

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*: A Work in Progress from Vision to Reality

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In order to understand Virginia Woolf's vision of reality as well as her aesthetics, *To the Lighthouse* is of key importance, for in it the double nature of the author's vision is related to two opposite approaches to truth: the masculine and the feminine. In it we can see how Mr. Ramsay embodies the masculine one and Mrs. Ramsay the feminine; how he emphasises the “changing” (evanescence, time) and she, the “solid” (permanence, timelessness). Furthermore, we can clearly see the relationship between Lily Briscoe's role as an artist and Virginia Woolf's aesthetics. We also see how Lily's painting symbolises the androgynous work of art: in it an equilibrium is established between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, symbols of the evanescent and eternal aspects of reality.

Lily Briscoe is a “silent” painter in the same manner as Virginia Woolf's sister, Vanessa Bell had always been. In Vanessa's paintings Virginia Woolf had perceived the “shock of emotion” which the “visible world” offered her “every day of the week” and a deep, complex emotion expressed through relations of forms and colors.¹ Similarly, in this novel, Lily's painting represents “the residue of her thirty-three years, the deposit of each day's living, mixed with something more secret than she had ever spoken or shown in the course of all those days.”² Lily studies the particular (Mrs. Ramsay and James at the window), but she also goes beneath it to the impersonal and the abstract. She believes a mother and a child, who are “subjects of universal veneration,” may be “reduced...to a purple shadow without irreverence.” (: 69) In her painting she is primarily concerned not with “likeness” but with “the relations of masses, of lights and shadows.” (: 70) These formal relations represent the essence or symbolic value abstracted from the subject matter. Indeed, like most of Virginia Woolf's characters, Lily is more concerned with the “inner” than the “outer” aspect of reality. Yet, the latter remains important, because the essence must be reached through the particulars.

So, too, in *To the Lighthouse* the particular and the general are interdependent. For instance, while convincingly lifelike, the main characters simultaneously function as part of the symbolic structure of the

novel. Lily Briscoe is both an individual and an exponent of the author's aesthetics; indeed her painting is, as we shall see, an abstract equivalent of the novel itself. When she finally completes her painting the novel is equally completed.

The presence of an artist in *To the Lighthouse* is not a dimension present in *Mrs. Dalloway*. In both novels however Virginia Woolf shows her concern about the vision of reality, but in the later work she also shows its relationship to her aesthetics. Thus, *To the Lighthouse* is a much richer novel in content than her previous one. It is also a greater technical achievement than *Mrs. Dalloway*, because the author succeeds in making it both more symbolic and more realistic. Only the party, a symbol of unity, plays as important a role in *Mrs. Dalloway* as do the dinner party, island, lighthouse, window and painting in *To the Lighthouse*. Moreover, the symbolic use of land, sea, and drowning, present in *Mrs. Dalloway*, becomes even more dominant in *To the Lighthouse*, for the novel takes place by and on the sea.³

To the Lighthouse seems more "realistic" (that is, more life-like) than *Mrs. Dalloway* mainly because the two central characters, representing the masculine and the feminine visions, are not merely juxtaposed like Septimus and Clarissa; instead, as man and wife, they interact. Therefore, while Septimus and Clarissa's relationship can only be suggested, the Ramsays' relationship can be observed. Also, in *To the Lighthouse* Virginia Woolf does not have to invent sights and sounds by which two separate worlds are coincidentally joined. Transitions between the thoughts of different individuals or groups of characters in *To the Lighthouse* seem searched rather than coincidental, both because the characters interact and also because they are universally accepted for what they represent. In the novel as a whole the author abandons unity of time, but she strengthens the unity of place. The action takes place in a much smaller area than London, namely, inside or near the Ramsays' summer home.

As indicated earlier, in all her novels Virginia Woolf wants to give an impression of "tumult" and "pattern", or in Lily Briscoe's terms, "chaos" and "shape." Thus, like Lily in her painting, she aims in *To the Lighthouse* "to make of the moment something permanent." In fact, both she and Lily want to make life itself "stand still."⁴

To suggest "life itself," which Lily refers to as the "passing of flowing," Virginia Woolf records her characters' stream of consciousness. Although the details are carefully selected, she preserves the apparently aimless pattern of Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts, for example, as well as her

contradictory judgments. She records Mrs. Ramsay's attitude toward Charles Tansley as follows:

He looked so desolate; yet she would feel relieved when he went; yet she would see that he was better treated tomorrow; yet he was admirable with her husband; yet his manners certainly wanted improving; yet she liked his laugh--(: 145).

Lily's attitude toward Mrs. Ramsay is similarly complex. Lily admires her, for she:

Resolved everything into simplicity; made these angers, irritations fall off like old rags; she brought together this and that and then this, and so made out of that miserable silliness and spite (she (Lily) and Charles squabbling, sparring, had been silly and spiteful) something--this scene on the beach for example, this moment of friendship and liking--which survived, after all these years, complete, so that she dipped into it to re-fashion her memory of him, and it stayed in the mind almost like a work of art (: 196-197).

But while admiring Mrs. Ramsay as unifier (in a sense, she too is an artist), Lily objects to her way of pitying men, of being "highhanded" (: 63), and of insisting that "an unmarried woman has missed the best of life:" (: 66) William Bankes, another guest of the Ramsays, similarly admires and criticises Mr. Ramsay. Both Lily and William prefer the life of the single person devoted to his work. Yet watching the Ramsays with their children sometimes makes them envious. On one occasion, for instance, William Bankes could not "clear himself in his own mind from the imputation of having dried and shrunk" (: 29). In short, each character is seen in different ways at different moments and, as in life, the resulting contradictions are not resolved. Thus, the evanescent, chaotic quality of life is preserved.

Yet, like Lily Briscoe, Virginia Woolf combines the "shifting" with the "solid." The "shape" of *To the Lighthouse* is more sharply defined than it is in Mrs. Dalloway, it is actually divided into three main parts: "The Window," "Time Passes," and "The Lighthouse." As already mentioned, the setting - the Ramsays' summer house on the Isle of Skye- is the same throughout. The first section, "The Window," describes an afternoon and evening in mid-September, 1910, as lived by Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, their eight children, and five guests. The third section, "The Lighthouse" describes a morning ten years later as lived by Mr. Ramsay, his children, and two of the same guests (the artist, Lily Briscoe, and a poet, Augustus Charmichael). In

the short middle section we learn, in retrospect as Mrs. McNab and Mrs. Bast clean the Ramsays' long empty summer home, what has happened during the intervening years. The over-all time pattern is established by these three divisions.

Throughout, the progression of clock-time is paralleled with the characters' inner sense of time which allows an intermingling of thought about the past, present and future. However, there is a difference in tonal stress in each section. In "The Window" the emphasis is upon the present, in "Time Passes" the emphasis is upon the future, when the house will be reoccupied, and in "The Lighthouse" the emphasis is upon the past—the morning's activities are haunted by the memory of Mrs. Ramsay, whose death was announced in Part II. Because of repeated references in Part III to the beginning section of the book, a circular movement and a sense of wholeness is suggested by the structure of the novel.⁵ The time-pattern is held together as a unit by the existence of the lighthouse, the slow realization of Lily's aesthetic vision, and the influence of Mrs. Ramsay.

In Part I of the novel Mrs. Ramsay is knitting a "reddish-brown stocking" which is to be taken to the son of the lighthouse keeper the next day. Her six-year-old son, James, is excitedly looking forwards to the trip. But when Mr. Ramsay appears and unmercifully insists in front of James that the weather "won't be fine" tomorrow; therefore, they will not be able to go to the lighthouse. James' disappointment is so great that Mrs. Ramsay is sure that "he will remember that all his life." (: 80) In "Time Passes" is not permitted to forget the presence of the lighthouse, for its light continues to flash across the now deserted rooms. In Part III Mr. Ramsay plans a trip to the lighthouse and forces his children, James and Cam, to accompany him. Disliking his domineering personality, the two teenagers vow "to resist tyranny to the death." (: 200) However, as they progress to the green sea water (the color green and the sea image are both associated with Mrs. Ramsay and her talent for dissolving human differences), Cam's feminine senses are aroused and she begins to find her father "most lovable" and "most wise". (: 232) Even James begins to feel some kind of relationship with his father, a sort of kinship of loneliness. Finally Mr. Ramsay changes, at least momentarily; instead of seeking sympathy from others, as he usually does, he tries to make Cam happy and he remembers to praise James. Their relationships having improved, they reach the lighthouse.

In Virginia Woolf's novels the sea is at once consoling and terrifying. As pointed out in Chapter I, Mrs. Ramsay usually regards it as consoling, for

she identifies it with an underlying Unity; Mr. Ramsay usually regards it as terrifying, for he associates it primarily with the Void. Both Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay are fascinated by the sea.

In Part III of the novel Mr. Ramsay and the children go to the lighthouse in the sailboat of a fisherman named Macalister. Throughout Part III Macalister is telling a story about eleven ships caught in a storm; three sank causing three men to drown. (: 201, 249) A storm at sea and a drowning are also the subject of the lines from "The Castaway" which Mr. Ramsay quotes periodically during the voyage to the lighthouse. Implicit in all of this is not only Mr. Ramsay's concern with the void but also the grief he feels due to his wife's death. At the end, however, he succeeds somewhat in coming to terms with Death: when Macalister mentions that their sailboat has arrived at the spot where the three men were drowned, James and Cam expect their father to burst out again with the line, "But I beneath a rougher sea;" instead he simply says "Ah" as if he thought to himself. But why make a fuss about that? Naturally men are drowned in a storm, but it is a perfectly straightforward affair, and the depths of the sea...are only water after all." (: 250) In a sense, like Lily, he finds a certain equilibrium between the masculine and the feminine visions. The expression of his vision is basically masculine, however, just as the expression of Lily's vision, like that of Mrs. Ramsay, is basically feminine: that is, he utilizes facts, the essences.

Like Mr. Ramsay, Cam and James move towards an androgynous vision. Both children had thus accepted their mother's vision and rejected their father's. In "The Window," for instance, James had sided with his mother against his father's certainty that rain would make the next day's trip to the lighthouse impossible, (: 4-5) and Cam had willingly been persuaded by Mrs. Ramsay that an old pig's skull (symbolizing death, a masculine fact) could be transformed by a shawl into "a mountain, a bird's nest, a garden." (: 144) In the course of the voyage, however, both adopt for the first time a sympathetic attitude towards their father. Responding to him as a female, Cam is the first to identify with Mr. Ramsay's point of view. Her vision of the island on which they live echoes his vision of it in Part I. There one reads:

He thought, looking at the land dwindling away, the little island seemed pathetically small, half swallowed up in the sea.

"Poor little place," she murmured with a sigh (: 89).

And in Part III:

It was like that then, the island, thought Cam, once more drawing her fingers through the waves. She had never seen it from out at sea before. It lay like that on the sea, did it, with a dent in the middle and two sharp crags, and the sea swept in there, and spread away for miles and miles on either side of the island. It was very small; shaped something like a leaf stood on end (: 230).

Cam's use of the "leaf" image to describe the island recalls Lily's use of "leaves shaking"

as an example of the "external passing and flowing."⁶

Cam's vision of the evanescent quality of life as symbolized by the leaf-shaped island is further over the sea, Cam becomes increasingly conscious of the void:

She gazed back over the sea, at the island. But the leaf was losing its sharpness. It was very small; it was very distant. The sea was more important now than the shore. Waves were all around them, tossing and sinking,...About here, she thought, dabbling her fingers in the water, a ship had sunk, and she murmured, dreamily, half asleep, how we perished, each alone (: 233).

Further on during the voyage,

She gazed at the immense expanse of the sea. The island had grown so small that it scarcely looked like a leaf any longer. It looked like the top of a rock which some big wave would cover (: 248).

When they are about to land at the lighthouse, Cam notices her father "looking back at the Island." She wonders whether "With his long-sighted eyes perhaps he could see the dwindled leaf-like shape standing on end on a plate of gold quite clearly." But, perhaps because she is near-sighted like her mother, "It was all a blur to her." (: 252)

Although they had arrived at the island, Mr. Ramsay still:

sat and looked at the island and he might be thinking. We perished, each alone, or he might be thinking, I have reached it (the lighthouse). I have found it, but he said nothing (: 252).

While Mr. Ramsay is looking back toward the island where Lily is trying to finish the painting of his wife, Lily looks at the almost invisible lighthouse and says, "He must have reached it." (: 252) As earlier in Part III when she answers Mr. Ramsay's need for feminine sympathy by praising his boots, she accepts once more the female role formerly

the effort of thinking of his landing there, which both seemed to be one and the same effort, had stretched her body and mind to the utmost. Ah, but she was relieved. Whatever she had wanted to give him, when he left her that morning, she had given him at last (: 252-253).

This symbolic union of male and female recalls the two most important scenes between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay in Part I (: 50-55, 151-154); indeed, to complete her painting, Lily has to experience this union. When Lily declares "It is finished," she is referring to both the trip to the lighthouse and her vision.⁷

As already mentioned before, the line which Lily proceeds to make on the painting is the lighthouse as well as the tree, both androgynous symbols. The androgynous quality of the lighthouse is made clear when James has his vision. When he sees that the lighthouse is not only that which his mother saw ("a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye that opened suddenly and softly in the evening") but that which his father saw ("the tower, stark and straight"), he lessens his hostility for his father by becoming conscious of the reasons for it. He recalls little by little two incidents which occurred in "The Window": his father saying they could not go to the lighthouse and his father taking away his mother's attention and leaving him "impotent, ridiculous, sitting on the floor grasping a pair of scissors." (: 207, 228) James is not ready to give love and sympathy to his father, however, until Mr. Ramsay praises him for steering "like a born sailor." (: 250) To receive praise from his father represents a victory for James, for it signifies that he is no longer "impotent" or "ridiculous." Indeed, whereas he lost the battle with his father for his mother's attention ten years earlier, he has just won the battle with his father for Cam's sympathy. He has feared Cam would desert him as his mother had but then noticed that "Cam dabbled her fingers in the water and stared at the shore and said nothing. No, she won't give way, he thought; she's different, he thought." (: 207) As Josephine Schaefer says in *The Three-fold Nature of Reality*, James, in coercing Cam to submit to him, has "beaten his father at his own game, and in doing so he has laid the ghost of his old hatred."⁸

Thus, in the final section of the novel Mr. Ramsay's vision of the sea, Cam's vision of the island, Lily's vision of Mrs. Ramsay, and James's vision of the lighthouse all become androgynous or complete: A fusion occurs in their views of "reality" as well as in their personal relationships.

Paradoxically, it is the threat of the Void (their consciousness of "how we perish, each alone") that makes each forget himself and extend sympathy towards the others. Both literally and symbolically, the trip to the lighthouse is a success, because the characters have unconsciously adopted Mrs. Ramsay's philosophy: in light of the senselessness and suffering inherent in the human condition and therefore common to us all, one must try to create individual happiness and group harmony as often as possible. They succeed in identifying with her point of view just as Mrs. Dalloway identified with and therefore understand Septimus's.

Parts I and III are similar in that each treats in detail a short period of time, whereas the linking section covers in an abbreviated form a long period. Moreover, the central events in Parts I and III (the dinner party, the trip to the lighthouse) involve situations in which a sense of oneness is achieved by a group of disparate individuals. Likewise, as Lily is painting in Part III, she slips into the "waters of annihilation" (a state of impersonality) just as Mrs. Ramsay does while sitting alone in Part I (: 220,81). For Lily, like Mrs. Ramsay, "the world seemed to dissolve into a pool of thought, a deep basin of reality" (: 218). Also, scenes from "The Window" are recalled by James and Lily in Part III: and, of course, in "The Lighthouse" Lily completes her painting of the scene which dominates Part I—namely, Mrs. Ramsay and James framed by the window. Indeed, the characters' thoughts, for the most part, continue in the third section to focus upon Mrs. Ramsay much as they did in the first; this is true also in the linking section but the characters whose thoughts we follow there are not the same as in parts I and III. Finally, the trip and the painting provide the focus for much of the thinking in "The Window" and "The Lighthouse"; yet they play no role in "Time Passes".

However, "Time Passes" is an important part of the over-all rhythm and theme of the novel. Its very existence at once undermines and enhances the semi-mystical experiences of Oneness (products of the 'feminine' vision) which dominate the first section of the book. For in "Time Passes" Mr. Ramsay's view of life comes to the fore. In it the emphasis falls on time not timelessness, death not life, flux not permanence; suddenly there is separateness not unity, chaos not order, facts not visions. The unused house has deteriorated; the garden has grown wild; war has broken out; and

the deaths of Mrs. Ramsay and two Ramsay children, Prue and Andrew, are announced. In Part I Mrs. Ramsay's belief that human beings should establish and preserve harmony despite the facts is sanctioned while Mr. Ramsay's insistence upon facts is ridiculed. But Part II shows that the 'facts' cannot be ignored for long: eventually even a visionary like Mrs. Ramsay and the dreams she had for her children are affected by them. By showing that the masculine approach to truth is valid, just as the feminine is valid, the way is prepared for the balancing of the two in the final section of the novel.

Virginia Woolf regarded *To the Lighthouse* as the end towards which she had been moving in *Jacob's Room* and *Mrs. Dalloway* (AWD: 99); her vision of life and the novel was on the whole the same as in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Perhaps because of this and because she knew the subject matter well, she was able to write in her diary on February 23, 1926: "after that battle *Jacob's Room*, that agony—all agony but the end—*Mrs. Dalloway*, I am now writing as fast and freely as I have written in the whole of my life; more so—20 times more so—than any novel yet" (: 85). Writing her next novel was not easy, however, for both her personal and aesthetic vision had changed: on March 28, 1930 she spoke of *The Waves* as "the most complex and difficult of all my books" (AWD: 156).

Note

¹ Virginia Woolf, 1930, "Foreword" *Recent Paintings by Vanessa Bell*, February 4th to March 8th, The London Artist's Association: 3-4.

² Virginia Woolf, 1991, *To the Lighthouse*, CIDEB Editrice, Rapallo: 69. Numbers in parenthesis throughout indicate page references to this edition.

³ While writing *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf notes in her Diary: "I am making more use of symbolism," (: 101).

⁴ *To the Lighthouse*: 197.

⁵ Virginia Woolf makes this comment about the book in her Diary: "I feel as if it fetched its circle completely this time," (: 100).

⁶ Cfr. *To the Lighthouse*: 197, with the difference that Lily uses the leaves to symbolise "evanescence", and the trees to symbolise "stability"; the line she draws in the centre of her painting represents a tree (: 181). The tree and leaf images are also very important in poetic lines quoted by Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay: "And all the lives we ever lived/And all the lives to be/Are full of trees and changing leaves" (: 138,148).

⁷ Lily's remark, "It is finished," contrasts with Mrs. Ramsay's remark when she refers to the 'reddish-brown stocking' at the end of Part I of the novel: "I shan't finish it" (: 253, 153).

⁸ *Studies in English Literature*, VII, The Hague, 1965: 133.

⁹ Significantly, at this final moment of harmony, vision, and identification Augustus Carmichael reminds Lily of Neptune: "...Mr. Carmichael stood beside her, looking like an old pagan God, shaggy, with weeds in his hair and the trident (it was only a French novel) in his hand" (: 253). As a poet, he is, like Lily and Mrs. Ramsay, a unifier.

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