

Modern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

Virginia Woolf's
To the Lighthouse



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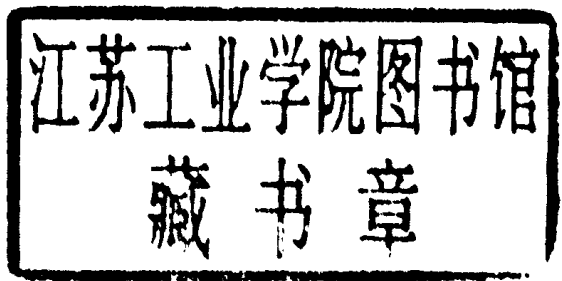
Virginia Woolf's
To the Lighthouse

Edited and with an introduction by

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Modern Critical Interpretations

Virginia Woolf's
To the Lighthouse

Editor's Note

This book gathers together a representative selection of the best critical interpretations of Virginia Woolf's novel, *To the Lighthouse*. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Christina Büchmann for her erudite aid in editing this volume.

My introduction centers upon the relationship between Walter Pater's secularized epiphanies and privileged moments, and those of Woolf, particularly in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. Hermione Lee begins the chronological sequence of criticism with a study of "completed forms" in *To the Lighthouse*, forms that she sees as Woolf's only answers to death and chaos.

In Jane Lilienfeld's reading, *To the Lighthouse* represents Woolf's mature resolution to her ambivalences towards her parents, particularly towards her mother, while Martin Corner emphasizes instead Woolf's "atheistic mysticism" in the novel.

John Burt, juxtaposing *A Room of One's Own* and *To the Lighthouse*, subtly concludes that Woolf's novel returns despite itself to realism and conventional social order, yet remains a work mourning its own inability to transcend both aesthetic and societal formalisms. A related reading by Gillian Beer establishes *To the Lighthouse* as an elegiac work, by way of a Humean account of experience.

Frank Gloversmith invokes the Bloomsbury aesthetic doctrine of "significant form" as context for *To the Lighthouse*, after which a panel discussion by Gillian Beer, Bernard Bergonzi, John Harvey, and the novelist Iris Murdoch culminates in Murdoch's strong declaration that there is only human experience, rather than a specifically female experience, as feminist critics of Woolf tend to insist.

In this book's final essay, Perry Meisel, while granting the elegiac aspect of *To the Lighthouse*, sees the novel as a crucial work that calls into question the myth of literary modernism. Meisel's emphasis takes this volume full circle, back to my introduction's Paterian appreciation of Woolf's ways of representing the privileged moment of sensation and perception.

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Introduction

I

In May 1940, less than a year before she drowned herself, Virginia Woolf read a paper to the Worker's Educational Association in Brighton. We know it as the essay entitled "The Leaning Tower," in which the Shelleyan emblem of the lonely tower takes on more of a social than an imaginative meaning. It is no longer the point of survey from which the poet Athanase gazes down in pity at the dark estate of mankind, and so is not an image of contemplative wisdom isolated from the mundane. Instead, it is "the tower of middle-class birth and expensive education," from which the poetic generation of W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice stare sidelong at society. Woolf does not say so, but we can surmise that she preferred Shelley to Auden, while realizing that she herself dwelt in the leaning tower, unlike Yeats, to whom the lonely tower remained an inevitable metaphor for poetic stance.

It is proper that "The Leaning Tower," as a speculation upon the decline of a Romantic image into belatedness, should concern itself also with the peculiarities of poetic influence:

Theories then are dangerous things. All the same we must risk making one this afternoon since we are going to discuss modern tendencies. Directly we speak of tendencies or movements we commit ourselves to the belief that there is some force, influence, outer pressure which is strong enough to stamp itself upon a whole group of different writers so that all their writing has a certain common likeness. We must then have a theory as to what this influence is. But let us always remember — influences are infinitely numerous; writers are infinitely sensitive; each writer has a different sensibility. That is why literature is always changing, like the weather, like clouds in the sky. Read a page of Scott; then of Henry James; try to work out the influences that have trans-

formed the one page into the other. It is beyond our skill. We can only hope therefore to single out the most obvious influences that have formed writers into groups. Yet there are groups. Books descend from books as families descend from families. Some descend from Jane Austen; others from Dickens. They resemble their parents, as human children resemble their parents; yet they differ as children differ, and revolt as children revolt. Perhaps it will be easier to understand living writers as we take a quick look at some of their forebears.

A critic of literary influence learns to be both enchanted and wary when such a passage is encountered. Sensibility is indeed the issue, since without “a different sensibility” no writer truly is a writer. Woolf’s sensibility essentially is Paterian, as Perry Meisel accurately demonstrated. She is hardly unique among the great modernist writers in owing much to Pater. That group includes Wilde, Yeats, Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane, as well as Pound and Eliot. Among the novelists, the Paterians, however involuntary, include Scott Fitzgerald, the early Joyce, and in strange ways both Conrad and Lawrence, as well as Woolf. Of all these, Woolf is most authentically Pater’s child. Her central tropes, like his, are personality and death, and her ways of representing consciousness are very close to his. The literary ancestor of those curious twin sensibilities—Septimus Smith and Clarissa Dalloway—is Pater’s Sebastian Van Storck, except that Woolf relents, and they do not go into Sebastian’s “formless and nameless infinite world, quite evenly grey.”

Mrs. Dalloway (1925), the fourth of Woolf’s nine novels, is her first extraordinary achievement. Perhaps she should have called it *The Hours*, its original working title. To speak of measuring one’s time by days or months, rather than years, has urgency, and this urgency increases when the fiction of duration embraces only hours, as *Mrs. Dalloway* does. The novel’s peculiar virtue is the enigmatic doubling between Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith, who do not know one another. We are persuaded that the book is not disjointed because Clarissa and Septimus uncannily share what seem a single consciousness, intense and vulnerable, each fearing to be consumed by a fire perpetually about to break forth. Woolf seems to cause Septimus to die instead of Clarissa, almost as though the novel is a single apotropaic gesture on its author’s part. One thinks of the death died for Marius by Cornelius in Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean*, but that is one friend atoning for another. However unified, does *Mrs. Dalloway* cogently link Clarissa and Septimus?

Clearly the book does, but only through its manipulation of Pater’s evasions of the figure or trope of the self as the center of a flux of sensations.

In a book review written when she was only twenty-five, Woolf made a rough statement of the stance towards the self she would take throughout her work-to-come, in the form of a Paterian rhetorical question: "Are we not each in truth the centre of innumerable rays which so strike upon one figure only, and is it not our business to flash them straight and completely back again, and never suffer a single shaft to blunt itself on the far side of us?" Here is Clarissa Dalloway, at the novel's crucial epiphany, not suffering the rays to blunt themselves on the far side of her:

What business had the Bradshaws to talk of death at her party? A young man had killed himself. And they talked of it at her party—the Bradshaws talked of death. He had killed himself—but how? Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt. He had thrown himself from a window. Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness. So she saw it. But why had he done it? And the Bradshaws talked of it at her party!

She had once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine, never anything more. But he had flung it away. They went on living (she would have to go back; the rooms were still crowded; people kept on coming). They (all day she had been thinking of Bourton, of Peter, of Sally), they would grow old. A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death.

The evasiveness of the center is defied by the act of suicide, which in Woolf is a communication and not, as it is in Freud, a murder. Earlier, Septimus had been terrified by a "gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes." The doubling of Clarissa and Septimus implies that there is only a difference in degree, not in kind, between Clarissa's sensibility and the naked consciousness or "madness" of Septimus. Neither needs the encouragement of "Fear no more the heat o' the sun," because each knows that consciousness is isolation and so untruth, and that the right worship

of life is to defy that isolation by dying. J. Hillis Miller remarks that: “A novel, for Woolf, is the place of death made visible.” It seems to me difficult to defend *Mrs. Dalloway* from moral judgments that call Woolf’s stance wholly nihilistic. But then, *Mrs. Dalloway*, remarkable as it is, is truly Woolf’s starting-point as a strong writer, and not her conclusion.

II

Critics tend to agree that Woolf’s finest novel is *To the Lighthouse* (1927), which is certainly one of the central works of the modern imagination, comparable to Lawrence’s *The Rainbow* or Conrad’s *Victory*, if not quite of the range of *Women in Love* or *Nostramo*. Perhaps it is the only novel in which Woolf displays all of her gifts at once. Erich Auerbach, in his *Mimesis*, lucidly summing up Woolf’s achievement in her book, could be expounding Pater’s trope of the privileged moment:

What takes place here in Virginia Woolf’s novel is . . . to put the emphasis on the random occurrence, to exploit it not in the service of a planned continuity of action but in itself. And in the process something new and elemental appeared: nothing less than the wealth of reality and depth of life in every moment to which we surrender ourselves without prejudice. To be sure, what happens in that moment—be it outer or inner processes—concerns in a very personal way the individuals who live in it, but it also (and for that very reason) concerns the elementary things which men in general have in common. It is precisely the random moment which is comparatively independent of the controversial and unstable orders over which men fight and despair; it passes unaffected by them, as daily life. The more it is exploited, the more the elementary things which our lives have in common come to light. The more numerous, varied, and simple the people are who appear as subjects of such random moments, the more effectively must what they have in common shine forth.

The shining forth is precisely Pater’s secularization of the epiphany, in which random moments are transformed: “A sudden light transfigures a trivial thing, a weathervane, a windmill, a winnowing flail, the dust in the barn door; a moment—and the thing has vanished, because it was pure effect.” Woolf, like Pater sets herself “to realize this situation, to define, in a chill and empty atmosphere, the focus where rays, in themselves pale and impotent, unite and begin to burn.” To realize such a situation is to set oneself

against the vision of Mr. Ramsay (Woolf's father, the philosopher Leslie Stephen), which expresses itself in the grimly empiricist maxim that: "The very stone one kicks with one's boot will outlast Shakespeare." Against this can be set Lily Briscoe's vision, which concludes the novel:

Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was—her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.

"An attempt at something" postulates, for Woolf, a center, however evasive. The apotheosis of aesthetic or perceptive principle here is Woolf's beautifully poised and precarious approach to an affirmation of the difficult possibility of meaning. *The Waves* (1931) is a large-scale equivalent of Lily Briscoe's painting. Bernard, the most comprehensive of the novel's six first-person narrators, ends the book with a restrained exultation, profoundly representative of Woolf's feminization of the Paterian aesthetic stance:

"Again I see before me the usual street. The canopy of civilisation is burnt out. The sky is dark as polished whale-bone. But there is a kindling in the sky whether of lamplight or of dawn. There is a stir of some sort—sparrows on plain trees somewhere chirping. There is a sense of the break of day. I will not call it dawn. What is dawn in the city to an elderly man standing in the street looking up rather dizzily at the sky? Dawn is some sort of whitening of the sky; some sort of renewal. Another day; another Friday; another twentieth of March, January, or September. Another general awakening. The stars draw back and are extinguished. The bars deepen themselves between the waves. The film of mist thickens on the field. A redness gathers on the roses, even on the pale rose that hangs by the bedroom window. A bird chirps. Cottagers light their early candles. Yes, this is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again.

"And in me too the wave rises. It swells; it arches its back. I am aware once more of a new desire, something rising beneath

me like the proud horse whose rider first spurs and then pulls him back. What enemy do we now perceive advancing against us, you whom I ride now, as we stand pawing this stretch of pavement? It is death. Death is the enemy. It is death against whom I ride with my spear couched and my hair flying back like a young man's, like Percival's, when he galloped in India. I strike spurs into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!"

The waves broke on the shore.

"Incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again," though ascribed to Bernard, has in it the fine pathos of a recognition of natural harshness that does not come often to a male consciousness. And for all the warlike imagery, the ride against death transcends aggressivity, whether against the self or against others. Pater had insisted that our one choice lies in packing as many pulsations of the artery, or Blakean visions of the poet's work, into our interval as possible. Woolf subtly hints that even Pater succumbs to a male illusion of experiential quantity, rather than to a female recognition of gradations in the quality of possible experience. A male critic might want to murmur, in defense of Pater, that male blindness of the void within experience is very difficult to overcome, and that Pater's exquisite sensibility is hardly male, whatever the accident of his gender.

Between the Acts (1914), Woolf's final novel, can be read as a covert and witty subversion of late Shakespeare, whose romances Woolf attempts to expose as being perhaps more male than universal in some of their implications. Parodying Shakespeare is a dangerous mode; the fat-out farce of Max Beerbohm and Nigel Dennis works more easily than Woolf's allusive deftness, but Woolf is not interested in the crudities of farce. *Between the Acts* is her deferred fulfillment of the polemical program set forth in her marvelous polemic *A Room of One's Own* (1929), which is still the most persuasive of all feminist literary manifestos. To me the most powerful and unnerving stroke in that book is in its trope for the enclosure that men have forced upon women:

For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics. But this creative power differs greatly from the creative power of man.

That last assertion is becoming a kind of shibboleth in contemporary feminist literary criticism. Whether George Eliot and Henry James ought to be read as instances of a gender-based difference in creative power is not beyond all critical dispute. Is Dorothea Brooke more clearly the product of a woman's creative power than Isabel Archer would be? Could we necessarily know that Clarissa Harlow ensues from a male imagination? Woolf, at the least, lent her authority to provoking such questions. That authority, earned by novels of the splendor of *To the Lighthouse* and *Between the Acts*, becomes more formidable as the years pass.

To the Lighthouse: Completed Forms

Hermione Lee

So that is marriage, Lily thought, a man and a woman looking at a girl throwing a ball . . . And suddenly the meaning which, for no reason at all . . . descends on people, making them symbolical, making them representative, came upon them, and made them in the dusk standing, looking, the symbols of marriage, husband and wife. Then, after an instant, the symbolical outline which transcended the real figures sank down again, and they became . . . Mr and Mrs Ramsay watching the children throwing catches.

The passage draws together, as in the curve of the ball, the three centres of this tripartite novel: the Ramsays' family life; the "symbolical outline," which transcends the "real figures"; and Lily's attempt to master both symbol and reality.

Prue and Jasper, throwing catches, are watched by their parents on a September evening before dinner. It is a family party in a shabby house on the Isle of Skye; there are eight children and some guests—Charles Tansley, a young philosopher; Augustus Carmichael, an old college friend of Mr Ramsay's; William Bankes, a widowed botanist; Lily Briscoe, who paints; and Minta Doyle and Paul Rayley, who are falling in love. One of the younger children, James, has just gone to bed, disappointed because the weather (as his father and Charles Tansley have unkindly assured him) will not be good enough to make the long-promised journey to the lighthouse the next day. Two of the older children are still at the beach with Paul and Minta. Mrs

Ramsay, upset by the conversation about the lighthouse, is worried in case they will be late: the cook has made a *boeuf en daube* which cannot be kept waiting.

These are “real figures,” and this is the stuff of a more than usually uneventful family saga. Charles Tansley, ill at ease in the rather snobbish family who don’t like his ties, might find a place in Arnold Bennett’s *Clayhanger*. James’s disappointment could form a part of Hugh Walpole’s *Jeremy*. But the scene in which Mr and Mrs Ramsay watch the children throwing catches suggests that the novel reaches beyond its realistic materials. The people are also shapes, and the shapes convey larger meanings than can be contained in the lives of individuals. The point of view from which the scene is described hovers between the personal and the general.)

Nevertheless, *To the Lighthouse* is at an important level a dramatic, realistic, ironic story of a family life which was, to a great extent, Virginia Stephen’s. “Writing the *Lighthouse* laid them in my mind” she says of her preoccupation with her parents; and Vanessa Bell, best qualified to judge, comments:

In the first part of the book you have given a portrait of mother which is more like her than anything I could have conceived of as possible. You have made me feel the extraordinary beauty of her character . . . It was like meeting her again with oneself grown up and on equal terms . . . You have given father too I think as clearly, but perhaps . . . that isn’t quite so difficult. There is more to catch hold of.)

Vanessa herself is part of *To the Lighthouse*, as one of the Stephen children whose lives with their widowed father inspired James’s and Cam’s relationship with Mr Ramsay in the last part of the novel, and as Lily Briscoe, whose struggle with her art is as much Vanessa’s as Virginia Woolf’s own: “God! how you’ll laugh at the painting bits in the Lighthouse!” Virginia wrote to her.

The marriage of Leslie Stephen and Julia Duckworth seemed to Virginia Woolf to present an archetypal pattern of sexual antitheses. Her portrayal of the Ramsays makes these contrasts so obvious, and is so characteristic of her treatment of the differences between male and female sensibilities, that the grandeur and subtlety of the relationship seems all the more extraordinary. Mrs Ramsay is beautiful, queenly, shortsighted, philanthropic and inventive. Her intimacy with her children nourishes her natural tendency towards fantasy and exaggeration. Like Mrs Hilbery she is associated with poetry, Mr Ramsay (like Mr Hilbery) with prose. Mr Ramsay does not see what is close to him—the flowers, or his own children’s beauty. Instead, with “an eye like an eagle’s,” he seeks for truth. He is awkward and ungainly in com-