recognizing this does not dissolve the formal argument, but it does specify its scope: what Woolf makes available is a grammar for decentering the human, not a politics of ecological justice, and the two must not be conflated. Rob Nixon’s account of the “slow violence” borne disproportionately by the poor, and Jason W. Moore’s insistence that the epoch be periodized as a Capitalocene organized by capital’s appropriation of cheap nature rather than as an undifferentiated Anthropocene, name precisely what a formal analysis of this kind cannot by itself deliver (Nixon 2011, pp. 2–3; Moore 2015, pp. 169–73). The argument that follows is therefore offered as a contribution to the formal conditions of non-anthropocentric imagination, not as a substitute for the distributive and political analysis that must accompany it.

What these ecocritical genealogies have in common is that they read Woolf as a “secular” modernist, treating her formal engagement with the nonhuman world separately from the mystical layer that permeates her writing. Yet if one is to argue that Woolf offers a post-Christian, rather than purely secular, ecological imagination, it is necessary to confront the mystical dimension that has too often been too readily subsumed under “atheism” or “aestheticized religion”.

In “Varieties of Mystical Experience in the Writings of Virginia Woolf” Julie Kane points out that Woolf maintained a long-standing ambivalence toward her own mystical experiences. Before writing *The Waves*, Woolf showed “utter contempt” for contemporary Theosophists and mystics, such as Annie Besant. Yet her own novels—including *The Voyage Out*, *Mrs Dalloway*, and *To the Lighthouse*—are filled with experiences typically associated with mysticism, such as telepathy, auras, astral travel, and synaesthesia. If one were to compile a catalogue of such phenomena, “the list would be virtually indistinguishable from the topics of interest to the

Theosophists and spiritualists of her day” (Kane 1995, p. 328). Woolf named three foundational childhood experiences—the loss of self, fusion with a larger whole, and moments of apprehending “reality”—as “moments of being.” In doing so, she “managed to evade the negative connotations of ‘mysticism’ by terming them ‘moments of being’ rather than ‘mystical experiences’” (p. 332).

As Julie Kane argues, the crucial turning point occurred in the 1930s: “In late 1930 the mystical poet W. B. Yeats and the mystical physicist James Jeans seem to have helped Woolf to ‘authorize’ and integrate the mystical side of her nature.” Yeats’s fully developed mystical philosophy inspired in Woolf both awe and resonance. Sir James Jeans’s claim that the universe is “more like a mind than a machine”—indeed, “more like a great thought”—gave her intuitive perceptions the support of cutting-edge science. “Virginia Woolf did not ‘convert’ to a mystical worldview from a position of skepticism, but rather ceased to deny the authenticity of experiences and perceptions which often paralleled contemporary Theosophical teachings” (Kane 1995, p. 347). In later works such as *The Waves* and *The Years*, she began to engage more seriously with large-scale themes such as the immortality of the soul and reincarnation. This chronology closely overlaps with the period on which this study focuses, 1927–1941, and thus provides concrete rather than merely symbolic evidence. Woolf’s late writing is precisely the experimental field in which the “nonhuman turn” traced by ecocriticism and the “formal residue” traced by the spiritual turn (after Woolf’s own act of self-authorization around 1930) are integrated into a single formal grammar. This is why the argument for a post-Christian ecological imagination finds its strongest exemplification in Woolf’s late texts, rather than in her oeuvre as a whole.

On the basis of the cumulative evidence provided by these two independently developed lines of scholarship, this study reads Woolf neither as a Christian nor as a purely secular posthumanist, but situates her in a distinctive position: she inherits the formal gravity of Christian narrative—its temporal structure, affective rhythm, and grammar of “presence” and “reality”—while refusing to place the human being at the center. This is the same paradox identified in scholarship on religious belief in Mrs Dalloway: Woolf’s critique of secularism, in some sense, remains open to Christian beliefs and values. This study further reads such “openness” to Christian narrative as a formal inheritance rather than a substantive return. It then translates the concrete operation of this formal inheritance in her late writing into a formal deployment of ecological ethics: the configuration of attention proper to Christian narrative (“creation–fall–redemption”) is redistributed onto the nonhuman world.

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE AND THE WAVES: GRAMMATICAL DEMOTION, COSMIC RHYTHM, AND THE FORMAL ENACTMENT OF APOPHATIC THEOLOGY

The following discussion turns to Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, examining how she deploys her non-anthropocentric ethics and ecological imagination at the level of novelistic grammar and structure, rather than merely at the thematic level. What Woolf undertakes is not simply “foregrounding the nonhuman”, but rather “grammatically demoting the human”. The former is an operation at the level of content: any work that takes landscapes, animals, or the sea as its subject matter may be said to do something similar. The latter is far rarer and far more radical. It requires narrative syntax itself—the distribution of subjects, the placement of verbs, the hierarchy of clauses, the use of brackets, and the ontological weight of embedded structures—to perform the work of decentering the human in every line. Bonnie Kime Scott has already observed that “Time Passes” brings nonhuman forces into the foreground (Scott 2012, p. 209), but her discussion remains at the former level. This section seeks to push the analysis toward the latter.

The ‘Time Passes’ section at the center of *To the Lighthouse* is one of the most radical formal experiments in modernist literature. In fewer than eighteen pages it traverses roughly a decade (during which the First World War takes place), and its central ‘character’ is not any human being but rather an ‘empty house,’ along with such impersonal forces as wind, air, rust, damp, and salt. The deaths of three members of the Ramsay family—Mrs Ramsay, Prue, and Andrew—are reported in three brief sentences enclosed in brackets []. This is by no means a simple “interpolation”; the brackets themselves, together with the syntactic choices made within them, jointly perform an ontological operation.

The most familiar of the three is Mrs Ramsay's death, which reads in the original as follows: "[Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty.]" (Woolf 1989, p. 128) This is followed by Prue's death: "[Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth, which was indeed a tragedy, people said, everything, they said, had promised so well.]" (p. 132) And then Andrew's: "[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous.]" (p. 133) These three passages are not merely set within brackets—their very grammar constitutes a grammar of demotion. Mrs Ramsay's death is handled as a participial absolute (having died rather suddenly the night before), subordinated to the main clause "Mr. Ramsay stretched his arms out"; the grammatical center of gravity of the narration falls on the physical fact that "his arms... remained empty", rather than on the death itself. In other words, the death—which in the traditional "subject–event–evaluation" rhythm demanded by creation narrative should have occupied the central position—is, in Woolf's hands, compressed into a participial clause and rendered as the qualifying background to another action. Prue's death is embedded in the polyphony of indirect speech—the twofold repetition of people said and they said turns the death into the background sound of what people say, rather than into a foregrounded event. The narrative stance retreats from announcement to hearsay; the weight of death is dispersed into a subject-less social white noise. Andrew's death is yet more extreme: the subject that triggers the death is nonhuman matter—"A shell exploded"; Andrew himself is merely one among the twenty or thirty young men blown up in France, entering the sentence through the prepositional phrase among them; his death is further compressed into a relative clause, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous. All three deaths are pushed from the subject position into subordinate clauses, adverbs, passive constructions, or external triggers.

This reading must, however, be defended against three established and powerful alternatives, since the brackets of "Time Passes" are among the most heavily interpreted devices in modernist criticism. Erich Auerbach's classic account reads Woolf's syntax as the culmination of a European turn toward the multipersonal representation of consciousness, in which external event is subordinated because reality has migrated inward, into the dispersed minds through which it is refracted (Auerbach 2003, pp. 530–36). Ann Banfield, by contrast, derives the same syntactic effects from an epistemological source: drawing on Russell's distinction between sensibilia and sense-data, she reads Woolf's empty rooms and unobserved objects as the novelistic realization of the "unoccupied perspective," the philosophical thought-experiment of a world perceived by no one (Banfield 2000, pp. 66–72). Gillian Beer, in a third register, situates the section within the elegiac and scientific inheritances of Woolf's Victorian formation, in which Leslie Stephen's agnosticism and post-Darwinian time supply the frame for a mourning that has lost its consolatory apparatus (Beer 1996, pp. 29–37). In one respect each of these accounts is more economical than a theological reading: none requires any reference to Genesis. Yet none of them explains why the section retains the solemnity of the very form it dismantles. Auerbach's inward migration accounts for the demotion of event but not for the liturgical cadence in which that demotion is delivered; Banfield's unoccupied perspective accounts for the absence of an observer but not for the grief that the absence continues to carry; Beer's post-Darwinian elegy accounts for the loss of consolation but treats the residual Christian form as a historical remainder rather than as an active formal resource. The reading proposed here is accordingly not a rival to these accounts but a supplement to them, addressed to a question they do not pose: what happens to the affective architecture of a creation narrative when its subject is withdrawn and its rhythm is kept.

In the traditional creation narrative—and in the implicit logic of the stewardship paradigm—the human being is the "climax of creation", the subject of "dominion" and the central stage of the ethical drama. "Time Passes" performs a structural operation: it demotes the human to a footnote to material processes. To foreground the nonhuman is an operation of content; to demote the human is an operation of form.

This operation stands in particularly sharp formal contrast to the first chapter of Genesis. The grammatical rhythm of the creation narrative may be summarized as a progressive chain: God speaks—"Let there be light"; things come into being—"and there was light"; God evaluates—"God saw that the light was good"; the human appears as the culmination—"God created humankind in his own image"; and the command of "dominion" is issued—"have dominion over the earth." Each step prepares the position of the human. The trajectory of the subject moves from the divine subject, God, through created beings, creatures, to the human, adam, where it comes to rest and receives the legitimacy of ethical agency. "Time Passes", by contrast, works in reverse. Its

narrative chain may be read as follows: the house as container; the entrance of the wind—"Let the wind blow; let the poppy seed itself and the carnation mate with the cabbage" (p. 138); the decay of doors and windows; the deaths of certain characters as bracketed events; and Mrs McNab's broom as the only continuous form of human labor. Mrs McNab—a working-class old woman rather than the "reflective subject" favored by traditional humanist poetics—is the only human figure who continues to act within the narrative frame of this section. This in itself constitutes a quiet irony directed at the assumption of "the human as a special ethical agent". In the form of the creation narrative, the human is the "namer", Adam naming the animals. In "Time Passes", the human is the "cleaner" and the rhythm of cleaning is embedded within the longer rhythms of wind, mold, and damp.

It can thus be seen that the middle section of *To the Lighthouse* performs a formal inversion of the first chapter of *Genesis*. The chain structure remains; the relay of subjects remains. Yet the endpoint of that relay is not the human enthroned, but a cleaner bending down to scrub the floor. Even she, however, does not constitute the center. She is instead absorbed into a broader field of action composed of the rhythms of wind, mold, and damp. This inversion is neither mockery nor a rejection of religion. It is, rather, a redistribution at the level of form. The solemn rhythm of the creation narrative is retained, but the attention that would otherwise converge on the human subject is redistributed toward the nonhuman world and subaltern labor.

In "The Lighthouse", Lily Briscoe returns to the house and completes the painting that has remained unfinished for ten years. The house itself undergoes a kind of "resurrection": Mrs McNab and Mrs Bast clean it, the furniture is restored to its place, and the floors are waxed again. This is a material form of "return." Lily's final stroke—"It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision" (p. 209)—formally echoes Christ's words on the cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30 NIV), a formal resonance that Jane de Gay has precisely identified. Yet this does not place the human back at the center. Lily's "vision" is an impersonal visual achievement: not an act of self-discovery, not a redemption of community, but a stroke of paint laid upon the canvas. The house is restored, but Mrs Ramsay is not resurrected; grief is acknowledged, but not dissolved. This precisely describes the formal feature of a post-Christian ecological imagination: it preserves the affective rhythm of redemption without restoring the human-centered narrative position. In other words, the solemn and liberating tone carried by the Christian "It is finished" is absorbed into the affective rhythm of Woolf's fiction. Yet the bearer of "accomplishment" is no longer a Christ-like mediating person, but a stroke of paint, a restored house, and the labor of a cleaner.

A further tension, often overlooked by traditional readings, should be added here. Critics such as Christine Froula and Julia Briggs read "Time Passes" as an "elegy" emphasizing the emptiness of the world, the loss of meaning, and the foreshadowing of death (Froula 2004, pp. 152–53; Briggs 2005, p. 176). This reading captures one aspect of the section's rhythm, but it overlooks an evident countervailing fact: nonhuman life—thistles, swallows, butterflies, green decay, poppies, and artichokes—is invading the house, bringing beauty, sound, color, and continuity: "The whole room was green". This is not despair, but rather a sense that "life wants to live": an ordinary, nonhuman form of life that traditional humanism has failed to recognize. At the same time, Woolf rejects the pathetic fallacy: nature is "perfectly indifferent" and "the mirror was broken" (p. 134). Nature does not serve human beings, nor does it mirror human emotions. It exists independently; it participates in the same events and stimuli as human beings, yet retains its own rhythm. Mrs McNab's "half-heard melody" becomes a metaphor for this paradox: the simultaneity of fragmentation and coherence, and a kinship within difference. In short, the grief of "Time Passes" is not grief over the loss of the world, but grief over the loss of anthropocentric belief. Within that grief, the world itself continues to emerge, proliferate, and unfold its colors.

It is reasonable to read "Time Passes" as an instance of "vibrant matter" in Bennett's sense: wind, damp, and rust are all endowed with a quasi-agency, while Mrs McNab's broom and the wooden structure of the house appear as "things that act". What Bennett's vital materialism lacks, however, is precisely the form of grief. Her materialism can give us thing-power, but it cannot give us "his arms . . . remained empty" (p. 128). That is, Bennett's materialism cannot explain how grief can still be borne as grief without returning to a human-centered framework. Woolf's materialism, if it may be called that, is a materialism marked by a grammar of mourning. In a way that propositional argument cannot achieve, Woolf turns "non-anthropocentric creation" into a formal event that can be experienced in reading. She is not arguing for a position; she is making that position bear upon the reader as syntactic weight.

The Waves is composed of nine interludes alternating with nine episodes. The interludes are italicized, third-person “shore–sun” sketches, moving from dawn—“The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it...” (Woolf 2006, p. 3)—to the blazing noon sun, and finally to the breaking of the waves on the shore at sunset. The episodes, by contrast, consist of the interior monologues of six characters: Bernard, Susan, Rhoda, Neville, Jinny, and Louis.

The formal function of the interludes is not decorative, but ontological. Carrie Rohman and Derek Ryan point out that the interludes present “nonhuman rhythms” or “cosmic forces”, a rhythm that exceeds human knowledge and perception (Ryan 2015, p. 148; Rohman 2011, p. 14). Drawing on Woolf’s own wording in her 1928 diary, Scott describes the novel as being permeated by a nonhuman temporality that “permeates every atom”. Scholars have generally recognized that *The Waves* is not a novel centered on human beings and supplemented by descriptions of nature; rather, it is a novel framed by cosmic rhythm, within which human stories are embedded. The interludes are not the background to the episodes; rather, the episodes are parentheticals between the interludes.

The entire lives of the six characters—childhood, youth, the death of Percival, middle-aged disillusionment, and retrospective old age—are compressed into the dawn-to-dark frame of the sun’s movement across a single day. In other words, the whole span of human life is made equivalent to a single day in the life of the sun. This textualizes what Christina Alt, in her chapter “Virginia Woolf and Anticipations of the Anthropocene” in Adkins’s edited volume *Virginia Woolf and the Anthropocene*, identifies as Woolf’s “deep-time sensibility”: human stories are juxtaposed with geological and cosmological time, and the human scale does not prevail (Alt 2024, p. 48).

When a novel is framed by cosmic rhythm and compresses the entirety of human life into a single day, how does it formally redistribute the ownership of “creation”? The answer is given most radically at the end of the novel. The ninth episode consists of Bernard’s long monologue, which occupies roughly one fifth of the entire novel. In the final pages, Bernard undergoes a dissolution of the self: “I am not one person; I am many people”; “There is no division between me and them. As I talked I felt, ‘I am you’” (p. 205;214). He then hurls himself against “Death” in the penultimate line of the novel: “Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!” (p. 220). The novel then ends with a single italicized line: “The waves broke on the shore” (p. 220).

This formal choice is crucial. Bernard’s heroic cry is the final echo of humanist rhetoric: self-assertion, defiance, and apostrophe to death. It mobilizes one of the oldest rhetorical patterns: the human being as a willing subject standing against the universe. Yet the immediately following sentence, “The waves broke on the shore,” surrounds, covers, and absorbs this cry through the most minimal syntax. The waves do not answer, affirm, or refute; they simply continue.

This is the formal moment in Woolf that comes closest to apophatic theology. The central gesture of apophatic theology is to allow “silence” and “unsaying” to bear the deepest referential weight after all human speech has been exhausted. The way to gesture toward the transcendent is not through more speech, but through the withdrawal of speech. Bernard’s final self-hurling is a cataphatic utterance: it affirms the subject, affirms the will, and affirms resistance. The final line, by contrast, performs an apophatic negation. It does not refute Bernard; rather, it allows his cry to find its limit within the longer rhythm of the cosmos. What matters is that the waves do not defeat Bernard, nor do they mock him. They are simply longer. This “longer” rhythm is the most radical response.

To call this an “apophatic moment” is more than a loose typological gesture. The apophatic tradition descending from Pseudo-Dionysius’s *Mystical Theology* operates through a precisely structured grammatical sequence: cataphatic predication (“God is good, wise, powerful”) is first negated (“God is not-good, not-wise, not-powerful”), and the negation is itself superseded by a third, hyperphatic gesture in which the divine is recognized as beyond both affirmation and denial (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, pp. 135-37). The point is not silence in any quietist sense; it is the rigorous discipline of allowing speech to exhaust itself in such a way that what exceeds speech is registered as the form of speech’s failure. William Franke’s *A Philosophy of the Unsayable* (2014)

extends this insight beyond strictly theological discourse, arguing that apophysis persists across mystical theology, negative philosophy, and literary modernism as a “family resemblance” rather than a doctrinal lineage (Franke 2014, pp. 4-7). It is precisely this generalizable structure that allows a non-doctrinal text to perform an apophatic gesture without thereby becoming theology in disguise. The closing sequence of *The Waves* enacts the Dionysian three-step in the novel’s grammar. Bernard’s apostrophe—“Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, Death!”—is the cataphatic phase, mobilizing the full vocabulary of selfhood, will, and human resistance. The final italicized sentence, “The waves broke on the shore” performs the apophatic negation: it does not refute Bernard, but lets the predicates of his sentence dissolve into a syntactically minimal, subjectless rhythm. What corresponds to hyperphasis is not articulated as another sentence but as the interval between Bernard’s cry and the wave-line—the typographic and rhythmic gap in which the reader registers that what exceeds Bernard’s speech is not a higher utterance but a longer duration. Yet here Woolf’s apophysis decisively departs from its theological inheritance. In Pseudo-Dionysius, what speech fails to capture is the hyperousios, God beyond being; in Woolf, what speech fails to capture is the more-than-human duration of the material world. The structural operation is preserved; its referent is redistributed. This is precisely what makes the moment “post-Christian” rather than “crypto-Christian”: the discipline of unsaying remains, but what unsaying gestures toward is no longer the One above being but the rhythm of waves, sun, and shore.

This convergence—preservation of structural form, redistribution of referent—is precisely the operation that brings Catherine Keller’s apophatic ecology into formal resonance with *The Waves*. In *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (2014), Keller explicitly fuses the apophatic tradition with a relational cosmology, arguing that the disciplines of “unknowing” developed by mystical theology become, in the planetary present, an ethic of entangled non-mastery (Keller 2014, pp. 6-7). Her earlier *Face of the Deep* had already moved the formal center of the creation narrative away from the Word: God does not speak above tehom; God vibrates within tehom. *The Waves* enacts the same displacement at the level of novelistic syntax. The repeated sentence of the interludes, “The waves broke on the shore” is not decorative description; it is the formal counterpart of tehom within the grammar of the novel. When Bernard’s monologue is finally encircled by this sentence, human speech meets its limit not in a higher speech but in the longer rhythm of the deep. The stories, metaphors, and propositions through which Bernard has spent his life constructing meaning no longer occupy the formal center of the creation narrative; the recurrence of the waves does. It is telling that Keller herself, when searching within theology for an imaginative form capable of bearing non-anthropocentric creation, draws extensively on Joyce, Melville, and Whitehead. Yet what Keller borrows from these writers operates chiefly at the level of metaphor and image; what *The Waves* offers is the apophatic gesture embedded in narrative grammar itself—at the level of sentence rhythm, the run-on of italicized interlude into roman-type episode, and the spatial relation between Bernard’s last cry and the wave-line that surrounds it. Woolf had already produced this form in 1931, not as a theological proposition but as a novelistic structure.

An obvious objection presents itself at this point. Holly Henry has demonstrated in detail that Woolf’s cosmic imagery derives substantially from the popular astronomy of James Jeans and Arthur Eddington, whose accounts of stellar scale and cosmic indifference Woolf read closely and recorded in her diaries; on this account the interludes require no theological genealogy whatever, and their “apophysis” is simply the astronomical sublime rendered in prose (Henry 2003, pp. 1–10). Gillian Beer’s essays on Woolf and prehistory make a parallel case from the side of geology and evolutionary time (Beer 1996, pp. 6–13). These are strong readings, and this study does not contest their evidentiary basis; the scientific provenance of Woolf’s cosmic imagery is not in doubt. What the scientific genealogy cannot account for is the shape of the ending. Astronomical scale, by itself, produces either terror or indifference; it does not produce the specific three-part movement of assertion, encirclement, and interval that the closing pages enact, nor does it explain why the final line arrives with the cadence of a resolution rather than that of an annihilation. Popular astronomy supplies much of Woolf’s content; the grammar in which that content is disposed was trained elsewhere. The claim advanced here is accordingly a modest one: not that Woolf was writing theology, but that the form in which she arranged her cosmological materials had been schooled by a narrative tradition whose substantive claims she no longer accepted.

To the Lighthouse and *The Waves* carry out this work primarily at the levels of grammar and temporality. Yet human reflective figures—Mrs Ramsay and Bernard—still, in a certain sense, perform the function of “witnesses”. This residual anthropocentric trace means that, between the earlier works under discussion and contemporary variants of Christian stewardship ethics, there remains a structural tension rather than a complete rupture.

FLUSH AND BETWEEN THE ACTS: SENSORY MIGRATION, COLLECTIVE PAG-EANT, AND A NON-ANTHROPOCENTRIC ESCHATOLOGY

This section offers a juxtaposed close reading of *Flush* and *Between the Acts*, arguing that in the middle and late phases of her career Woolf decisively moves beyond the structural anthropocentrism of stewardship ethics through two complementary formal resources: animal subjectivity and collective landscape. The former transfers the “privilege of narrative perception” entirely from the human to nonhuman sensation, thereby effecting a fundamental migration of narrative grammar; the latter makes the assemblage itself the protagonist, constructing a non-anthropocentric eschatology. Together, they establish the imaginative substrate upon which any genuinely non-anthropocentric ecological theology must first be grounded. It should be emphasized at the outset that the key to this argument does not lie in Woolf’s “sympathy for animals” or “concern for the environment”. Such an expansionist reading, which still takes the human as the affective subject, is precisely the logic contained within stewardship ethics itself and therefore the logic that must be surpassed. Rather, the point is that Woolf carries out a more radical ontological operation at the level of form: she allows the animal’s nose and the earth’s cough to become narrative subjects, enabling “creation” to be narrated without presupposing “the human as center.”

Published in 1933, *Flush* (a mock-biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s red cocker spaniel) has long been marginalized in Woolf studies as a minor text. Woolf herself half-mockingly referred to it as a “little book,” a self-deprecating description that further reinforced the scholarly underestimation of its significance. Yet when viewed from the perspective of the post-Christian ecological imagination with which this study is concerned, *Flush* is not a minor text at all. It is, rather, one of the most crucial and radical experiments among Woolf’s formal innovations. It organizes the entire narrative through an animal perceptual modality rather than a human one. At the level of subject matter, it takes “the biography of a dog” as its narrative object. More importantly, however, at the level of form, it makes the dog’s mode of perception the fundamental medium through which the narrative unfolds. The former is something that any animal fable or work of animal literature might accomplish; the latter is a rare and radical experiment in literary history.

Woolf’s *Flush* perceives the world primarily through smell rather than sight. The novel performs this de-centering operation from its opening pages through an intensely material olfactory writing: “The cool globes of dew or rain broke in showers of iridescent spray about his nose; the earth, here hard, here soft, here hot, here cold, stung, teased and tickled the soft pads of his feet. Then what a variety of smells interwoven in subtlest combination thrilled his nostrils...” (Woolf 1976. p. 12). In this opening scene, the world is not an object to be “seen,” but a subjective field to be smelled. Flush’s nose is not an extension of human vision, but an independent organ of agency, one that transforms the “vibrant matter” of smells into the governing rhythm of the narrative. Equally important, the tactile sensations of the paw pads—“hard” “soft” “hot” and “cold”—are interwoven with smell to form a multimodal nonvisual perception. This is precisely the sensory hierarchy that traditional human realist narrative has repressed and that ocularcentrism has obscured.

This amounts to a radical reconstruction of narrative perspective. What is at stake is no longer “the human observing the animal” which reduces the animal to an object of the human gaze, but rather “the animal perceptual modality being lent to the narrative,” with the animal’s mode of perception serving as the fundamental medium through which the text unfolds. This distinction is crucial, because it marks the fundamental boundary between *Flush* and traditional animal literature, from *Black Beauty* to Jack London’s fiction. However sympathetic such works may be, they remain, in essence, stories about animals written by humans for human readers.¹³

In *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory*, Derek Ryan approaches *Flush* through the framework of “the animal question,” situating it within the contexts of Deleuze’s becoming-animal and Donna Haraway’s new materialist concept of companion species. From the standpoint of the narrative position presupposed by stewardship ethics, however, *Flush* performs a theological-political work that Ryan does not fully develop: it transfers

the perceptual privilege of narrative entirely from the human to the dog.¹⁴ The formal logic of *Flush* overturns all of these assumptions. In the novel, what theology might call the “discernment of spirit in all things” takes place in Flush’s nose, without requiring translation into human language or mediation by a human theologian. He senses the emanations of Miss Barrett’s sick body, the “aggressive smell” that accompanies Mr Browning’s entrance, and the despair of the Whitechapel cellar. The dog is not “property” to be cared for by human beings, but an active participant in a perceptual network composed of humans, urban matter, and historical trauma.

The scene of “mutual gaze” in which Flush and Barrett first encounter one another—where each feels, “Here am I , but how different!” (P. 23) —is especially revealing of this formal reconstruction. This scene does not stage a hierarchical relation between master and slave, or owner and pet. Rather, it is a tactile pulsation in the sense of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and an ontological encounter between companion species in Haraway’s sense. *Flush*’s active leap onto the sofa itself manifests his agency as a nonhuman life: he is not merely permitted to enter; he participates on his own initiative in the formation of the relation.

The novel’s most theoretically critical gesture lies in the absolute privilege granted to smell within the text: “Where Mr Browning saw, Flush smelt; where Mr Browning wrote, Flush smelt. ... love is mainly smell; form and colour are smell; music and architecture, law, politics and science, are smell. ... To us [humans], with our poor noses, an attempt to do justice to this complexity in words would have been impossible” (p. 130). The rhetorical force of this passage lies by no means merely in its surface humor or parody. Its deeper purpose is to downgrade, at the ontological level, the hegemony of human language. It makes the linguistic signs in which human beings take pride—and the entire cultural apparatus built upon them, including law, politics, and science—only one special case among the many perceptual modes of the cosmos, rather than the sole measure by which all things are judged and nature is disciplined. This demotion structurally resonates with Derrida’s critique of logocentrism. Yet Woolf does not accomplish this work through philosophical argument. She enacts it by allowing another perceptual modality—smell—to occupy the dominant position in the narrative.

Two objections must be registered before this argument can stand. The first concerns anthropomorphism. Craig Smith has argued that *Flush* is best read not as an achieved representation of canine subjectivity but as a sustained meditation on the impossibility of such representation: the text’s most conspicuous gesture is its own admission that human language cannot do justice to olfactory complexity, and the “dog’s world” it constructs remains, unavoidably, a human artefact (Smith 2002, pp. 348–52). The second concerns genre and tone. *Flush* is a parodic mock-biography, written quickly for a commercial audience between two demanding novels, and its humour is directed at least as much at Victorian biography and at the Barrett household as at ocularcentrism; to extract an ontological programme from a jeu d’esprit risks precisely the over-reading against which Alt’s historiographical caution warns. Both objections are well taken, and neither is fatal. The argument advanced here does not depend on the claim that Woolf achieved access to canine experience—a claim the text itself disavows—but on the weaker and more defensible claim that the narration is organized by a sensory hierarchy that is not the human one, and that this reorganization is carried by syntax rather than asserted as theme. The text’s explicit admission of failure is, indeed, formally productive rather than disabling: in the register of comedy it performs the same structure of exhausted speech that *The Waves* performs in the register of the sublime. As for genre, the parodic mode is what permits the operation in the first place. A solemn treatise on animal interiority could only have restated the problem of human representation; a comic biography can suspend the authority of the human observer without having to argue for that suspension.

Flush is also a profoundly critical social text, and this is precisely the dimension that a simple framework of “animal ethics” or “animal theology” finds difficult to reach. Through the canine perspective, Woolf subtly exposes the multiple hierarchies of class, gender, and race that structure human society. In the novel, the status difference between aristocratic dogs and mongrels—a form of discrimination based purely on genealogy—is juxtaposed with the position of the maid Wilson within the Barrett household. As a lower-class woman, Wilson’s agency and social visibility are likewise structurally constrained. When Flush and Barrett travel together to Italy, the democratic atmosphere “liberates” both human and dog: here, the novel declares that “All dogs were his brothers.” (p. 117) The political implication of this juxtaposition is profound. It reveals the falsity of discrimination as a cultural construction: whether the object of discrimination is an animal, a woman, a servant, or a

foreigner, the underlying logic is the same hierarchical ontology. This ontology is precisely the secularized transformation of the Great Chain of Being, or *scala naturae*, that runs through the Christian tradition from Augustine to Aquinas. It is also the conceptual inheritance that stewardship ethics cannot fully escape, because as long as the position of the “steward” exists, hierarchy persists.

Woolf is not attempting to secure a higher position for animals within the hierarchy, which is precisely the limitation of Linzey’s work. Rather, by allowing animal perception to organize the narrative, she enacts the fictiveness of hierarchy itself. The critique articulated through animal perception and animal encounter possesses a greater imaginative persuasiveness than any direct political argument advanced from a human standpoint, because it does not resist from within the existing discursive order; it refuses the premises of that order from the outset.

Between the Acts undertakes a more thorough ecological reconstruction on the macro-levels of history and cosmology. On a day in June 1939 (on the eve of the full outbreak of the Second World War), an English country house, Pointz Hall, is hosting its annual amateur historical pageant. The villagers perform fragments of English history from the Middle Ages to the Victorian period, and Miss La Trobe is both the director and the author of the performance.

Yet the true protagonist of the novel is neither La Trobe nor any individual “character,” but the assemblage itself. This formal choice marks the most radical rejection of human-centered narrative in Woolf’s late writing. The assemblage of *Between the Acts* is vast and heterogeneous. It includes not only the gentry and villagers in the audience and the fragments of history performed on stage, but also the pond as a prehistoric residue; swallows flying back and forth; the cows that suddenly appear and interrupt the performance with their cries—the novel explicitly states that “the cows took up the burden” (Woolf 1941, p. 140); the military aircraft flying low overhead and casting the shadow of the coming war; the church bells; the lilies in the pond; and the mud and ferns that register prehistoric time.

In *Woolf and the Anthropocene*, Rasheed Tazudeen, in the chapter “Hearing Beyond Extinction,” precisely captures this formal feature. He argues that *Between the Acts* is a text of “hearing beyond extinction”: it incorporates humans, animals, plants, prehistoric time, and the approaching war into the same pageant without hierarchy (Adkins 2024, p. 153). Similarly, Molly Volanth Hall’s discussion of “mud” argues that mud functions in *Between the Acts* as an anti-archival form, marking Woolf’s radical rejection of any anthropocentric monument that seeks “archival permanence”. History is no longer inscribed in stone or documents; rather, it dissolves, proliferates, and returns to the unindexable materiality of mud (Adkins 2024, p. 105).

In traditional Christian eschatology, the absolute center of the drama is always “the final destiny of the human”: heaven, hell, the Last Judgment, and redemption. The end of the entire cosmos is narrativized as a drama in which the human is the protagonist, the recipient, and the telos. Even in contemporary variants such as Jürgen Moltmann’s “cosmic eschatology,” where the fate of creation is taken into account, the narrative gravity remains affectively anchored in human hope.¹⁵ In *Between the Acts*, however, Woolf imagines the “end” as a collective pageant in which all creatures participate. Here, the history of human civilization—the portion staged in the pageant—is only a brief section within the long temporality of the earth, bordered before and after by vast prehistoric geological time, represented by mud, ponds, and ferns, and by the destructive postwar time to come, signaled by the roar of aircraft. Animals, such as cows and swallows, may at any moment intervene as full agents and reshape the performance, while the mechanical roar of warplanes intrudes upon the stage as a violent interruption. If the narrative form of traditional eschatology is “the human as the sole recipient awaiting judgment”, then the form of *Between the Acts* is “the whole of creation engaged in co-performance”.

This non-anthropocentric eschatology receives its sharpest expression in the “mirror” scene at the end of the novel. After the historical pageant ends, the actors hold up various reflective objects—a cheval glass borrowed from the parish, broken mirrors, tin cans, candlesticks, and the like—forcing the audience, the actors, the earth, and the sky to be reflected at once: “Look! Out they come, from the bushes—the riff-raff... Ourselves! Ourselves!” The loudspeaker then emits the broken sound of “We... We... We...” which finally gathers into a fragmented “we”—“orts scraps and fragments like ourselves” (p. 183; 188). Here, “we” is no longer the pronoun of a merely

human community. It names an entire material-temporal network that includes cows, birds, wind, sunlight, pre-historic stones, Roman roads, and the ruins of Elizabethan manor houses. The shadow of war is not a tragedy belonging to human beings alone, but a collective trauma of the entire landscape. Here Woolf inherits the affective gravity of the Christian rhythm of “fall–redemption”: the “fall” staged by the historical pageant corresponds to the rupture of the two world wars. Yet redemption does not come from humanity itself, but from the duration of the landscape. The earth will not end; cows will continue to cough, birds will continue to sing, and the sun will continue to rise. This grief is “non-anthropocentric” precisely because its subject is the landscape itself, rather than any single human agent.

The collective form of the pageant’s ending becomes more legible when situated against a specific Anglican liturgical inheritance. The Sanctus of *the Book of Common Prayer*’s Eucharistic Rite—“Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts, Heaven and earth are full of thy glory”—constructs a formal scene in which the worshipping human we joins, belatedly and as the smallest voice, an already-ongoing cosmic chorus of angels, archangels, “all the company of heaven”, and indeed of all creation. The same formal pattern animates the *Benedicite* (the Song of the Three Holy Children, recited at Anglican Morning Prayer) and Psalm 148, in which suns, mountains, beasts, and “all green things upon the earth” each take up their appointed line of praise before the human voice is permitted its turn. As Paulsell and de Gay have shown, Woolf—raised in a household saturated by the rhythms of the Book of Common Prayer—knew this liturgical grammar intimately, even as she repudiated its doctrinal frame (Paulsell 2019, pp. 8;102–7; de Gay 2018, p. 46). It is this grammar that the closing scene of *Between the Acts* inherits and rewrites. When the loudspeaker’s broken “we... we... we...” finally gathers into “orts scraps and fragments like ourselves”, and the cows, swallows, rain showers, and Roman roads are drawn into the mirror’s reflection, Woolf is not improvising a vague pluralism; she is deploying the precise formal architecture of the Sanctus—the threefold acclamation, the cosmic chorus encircling the human voice, the human as latecomer to a praise already in progress. What she withdraws is the vertical axis. In the Sanctus, the chorus of creation is offered upward to a transcendent Creator who alone occupies the position of “Lord of hosts”; in *Between the Acts*, the upward axis is gone, and the chorus circulates horizontally, participants delimiting one another within the same material-temporal field. The cows do not praise; they simply take up the burden. The swallows do not glorify; they simply fly. The mirror reflects not God’s glory but “ourselves”—a “we” expanded to include the more-than-human. This is what makes the moment “post-Christian” with a precision that vaguer terms like “secular sacred” or “spiritual residue” cannot match: the formal scaffolding of liturgical participation is preserved, including the threefold stuttering, but its theistic apex is suspended. What remains is the horizontal community of creation whose chorus is no longer praise of any transcendent recipient but the rhythm of co-existence itself—precisely the formal condition stewardship ethics has been unable to articulate, because liturgy without an apex is, within most systematic theology, structurally difficult to articulate.

This reading must nevertheless be held against a body of criticism that construes the same scene in an altogether darker key. Michele Pridmore-Brown has shown that the loudspeaker of *Between the Acts* belongs to the technological repertoire of 1930s fascism: the gramophone and the amplified voice were the instruments through which the massed “we” of totalitarian politics was manufactured, and Woolf, writing amid the broadcast rhetoric of 1939, was acutely aware that a chorus of fragments could be orchestrated into unanimity as easily as into plurality (Pridmore-Brown 1998, pp. 408–11). Esty’s account of late-modernist national revival extends the point: the village pageant was not a neutral form, but one that the decade had already put to work in the manufacture of an insular English communality (Esty 2004, pp. 54–58). And from within the environmental humanities, Kathryn Yusoff’s critique of the undifferentiated Anthropocene “we”—a pronoun that universalizes responsibility while erasing the racial and colonial distribution of who has extracted and who has borne the cost—falls with particular force upon any celebratory reading of the mirror scene (Yusoff 2018, pp. 1–5). Taken together, these readings make it impossible to treat the expansion of “we” as straightforwardly liberatory. Yet they also, in an unexpected way, corroborate the formal argument. What makes the scene resistant to fascist appropriation is precisely that its “we” is never permitted to close: the loudspeaker stutters, the mirror-bearers are “riff-raff” rather than a chorus, the phrase that finally arrives is “orts, scraps and fragments,” and the cows interrupt from outside the frame. A unanimous “we” is exactly what the scene withholds. The chorus is horizontal not because horizontality is politically innocent—Woolf, in 1939, had no illusions on that score—but because the vertical apex that would have organized it has been removed, and nothing has been permitted to occupy the vacancy. The mirror scene is therefore best read not as an ecological consolation but as an experiment conducted under

duress: an attempt to imagine a collectivity that is neither anthropocentric nor totalitarian, at the historical moment when both alternatives were most pressing.

Written under the shadow of the full outbreak of the Second World War, *Between the Acts* gestures, in the most haunting and forceful way, toward the political urgency of the Anthropocene. The insight of this gesture lies in Woolf's acute recognition that anthropogenic geological catastrophe—the geological processes reshaped by human activity, represented by mud, ponds, and prehistoric time—and anthropogenic military catastrophe, represented by the bomber, are not crises belonging to two separate dimensions. They are, in fact, the extreme consequences of the same chronic disorder: a narrative of subjectivity that permanently places the human at the center and grants humanity absolute dominion. As Woolf writes in her diary, “A kind of growl behind the cuckoos and t’other birds. A furnace behind the sky. It struck me that one curious feeling is, that the writing ‘I’ has vanished. No audience. No echo. That’s part of one’s death. We live without a future” (Woolf 1985 : p. 293).

Faced with this imminent destruction, Woolf offers her final eco-aesthetic answer in her last novel: the human being must be displaced from the position of “director” in this cosmic pageant. At the end of the novel, Miss La Trobe, the so-called “author” and “director” is ultimately “defeated”. Yet this “defeat of the author” is by no means a passive concession in ecological terms. It is, rather, an affirmative restitution. The true force of the pageant has already and irreversibly passed out of the hands of the human author and into the collective interruptions of the cows’ lowing, the swallows’ circling, the arrival of rain showers, and the roar of machines. This is the sharpest expression of Woolf’s post-Christian ecological imagination at its darkest political moment: humanity is no longer the director of creation, but creation itself continues, vigorously and expansively, beneath the vast, decentered curtain of the cosmos.

This “relinquishment of directorship” completes, at the level of narrative ethics, the most thorough overcoming of stewardship ethics. The central metaphors of stewardship ethics—the human being as God’s gardener, keeper, or manager—presuppose a kind of “dramaturgical authority” over the order of creation. Even in its most humble versions, the human remains the subject responsible for what he or she manages. *Between the Acts*, by contrast, enacts a new ethical position by allowing La Trobe to be “defeated” by letting the cows “take up the burden” and by allowing the roar of aircraft to replace human lines. The distinctiveness of the human within creation is no longer manifested through “management” or “care” but through a profound awareness that human beings exist, together with all other things, within a fragile, solemn, and continuously generative created world. “it became darker & darker... We had fallen. It was extinct. There was no colour. The earth was dead.” “We had seen the world dead. This was within the power of nature.” (Woolf 1981: pp. 143–44). This declaration by Woolf finally finds its formal realization in her final novel.

Ultimately, *Flush* and *Between the Acts* together demonstrate that the post-Christian ecological imagination is neither a simple negation of the Christian inheritance nor a Romantic worship of nature, but a radical formal rewriting. It invites theology to learn a new language: one in which human distinctiveness is no longer manifested through “care” or “management” but through a profound awareness that human beings exist, together with all other beings and things, within a fragile, solemn, and continuously generative created world.

This is what is experienced when the aged *Flush* turns over under the Florentine sun to warm the other side of his body, forming an equal co-presence with sunlight, flies, and melon flesh; it is also what the audience at Pointz Hall experiences when they see “we... we... we...” in the mirror. Redemption is not humanity’s rescue of nature, but the process through which all beings and things mutually delimit and generate one another within a shared material-temporal network. This “imaginative substrate”—in which humanity is neither nihilistically reduced to insignificant dust nor divinized as the sovereign of creation—is the necessary foundation upon which any genuinely non-anthropocentric theological paradigm must first be built.

THE IMAGINATIVE SUBSTRATE: DECENTERED SYNTAX, DURATIONAL TEMPORALITY, AND NON-ANTHROPOCENTRIC GRIEF

Through the foregoing analysis, this study argues that Woolf’s late novels provide three formal resources that theology can borrow for a post-Christian ecological imagination: decentered syntax, nonhuman durational temporality, and non-anthropocentric grief. These three resources do not themselves constitute a new paradigm

of ecological theology. Rather, they are formal conditions that any non-anthropocentric ecological theology in the age of the Anthropocene must satisfy.

An immediate objection arises here: are decentered syntax, durational temporality, and non-anthropocentric grief specifically “post-Christian” resources, or simply generic features of literary modernism, equally available in Joyce, Stein, Beckett, or Faulkner? If the latter, the qualifier is decorative. The objection touches the conceptual core of this study, and the answer requires a precise distinction. Modernist form can perform two distinct operations. The first is the dismantling of subject-positions, perspective, and stable narrative voice—an operation widely shared across the period. The second is the redistribution of an inherited affective-temporal gravity onto a non-anthropocentric bearer, while preserving that gravity’s formal rhythm of gift, rupture, and return. The first is common; the second is rare, and it is the Christian narrative inheritance that makes the second possible. Joyce dismantles perspective but leaves intact the teleological-affective arc of homecoming in *Ulysses*, which remains anthropocentric in its emotional economy. Stein dismantles syntax so radically that the gravity itself dissolves, leaving brilliant formal experiments without the affective weight that ecological grief requires. Beckett empties out subject and world together but routes the resulting negations toward bleakness, not toward the nonhuman as positive bearer of gravity. None of these forms can be borrowed by ecological theology, because what theology requires is not decentering as such, but decentering that still bears solemnity, loss, and a gesture toward transcendence. Woolf’s late novels accomplish this rarer operation. The bracketed deaths of “Time Passes” carry the weight of Christian elegiac form—the parenthesis as liturgical instrument of grief rather than mere syntactic footnote—redistributed onto a position no longer occupied by the human. The interludes of *The Waves* preserve the threefold rhythm of creation, fall, and redemption while rerouting its bearer from the soul to the cosmic shoreline. The “we...we...we...” of *Between the Acts* inherits the liturgical “we” of Anglican collective confession and reassigns it to a more-than-human assemblage. “Post-Christian” therefore names not a set of beliefs but a formal economy: the discipline of having undergone Christian narrative’s training in carrying gravity, combined with the discipline of refusing to grant the human exclusive title to that gravity. By this criterion, much of secular modernism is not post-Christian but simply post-narrative: it dissolves what theology needs preserved. Woolf’s late novels occupy the rare formal location where Christian narrative gravity is borne by a non-anthropocentric grammar—and this location, not modernist decentering as such, is what ecological theology can borrow.

The first resource is a syntax that allows “the human to be decentered without rendering the world empty”. The question is how, after decentering, the world can still be narrated as a weighty presence. This double requirement rules out two inadequate alternatives: decentering the human into nothingness, as in nihilistic deconstruction, and decentering the human only by making it the first member of a larger community, as in relational expansionism. The former cannot sustain narrative gravity; the latter merely moves the human from the “center” to the position of “first among members”, leaving the underlying grammar unchanged.

This study has identified three syntactic operations in Woolf’s fiction. The first is bracketed demotion: Mrs Ramsay’s death is compressed into an adverbial structure within square brackets; the grammatical weight falls on the physical fact that “his arms . . . remained empty” while death itself is reduced to the modifying background of another action. The second is subject displacement: in “Time Passes”, wind, poppies, mold, damp, thistles, and swallows—rather than any reflective human subject—become the grammatical subjects of action. The third is the transfer of perceptual modality: Flush allows the dog’s nose to organize the rhythm of narration, so that the world is not an object to be “seen”, but a subjective field to be smelled.¹⁶

The second resource is a formal temporality that embeds human stories within nonhuman temporal frameworks. The ten years of “Time Passes”, the movement of *The Waves* from dawn to sunset, and the juxtaposition of prehistoric ferns with warplanes in *Between the Acts* all show Woolf compressing the totality of human life into temporal rhythms far longer than the human. This is the formal realization of Chakrabarty’s “planetary perspective” within the grammar of the modernist novel: geological time is not merely “discussed” at the thematic level, but “borne” at the level of narrative rhythm.

Woolf’s formal answer is “durational rhythm”: neither linear nor cyclical, but rhythmic. Bergson’s concept of *durée* provides the conceptual vocabulary; Woolf turns it into sentence-form. Her long sentence structures—with multiple temporalities nested within one another, suspended without closure, extended rather than ad-

vanced—are not descriptions of duration, but formal realizations of it. The grammatical rhythm of the nine italicized interludes in *The Waves* constitutes an irreducible “everyday cosmic rhythm” within which the entire lives of the six characters are embedded. This formal arrangement is the most rigorous literary realization of “nonhuman time as the frame of human stories”. The real temporal task of the Anthropocene is not to prove the existence of the *longue durée*, which science has already done, but to imagine a narrative form capable of bearing the scale of nonhuman time without resorting to teleological consolation. Woolf’s durational rhythm most rigorously satisfies the double requirement of having rhythm without direction, and form without an anchor.

Two challenges from recent ecocriticism should be met at this point. Timothy Morton’s critique of “ecomimesis” in *Ecology without Nature* holds that ambient writing—prose that conjures atmosphere, surroundings, and the sensation of an encompassing environment—does not dissolve the subject–object division but reinstates it the more insidiously, producing “Nature” as an aesthetic backdrop at the very moment it claims to abolish the distinction (Morton 2007, pp. 29–36). The italicized interludes of *The Waves* would appear, on the face of it, to be textbook ecomimesis. Ursula Heise’s argument for eco-cosmopolitanism raises a second difficulty: an ecological imagination anchored in the rhythms of a single shoreline or a single Sussex garden may cultivate attachment at the expense of the deterritorialized, systemic understanding that planetary environmental problems require (Heise 2008, pp. 50–62). The first challenge is met, if at all, by the interludes’ refusal of the ambient position: they do not surround a perceiving subject, since they are formally sealed off from the episodes by typography and grammar, and they continue after the perceiving subjects have ceased. Ambience requires someone to be immersed; the interludes supply no one. The second challenge is met on the temporal rather than the spatial axis of the argument. What Woolf’s form supplies is not attachment to a place but the capacity to hold human duration inside a longer one, an operation that is scale-portable in a way that place-attachment is not. Anna Tsing’s account of collaborative survival and of the “arts of noticing” amid ruins suggests, further, that the affective repertoire required by the present is broader than grief alone (Tsing 2015, pp. 17–25); the concentration on grief in this study is a deliberate narrowing, justified by the specific formal deficit it identifies in ecological theology, and not a claim that grief exhausts what ecological imagination demands.

The third resource is a form through which grief of theological magnitude can be felt for the loss of nonhuman things. This is the deepest affective blind spot in contemporary ecological theology. The grief articulated in the traditions of grace, virtue, and liberation is real and important, but it remains confined within the grammar of “humans mourning humans”. It cannot yet recognize species, habitats, and geological epochs themselves as legitimate objects of grief. In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), Amitav Ghosh argues that the modern novel, as a genre, has systematically excluded the climate crisis from its imaginative range (Ghosh 2016, p. 35). Yet his critique is directed primarily at the mainstream realist tradition of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and does not identify the extent to which experimental modernist fiction (especially Woolf’s) was already performing precisely the formal work he describes as “missing”. This study argues that Woolf’s form of non-anthropocentric grief can be identified in three complementary modes.¹⁷ Woolf’s formal work consists in displacing the subject of grief itself from the human position: objects grieve, the dog grieves, the landscape grieves. The human reader does not stand outside these forms of grief in order to grieve for them; rather, the reader reads them and is traversed by them.

Any paradigm of ecological theology that seeks genuinely to fulfill its non-anthropocentric commitment must deploy decentered syntax in its own writing, bear the scale of nonhuman time, and become affectively capable of grieving for nonhuman things. If any one of these is lacking, its non-anthropocentric commitment will be quietly ironized by its own grammar.

Stewardship ethics is deeply rooted in ecological theology not because it is inadequate theology—it is, in fact, a highly developed theology—but because it embeds the threefold formal gravity of Christian narrative: the human as protagonist of creation at the level of grammar, history as moral drama at the level of temporality, and human responsibility toward other humans at the level of affect. Merely rewriting “dominion” as “care” at the level of content cannot unsettle this threefold gravity. What is required is another set of resources, equal in force, at the level of form.

Decentered syntax replaces the syntactic position of “the human as protagonist of creation”, making “the human as participant” the new grammatical default. Durational temporality replaces the temporal form of “history as moral drama” making “history as multiple nested rhythms” the new narrative time. Non-anthropocentric grief replaces the affective grammar of “we mourn what we have lost” making “the world mourning its own dissolution” the new affective center. This substitution is not a simple replacement of content, but a comprehensive rewriting of narrative form. It preserves the formal gravity of Christian narrative—rhythm, solemnity, a sense of loss, and a gesture toward transcendence—while redistributing the position that bears this gravity away from the human and onto a larger network constituted by humans, animals, matter, and time.

Woolf does not “answer” the questions of ecological theology; she changes the formal conditions under which those questions can be posed. The real collaboration between theology and literature is not one of substitution, but of mutual formal dependence: theology expands its own space of questioning by borrowing the imaginative forms of literature, while literature gains ethical depth in narrative through the formal gravity of theology. The post-Christian ecological imagination operates precisely at the intersection of these two tensions.

Woolf’s formal contribution is not a doctrine, not an ethics, and not a spirituality, but a grammar, a rhythm, and a form of grief: a formal substrate that enables “creation” to be spoken, borne, and mourned without presupposing “the human as center”. If ecological theology is to confront the double intellectual and affective challenge of the Anthropocene, it must pass through the discipline of this formal substrate.

CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary relational ecological theology (from Bauckham’s “community of creation” to McFague’s “body of God” theology, from Wallace’s “Christian animism” to Keller’s *creatio ex profundis*) has systematically moved beyond the rhetoric of “dominion” at the level of content. Yet because of the formal constraints of systematic theology as a genre, it still quietly preserves anthropocentrism at the three levels of grammar, temporality, and affect. This means that it is insufficient merely to rewrite “dominion” as “care” or “separation” as “co-presence” at the level of content. Without support at the level of form, any non-anthropocentric commitment will be ironized by the grammar of its own writing. On this basis, this study argues that Woolf’s late novels—through the bracketed syntax of *To the Lighthouse*, the cosmic interludes and apophatic moment of *The Waves*, the transfer of olfactory modality in *Flush*, and the “relinquishment of directorship” in *Between the Acts*—provide three formal resources that theology can borrow: decentered grammar, nonhuman durational temporality, and non-anthropocentric grief. These resources do not constitute a new paradigm of ecological theology; rather, they are the formal conditions that any such paradigm must satisfy.

This position may encounter objections from two directions, and these objections should be addressed in advance. First, theologians may ask whether making “formal self-consciousness” an internal requirement of argumentative validity excessively literaryizes theology, a discourse grounded in doctrine, liturgy, and communal practice. This study does not require theology to become literature. Rather, it asks theology to recognize that its grammatical positioning of “the human as reflective subject” is not a neutral vehicle, but a formal choice that carries substantive theological commitments. If this point is ignored, relational revisions at the level of content will have difficulty becoming genuinely effective. Second, literary scholars may ask whether placing Woolf within a theological genealogy misreads her secular, and even explicitly anti-institutional, spiritual stance. This study, however, does not read Woolf as a Christian. It reads her instead as a post-Christian writer working through a double posture: formally residual yet substantively suspended. It is precisely this double posture that allows her formal resources to resonate with Keller’s theology of the deep while preventing them from being subsumed by any contemporary trajectory of ecological theology.

On this basis, this study extends an invitation to dialogue to three scholarly communities. First, for ecological theologians: if the diagnosis of “formal conditions” is accepted, then work after Bauckham, McFague, Wallace, and Keller should not stop at proposing more relational claims at the level of content. It must also attempt, at the level of writing, genuinely to loosen the position of “the human as narrative subject”. Advancing this task requires concrete collaboration between theologians and literary scholars on liturgical texts and theological prose. Second, for scholars of comparative religion: the “post-Christian” framework proposed in this study may, in principle, be extended into a broader “post-religious ecological imagination”.¹⁸ It must instead systematically

examine, at the level of form, whether Daoist, Buddhist, or Shinto traditions provide grammatical, temporal, and affective resources of comparable force. Such an examination would itself redefine the methodological threshold of “post-religion” as an analytical category. Finally, for scholars of modernism: if the analytical model of “formal inheritance and substantive suspension” can be identified beyond Woolf in the works of Lawrence, Forster, Djuna Barnes, and even Eliot, then modernism itself may need to be reread as an underestimated form of formal work within the Western narrative of secularization, one with independent theological significance. Such a re-reading would revise the conventional division of disciplinary labor between modernist studies and religious studies.

The limitations of this study must, however, be stated frankly. Although Woolf as a single case is exemplary, she is not sufficient to support the general proposition that “modernism is a post-Christian ecological imagination.” The scope of the argument is limited to Anglophone modernism and Euro-American ecological theology; similar formal resources in Chinese-language and non-Western contexts have not yet been brought into comparative view. This article also stops at identifying the possible conditions under which such formal resources may be borrowed; it does not itself undertake formal experimentation at the level of theological writing or liturgical practice. It should be noted that these limitations are not omissions that could simply be remedied in isolation by expanding the length of the article. Rather, they mirror the threefold invitation to dialogue outlined above. They mark precisely the collaborative structure of a topic that no single study can complete on its own. The intellectual and affective challenges of the Anthropocene will not thereby be resolved, but the formal conditions proposed here may be developed further through sustained collaboration among theologians, scholars of religion, and literary critics. A contribution that literary studies can make alongside theological self-reflection.

Three further limitations follow from the method itself. First, formal analysis of the kind practised here can establish what a text makes sayable, but not what caused it to be said; the claim that Woolf’s grammar inherits liturgical form is a claim about formal homology, evidenced by her documented immersion in the rhythms of the Book of Common Prayer, and not a claim about compositional intention. Second, the engagement with rival interpretations offered above is necessarily selective. Woolf criticism is now large enough that any reading must choose its interlocutors, and the choices made here—Auerbach, Banfield, Beer, Henry, Smith, Pridmore-Brown, Esty—privilege those accounts that offer non-theological explanations of the same formal features, at the cost of less sustained attention to the feminist, queer, and postcolonial readings that would inflect the argument differently. Val Plumwood’s analysis of the master model, which links the domination of nature to the domination of women and of colonized peoples, indicates one such direction that the present formal argument gestures toward without developing (Plumwood 1993, pp. 41–47). Third, the historical contextualization offered in Section 3 remains schematic; a fuller account would need to situate Woolf’s late novels within the archival record of interwar rural and preservationist politics rather than within its historiography.

REFERENCES

1. Adkins, Peter. 2019. *Modernist Anthropocene Aesthetics: Ecological Innovations in the Novels of James Joyce, Djuna Barnes and Virginia Woolf*. Ph.D. thesis, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK.
2. Adkins, Peter, ed. 2024. *Virginia Woolf and the Anthropocene*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
3. Alaimo, Stacy. 2010. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
4. Alt, Christina. 2010. *Virginia Woolf and the Study of Nature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
5. Arnold, Matthew. 2006. *Culture and Anarchy*. Edited by Jane Garnett. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
6. Ashley, Benedict M. 1992. “Dominion or Stewardship?: Theological Reflections.” In *Birth, Suffering, and Death: Catholic Perspectives at the Edges of Life*. Edited by Kevin Wm. Wildes, S.J., et al. Dordrecht: Springer Science B.V., pp. 85–106.
7. Auerbach, Erich. 2003. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
8. Palmer Clare 1992. “Stewardship: A Case Study in Environmental Ethics.” *The Earth Beneath: A Critical Guide to Green Theology*. Ball, Ian, Margaret Goodall, Clare Palmer., et al. London: Great Britain.
9. Banfield, Ann. 2000. *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

10. Bauckham, Richard. 2010. *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation*. Waco: Baylor University Press.
11. Beer, Gillian. 1996. *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
12. Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.
13. Berry, Thomas. 1988. *The Dream of the Earth*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
14. Braidotti, Rosi. 2013. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
15. Briggs, Julia. 2005. *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*. Orlando: Harcourt.
16. Callicott, J. Baird. 1989. *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
17. Callicott, J. Baird. 1997. *Earth's Insights: A Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
18. Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2021. *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
19. Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. 2015. *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
20. de Gay, Jane. 2018. *Virginia Woolf and Christian Culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
21. Dirschauer, Marlene. 2023. *Modernist Waterscapes: Water, Imagination and Materiality in the Works of Virginia Woolf*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
22. Eagleton, Terry. 2014. *Culture and the Death of God*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
23. Esty, Jed. 2004. *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
24. Felch, Susan M., ed. 2016. *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Religion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
25. Foster, Ashley A. 2016. "Writing in the 'White Light of Truth': History, Ethics, and Community in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*." *Woolf Studies Annual* 22: 41–74.
26. Foley, E. "Sacramentality, Chaos Theory and Decoloniality." *Religions* 2019, 10, 418. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10070418>.
27. Franke, William. 2014. *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
28. Froula, Christine. 2004. *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde: War, Civilization, Modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press.
29. Ghosh, Amitav. 2016. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
30. Gottlieb, Roger S., ed. 2003. *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*. New York: Routledge.
31. Griesinger, Emily. 2015. "Religious Belief in a Secular Age: Literary Modernism and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*." *Christianity & Literature* 64: 438–64.
32. Groover, Kristina K., ed. 2019. *Religion, Secularism, and the Spiritual Paths of Virginia Woolf*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
33. Grusin, Richard A., ed. 2015. *The Nonhuman Turn*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
34. Hall, Douglas John. 1982. *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*. New York: Friendship Press.
35. Haraway, Donna J. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.
36. Heise, Ursula K. 2008. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. New York: Oxford University Press.
37. Henry, Holly. 2003. *Virginia Woolf and the Discourse of Science: The Aesthetics of Astronomy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
38. Hobson, Suzanne. 2011. *Angels of Modernism: Religion, Culture, Aesthetics 1910–1960*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
39. Jenkins, Willis. 2008. *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
40. Kane, Julie. 1995. *Varieties of Mystical Experience in the Writings of Virginia Woolf*. *Twentieth Century Literature* 41: 328–49.
41. Keller, Catherine. 2003. *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*. London: Routledge.
42. Keller, Catherine, and Mary-Jane Rubenstein, eds. 2017. *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms*. New York: Fordham University Press.

43. Keller, Catherine. 2014. *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement*. New York: Columbia University Press.
44. Kinsley, David R. 1995. *Ecology and Religion: Ecological Spirituality in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
45. Knight, Christopher J. 2007. "The God of Love Is Full of Tricks: Virginia Woolf's Vexed Relation to the Tradition of Christianity." *Religion & Literature* 39: 27–46.
46. Lewis, Pericles. 2010. *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
47. Lostoski, Leanna. 2016. "Imaginations of the Strangest Kind: The Vital Materialism of Virginia Woolf." *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 49: 53–74.
48. Lostoski-Ho, Leanna Jean. 2023. *Modernism on the Edge of the Anthropocene: The Ecological Imagination of Forster, West, Warner, Woolf, and Eliot*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH, USA.
49. Matless, David. 1998. *Landscape and Englishness*. London: Reaktion Books.
50. McFague, Sallie. 1993. *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
51. Moltmann, Jürgen. 1996. *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*. Translated by Margaret Kohl. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
52. Moore, Jason W. 2015. *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. London: Verso.
53. Morton, Timothy. 2007. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
54. Morton, Timothy. 2013. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
55. Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. 1996. *Religion and the Order of Nature*. New York: Oxford University Press.
56. Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
57. Nussbaum, Martha C. 1990. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press.
58. Nussbaum, Martha C. 2024. *Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibility*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
59. Paulsell, Stephanie. 2019. *Religion Around Virginia Woolf*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
60. Plumwood, Val. 1993. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London: Routledge.
61. Pridmore-Brown, Michele. 1998. "1939–40: Of Virginia Woolf, Gramophones, and Fascism." *PMLA* 113: 408–21.
62. Pseudo-Dionysius. 1987. *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*. Translated by Colm Luibheid. New York: Paulist Press.
63. Reumann, John H. 2014. *Stewardship & the Economy of God*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.
64. Rockefeller, Steven C., and John Elder, eds. 1992. *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a Religious Issue*. Boston: Beacon Press.
65. Rohman, Carrie. 2011. "'We Make Life': Vibration, Aesthetics, and the Inhuman in *The Waves*." In *Virginia Woolf and the Natural World*. Edited by Kristin Czarnecki and Carrie Rohman. Clemson: Clemson University Digital Press, pp. 12–23.
66. Ruether, Rosemary Radford. 1992. *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing, 1st ed.* New York: HarperCollins.
67. Ryan, Derek. 2013. *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory: Sex, Animal, Life*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
68. Ryan, Derek. 2015. "Posthumanist Interludes: Ecology and Ethology in *The Waves*." In *Virginia Woolf: Twenty-First-Century Approaches*. Edited by Jeanne Dubino, Gill Lowe, Vara Neverow and Kathryn Simpson. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 148–68.
69. Scott, Bonnie Kime. 2012. *In the Hollow of the Wave: Virginia Woolf and Modernist Uses of Nature*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
70. Sherman, David. 2016. "Woolf's Secular Imaginary." *Modernism/modernity* 23: 711–31.

71. Smith, Craig. 2002. "Across the Widest Gulf: Nonhuman Subjectivity in Virginia Woolf's *Flush*." *Twentieth Century Literature* 48: 348–61.
72. Snaith, Anna. 2000. *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
73. Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
74. Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
75. Tucker, Mary Evelyn, and John A. Grim, eds. 1994. *Worldviews and Ecology: Religion, Philosophy, and the Environment*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
76. Wallace, Mark I. 2018. *When God Was a Bird: Christianity, Animism, and the Re-Enchantment of the World*. New York: Fordham University Press.
77. Waller, L. Elizabeth. 2000. "Writing the Real: Virginia Woolf and an Ecology of Language." *Bucknell Review* 44: 137.
78. White, Lynn, Jr. 1967. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science* 155: 1203–7.
79. Williams, Raymond. 1973. *The Country and the City*. New York: Oxford University Press.
80. Woolf, Virginia. 1941. *Between the Acts*. New York: Harcourt.
81. Woolf, Virginia. 1960. *The Second Common Reader*. New York: Harcourt.
82. Woolf, Virginia. 1975a. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume III*. New York: Harcourt.
83. Woolf, Virginia. 1975b. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume V*. New York: Harcourt.
84. Woolf, Virginia. 1976. *Flush: A Biography*. San Diego: Harcourt.
85. Woolf, Virginia. 1981. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume Three*. New York: Harcourt.
86. Woolf, Virginia. 1985. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume Five*. New York: Penguin Books.
87. Woolf, Virginia. 1989. *To the Lighthouse*. San Diego: Harcourt.
88. Woolf, Virginia. 1990. *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals*. Edited by Mitchell A. Leaska. San Diego: Harcourt.
89. Woolf, Virginia. 2002. *The Common Reader: First Series*. Orlando: Harcourt.
90. Woolf, Virginia. 2006. *The Waves*. Orlando: Harcourt.
91. Yusoff, Kathryn. 2018. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

NOTES

¹ Jenkins, Willis. 2008. *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 237-38. Jenkins questions whether the limitations shown by classic theologians in addressing environmental ethics are merely "idiosyncratic to their personalities" and "personal or contextual bias" (personal blind spots), or if they are problems "endemic to soteriology"—symptomatic of an underlying structural fault in the theological system itself.

² Yet Arnold repeatedly suggests that culture does not replace religion; rather, it enlarges and deepens religious experience, helping people find a new spiritual support after the "decline of the old faith" (Arnold 2006, p. 36). This position closely accords with the argument advanced in this study.

³ Globalization: The principle that Christian stewardship extends to the entire, interdependent earth, rejecting narrow nationalism and provincialism.; Communalization: The shift from Western individualism to corporate responsibility, emphasizing human solidarity and collective action to address global crises.; Ecologization: The expansion of stewardship to include the care and preservation of the nonhuman world and the entire biosphere, rejecting the exploitation of nature.; Politicization: The demand that stewardship move beyond private charity to challenge unjust political/economic structures and seek systemic global equity.; Futurization: The commitment to the long-term survival of the planet and future generations, countering modern society's obsession with immediate gratification.

⁴ It shows the extent to which a theological project can rewrite the content of responsibility, while still being compelled to retain the grammatical position of the human as the bearer of that responsibility.

⁵ Clare Palmer precisely identifies this implicit structure in her 1992 essay "Stewardship: A Case Study in Environmental Ethics" included in Ball, Ian, Margaret Goodall, Clare Palmer, and John Reader, eds. 1992. *The Earth Beneath: A Critical Guide to Green Theology*. London: Great Britain, pp. 67-86. Palmer writes: "The idea of stewardship comes originally from societies where feudal landlords left managerial slaves in charge of their property." (p. 74) This implicit triangular structure of feudal lord, servant-manager, and property does not establish genuine care or community; rather, it reinforces the domination and instrumentalization of nature by human beings.

⁶ A typical example is Benedict M. Ashley's "Dominion or Stewardship?: Theological Reflections" included in Wildes, Kevin Wm., S.J., et al., eds. 1992. *Birth, Suffering, and Death: Catholic Perspectives at the Edges of Life*. Dordrecht: Springer Science. Ashley explicitly uses the language of natural law and teleology to redefine "absolute dominion" as "entrusted stewardship": what God grants to human beings is not sovereign possession over nature, but the responsibility to govern life according to the intrinsic

purposes of creation. (p. 92) Yet Ashley's proposal is structurally homologous with reformist Protestant stewardship theology. Human beings bear responsibility precisely because they are understood as the distinctive agents within creation, endowed with reason and freedom. (p. 86) This homology suggests that the present study is not criticizing the specific position of any single denomination, but the formal grammar shared by Christian theology as a mode of discourse. Similarly, in *Stewardship and the Economy of God*, John H. Reumann ultimately proposes an integrative model with a "dual foundation": redemption-based stewardship applies to Christians within the church, while creation-based stewardship calls all human beings, including nonbelievers, to act as co-stewards of the world. (Reumann 2014, pp. 117-19) In terms of content, this dual model corresponds closely to Hall's "five principles"; in terms of form, however, it likewise presupposes the human being as the ethical subject.

⁷ Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, was a major Victorian agnostic controversialist and the editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*; her mother, Julia Stephen, maintained a gentle but irreducible form of "secular piety"; her aunt, Caroline Emelia Stephen, was an important Quaker theological writer in Britain; and her aunt Julia Margaret Cameron was a devout Christian photographer.

⁸ Foster's attention to the intrinsic connection between the "Inner Light" and the interconnectedness of all things provides an important intellectual resource and point of inspiration for this study's translation of theological resources into ecological ethics.

⁹ Interestingly, Emily Griesinger makes a similar argument. Drawing on Charles Taylor's framework in *A Secular Age*, she situates Woolf's literary modernism within the "secular imaginary" noting that Bloomsbury itself represents a "secular subversion of Christianity." Although an avowed atheist, Woolf critiques secularism in Mrs. Dalloway and remains open to sacred or mystical experience: her stream-of-consciousness technique portrays the soul as a "sacred" space or "sanctuary" Clarissa embodies an "atheist religion" of secular humanism, and Septimus Smith—Clarissa's "dark double"—exposes the coercive medical authority of secular modernity (Dr. Holmes and Dr. Bradshaw) over transgressive subjects. See Griesinger, Emily. 2015. "Religious Belief in a Secular Age: Literary Modernism and Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway." *Christianity & Literature* 64: 438–64.

¹⁰ Edward Foley similarly argues that sacramentality may persist outside explicit Christian belief: "Maybe even more unsettling is the possibility that sacramentality can thrive in the work of self-professed agnostics, apostates and atheists" (p. 4). This claim is important for the present study because it suggests that sacramental form may survive doctrinal abandonment and be redirected, through a kind of "negative capability," toward the everyday body and the material world, as in the works of Woolf, Proust, and Joyce. See Foley, E. "Sacramentality, Chaos Theory and Decoloniality." *Religions* 2019, 10, 418.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10070418>.

¹¹ This historiographical honesty prevents any romanticized account that equates Woolf with an early environmentalist. It also provides a disciplinary constraint for the present study, which establishes Woolf's paradigmatic significance on the basis of "formal inheritance" rather than "intellectual anticipation."

¹² Waller's analysis unfolds on four levels: first, at the level of bodily perception, through the incorporation of the "earth-body"; second, at the narrative level, through a form of "geo/bio-graphy" in which nonhuman protagonists such as animals and plants "shape, influence, and guide" human thought; third, through the ecological rhythm of language in *The Waves*, where language and water are fused; and fourth, through the creative ethical self-consciousness expressed in Woolf's claim that "I am writing to a rhythm and not to a plot."

¹³ This issue similarly exists in Martha C. Nussbaum's *Justice for Animals* (2023). Although its "Capabilities Approach" emphasizes animals flourishing in their own characteristic forms, it is essentially centered on human emotions of wonder and compassion, and is in fact an extension of the human principle of compassion.

¹⁴ Mark Wallace's "Christian animism" attempts to expand the range of Spirit to nonhuman life by imagining God as bird, but his theological writing remains organized by human spiritual discernment of the bird: it is the human being who witnesses, names, and interprets the bird's spirituality. Andrew Linzey's "animal theology" defends the souls and dignity of animals, but the grammar of that defense is still that of a human theologian speaking on behalf of animals. Even in Richard Bauckham's more ecologically sensitive model of the "community of creation" the human being remains positioned as a "reflective witness."

¹⁵ Moltmann, Jürgen. 1996. *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*. Translated by Margaret Kohl. Minneapolis: Fortress Press., Although Moltmann proposes "Cosmic Eschatology," he explicitly states: "Cosmic eschatology also belongs within the framework of this remembered hope for Christ" (Jürgen 1996, p. 261). The renewal of the cosmos ultimately serves human hope, rather than a collective spectacle in which all creatures participate equally.

¹⁶ Two tasks that are easily confused must be distinguished here. Foregrounding the nonhuman is an operation of content; grammatically demoting the human is an operation of form. The latter requires narrative syntax itself to perform decentering in every line. Mainstream environmental literature often satisfies the former condition, but rarely the latter.

¹⁷ Object-grief. In "Time Passes", Woolf describes the empty house's decay through abandoned objects—"a pair of shoes, a shooting cap, some faded skirts and coats"—that alone "kept the human shape". These things carry the grammatical weight of grief: Mrs Ramsay's absence is registered not by recollection but by material traces that retain her form. Woolf thus extends Bennett's vibrant matter into mourning, adding a compressed grammar that translates absence into tangible presence; Nonhuman sensory grief. In *Flush*, the dog's suffering is conveyed directly through canine perception—"Where Mr Browning saw, Flush smelt"—rather than translated into human sympathy. This form challenges Andrew Linzey's animal theology, which speaks "on behalf of" animals. Woolf abolishes the need for human representation: animal grief is recognized in its own modality, without translation; Collective-landscape grief. In *Between the Acts*, warplanes interrupt the pageant; "the cows took up the burden" and the final "we... we... we..." expands in mirrors to embrace cows, swallows, wind, sunlight, stones, Roman roads, and ruined manors. The pronoun "we" is rewritten: it no longer defaults to human community but is filled by the full material-temporal breadth of the landscape.

¹⁸ Yet such an extension cannot remain at the level of thematic correspondence, such as pairing the Daoist idea of "equalizing things" with the Christian "community of creation".