

‘AN ODD ROAD’ TOWARDS VIRGINIA WOOLF’S LIGHTHOUSE

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This paper analyzes the image of the lighthouse in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* as an unframed pictorial object of art. The sections “The Window” and “The Lighthouse” epitomise the Modernist practice of removing frames to display an object with powerful narrative significance, while in the story the painter character Lily Briscoe struggles to depart from conventional modes of representing perceptions and emotions. The lighthouse as an unframed pictorial art object becomes a dynamic image whose signification is heightened throughout the text. It will be argued that the lighthouse, commonly associated with Mrs Ramsay, works as the unifying axis of the novel. Correspondingly, the opposition presence/absence established by Mrs Ramsay and the image of the lighthouse in the first and the third parts will be considered, as well as Lily’s determination to put into practice her own methods of creativity and gaining wisdom, which are those of Mrs Woolf herself.

Keywords: ekphrasis, unframed image, lighthouse, Woolf, Modernist fiction

Criticism has pointed out two beginnings in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927). The first one is the opening of the novel, labelled by Cuddy-Keane as an “anti-beginning” (2008: 99), whereas the second –described as one of the “two key moments in the history of literature [that] continue to resonate among narrative beginnings” (Richardson 2008: 2– occurs in the last quarter of the book, when Lily Briscoe “raised her brush” and asked “Where to begin? –That was the question” (Woolf, 1977: 147). Then, like in a heroic instant, “she made her quick decisive stroke. The brush descended. It flickered brown over the white canvas; it left a running mark” (148). Each beginning signals a specific process- narration and painting, respectively- but both converge to the closing sentence of the novel: “I have had my vision” (192). By means of free direct speech, the character’s thought and the narrator’s voice mingle in one single, ambiguous statement. The satisfactory, simultaneous conclusion to both processes invites an analysis of how they interact while running parallel throughout the novel. Indeed, many scholarly works have examined how Lily Briscoe’s ideas about art and painting both articulate and exhibit Woolf’s own conception of fiction and novel writing. This paper also deals with novel and painting; in particular, it examines the lighthouse, not so much as a symbol, but as the core image of the novel.

Woolf herself denied that the lighthouse communicates anything at all. On being asked about its symbolic meaning, she declared that she “meant *nothing* by The Lighthouse. One has to have a central line down in the middle of the book to hold the design together” (Goring 1994: 227). Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that the image of the lighthouse works as the unifying and axial object of the novel. It binds together the bits and fragments, facts and impressions, gestures and wishes, sights and visions, colours and mist, surface and depth, spoken and unspoken words, sound and silence, the fullness and the emptiness of existence and representation.

Woolf’s narrative technique, as well as Lily Briscoe’s painterly practice, exhibits the impact of post-impressionist aesthetics, and consequently a conspicuous rejection of the principles that governed conventional composition and true-to-sight perspective in arts and fiction. It does not mean that Woolf and other Modernist novelists did no longer wish to portray and scrutinize reality; much on the contrary, they became conscious that the words and the forms available were rather limited for a truthful rendering of the complexities of life and reality into fiction.

Jean-François Lyotard associated the notion of *modernity* (in whatever period it may appear) with a “shattering of belief,” and an awareness of the “‘lack of reality’ of reality.” For him, modernism derives from the individual’s failure to adequately present a given object by means of a given concept. He connected this “‘lack of reality’ of reality” with Nietzsche’s notion of nihilism and traced it back to “the Kantian theme of the sublime” (1984: 77).

Romantic aesthetics taught us to consider the symbolic dimension of art objects. These were offered as screens, or specular objects, by means of which readers/viewers were able to share the artists’ experiences of the sublime or their uniqueness of visions, ideas, emotions or perceptions. Under the influence of Romanticism, art was deemed to render the abstract visible and translatable into verbal language. James Heffernan has defined *ekphrasis* as “the verbal representation of a visual representation” (1993: 3), therefore, it attempts to contrive in a verbal medium a non-verbal depiction of thoughts, feelings, impressions, intuitions or psychic drives of any sort, since –in general– these deep personal, moral or supernatural experiences escape from being materialized in verbal intelligible language, either because they exist in the subconscious, or because they transcend the individual. In Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory, this phenomenon largely constitutes what he called the Real. Although the Real was never satisfactorily defined by Lacan, it was identified with what remains outside the Symbolic (related with law, culture and language) and the Imaginary (concerned with the image that the individual has of him/herself, and his/her ideal ego). Lacan’s notion of the Real (as the ‘real-ity’ in the individual that exists outside language, that can never be verbalized – ‘present-ed’– nor can it be asserted by his/her *imago*) may be aligned with the experience of the “unpresentable” in Lyotard’s identification of modern art as the one which “devotes its ‘little technical expertise’ ... to present the fact that the unpresentable exists” (1984: 78).

Painters are not infrequent in English Literature (i.e. *Jane Eyre* or Kurtz), nor are paintings. In realistic fiction, a painting may introduce extraordinary or supernatural elements in the ordinary world of the characters without destroying the illusion of reality. Narrators or characters often frame the object of their vision as if it were a painting to indicate the need of a symbolic, deeper reading. Modernist novelists, however, dismantled the frames around the painting and liberated the pictorial symbols, just to relocate them as meaningful, unframed objects in their narrative worlds. The aesthetic gap between the realist novel and the Modernist practice of fiction in English literature was caused by several factors, albeit mainly by the irruption of symbolism and its exhaustion in benefit of imagism, and the influence of the post-impressionist conceptions of creativity and art. In Joyce’s “The Dead”, for example, Gabriel Conroy’s epiphanic experience and the powerful symbol of snow may illustrate the subtle but deep chasm separating two antagonistic modes of representing reality. Snow is pervasive throughout the short story. It can be interpreted as a pictorial symbol, like in Brueghel’s *Hunters in the Snow*, but its meaning is increasingly heightened as the story and the text coalesce into an intricate web of relations that converge to the final epiphany (see Monterrey 2011).

Woolf’s lighthouse is also an unframed image, like Joyce’s snow. The structure of the novel *performs* the theoretical principle that I am following here, as the frame of the first part, “The Window”, is dismantled to display the essence of the object in the third part, “The Lighthouse”. If it had only been shown as a painting, within a frame, it would have been open to a variety of symbolic meanings; but placed on the horizon of the narrative setting, and signalled by its title as the goal of the novel, the lighthouse is turned into the unifying image and the structural axis of the novel. I shall now concentrate on two aspects to explain my point. One is the full interaction between the first and the third parts of the novel, and the other is the process of Lily Briscoe’s painting.

“The Window” functions as a frame –both as a part of the novel and as an object of the house– encompassing a world of the past, back to 1910 (marked by Woolf as the beginning of a new era). It examines the characters’ existential and intellectual positions in the small community of a family and its friends, surrounded by the minimalist environment in a Hebrides isle. “The Window” connects the internal and the external, the domestic and the public, by gazing at the outside, by regarding the object through established limitations. Therefore, the synecdoche of “The Window” alerts us of a restricted, familiar, conventional viewpoint to perceive the truth and fullness of a landscape both social and artistic. Lily Briscoe, who uneasily fits in the group, deconstructs this viewpoint by consistently articulating an alternative method of pictorial (re)presentation, which she will not be able to execute until “The Lighthouse”, when she sets her easel socially and intellectually undisturbed.

The Ramsays and their guests form a microcosm enlivened by the powerful presence of Mrs Ramsay and cemented by her patriarchal husband (a respected philosopher and father of eight children). In this part, Mr Ramsay and the rest of the characters, including the children, struggle “with the problem of subject and object and the nature of reality” (Waugh 1992: 110). Criticism has shown that “The Window” is complete and round in itself as the opening words “Yes, of course” (9) and the beginning of the closing paragraph “Yes, you were right” (114) suggest. This part attempts to depict the balance between the sexes –the relation between the masses– sustained by the tenets of patriarchal common sense. It also examines the tensions and conflicts to be faced when starting and carrying out a creative action of some sort (an excursion, a stocking or a painting) within a given set of fixed intellectual patterns.

Separated by the short interlude “Time Passes”, “The Lighthouse” takes place in the same setting of the first part, ten years afterwards, with the surviving characters and their respective obsessions, worries and desires. For Michael Levenson, “The Window” suggests “a transparency between perceiving self and perceived world” (1991: 175), but “as the novel moves into its central section, the figure of the mirror describes another temptation in our dealings with the external world” (1991: 176). It, thus, allows a final transformation in “The Lighthouse”: “The window, having lost its transparency and the mirror having ceased to reflect, the painter’s canvas comes into prominence and becomes the occasion for a new meditation of the figure of the rectangle” (1991: 177). Although what is created on the canvas cannot be described, at least it can be hinted at. For Levenson it is “something which is neither of the world nor of the self but a third thing composed in their mutual unveiling” (178). Using Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory, the canvas functions as a screen, as “a locus of mediation” (1994: 107) between the gaze and the thing.

As the title of the third part indicates, the lighthouse dominates the space as the Ramsay party embarks towards it and reaches it successfully, while Lily paints her canvas *overlooking* the bay. In the process, the significance of the lighthouse is

heightened by the subtleties of the narrator’s account and the characters’ sensorial perception of it, by confronting their obsessions, and by the blurred, specular view of the now distant, misty (Ramsay) island from the lighthouse.

What is missing in “The Lighthouse” is, of course, Mrs Ramsay, whose death is suddenly and briefly mentioned in “Time Passes”. The phallic shape of the lighthouse has often been associated with Mrs Ramsay; but its symbolism, its very nature, covers many more dimensions: “A discussion of the androgynous nature of the Lighthouse symbol does not reveal its full meaning, for it is also associated with ideas about time, flux, death and egoism. Just as an actual Lighthouse functions to mark fixed spot in moving waters, so the Lighthouse in this novel symbolizes fixed points or ways of creating fixed in the flux of human life” (Kaehele 1970: 194).

The androgynous nature of Mrs Ramsay is well established: “There is a general critical recognition that Mrs Ramsay is somehow androgynous and that her androgyneity is linked to the figure of the lighthouse” (Pratt 1972: 427). Pratt identifies other instances that evince this aspect of Mrs Ramsay, but she does not list the stocking she is knitting for the lightkeeper’s sick boy. Mrs Ramsay’s needles and stocking are as phallic as the lighthouse with which she identifies herself. Just like the lighthouse presence is only a beam that breaks darkness in the first part and penetrates the house through the window in “Time Passes”, in the third part Mrs Ramsay is felt as emptiness by her husband and as absence by Lily, two modes of experiencing loss –emptiness and absence– that turn her into an object of desire, just as much as the lighthouse was for James in the opening paragraph of the novel. In this sense, the pairs ‘Mrs Ramsay-Lighthouse’ in the first part and ‘Lighthouse-Mrs Ramsay’ in the third part constitute the axis of the novel. In “The Window” both James and Lily fail to fulfil their respective projects- the excursion and the portrait, respectively- due to patriarchal impositions or prejudiced convictions; but they achieve their goals in “The Lighthouse”. James accompanies his father on the boat. For him to contemplate the rock and the building so closely is a moment of self-knowledge: “it was a stark tower on a bare rock. It satisfied him. It confirmed some obscure feeling of his about his own character” (187). Their sailing on the surface of the sea (while Mr Ramsay reads compulsively Cowper’s “The Castaway”) contrasts with Lily’s distorted perception of the actual landscape of the bay as she deepens her vision into her lucid memories while painting the canvas.

Mrs Ramsay’s needle, Lily Briscoe’s brush and Mrs Woolf’s pen denote three modes of gaining control of the lighthouse by means of phallic tools – love, painting and writing. From the lighthouse, they can hardly see their island, and cannot distinguish their house. Now the world of “The Window” is seen in the mist. Indeed, the axis ‘lighthouse-Mrs Ramsay’ operates like mirrors reflecting alterities, abstractions, distortions and inversions subjected to the dominant point of view in each section.

Mr and Mrs Ramsay represent a balance between the sexes that responds to Victorian ideological and philosophical patterns. Creative, protective, loving, beautiful, short-sighted, domestic Mrs Ramsay complements rational, inaccessible, rough, tyrannical and philosophically-minded Mr Ramsay. The complex symbolism of the lighthouse represents both sides; but the autobiographical dimension of the novel must also be taken into account.

Woolf’s initial plan was to write about her father, Mr Leslie Stephen; but it obviously took another direction. Yet, her sister Mrs Vanessa Bell was delighted to acknowledge Woolf’s achievement in portraying their father. It might have been impossible for her to dissociate her family environment and the world of books and art. In this context, Lily Briscoe emerged as Woolf’s first artist character, and *To the Lighthouse*, while keeping the original model for Mr Ramsay, embarked into a search

for the nature of art, understood as a comprehensive act of memory, vision, experience and performance. When Lily learns that Mr Ramsay will be sailing towards the lighthouse and that she will not be disturbed by him nor by his remarks, she sets on “an odd road” towards her alternative (visionary) lighthouse by beginning to paint a canvas: “Lily stepped back to get her canvas –so– into perspective. It was an odd road to be walking, this of painting” (160).

Readers never know what the final image on the canvas looked like, but it is easily inferred by the commentaries in sections 9 and 17 of “The Window” that Lily will be guided by post-impressionist aesthetics; the authenticity of representation would not coincide with close likeness to sight perception, which would be the correct method if she followed Mr Ramsay’s philosophy.

As Lily’s brush takes colours, she plunges into memory. The world of “The Window” is not veiled in mist for her. This makes the loss and absence of Mrs Ramsay so painful for her. She had everything Lily lacked. She represented the type of woman, the commonsensical, approved type of woman, which Lily was not (neither would she ever be). Lily must accept her personal distinction and go on with it. It is this distinction what will be shown on the canvas, as a result of her newly acquired wisdom.

Lily concluded her painting as “she drew a line there, in the centre” (192). The closure represents the inversion of a beginning. Just like a painter always starts by marking the centre of the canvas with a point, a cross, or a *line*, so does the novelist with a *line*, a word, a sentence, that recalls the verse-line, the elemental unit of a poem. Both processes –Lily’s painting and Woolf’s narration– reach their respective closure with the first gesture of a beginning, as indeed the novel concludes with the experience of that pristine, sublime, un-presentable “vision” into the new realm of creativity and performance. It is in this conclusion that the lighthouse as an unframed significant object obtains its widest significance. The line joints indissolubly the abstraction of a lighthouse, or its beam, and a literary line, either of a novel or –as Woolf ventured about *To the Lighthouse*– an elegy.

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