

To the Lighthouse: End of Meaning

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Abstract

The study, diverging from current critical discourse on Virginia Woolf as eccentric author, sets out expressly to look at Woolf as enigmatic text. In so doing, it explores largely untapped Woolf terrain. Its broad focus is on Woolf's two major novels, Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse though it concerns itself more particularly with the latter – and more mature – work. It takes in Woolf's distinctive angle on modernism, as evinced by her first short story, "The Mark on the Wall," besides considering her unique aesthetic, as laid out in her quasi-memoir, "A Sketch of the Past." The discussion likewise engages with Woolf's understanding of the tensions and disjunctions inherent within fiction and the nature of fiction as a deconstructive mode. Principally, it engages with Woolf's individual understanding of time and her ostensible resolution of the conundrum of time's slippage. Equally significantly, the essay looks at the impact of the revolution in pictorial art, especially Picasso, on the shape of fiction, as conceived of by Woolf. It considers the possibility, in the light of this revolution, understood as pivotal to modernist thought, of a transition from theme to form taking place, for instance, in To the Lighthouse.

One of the curious things about Virginia Woolf studies today is the fact that critics seem unable to separate the woman from her work. Biographical factors appear to play an important part in any assessment of Woolf's writing. This is understandable, to some extent, given her peculiar persona or what Hermione Lee refers to – in Woolf's own words ("A Sketch of the Past" 80) – as her "life-writing" (Lee 12) (including diaries, letters, journals, memoirs, even novels) and the unusual circumstances of her private life. However, that life became public property long ago. We know it – the Bloomsbury perspective, St. Ives childhood, premature mother-loss, homoeroticism, manic depression, suicide.

So one wonders – given all the givens about Woolf – why biographical crutches continue to be required in discussions of her fiction. There is similarly a concern about the increasingly anecdotal comment on Woolf which often amounts to little more than gratuitous chat. Admittedly, there are critics like Maud Ellmann, for instance, who have avoided the practice and given preference to psychoanalytical comment instead. There are also inter-textual modernist studies of Virginia Woolf (see Parsons) besides feminist readings (see Snaith, Simpson, etc.). But the majority of commentators still appear to resist grappling independently – simply as great art – with Woolf's individual texts.

"Contexts" – historical, political, social, literary and, of course, critical – come in the way. Awkward questions arise. Are we, for instance, to take it that we are not in a position to interpret texts such as *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* without reliance on biography or, for that matter, as mere adjuncts to the work of Joyce? Is Woolf merely an English Proust, bent on recuperating her own personal past or self or a vaguely "humanist" aesthete in "modernist" disguise? Are these texts otherwise indecipherable? This is not to propose a

taboo on biographical testimony – and certainly not on a modernist format – in support of critical argument, simply to advocate a less restrictive approach to Woolf’s hybrid fictional texts.

Partly with a view to upholding the primacy of the text rather than the author as fetishistic object, this paper aims at considering one of Woolf’s more mature novels, *To the Lighthouse*. It is, we know, a text rooted in elegiac childhood memory. It also, as is not often remembered, purports to tell us how, as a fiction, *To the Lighthouse* actually comes about. First, it seems relevant that *To the Lighthouse* is similar to its forerunner, *Mrs Dalloway* in the peculiar nature of its aesthetic. Like *Mrs Dalloway*, it combines a characteristic sense of ecstasy and terror – ecstasy in the sense of a lifting into a pristine mode of perception and terror in the face of transience, war, and death. We see something quite like this aesthetic, painfully dissected and put together in Woolf’s makeshift memoir, “A Sketch of the Past.”

Woolf explores the “ecstasies and raptures” which date back to her childhood at St. Ives together with a sense of horror in the face of the “other” in the looking glass and the molested body and death. Fumbling, as she tries to explain the complexity of the feeling, she confronts a suicide, a particular death – the death of Valpy, a family friend – and her resultant sense of disintegration. This leads to a kind of writerly resolution through a quest for wholeness:

... a man I had seen had killed himself. The sense of horror held me powerless. But in the case of the flower I found a reason. And was thus able to deal with the sensation. I was not powerless. I was conscious – if only at a distance – that I should in time explain it. I do not know if I was older when I saw the flower than I was when I had the other two experiences. I only know that many of these exceptional moments brought with them a peculiar horror and a physical collapse; they seemed dominant; myself passive. This suggests that as one gets older one has a greater power through reason to provide an explanation; and that this explanation blunts the sledge-hammer force of the blow. I think this is true, because though I still have the peculiarity that I receive these sudden shocks, they are now always welcome; after the first surprise I always feel instantly that they are particularly valuable. And so I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. *It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole*; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together. From this I reach what I may call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant ideal of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. (“A Sketch of the Past” 70, my italics)

The extract affords a valuable insight into the precise nature of the aesthetic that informs Woolf's two novels and gives them their "wholeness" and coherence. Ecstasy and horror are key to an understanding of *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs Dalloway*. The rapture in each is, for instance, matched by horror in the face of death. The two are blended, forming part of a composite whole. The death of Septimus Smith may take place in the wings in *Mrs Dalloway*, yet it inexorably cuts across the celebratory evening at the Dalloways' home. Mrs Ramsay's death, quietly but irrevocably, terminates the revels at the cottage at Skye.

Of course, *Mrs Dalloway*, which covers a day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway, is more simply "social" whereas *To the Lighthouse* takes, like Woolf's first short story, "The Mark on the Wall," a rather more philosophically questioning position. "The Mark on the Wall" is relevant in that it sheds light on *To the Lighthouse*. It contains Woolf's *pensées* in typical stream of consciousness form. But, above all, it sets out her personal – and highly individualized – understanding of modernism together with a kind of theory of fiction. In effect, it announces a "new" fiction," a fiction arising out of the everyday but engaged in a tension with the "disconnected"¹ self or consciousness:

... the novelists in future will realize more and more the importance of these reflections, for of course there is not one reflection but an infinite number, those are the depths they will explore, the phantoms they will pursue, leaving the description of reality more and more out of their stories, taking a knowledge of it for granted, as the Greeks did and Shakespeare perhaps ("The Mark on the Wall" 32)

Less of a "story" and more of an informal discourse or even "essay" or a prototypical exercise in the production of an "inner" voice, "The Mark on the Wall" explores the nature of thought and the way in which it flows or connects – often in terms of the personal or historical past – or breaks off and diverges. It speaks of thoughts assembling, in a moment of focus "on a new object," in the manner of ants carrying "a blade of straw" ("Mark" 30) before they abandon it. The natural analogy is meant to tell us that thought is self-sustaining and has a life of its own – indeed that the self, which is the sum of its thoughts, has a life deep "below" the "surfaces of facts."

There is a strange defiance with which Woolf, in this story, addresses the issue of literal reality or "fact" versus the imagination. We observe an assault on comfortable notions of "solidity" and "stability" and a readily known world. According to Woolf, the grounds of knowledge are questionable. There can be no certain knowing, no conviction: "Nothing is proved, nothing is known" ("Mark" 33). Albeit tinged with Woolf's characteristic humor, a fundamental anxiety pervades the text. Where, for instance, the narrator asks, pointing to the transience of life and the world of things, did the "many remembered possession" go? "Opals and emeralds ... lie about the roots of turnips" ("Mark" 30). It is in this spirit that Woolf explores the issue of "modernism" and, with it – as a sort of pivot – of meaning and the nature of meaning. The question that Woolf raises – teasingly, cryptically – about the mark on the wall of the story has to do, precisely, with meaning.

From the very outset, “reality” in the shape of the mark on the wall is mystified. Is it, the narrator asks, a mark left behind by a nail? Possibilities are considered. Woolf presents us with variables of meaning. The mark, Woolf seems to be saying, is a wandering signifier. What is it, she asks: “a nail, a rose leaf, a crack in the wood?” (“Mark” 33).

By the end of the story, the enigma has been resolved. We are told it is a snail. The point has to do with life and its unreality and insubstantiality or in fact – since snails are earthworms – with death. The ending of “The Mark on the Wall” is subtly executed. There is a deceptive simplicity – and irony – to the moment when the narrator is interrupted in her thoughts by an interlocutor (evidently her husband) and the truth about the mark on the wall is revealed. There is minimal dialogue. The stream of consciousness breaks as in Woolf’s novels. The narrator is informed by the person in question that he is going out to “buy a newspaper... though it’s no good buying newspapers. The reason follows: “Nothing ever happens.” Literal reality is shown as diminished and empty, a mere shell. At the same time, given the testimony of World War I, it is seen as violent, abhorrent: “Curse this war! God damn this war!” (“Mark” 35).

All these themes or concerns would later be virtual articles of faith to Woolf. Horror in the face of a war-stricken present, a persistent sense of transience, insubstantiality, epistemological uncertainty, freedom from the male principle, the higher reality of art (the “mark”) as compared to given reality (the “snail”) and – as in *Prufrock* – a crushing sense of indeterminacy are revisited in *To the Lighthouse*.

Mrs Ramsay, with her whimsy, and Lily Briscoe with her angst, for instance, both have their ultimate origins in “The Mark on the Wall.” Mr Ramsay can similarly be located within the caricature of the male principle as exemplified by Whittaker’s Table of Precedency. Woolf’s evocative triple cadence (“a nail, a rose leaf, a crack in the wood”) is likewise echoed at various points in *To the Lighthouse*. So is Woolf’s irony. The parallels, as will be seen, are ample.

At one level, *To the Lighthouse* presents, in the section titled “Window,” an idyll, short-lived enough, at Skye, involving Mr and Mrs Ramsay, and their children and house-guests. Subsequently, in the two later sections, “Time Passes” and “The Lighthouse,” it savagely enacts the destruction of that idyll by Nature – and the War – followed by an act of understanding and atonement.

In the second section, mortality unaccountably intervenes: the text commits “matricide.” Mrs Ramsay, the central character and presiding deity of the text, as well as the fountainhead or source of “sympathy,” is suddenly no more. Other lives too are erased. Andrew is killed by a shell. Prue dies in childbirth. The deaths are seen to take place, without ceremony, on the sidelines. Mr Ramsay stretches out his arms “one dark morning” only to discover, with a chilling irony, that his arms are empty and his wife, “having died rather suddenly the night before” (122), is not there. We get the impression that she has melted into thin air. The deaths of their children Andrew and Prue are similarly reported, parenthetically, as more or less surreal events. Life is shown as curiously insubstantial or a scant, hastily concluded episode.

“The Lighthouse” accordingly opens, with an almost implacable logic, to house-guest and painter, Lily Briscoe’s distraught question: “What does it mean, what can it all mean?” A little later we are offered a kind of answer:

And, resting, looking from one to the other vaguely, the old question which traversed the sky of the soul perpetually, the vast, the general question which was apt to particularize itself at moments such as these, when she released faculties that had been on the strain, stood over her, paused over, darkened over her. What is the meaning of life? (153).

The text points to a mystification and at the same time offers a means of decoding it. What it appears to be saying is this: *To the Lighthouse* is not merely symbolic but operates at two distinct, clearly formulated levels, particular and general, as allegories do. What it further suggests is that the novel is an allegory, in keeping with modernist thought – as, for example, in Eliot and Forster – relating to meaning. So, if we are to make sense of *To the Lighthouse*, it must clearly be approached in this way.

As already partly suggested, meaning is subjected to a curious form of complication at the very start of the novel. It is called into question in the shape of an apparently innocent domestic conflict between Mr and Mrs Ramsay over the weather at Skye and the possibility (or otherwise) of a journey to the lighthouse. However, as we see, the bickering is anything but innocent. It is central to the narrative and appears to constitute a radical disjunction between two distinct modes of belief:

“Yes, of course, if it’s fine tomorrow,” said Mrs Ramsay. “But you’ll have to be up with the lark,” she added. ... James Ramsay, sitting on the floor cutting out pictures from the illustrated catalogue of the Army and Navy stores, endowed the picture of a refrigerator as his mother spoke with heavenly bliss ...

“But,” said his father, stopping in front of the drawing room window, “it won’t be fine.”
(3-4)

The difference is too subtly delineated and routine in conception, too “domesticated” – too much a part of a perennial sparring between the Ramsays – to be instantly appropriately identified. Yet, for all the naturalism and lightness of touch – and musicality – with which it is conveyed, it is inescapably there. Discord between husband and wife over the weather is more than just domestic or meteorological. The dispute has to do with humanist-modernist tensions which pervade the text. There is a gap between the Ramsays that is irreconcilable: “Strife, divisions, difference of opinion, prejudices twisted into the very fibre of being, oh that they should begin so early, Mrs Ramsay deplored” (8).

However, it is less a gap in temperament than vision. It is a gap we first perceive through James since it is for him that a trip to the lighthouse is intended by his mother. To James, oedipal ally of his mother, dreaming of killing his father who throws cold water over the proposed visit, Mr Ramsay represents the spirit of negation, the negative principle, the great “no” of the universe, the other, with his eye on givens and “facts uncompromising.” We learn how

the Ramsay family are knit together: through the negativity of Mr Ramsay, the purveyor of factuality or scientifically verifiable “reality” (the “phantom kitchen table ... whose virtue ... had been laid bare ... which stuck there, its four legs in the air” [21])² on the one hand and the transforming and healing imagination of Mrs Ramsay, with her dreams and desiderata – and classical “sympathy” – on the other. Interestingly, to James, as to Mrs Ramsay, the lighthouse seems already to possess a symbolic significance.

Consequently, letter, as embodied by Mr Ramsay – the smug logical-positivist to whom the lighthouse is merely a literal place and rain an equally literal obstacle – and symbol are seen to be strangely at odds³. This is the stuff of which life, for Mrs Ramsay, seems to be made. Fact or literal reality, the narrator appears to imply, is an inescapable alloy of fiction. It is the outsider which has somehow found its way *in* and must be reckoned with. Presence, as Mrs Ramsay is painfully aware, is not possible without representation. The creative principle cannot – this is a fundamental irony of the text – come into play in the absence of the “arid scimitar” of the violative Freudian other.

The issue is made more explicit still in the context of Mr Ramsay’s acolyte and a house-guest at the Ramsays’, Charles Tansley. There is, for example, as recounted by her, a revealing exchange between Mrs Ramsay and Tansley:

She could not help laughing herself at times. She said, the other day, something about “waves mountains high”. Yes, Charles Tansley said, it was a little rough. “Aren’t you drenched to the skin?” she had said. “Damp, not wet through,” said Mr Tansley, pinching his sleeve, feeling his socks. (7)

What we perceive here is a quite extraordinary deconstructive mode. Mrs Ramsay is seen, in a moment of euphoric explication, breaking down language into its verbal and proverbial components so as the better to account for her own aesthetic or the fiction of which she is a part. Her laughter is ironic and caused by her sense of a peculiar breach within thought itself. The matter is, at some level, one of imagination and faith. But it is also more than that. What is suggested is that, in keeping with his sobriquet – “atheist” – Tansley is not just, with the “first pages in proof” of his “Prolegomena” (10), devoid of faith but also altogether exempt from a capacity for metaphor. Mrs Ramsay’s laughter is, therefore, equally a symptom of her awareness of a crucial lack in the guise of a spirit run dry.

The point to note is that figure or metaphor here is shown, in its sheer versatile scope – or sweep – as being proper to the female rather than male. It comes naturally, in other words, to Mrs Ramsay, as a woman, to speak quite as she does – with provocative extravagance, in hyperbolic terms, figuratively. However, this is clearly not true of Tansley whose language, at least for Mrs Ramsay, cannot, like that of Mr Ramsay who is unable to make it beyond the letter “Q,” climb out of its complacency and is clinically exact, literal, dead⁴. One is reminded, inevitably, of the Pauline conception: *the letter killeth*:

it was not that they minded, the children said. It was not his face, it was not his manners. It was him – *his point of view*. When they talked about something interesting,

people, music, history, anything, even said it was a fine evening so why not sit out of doors, then what they complained of about Charles Tansley was that until he had turned the whole thing round and made it somehow reflect himself and disparage them, put them all on edge somehow *with his acid way of peeling the flesh and blood off everything*, he was not satisfied. (7, my italics)⁵

Tansley, then, to Mrs Ramsay and her children, represents denial and, in a way, death.

Apart from being a source of momentary mirth, communication at Skye inevitably proves a casualty. However, Mrs Ramsay, the source of beauty, “with stars in her eyes and veils in her hair, with cyclamen and wild violets” (13,) has to make her way forward, overflowing with indignation and humanity, contemplating loneliness and Empire⁶, incomplete stocking in hand, in the faintly *distract* style that is her hallmark, part compassion and part irony, in a straight line from Jane Austen and George Eliot. The lighthouse which is, in a sense, a place of illumination, is, for the moment, necessarily, off limits. And meaning, which we are directed by the narrator to consider later in the text, already confronts a sort of impasse.

The portrayal of Mr Ramsay as a pompous, bungling Tennysonian hero represents a further, no less deliberate tangling of meaning. Woolf’s putdown of the male of the species in the savagely ironic terms of “The Charge of the Light Brigade” is classic. We see the myth of the power of male over female exploded with a curious persistence during the course of the text. Mr Ramsay is shown as patriarchal yet weak inasmuch as, despite his heroic bluster and show of authority – a bizarre mix of boots and brains – he nevertheless hankers unremittingly after “sympathy” from his wife. The quote from Tennyson, “someone had blundered,” turned into a mocking refrain in Woolf, points, on the face of it, to a confession (and simultaneous disclaimer) by Mr Ramsay about his fallibility as a male and, by inference, the “mistake” or contradiction underlying the all too inflated male project. It is on this idea – of a generic flaw – that the Tennysonian analogy in Woolf may be said to turn.

This is developed further in the course of the narrative. We see, for instance, a fairly explicit analogy drawn in the text between a shot fired from a gun by Jasper and the perceived “blunder”:

(A) shot went off close at hand, and there came, flying from its fragments, frightened, effusive, tumultuous, a flock of starlings.

“Jasper!” said Mr Banks. They turned the way the starlings flew, over the terrace. Following the scatter of swift-flying birds in the sky they stepped through the gap in the high hedge straight into Mr Ramsay, who boomed tragically at them, “Someone had blundered!” ... and, Lily Briscoe and Mr Banks, looking uneasily up into the sky, observed that the flock of starlings which Jasper had routed with his gun had settled on the tops of the elm trees. (23)

The point seems clear enough. Jasper, no less male than his father, is seen suddenly to disturb the peace. As a result, the conversation between Lily Briscoe and Mr Banks comes to a halt. The starlings are scattered. Mr Ramsay is described as, in a moment of recognition, voicing

the Tennysonian mantra, “tragically.” The moment is emblematic. We are alerted to the interventionist – and wanton – nature of the typical male. At some level, albeit harmless, Jasper’s is shown as a mild act of war, an assault on Nature or a mysterious violation. We are implicitly pointed to Mr Ramsay’s (and Mr Tansley’s) own earlier mindless interventions in connection with the visit to the lighthouse and also to what grimly looms ahead in the text: the World War.

It is the text’s – or narrator’s – way of telling us where the “blunder” in fact lies and also explaining that it is fundamental. The narrator seems to be at pains here to give her view of the precise nature of things while also positing an original cause or aetiology. Interestingly, there is a similarity between the shot fired by Jasper and the “bang” heard in *Mrs Dalloway*. In each case, we see a peculiar moment of kinesis, one that is kinetic as much as it is kinesthetic and can be said to set the world of each text in motion. It is therefore, in a way, necessary – and, in the case, at least, of *To the Lighthouse* – a necessary evil.

That does not mean that Jasper’s act is “bad” in itself – since it is also merely the innocent act of a young person – but that it hides a basic ill or *culpa* in Nature’s or the world’s origins. Meaning is, of course, once again called into question. The suggestion is that the world or life in its beginnings is a mere shot in the dark, the result of an arbitrary intervention, strangely random and unmeant. That is why, to Woolf, while it is aesthetically ample, life is also ephemeral. More properly perhaps, it lacks in concreteness and depth – indeed tends towards abstraction – and fails to afford a sustained and substantial experience.

The reason is partly that Woolf seems to see time, in line with Bergson and his theory of *durée*, as perceptibly in flow yet somehow also constantly renegeing on itself (*The Creative Mind*). The theory appears to envisage a strange breach in time, taken as lending itself to a retrospective differentiation or individuation. The space of memory or of individual moments as they pass is consequently seen in Woolf as intricate and vast. This is what *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* seem specially to explore. We come upon it too in Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* as also *The Waves*. Let us see for a moment how time and memory come about, for example, in *To the Lighthouse*:

She had a dull errand in the town; she had a letter or two to write; she would be ten minutes perhaps; she would put on her hat. And, with her basket and her parasol, there she was again, ten minutes later, giving one a sense of being ready. (9)

Time is perceived here in the moment of its passing, poised between conditional future and past. There is an errand to be performed but, prior to that, letters to be written and a hat to be worn. The question the passage poses has to do with the mysterious “ten-minute” gap between the “earlier” and “later” moments of Mrs Ramsay’s personal time. It is as if the text is trying to determine where time “goes” or how it behaves at such moments and how the present actually occurs. Woolf seems to perceive time precisely as made up of such fortuitous intervals and the present as a function of memory and intention and a possibility, as in Eliot’s “Burnt Norton,” of future and past⁷.

While there seems, in Woolf, to be no present as such – or a present that is there merely by default and a memory that is simply a sort of hole⁸ – a temporal renewal is nevertheless achieved in the above extract, with Mrs Ramsay distractedly gathering basket and parasol and returning (“there she was”), having forgotten what she expressly went for: her hat. The idea of renewal – of time, through its various moments – is, of course, central to Woolf and her aesthetic and informs both her better known texts, *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. This can be seen to occur in the later work, for example, in terms of a recurrence. It may simply be a case, as in the context of quotidian time, of difference within sameness: “‘And, even if it isn’t fine tomorrow,’ said Mrs. Ramsay, raising her eyes to glance at William Bankes and Lily Briscoe as they passed, ‘it will be another day’” (24).

Alternatively, renewal can also be more complex as in the context of Nature or, more specifically, the sea:

Then, up behind the great black rock, almost every evening spurted irregularly, so that one had to watch for it and it was a delight when it came to a fountain of white water; and when, while one waited for that, one watched, on the pale semi-circular beach, wave after wave shredding again and again smoothly a film of mother of pearl. (19)

It is a given that the sea is paradigmatic in *To the Lighthouse*. It forms part of the perspective of overall flux and renewal in the novel. In the present instance, the sea is seen as sustaining itself through a continual process of return or recall. It represents a mysterious form of time in motion. The waves are emblematic of individual (marine) “moments.” As in *The Tempest*, a process of magical transformation is in evidence. Lily Briscoe and William Bankes are treated to a spectacle both “rich and strange.” We are exposed to the esoteric experience of the creative moment or fiction becoming fiction. The “fountain of white water” of the literal sea is seen giving way, over and over, by virtue of a kind of synaesthesia, to pure symbol in the shape of a renewed and poetically enriched “film of mother of pearl.”

Time is among the great secrets of Woolf’s work. She appears to have understood time and its workings as profoundly as, if not better than, Proust. The narrative of both her chief texts certainly suggests this. It is possible that this was facilitated by the “stream of consciousness” technique that she had access to and that allowed her to achieve what Proust, in his mnemonic manner, never did. Time may be seen to return in Proust but it does not, as in the case of Woolf, become present. It is recovered – and memorialized – but that is all. To read Proust is in effect to get lost in time. It is to go by train, after much soul-searching, to Balbec with the narrator’s grandmother and the *Lettres* of Mme de Sevigne (*Within a Budding Grove*). It is to lose direction with Françoise and inadvertently speed to Nantes. On the whole, it is to remain rooted in the past – on a permanent pilgrimage – in the virtual absence of a present.

Woolf’s aim was clearly different. She seems to have sought to place her narrative *in* the present by mixing “memory and desire” and also, in a way, her tenses. Time in Woolf is reflected in an evocative hodge-podge of happenings made simultaneous in a coherent aesthetic whole. That may be a by-product of the stream of consciousness technique. But it is of course more than that.

Woolf's narrative comes to life as no other novelist's does. It brings together possible and actual, dreamed of and real, near and distant as only poetry perhaps can. The "feeling" that is normally attributed to the protagonist of *Middlemarch* is more properly in evidence here. Woolf's run-on sentences with their complex structures betray an apprehension of an intensely felt existence, bodying forth a fragile dialogue of the self, replete with moral questioning and rich layers of sensory experience. The sense of nostalgia and evanescence in evidence is entirely Woolf's own:

Disappearing as stealthily as stags from the dinner-table directly the meal was over, the eight sons and daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay sought their bedrooms, their fastnesses in a house where there was no privacy to debate anything, everything; Tansley's tie; the passing of the Reform Bill; sea-birds and butterflies; people; while the sun poured into those attics, which a plank alone separated from each other so that every footstep could be plainly heard and the Swiss girl sobbing for her father who was dying of cancer in a valley of the Grisons, and lit up bats, flannels, straw hats, ink-pots, paint-pots, beetles, and the skulls of small birds, while it drew from the long frilled strips of seaweed pinned to the wall, a smell of salt and weeds, which was in the towels too, gritty with sand from bathing. (7-8)

There is a strange fugitive quality here. Not only are the Ramsay children shown to be in stealthy, "stag-like" flight. Their subjects of discussion – "sea-birds and butterflies," the "passing of the Reform Bill" and "Tansley's tie" – are no less volatile. The sunlight is pouring into "those attics" and "lighting up" what is animate (bats, beetles) and inanimate (flannels, straw hats, ink-pots, paint-pots, bird-skulls) and what may be said to be slipping through one's fingers (sand). In effect, what we see here are images of a time that is fleeting, a world that, despite being visible, audible and tactile, seems to be swiftly and irrecoverably slipping away.

So what is it that synthesizes all this and lifts it out of the narrative past and renders it present? Critics have mostly disregarded the ingenious device which enables Woolf to achieve this. This has to do with her special understanding of rhetoric and time. It is a device that Woolf has recourse to in both her major texts. If we look carefully, for instance, at the above quote, we will see that the typically long sentence is divided into two. The first part – or independent clause – relates to the elusive Ramsay children. The second part – or dependent clause, connected by means of the marker "while" – has to do with the curious minutiae of life in the Ramsay home. In both parts we see the use of the past tense in its simple form. However, two syntactical features make the sentence more than a little unusual. First, the two predicates in the second part of the sentence of which the subject is "the sun" – "poured" and "lit" – are somewhat idiosyncratically separated from each other.

The intervening phrase is as follows: *and the Swiss girl sobbing for her father who was dying of cancer in the Grisons*. This phrase is, of course, participial, the noun "girl" being modified by the present participle "sobbing." Interestingly, the phrase appears to be thematically and syntactically the outsider in the passage. It stands isolated, reflecting both the foreignness and aloneness of the girl with her plainly audible grief made the more poignant by the searching sunlight.

Of course, there is a good reason for the phrase being there. It has clearly been put there to highlight the irony of the moment. Above all, what the present participle – “sobbing” – does is to show the girl’s grief for her dying father as not just unbearable but unbearably present. Tragedy is seen to lie at the heart of the passage as a terrible, ineluctable fact. The episode of the Swiss girl consequently seems to represent a focal point of the passage while the remaining detail comes across as merely incidental. Death is shown as both central and present. It constitutes the coda of the moment. It is overriding. The effect of this – and of the present participle here – is magical. The entire scene is transformed. By a process of poetic transference, it is returned to us out of a continuous past in terms of a consistent dramatic present. This is among the most compelling features of Woolf’s style. It is equally in evidence in *Mrs Dalloway*. There too we are confronted – far more extensively in fact than in *To the Lighthouse* – with a curious interplay between signifier and signified as well as present and past. There is no dearth of examples. Present participles pervade *Mrs Dalloway*. It is riddled with them. Woolf seems to have gone out of her way to produce not just a new fiction but a novel temporal mode.

The opening of *Mrs Dalloway*, for instance, subtly blends Clarissa Dalloway’s past and present. Her admirer of yore, Peter Walsh is due to return so he is shown as not just of the stuff of memory but also – since he is actually heard to “speak” – a vital part of Clarissa Dalloway’s present. The past, to her, is not just figuratively “there” but palpably present:

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, *feeling* as she did, *standing* there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; *looking* at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks *rising, falling, standing and looking* until Peter Walsh said, ‘*Musing among the vegetables? – was that it?*’ (3, my italics)

The feat is largely accomplished through the use of the past perfect and simple past in combination with a spate of present participles (including a gerund) which, as in *To the Lighthouse*, draw the remembered past – through a sort of sleight-of-hand – compellingly into the present. The fusion of the two is perfect. On the face of it, of course, the past necessarily remains formally in the past or “in the mind.” But an unusual effect has nevertheless been achieved. A new – or renewed – time is in place. Woolf’s purpose was clearly to keep time open or to preserve a sense of flow in her narrative. And here, as elsewhere in *Mrs Dalloway*, she succeeds magnificently. We get a hint of Woolf’s awareness of the creative process and how her own fiction comes about – “fresh” and new – from the words of Clarissa Dalloway on the subject of “life”: “Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh” (4).

Woolf's writing has the quality of hand-blown glass, at once fragile and fey. Albeit different from that of *Mrs Dalloway*, the world of *To the Lighthouse* comes across as elusive and tenuous – and disappearing – like the Ramsay children or the sea at Skye taking on new hues as it becomes foam. It is also shown as subject to an inexorable destiny. Destiny is perceived in *To the Lighthouse*, as in *Mrs Dalloway*, as a function of time. As in Bergson, the experience of time consists, at one level, in a forward movement towards death (*Time and Free Will*). That movement is present in premonitory fashion throughout *Mrs Dalloway*. Big Ben's "leaden circles" and the "tolling" at "St. Margaret's" are among recurrent auguries. World War I and death are similarly prepared for in *To the Lighthouse*. The most powerful image of destiny here is possibly that of the dining room door closing for good behind Mrs Ramsay after a sort of "Last Supper" in the novel:

With her foot on the threshold she waited a moment longer in a scene which was vanishing even as she looked, and then, as she moved, and took Minta's arm and left the room, it changed, it shaped itself differently; it had become, giving she knew, one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past. (103)

Meaning becomes oddly uncertain at this point. At what seems to be the tail end of time in the text, we see it as inevitably compromised. We get a sense of the onset of a strange interval: a break, an ominous pause. We are constrained to ask: what might seem to have become of the present in the text? Is there such a thing? Does time present exist in *To the Lighthouse*? Or is it, as in Proust, merely remembered? The point Woolf seems to be making is this: time always merely announces its own end, it always only predates death. As we know, World War I is seen to follow shortly after this and Mrs Ramsay to die prematurely.

The fact is that, in the absence of Mrs Ramsay, meaning disappears. The death of Mrs Ramsay, the principal character of *To the Lighthouse*, seems, in other words, to represent a curious terminus and to symbolize the end of meaning in the text, which is why, in the last section, we come across the amanuensis-cum-artist, Lily Briscoe, asking the anguished question: "What does it mean?" To some extent, Lily Briscoe with her "Chinese eyes," whose purpose it is to record the aesthetic moment – the moment of "the wall: the hedge, the tree" – is left to "fill in" for Mrs Ramsay against an irremediably fractured perspective. "Multiplicity" – with the narrative later being shared equally by Cam and James – no longer seems relevant or of value. The narrative itself appears to go suddenly awry. Questions get asked of a kind not seemingly necessary before. The most trifling questions acquire an almost fundamental status. Incomprehension and terror reign:

What does one send to the Lighthouse indeed! At any other time Lily could have suggested reasonably tea, tobacco, newspapers. But this morning everything seemed so extraordinarily queer that a question like Nancy's – What does one send to the Lighthouse? – opened doors in one's mind that went banging and swinging to and fro and made one keep asking in a stupefied gape, What does one send? What does one do? Why is one sitting here, after all? ... How aimless it was, how chaotic, how unreal it was, she thought, looking at her empty coffee cup. Mrs Ramsay dead; Andrew killed; Prue dead too. (140)

There is a bewildering rift in time that Lily Briscoe seems to have to confront. This is the rift brought about by Mrs Ramsay's disappearance from the scene. Her healing hand has been withdrawn. Above all, Mr Ramsay has to be placated. It is not, given his persistent need for "sympathy" and the urgency of Lily Briscoe's own painting from "life" (after a decade has elapsed and she is already forty-four), the easiest of tasks.

Deeper questions also arise. What, for instance, Lily Briscoe asks, when faced with Mr Ramsay's obsessive intoning of words from the "Charge of the Light Brigade," is the Tennysonian code? What is the "truth of things"? Is it more than literal? Is it symbolic? To Lily Briscoe, stricken by bewilderment and groping for a foothold, the Ramsay house is "full of unrelated passions." This is because oneness in the shape of Mrs Ramsay appears to have gone. Bit by bit, the construct of a multiple perspective is seen, in the absence of the harmonizing presence of Mrs Ramsay, to implode. The idea or Joycean project of a discontinuous or dismembered narrative itself is seen to fail. We cannot ignore the implications. They are crucial.

What Woolf seems to be saying, after allowing her central character to die, is that classical unity or Mrs Ramsay's "sympathy" that knits the matter of *To the Lighthouse* together – and should be but is no longer there – is all-important. This is an inference that obviously has to be drawn. In the section prior to this, "Time Passes," chaos and night descend on the Ramsay home at Skye. War is shown to arrive and its onslaught symbolized by the devastation, at the hands of a pestilential Nature, of the all but deserted Ramsay home. The moment is apocalyptic. It is also cathartic. Noteworthy – apart from the deaths at this point – is the dehumanization that we observe. Besides the barbarism of Nature and a sense of an anarchy loosed on the world, we find ourselves in face of a terrifying, desolate, depersonalized space:

What people had shed and left – a pair of shoes, a shooting cap, some faded skirts and coats in wardrobes – these alone kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated how once they were filled and animated. (123)

Vacuity and nullity – and a miscreation – inform the text. The human form is known only by its residual sartorial shape. We glean the beginnings of a movement towards abstraction even as we confront the outermost limits of fiction. The living form – the reality of life itself – seems to be in question. We are shown everyday accessories emptied of human content. There are signifiers but no signified. There is a pictorial perspective with pure abstract images. The question of the reason for – and meaning of – Lily Briscoe's painting is inevitably begged. So too, again, is the issue of a multiple perspective and coherence as a literary value.

We know that Lily Briscoe's painting is abstract. We are told as much from the outset where the verisimilitude of Mr Paunceforte's "pink women on the beach" is contrasted with the formal relations in Lily Briscoe's art:

It was a question, she remembered, of how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left. She might do it by bringing the line of the branch across so; or break the vacancy in the foreground by an object ... so. (49)

It is possible – given that, to Woolf, “human character” changed as of 1910 (“Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown”), the year that saw (thanks to Roger Fry) Picasso’s work on display at a Post-Impressionist exhibition in London when she is bound to have heard of his epochal *Les Femmes d’Alger* – that there is an implicit connection between Lily Briscoe’s painting and Picasso’s art. It is relevant that it was in the latter’s work that, along with perspective, the human figure, as we know it, suddenly and momentarily disappeared, verisimilitude went by the board and form took over from theme as the new “reality.” We certainly seem to be looking at what Picasso had scrupulously examined and what Lily Briscoe also, in her curiously irresolute yet instinctive way, appears to confront: the problem of pictorial space:

“Is it a boat? Is it a cork?” she would say, Lily repeated, turning back, reluctantly again, to her canvas. Heaven be praised for it, the problem of space remained, she thought, taking up her brush again. It glared at her. ... Beautiful and bright it should be on the surface, feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into another like the colours on a butterfly’s wing; but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron. (163)

Lily Briscoe’s quandary, echoing that of Mrs Ramsay, is seen to persist till the end of *To the Lighthouse*. For us, as readers, it actually assumes the form of a crippling enigma where thematic meaning has been jettisoned and we are confronted with a sense of anguish over the question of achievable form. With the death of Mrs Ramsay, the nature of space – or “reality” – has changed and calls for a new mode of perception. However, we see a kind of resolution in the last four lines of the novel. Lily Briscoe says, “I have had my vision.” Understanding dawns at last and the painting, which has been in gestation for ten years, is suddenly and dramatically completed. We are told that Lily Briscoe “drew a line there, *in the centre*” (198, my italics).

There is a strange purity to what Woolf, through Lily Briscoe, seems to be saying. While, on the one hand, Woolf sees multiple perspectives as failing in the absence of a “sympathetic” center and this is, at the same time, marked down by her, however ironically, as a failure of the humanist tradition with its emphasis on centrality, she appears, on the other hand, to perceive this position as being redeemable or retrievable in art. Lily Briscoe’s “vision” suggests, almost magically, that, the death of Mrs Ramsay, or what is, in effect, an audacious sacrificial gambit notwithstanding, something of Mrs Ramsay can nevertheless be retained or recovered in the context of abstract art. It is a very fine point but – with Woolf staking her all on it – we are meant to glean something akin to a hard-won classical truth. As Woolf appears to see it, whereas, in abstract art, perspective may have been flattened out and gone, the center has *not*. In other words – it is something Woolf doggedly sets out to prove – there will, to her, in art, always *be* a formal center.

There can, Woolf seems to claim in *To the Lighthouse*, be no rushed or ill-considered departure from the critical classical format. As we can see, there is a highly complex paradox at play in the novel in this regard. Partly because Woolf seems, like Forster in *A Passage to India* and Eliot in *Prufrock*, to have regarded modernism as part of an interval where meaning was in abeyance and the issue of a “destination” had still not been resolved, her novel appears to

pull in two different directions, humanist and modernist, at the same time. On the whole, however, it appears to be the experience of *To the Lighthouse* that the modernist project is bound to hold fire – that it *cannot* be resolved – and that humanism or classicism has, to some extent, to be accommodated, being logically and historically inescapable.

Oddly ambiguous, Mr Ramsay's trip to the lighthouse along with his two children, James and Cam, in the last section of the novel, suggests something similar. We find ourselves in face of a peculiar kind of "stutter" in the direction of a classical *telos* such as Woolf appears to have in view from the very beginning of the novel. As we know, journeying to the lighthouse is shown as one of the novel's prime goals or desiderata or among the principal concerns of Mrs Ramsay while alive. Talk of the lighthouse and a possible visit to it are seen as high points in her son, James's boyhood.

We have also already observed that, to Mr Ramsay, the lighthouse constitutes, at least to start with, a merely literal destination that his wife seems, from purely womanly caprice, to harp on for the sake of her son when the "weather" simply does not permit. That Mr Ramsay sets out to atone, after his wife's death, for his persistent opposition to her wish to take their son, James to the lighthouse, is, of course, of the essence. There is a singular irony about this. Not only is Mr Ramsay's visit to the lighthouse curiously belated – a decade has intervened – but it is also depicted as more than a little ham-handed. Above all, it is carried out in the wrong spirit. It is "commandeered" or authorized in blundering "Ternnysonian" fashion. So far, at least as his children are concerned, Mr Ramsay despotically enforces the visit. We see James and Cam accompany him under duress.

Besides this, the trip to the lighthouse is oddly misguided, coming about for all the wrong reasons. It is seen as self-piteously motivated and undertaken by Mr Ramsay in pursuit of a "sympathy" no longer available. It is a pilgrimage of sorts but also purely literal – a boat trip *tout court* "in memory of dead people" – and shows us the "Ternnysonian" hero not just nurturing his grief as he recites lines from Cowper but pampered and thoughtless, as before, and characteristically dependent on a conducive setting: a favorable breeze, a smooth sea.

The relevant passages are playful and contemplative, grave and ironic and seem deftly to balance the odds – the tensions between father and daughter, on the one hand, and son, on the other, and at the same time, the intervals between the island where the Ramsay house stands and the lighthouse and between immediate apprehension and memory, present and past. We are made to understand that the journey takes place in an in-between space where time is perceptible and yet suspended, where it is present yet undergoing, as it travels through the minds of those on the boat, a subtle transformation. It is in this way, against the "chuckling" and "slapping" of water and between prolonged silences and fragments of speech, that the aura of Mrs Ramsay, as a mysterious link between future and past, is preserved and the present in the text's world made bearable. There is also a sense at this point that thematic space, the known space of Skye has given way to a rather more fluid *formal* space where moorings have to be taken afresh and understanding hangs in the balance.

To James and Cam, Mr Ramsay is the “enemy.” There is a “compact” between them to resist paternal “tyranny,” though this is seen as firmer on James’ side. Cam is wooed by Mr Ramsay for the sake of “sympathy” but this elicits a somewhat mixed response. On the one hand, she is deeply moved: “For no one attracted her more; his hands were beautiful to her, and his feet, and his voice, and his words, and his haste, and his temper, and his oddity, and his passion, and his saying straight out before everyone, we perish, each alone, and his remoteness” (161). At the same time, she is shown as no less aware of the “dark” side to her father – “that crass blindness and tyranny of his which had poisoned her childhood.” We are not allowed to forget that Mr Ramsay, though vaguely majestic, is strangely lacking in self-awareness. Consequently, the expedition, in his case, represents no classical moment – no great “end” as such – being, at best, a self-indulgent ritual. If anything, Mr Ramsay comes across as the glorified bearer of his wife’s offerings to the occupants of the lighthouse including the stocking, completed at last, for “Sorley’s little boy.” The moment is, however, ultimately shown as open-ended. It is left to the reader to decide whether Mr Ramsay is still in denial or whether he has at last – having looked back at the island for some signal, some hint – made the requisite leap of faith:

What could he see? Cam wondered. It was all a blur to her. What was he thinking now? she wondered. What was it he sought, so fixedly, so intently, so silently? ... He rose and stood in the bow of the boat, very straight and tall, for all the world, James thought, as if he were saying, “There is no God,” and Cam thought, as if he were leaping into space, and they both rose to follow him as he sprang, lightly like a young man, holding his parcel, onto the rock. (198)

Interestingly, it is James who is destined to have, like Lily Briscoe, his own vision and to be given a special classical and moral “end.” It is he who is granted the gift of understanding in an inadvertent moment when he catches sight of the lighthouse:

He could see the white-washed rocks; the tower stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see windows in it; he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry. So that was the Lighthouse, was it?

No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other Lighthouse was true too. (177)

In a sublime moment James is seen to receive, like the sacrament, a complex and complete vision. He perceives the lighthouse as it *is*, concrete and real. But he also understands its symbolic nature, its otherness, its sheer transcendence. The moment is simple and classical. The narrator does not make as much of it as of Lily Briscoe’s epiphany. Yet the lighthouse is nevertheless there for James, “stark and straight” – and also other and true. In this way then, we see Woolf bring together, in a sort of mutual mimesis involving fiction and art – where the former casually commandeers or at least allows for the latter (“Lily’s picture! Mrs Ramsay smiled ... remembering her promise, she bent her head ...”) and the latter somehow caps the former, making it good – the different humanist and modernist strands of her great work.

The statement about modernism, deeply thought over as it is, shies away – as it has to in keeping with the dubiety underlying modernist thinking – from assertion or dogma. There is too much at stake, or so Woolf seems to suggest, for any ultimate formula to be applicable to art in general. This accounts for Lily Briscoe’s extreme hesitation prior to making a conclusive move. What we see here is Woolf urging a measure of skepticism with regard to the Joycean mantra and a prescribed modernist mode. *To the Lighthouse* is a *tour de force* that confronts us with an ambivalent aesthetic and, while upholding modernism, harks back, albeit with unrelenting honesty, to the canons of classical critical thought. It shows us Woolf, the philosopher no less than artist and seer, pitted for a moment in a kind of ecumenical war against Joyce, the “heretic,” and yearning for a return to a meaning that seems to have gone.

Notes

- 1 The term is used by Woolf to describe her peculiar sense of being in “A Sketch of the Past”: “this did not prevent me from feeling ecstasies and raptures spontaneously and intensely and without any shame or the last sense of guilt so long as they were disconnected with my own body” (68).
- 2 Both Virginia Woolf and Forster seem to have had grave misgivings both about Britain’s empirical tradition and the empirical nature of logical positivism and its implications in the context of art.
- 3 We see humanism in its encounter with modernism. Art is perceived as struggling to preserve its privileged status in the face of literal reality or history. This is clearly symbolized by the persistent dispute of the Ramsays over the “weather.” We likewise see symbol and letter at loggerheads elsewhere. Mrs Ramsay is, for instance, shown, during her visit to town with Tansley, as no less “imperial,” in her own way, than Queen Victoria. That, of course, has to do with the empire of the mind contending with Empire proper.
- 4 The world of things had been replaced by Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus* by the world of facts and philosophy by logic. The conflict between the Ramsays may, at some level, be said to symbolize this. The letter “Q” in Woolf has to do with the “propositions” put forward by Wittgenstein (e.g. “All is the world that is the case,” etc.) and the reductionist (“QED”) “proofs” afforded by his *Tractatus*. Woolf plainly delights in her own *reductio ad absurdum* of Wittgenstein’s “philosophy.”
- 5 Woolf is once again pointing to Wittgenstein’s “analysis” of the “world” and the reduction of philosophy to mere atomism.
- 6 Refer to quotation from “A Sketch of the Past” on the quest for wholeness.
- 7 Implied in Bergson, we see the idea in Eliot and also in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*.
- 8 Woolf speaks, in “A Sketch of the Past,” of moments akin to this which she refers to as moments of “non-being” where the “cotton wool” of the day is all-enveloping and there is a sense of discontinuity in time.

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