

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE



VIRGINIA WOOLF

to my Mr. Jansley

LONDON: J. M. DENT & SONS LTD

INTRODUCTION

POSSIBLY the first outstanding characteristic of Virginia Woolf's work is the dazzling technique, a technique akin, in its emotional subtlety and intricate interpretation of moods, to that of Henry James and Proust. *The Mark on the Wall* is a practical exposition of her method—to fix the object and let the mind sway round it and all the associations it brings, with the freedom and suppleness of a gymnast. It is the method which Proust had developed some years earlier, and implies a very delicate balancing of attention—on the one hand, sensitiveness to the subconscious, and therefore free, movement of thought or emotion, and on the other hand, a continual intellectual control. The method is akin to psycho-analysis, with this difference, that here the subject and the controlling observer are one and the same person. Proust in his description of Elstir's art in *A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs* indicates the *raison d'être* of this method—to free the senses from the restraint which convention or habit imposes on an impression and to enable an object to be represented, at once clearly and with an exquisite freshness, as for the first time.

Nothing perhaps could better illustrate Virginia Woolf's technique than the opening pages of *Jacob's Room*, especially where the child's impression of the sands—the rock-pool, the red-faced holiday-makers asleep, the sheep's skull—are given with a seeming inconsequence and with the shock of a first encounter. Events are focused with the same shifting brilliance and surprise as in a kaleidoscope. *See first, connect afterwards*, says the artist. So in the description of Mrs Ambrose's tear in *The Voyage Out*, we see first mistily through the quivering round tear, the water which for her trembles

through it, the embankment where she is standing, the house—in imagination—which she has left, and the children there . . . ah, *that* is why she is crying!

The difficulty of course comes when the object to be revealed is not a simple one, but an emotional or mental process. A torch flung into dark water lights up a thick tangle of reeds swaying under the surface of the stream. Sometimes, in Virginia Woolf's novels, it seems as if the movement of the stream had been forgotten. *Jacob's Room*, which would have indicated the height of Virginia Woolf's attainment in pure technique if *Mrs Dalloway* had not followed it, suffers from this defect, that the minute particulars, flawless in themselves, do not build up a total significant impression. The details of each mental incident analysed are emotionally relevant to it, but each situation is not emotionally relevant to the whole. There are in fact too many moments; one is in danger of suffocation. Some passages, exquisite in themselves, could be cut out without affecting the general structure greatly. There is no central *point de repère*. On the whole *Jacob's Room* gives the impression of a delicate and intricate spider's web from which the middle, the critical centre of radiation, has been torn away. Each shining filament is there, but the centre edge is lacking.

In *Mrs Dalloway* Virginia Woolf is not so much at the mercy of urgent associations which clamour to be expressed at the expense of proportion. *Mrs Dalloway* indeed is a triumph of virtuosity. Behind the lithe figure of Clarissa the fabric gradually arises, having as its background the sounds and sights of her familiar London—the slow mellow booming of Big Ben, the crisp air of Bond Street on a fresh summer morning, the rustle of children in the parks, the good-humoured bustle of the town as the buses begin to swing up and the traffic becomes heavy. Richard Dalloway, Clarissa, Peter, move against this background, and because they are people with memories, it shifts and changes momentarily with their swaying thoughts. Nowhere in her

work is there a better example of the co-ordination of time and place than in this book. < Within the twelve hours of a waking day and in the limits of London, we have been shown, by their own physical movements in a confined space and their mental movements in a comparatively unlimited field, three full-length portraits, and an agonizingly accurate and piercing analysis of the state of mind which borders on lunacy. The contrast between Clarissa's world and that of Septimus is not fortuitous. > By it Virginia Woolfe achieves the same kind of impression of relativity as had been strikingly outlined in *Jacob's Room* (Fanny Elmer, Clara Durrant, Florinda, revealed successively in a series of illuminating flashes). People and occurrences at different levels touch each other slightly, as the ripple cast by a stone in water trembles into the arc of another, and is vaguely disturbed.

In respect of technique, however, *Mrs Dalloway* is in distinct contrast to the earlier *Night and Day* and *The Voyage Out*, where the technique is not fully adequate to the strength of feeling to be expressed. Yet these two books, along with the superb accomplishment of *To the Lighthouse*, possibly reveal more truly the artistic problem with which Virginia Woolf is concerned than any of the others. *Night and Day* is in some ways curiously un-Woolfian. In it people and events are shown progressively with a fairly apparent logical connection between each successive happening. The movement might be described as a movement along a straight line. Its main concern is the exposition of the situation between Katherine and Ralph Denham, and the interest lies chiefly in the almost scientifically accurate recording of Katherine's feeling towards Denham, unequalled, in its unromantic, honest, and most moving truth, except by the same theme in *The Voyage Out*, where Rachel's bewildered feelings are analysed with the same power and the same delicacy. This analysis, as in *Night and Day*, forms the critical moment of *The Voyage Out*. But *The Voyage Out* is perhaps more important from certain

other characteristics which come out fully in *To the Lighthouse*. In these two books, the first and almost the last of the novels, we are very near the centre of Virginia Woolf's art, and it is extraordinarily interesting to see how the earlier one seems to contain the germ of many of the later themes. The sharp thumbnail sketch of the Dalloways relates *The Voyage Out* to *Mrs Dalloway*—[Clarissa remains constant, but how Richard has improved as he grows older. Can he in fact possibly be the same person?—that grave silent Richard who buys roses for his wife because he cannot tell her he loves her, and the fatuous, platitudinous politician of the earlier book?] But the chief comparison is between *The Voyage Out* and *To the Lighthouse*. They are especially striking in the analogies they afford of character and situation—between Ambrose and Ramsay, Mr Pepper and Mr Bates, Helen Ambrose and Mrs Ramsay, Rachel and Lily Briscoe—and in the way in which the characters are intertwined. Rachel, for example, finds in music, until she meets Terence, the only satisfactory expression of herself. Lily Briscoe, in the later book, fulfils herself by trying to fix a moment, a scene, on canvas. Mrs Ambrose and Mrs Ramsay supply the practical complement to Rachel and Lily—they are the people who live, who manage to deal with life as though, miraculously, it were art and could be shaped and moulded.

Mrs Ambrose is in this respect a shadow of what Mrs Ramsay is to become. Yet though we see little of her, the account of her beauty, her kindness, her unconventionality, casts a statue-like shadow, and she is in some way significant. Why she should be so comes out if one compares a short and seeming-trivial passage at the beginning of the book with the recurring theme of *To the Lighthouse*. It occurs in the description of the first dinner party with the Dalloways on board ship. Richard speaks: "We politicians doubtless seem to you" (he grasped somehow that Helen was the representative of the arts) "a gross commonplace set of people; but we see both sides; we may be clumsy, but we do our

best to get a grasp of things. Now your artists *find* things in a mess, shrug their shoulders, turn aside to their visions—which I grant may be very beautiful—and *leave* things in a mess” . . . “It’s dreadful,” said Mrs Dalloway. . . . “I should like to stop all the painting and writing and music until this kind of thing exists no longer. Don’t you feel,” she wound up, addressing Helen, “that life’s a perpetual conflict?” Helen considered for a moment. “No,” she said, “I don’t think I do.”

Helen does not feel the conflict; on the other hand, Mrs Ramsay, in *To the Lighthouse*, resolves it. She adjusts life and people with the same perfection and serenity and completion as Lily Briscoe tries to attain in art. The problem of life and of art is in fact the same—to make the moment perfect, to harmonize discords, to attain a central significance. Mrs Ambrose does not quite do this; Mrs Ramsay does. Because she does, life flows through the book like light through a web, illuminating people and their relationships.

Further, in *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf is saying clearly—just as in *The Mark on the Wall* she exposed her technique clearly—that life is the centre of art. One remembers that incident in *Jacob’s Room* where Mrs Flanders’s black parasol supplied just the necessary touch to make Charles Steele’s picture complete. In *To the Lighthouse* the imaginary apparition of Mrs Ramsay to Lily expresses in symbol the fact that the artist must understand something of the art of living before he or she can make composition perfect. ‘Mrs Ramsay . . . resolved everything into simplicity . . . she brought together this and that and then this, and so made out of that miserable silliness and spite . . . something . . . which stayed in the mind almost like a work of art. . . . What is the meaning of life? That was all—a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck

unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other; herself and Charles and the breaking wave; Mrs Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs Ramsay saying "Life stand still here"; Mrs Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent)—this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing . . . was struck into stability. "Mrs Ramsay, Mrs Ramsay," she repeated. She owed this revelation to her.'

In *To the Lighthouse* art and life are no longer hostile to each other; they both unite in their attempt to achieve perfection of the moment in differing material. In this book Virginia Woolf has expressed permanently something which she had attempted to express more or less partially in the earlier books. (*To the Lighthouse* supplies a clue to *Jacob's Room* and *Mrs Dalloway* in their emphasis on the moment.) The theme which was recessive in *The Voyage Out* has now become dominant, and in the manner of expression not even *Orlando*, that triumph of pure technique, not even *Jacob's Room* can surpass it. It is the distinctive excellence of *To the Lighthouse* that in it a critical and significant problem has been expressed in terms of character, and so, has been solved.

D. M. HOARE

The following is a list of the works of Virginia Woolf:

Translation: *Tolstoi's Love Letters* (with S. S. Koteliansky, 1930).
The Voyage Out, 1915; *Kew Gardens*, 1919; *The Mark on the Wall*, 1919; *Night and Day*, 1919; *Monday or Tuesday*, 1921; *Jacob's Room*, 1922; *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, 1924; *Mrs. Dalloway*, 1925; *The Common Reader*, 1925; *To the Lighthouse*, 1927; *Orlando, a Biography*, 1928; *A Room of One's Own*, 1929; *The Waves*, 1931; *The Common Reader, Second Series*, 1932; *Flush, a Biography*, 1933; *The Years*, 1937; *Three Guineas*, 1938; *Roger Fry*, 1940; *Between the Acts*, 1941; *The Death of the Moth*, 1942; *A Haunted House*, 1944; *The Moment and Other Essays*, 1947; *The Captain's Death Bed*, 1950.

All rights reserved
by
J. M. DENT & SONS LTD
Aldine House · Bedford Street · London
Made in Great Britain
at
The Temple Press · Letchworth · Herts
First published in this edition 1938
Last reprinted 1952

I
THE WINDOW

I

THE WINDOW

I

'YES, of course, if it's fine to-morrow,' said Mrs Ramsay. 'But you'll have to be up with the lark,' she added.

To her son these words conveyed an extraordinary joy, as if it were settled the expedition were bound to take place, and the wonder to which he had looked forward, for years and years it seemed, was, after a night's darkness and a day's sail, within touch. Since he belonged, even at the age of six, to that great clan which cannot keep this feeling separate from that, but must let future prospects, with their joys and sorrows, cloud what is actually at hand, since to such people even in earliest childhood any turn in the wheel of sensation has the power to crystallize and transfix the moment upon which its gloom or radiance rests, 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. It was fringed with joy. The wheelbarrow, the lawnmower, the sound of poplar trees, leaves whitening before rain, rooks cawing, brooms knocking, dresses rustling—all these were so coloured and distinguished in his mind that he had already his private

code, his secret language, though he appeared the image of stark and uncompromising severity, with his high forehead and his fierce blue eyes, impeccably candid and pure, frowning slightly at the sight of human frailty, so that his mother, watching him guide his scissors neatly round the refrigerator, imagined him all red and ermine on the Bench or directing a stern and momentous enterprise in some crisis of public affairs.

'But,' said his father, stopping in front of the drawing-room window, 'it won't be fine.'

Had there been an axe handy, a poker, or any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it. Such were the extremes of emotion that Mr Ramsay excited in his children's breasts by his mere presence; standing, as now, lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one, grinning sarcastically, not only with the pleasure of disilluioning his son and casting ridicule upon his wife, who was ten thousand times better in every way than he was (James thought), but also with some secret conceit at his own accuracy of judgment. What he said was true. It was always true. He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact; never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being, least of all of his own children, who, sprung from his loins, should be aware from childhood that life is difficult; facts uncompromising; and the passage to that fabled land where our brightest hopes are extinguished, our frail barks founder in darkness (here Mr Ramsay would straighten his back and narrow his little blue eyes

upon the horizon), one that needs, above all, courage, truth, and the power to endure.

'But it may be fine—I expect it will be fine,' said Mrs Ramsay, making some little twist of the reddish-brown stocking she was knitting, impatiently. If she finished it to-night, if they did go to the Lighthouse after all, it was to be given to the Lighthouse keeper for his little boy, who was threatened with a tuberculous hip; together with a pile of old magazines, and some tobacco, indeed whatever she could find lying about, not really wanted, but only littering the room, to give those poor fellows who must be bored to death sitting all day with nothing to do but polish the lamp and trim the wick and rake about on their scrap of garden, something to amuse them. For how would you like to be shut up for a whole month at a time, and possibly more in stormy weather, upon a rock the size of a tennis lawn? she would ask; and to have no letters or newspapers, and to see nobody; if you were married, not to see your wife, not to know how your children were—if they were ill, if they had fallen down and broken their legs or arms; to see the same dreary waves breaking week after week, and then a dreadful storm coming, and the windows covered with spray, and birds dashed against the lamp, and the whole place rocking, and not be able to put your nose out of doors for fear of being swept into the sea? How would you like that? she asked, addressing herself particularly to her daughters. So she added, rather differently, one must take them whatever comforts one can.

'It's due west,' said the atheist Tansley, holding his bony fingers spread so that the wind blew through

them, for he was sharing Mr Ramsay's evening walk up and down, up and down the terrace. That is to say, the wind blew from the worst possible direction for landing at the Lighthouse. Yes, he did say disagreeable things, Mrs Ramsay admitted; it was odious of him to rub this in, and make James still more disappointed; but at the same time, she would not let them laugh at him. 'The atheist,' they called him; 'the little atheist.' Rose mocked him; Prue mocked him; Andrew, Jasper, Roger mocked him; even old Badger without a tooth in his head had bit him, for being (as Nancy put it) the hundred and tenth young man to chase them all the way up to the Hebrides when it was ever so much nicer to be alone.

'Nonsense,' said Mrs Ramsay, with great severity. Apart from the habit of exaggeration which they had from her, and from the implication (which was true) that she asked too many people to stay, and had to lodge some in the town, she could not bear incivility to her guests, to young men in particular, who were poor as church mice, 'exceptionally able,' her husband said, his great admirers, and come there for a holiday. Indeed, she had the whole of the other sex under her protection; for reasons she could not explain, for their chivalry and valour, for the fact that they negotiated treaties, ruled India, controlled finance; finally for an attitude towards herself which no woman could fail to feel or to find agreeable, something trustful, childlike, reverential, which an old woman could take from a young man without loss of dignity, and woe betide the girl—pray Heaven it was none of her daughters!—who

did not feel the worth of it, and all that it implied, to the marrow of her bones.

She turned with severity upon Nancy. He had not chased them, she said. He had been asked.

They must find a way out of it all. There might be some simpler way, some less laborious way, she sighed. When she looked in the glass and saw her hair grey, her cheek sunk, at fifty, she thought, possibly she might have managed things better—her husband; money; his books. But for her own part she would never for a single second regret her decision, evade difficulties, or slur over duties. She was now formidable to behold, and it was only in silence, looking up from their plates, after she had spoken so severely about Charles Tansley, that her daughters—Prue, Nancy, Rose—could sport with infidel ideas which they had brewed for themselves of a life different from hers; in Paris, perhaps; a wilder life; not always taking care of some man or other; for there was in all their minds a mute questioning of deference and chivalry, of the Bank of England and the Indian Empire, of ringed fingers and lace, though to them all there was something in this of the essence of beauty, which called out the manliness in their girlish hearts, and made them, as they sat at table beneath their mother's eyes, honour her strange severity, her extreme courtesy, like a queen's raising from the mud a beggar's dirty foot and washing it, when she thus admonished them so very severely about that wretched atheist who had chased them to—or, speaking accurately, been invited to stay with them in—the Isle of Skye.

'There 'll be no landing at the Lighthouse

tomorrow,' said Charles Tansley, clapping his hands together as he stood at the window with her husband. Surely, he had said enough. She wished they would both leave her and James alone and go on talking. She looked at him. He was such a miserable specimen, the children said, all humps and hollows. He couldn't play cricket; he poked; he shuffled. He was a sarcastic brute, Andréw said. They knew what he liked best—to be for ever walking up and down, up and down, with Mr Ramsay, and saying who had won this, who had won that, who was a 'first-rate man' at Latin verses, who was 'brilliant but I think fundamentally unsound,' who was undoubtedly the 'ablest fellow in Balliol,' who had buried his light temporarily at Bristol or Bedford, but was bound to be heard of later when his Prolegomena, of which Mr Tansley had the first pages in proof with him if Mr Ramsay would like to see them, to some branch of mathematics or philosophy saw the light of day. That was what they talked about.

She could not help laughing herself sometimes. She said, the other day, something about 'waves mountains high.' Yes, said Charles Tansley, 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.

But 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. And he would go to picture galleries, they said, and he would ask one, did one like his tie? God knows, said Rose, one did not.

Disappearing as stealthily as stags from the dinner-table directly the meal was over, the eight sons and daughters of Mr and Mrs Ramsay sought their bedrooms, their fastnesses in a house where there was no other privacy to debate anything, everything; Tansley's tie; the passing of the Reform Bill; seabirds 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.

Strife, divisions, difference of opinion, prejudices twisted into the very fibre of being, oh that they should begin so early, Mrs Ramsay deplored. They were so critical, her children. They talked such nonsense. She went from the dining-room, holding James by the hand, since he would not go with the others. It seemed to her such nonsense—inventing differences, when people, heaven knows, were different enough without that. The real differences, she thought, standing by the drawing-room window, are enough, quite enough. She had in mind at the