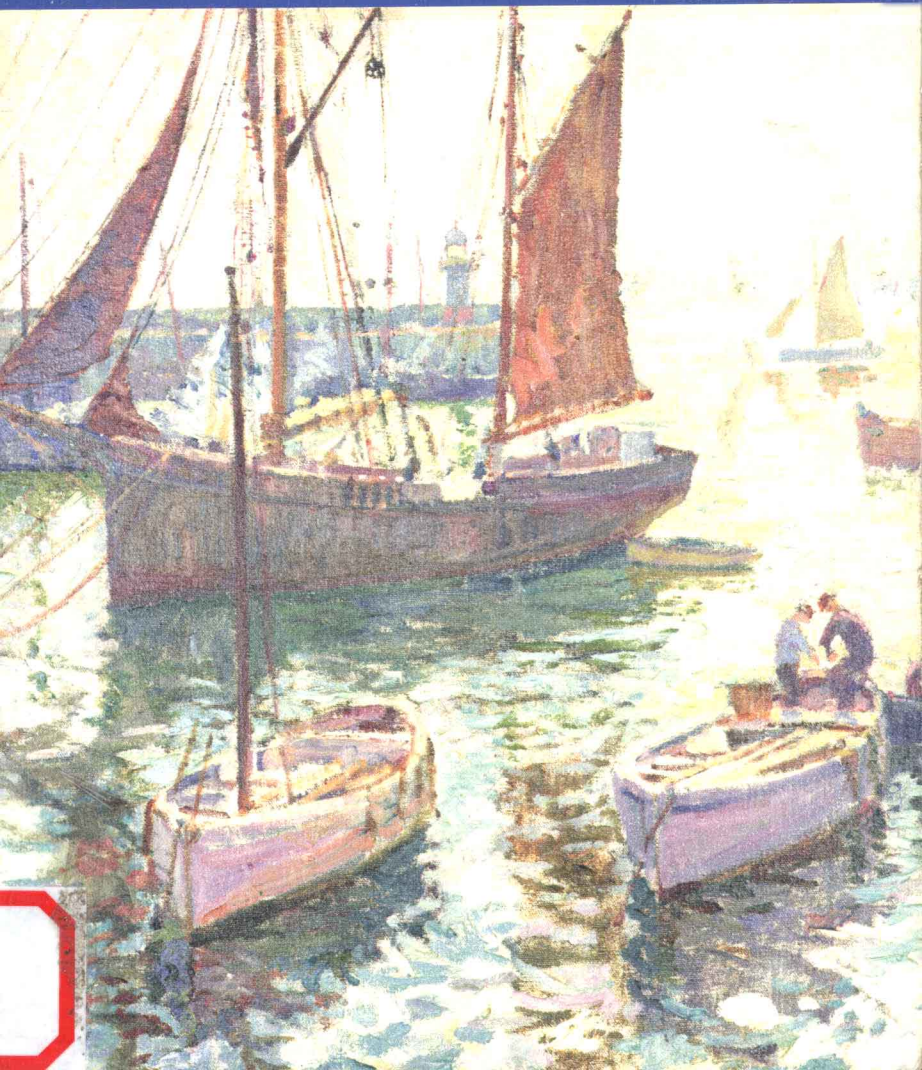


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To the Lighthouse

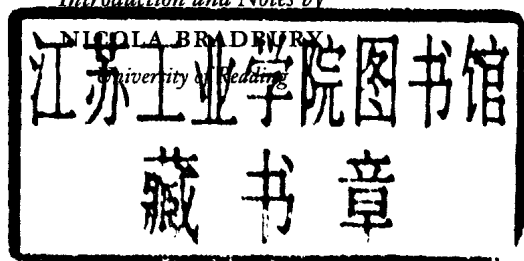
VIRGINIA WOOLF



TO THE LIGHTHOUSE

Virginia Woolf

Introduction and Notes by



WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

In loving memory of
MICHAEL TRAYLER
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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

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General Adviser
KEITH CARABINE
Rutherford College
University of Kent at Canterbury

INTRODUCTION

‘“About life, about death; about Mrs Ramsay” – no, she thought, one could say nothing to nobody’ (*To the Lighthouse*, pp. 132–3). Lily Briscoe, the painter, looking on, clumsy with words, illogical and ungrammatical, addresses the experience which Virginia Woolf tackles in her novel and finds it impossible to label. Yet the artist’s effort, and even her sense of failure, registering the scale of the task, help to communicate both how ambitious and unpretentious their work is. The mood is gay and grim in the spirit of a family holiday, domestic in scale but felt as cataclysmic, where the battle for survival of every individual, their struggles of self-assertion, are balanced by the craving for unconditional love. Rational science, championed by the men, is challenged by feminine intuition, art, and a music of memory furnished with snatches of poetry or sudden rushes of sensation. The perspective is intimate, thanks to Virginia Woolf’s

'stream of consciousness' technique, catching the thoughts and feelings, the immediate perceptions, of individual experience; but the issues go beyond the personal, to concerns of philosophy, psychology and gender.

Remote from ordinary life in a fictional space in the Outer Hebrides (actually based on the author's childhood holidays at St Ives in Cornwall), the Ramsays and their guests, a random group of middle-class intellectuals from London and Cambridge, nevertheless emerge as specimens of humanity and vehicles of consciousness. Over the first half of the novel a typical day from one vacation draws towards bedtime, then without warning the text breaks off into a ten-year interlude, covered in thirteen pages. The Great War, the sudden death of Mrs Ramsay and of two grown children, the desolation and recuperation of their holiday home, slip by with undifferentiated significance in the lyrical prose of 'Time Passes'. In Part Three the survivors reconvene, and complete their projected voyage to the lighthouse. Lily Briscoe takes up her abandoned painting, and triumphs over the problems of colour, mass, and line. 'It was done; it was finished.' As the work closes, 'Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision'(p. 154).

What is *To the Lighthouse* about? Life, death and Mrs Ramsay are central issues; the lighthouse, embattled and isolated at sea, emitting intermittent beams, a powerful image. But this is a work where 'action' (even the most crucial human events of birth and death or national history in wartime), 'character', theme and symbol prove crude and inadequate clues to interpretation. When starting to plan, Virginia Woolf listed them summarily: 'This is going to be fairly short: to have father's character done complete in it; & mothers [sic]; & St. Ives; & childhood; & all the usual things I try to put in - life, death, &c.' (Thursday 14 May 1925, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Hogarth Press, London 1977-84, 5 vols, Vol. III, p. 18). Two months later, she notes possible 'branches & roots which I do not perceive now' (Monday 20 July 1925, *Diary*, III, p. 36); but what attracts her is something else: 'this impersonal thing, which I'm dared to do by my friends, the flight of time, & the consequent break of unity in my design. That passage (I conceive the book in 3 parts . . .) interests me very much.'

The shift from family as subject, father as central character, and mother, and the location in a remembered place and time, 'all the usual things', towards a concern so unprecedented that it has no name, 'this impersonal thing', signals the modernism of *To the Lighthouse*. This move may have been psychologically motivated for

Woolf, and ideologically sanctioned as a daughter's rebellion against the Victorian patriarchy which dominated her early life. But the personal and autobiographical is caught up in a larger cultural shift from one era and code of values to a new range of possibilities, especially for women; and this potential requires new forms, rhythms and modes of expression. What makes Woolf's enterprise so interesting is the electric charge between ideas, emotion and words themselves: art as a dynamic field not static design. The revolutionary aim of this novel is not to memorialise but actually anticipate the moment of being, to catch at experience before it can be defined. Like Lily Briscoe, the whole text launches itself at 'her old antagonist, life' (p. 57), over the defiant conjunction 'but', and in language which is anything but abstract or rarefied: simple, monosyllabic, Anglo-Saxon, active: 'But what she wished to get hold of was that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything' (p. 144).

Born in 1882, Virginia Woolf was the daughter of a distinguished Victorian man of letters, Leslie Stephen, and his second wife, the beautiful widow Julia Duckworth. His signal work was the *Dictionary of National Biography*, recording the public life of great men with immutable dignity. Yet he personally suffered change and loss: his first wife had died; the Stephen and Duckworth half-siblings shared intense, perhaps incestuous, relationships; their family was a site of desperate desire and of competition for affection and security, ironically enacting a private emotional experience at least as typical of Victorianism and the patriarchy as any outward order. This was a certainly a tradition of 'talent and of beauty' (Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, Hogarth Press, London 1972, 2 vols, Vol 1, pp. 18-20), but it was also a stressful legacy, a psychological and cultural burden that only personal achievement could alleviate. Leslie Stephen and Julia provide the models for Mr and Mrs Ramsay: figures of power, but fallible too: Virginia records in her diary as late as November 1928, 'I used to think of him & mother daily; but writing *The Lighthouse* laid them in my mind' (III, p. 208).

Woolf had published four novels before this, and much critical and theoretical work: she was a writer in her own right, but of a very different kind from her father. If his circle epitomised the Victorian establishment, rooted in customary command, hers was at the axis of Modernism, an innovative intellectual and artistic challenge. Married to Leonard Woolf, himself a writer, publisher and Fabian supporter of the new Labour party, Virginia was surrounded by a circle of remarkable friends from Cambridge and London, the 'Bloomsbury

Group', who included painters and critics, philosophers, writers, dancers. She knew Maynard and Lydia Keynes, Lytton Strachey and Carrington, Bertrand Russell, Katherine Mansfield, E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence and T. S. Eliot; her sister was the painter Vanessa Bell, married to Clive, a lover of Duncan Grant and friend of Roger Fry, who organised the First Post-Impressionist Exhibition in London in 1910. This was a different base from the family: a professional, critical, philosophical, artistic group, addressing experience as the raw material of life, equally interested in problems of consciousness and form, self-awareness in crisis.

To the Lighthouse epitomises this kind of modernism, bringing an analytical sense of form to the urgent chaos of personality. There are people, fictional characters, here: the domineering yet insecure Mr Ramsay; his wife, whose poise recalls the perfection of Greek beauty; the irascible academic and eager acolyte; young lovers; children. But what they enact goes beyond personal vanity or serenity to another, impersonal design. Woolf speculated on the composition: 'I think I might do something in *To the Lighthouse* to split up emotions more completely' (Thursday 30 July 1925, *Diary*, III, p. 81). Within the work Lily Briscoe, also wrestling with problems of artistic form, completes her canvas actively and with a stroke that is definitive not representative: 'With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre' (p. 154). The novel draws energy from the tension between aesthetic and emotional imperatives: shape and flux, light and darkness, imaged in the stroboscopic sweep from the lighthouse and in the wave motion of the sea which both assails and justifies its existence. Before beginning to write, Woolf mused on 'a general sense of the poetry of existence that overcomes me. Often it is connected with the sea & St. Ives' (Wednesday 13 June 1923, *Diary*, II, p. 246). But afterwards she had 'netted that fin in the waste of waters' (Saturday 7 February 1931, *Diary*, IV, p. 10). The artist has triumphed.

Raw emotions, autobiography, provide the stuff of *To the Lighthouse*. It touches a nerve in the exposed family: protective between mother and child; competitive from the father. The gender roles are sustained by marital entrenchment within well-rehearsed defences, and the only alternatives seem to lie in exclusion or new forms of autonomy, as shown with some hesitation through the spinsterly independence and professional commitment of Lily Briscoe. But Woolf's treatment of this intimate material is combative. 'I go in dread of "sentimentality",' she said (Monday 13 September 1926, *Diary*, III, p. 110). Avoiding emotional clichés proves bracing: 'A new

problem like that breaks fresh ground in ones [*sic*] mind; prevents the regular ruts' (Monday 20 July 1925, *Diary*, III, p. 36). The novel challenges romantic conformism with a fascinating and sometimes disconcertingly varied attack: intellectually critical and witty; poetically charged, with verbal music and figurative invention; innovatory techniques juxtaposed with echoes of ancient stories and familiar rhymes, so that expression itself comes into question. Grimm's fairy story of the Fisherman and his Wife, which Mrs Ramsay reads to calm James (pp. 28, 31, 40-4), punctuates the immediacy of family and gender struggles with a fictional variant, where the wife is domineering and greedy, but the Golden Flounder in the sea, not people ashore, has ultimate power. Meanwhile Mr Ramsay finds his own relief from the anxiety of failure through the mantra-like chanting of the poetry of defeat, whether Tennyson's 'Charge of the Light Brigade' (p. 12) or Cowper's 'The Castaway' (p. 110). While his wife is 'oddly' and comically reminded of 'the great sea lion at the Zoo tumbling backwards after swallowing his fish and walloping off so that the water in the tank washes from side to side' (p. 24), Mr Ramsay 'dived into the evening air', abandoning the recurrent phrase 'Someone had blundered' (p. 24) to contemplate what he has achieved philosophically, and then to construct an elaborate fantasy of heroic endeavour and excusable failure, using an imaginary story of Arctic exploration and threatened survival (pp. 25-6). There is an elegiac strain to the novel, celebrating lost experience and irrecoverable expectations, both on a personal level and historically; but it is also comical, abrasive, down to earth. The text challenges former artists and writers, from Michaelangelo (p. 22) and Titian (p. 52) to Jane Austen (p. 77), Sir Walter Scott (p. 77), George Eliot (p. 71) Balzac (p. 88), Tolstoy (p. 78), even Shakespeare (p. 88), as well as philosophers, scientists and other signal intellectual figures: challenges them by reference, quotation, discussion, and by its own contrary example. Woolf's project as a writer is both stringent and ambitious: stripping away dead matter, to find the real, the actual, as it comes into being: 'I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes' (Wednesday 28 November 1928, *Diary*, III, p. 209).

'Yes' is the first word of *To the Lighthouse* and 'I have had my vision' (p. 154) its close: positive affirmation of an attitude of acceptance and achievement. The glimpse of a holiday and portrait of a family, interrupted by the reverberations of the Great War, and underpinned by a Darwinian struggle for survival, certainly acknowledges both violence and the threat of extinction; but it is above all celebratory. 'I am

now writing as fast & freely as I have written in the whole of my life' (Tuesday 23 February 1926, *Diary*, III, p. 59) Woolf recorded with alliterative gusto. Later, addressing the central passage, she confronts a new challenge: 'I rush at it, & at once scatter out two pages. Is it nonsense, is it brilliance?' (Sunday 18 April 1926, *Diary*, III, p. 75). Then, finally, 'What interests me in the last stage was the freedom & boldness with which my imagination picked up used & tossed aside all the images & symbols which I had prepared' (Saturday 7 February 1931, *Diary*, IV, p. 10). Her verve does not merely dominate the material: through writing she accesses her subject, energises the text, so that style itself becomes direct evidence of life. Subjectivity, resistance to subjection, lies at the heart of her approach to gender, class, self-definition. In this novel it is empowered by the rhythms of expression, rather than circumscribed in the old familiar ways through character, plot or omniscient narrative. So what might seem negative effects prove energising. Every change of direction, clash of tones, omission of information, plays a part in the intertextuality of innovation. This is a form built on chaos, often using the old models of strife (as in Mr Ramsay's haunting recitation of Tennyson's 'Charge of the Light Brigade'), but 'tossing aside' their futile, self-destructive, linear oppositionality, and invoking instead a multi-farious, polyvocal approach: 'to saturate every atom' (Wednesday 28 November 1928, *Diary*, III, p. 209).

To 'eliminate all waste' and yet 'saturate every atom' requires both discipline and ingenuity. The structural organisation of the text is surprisingly spare, yet dense, operating as a constructive challenge. The pattern disturbs familiar expectations of the tripartite structure of beginning, middle and end. Opening late in the afternoon, Part One scrambles through several centres of narrative consciousness and through memory and reverie as well as immediate drama towards the climax of Mrs Ramsay's dinner party. This set-piece scene pivots not on a character or action but around the great dish of boeuf en daube in the middle of the table. At this point, where a conventional novel might offer development, *To the Lighthouse* moves into eclipse. The central section is disconcertingly brief. Exposition is elided. Night and day, the weather and seasons, then the cleaning women Mrs McNab and Mrs Bast supplant the prominent figures of Part One. They are written out with casual economy. When Part Three resumes the loose ends of the opening, James's trip to the lighthouse and Lily Briscoe's painting, it is hard to say whether 'repetition had taken the place of newness' (p. 15), or elegy competes with the drive onwards. Here the text exhibits the 'freedom and boldness' Woolf

diagnosed in her own imagination, which 'picked up used and tossed aside all the images & symbols which I had created'. It is not design but energy which is celebrated here, and a new kind of textual extravagance.

Style like structure is deliberately thrown off balance in an experiment with expression. The drama of immediate performance, not careful rehearsal, is conveyed through every shift in tone and glitch in execution. When Lily Briscoe despairs of words her very exasperation brings them to life, jettisoning grammar and resorting to unruly, even combative images instead: '“About life, about death; about Mrs Ramsay” – no, she thought, one could say nothing to nobody. The urgency of the moment always missed its mark. Words fluttered sideways and hit the object inches too low”' (pp. 132–3). As a painter she thinks figuratively. This might be considered a feminine trait, but Woolf has a lot of fun with such gender stereotypes, as she explores the strange and comical rhythms of non-communication which only profound sympathy can overcome between Mr and Mrs Ramsay. His conception of philosophical thought is presented in black and white as a piano keyboard, or as an alphabet, where 'his splendid mind' can run easily to, 'say, the letter Q' (p. 24), but R is forever beyond reach. As for Mrs Ramsay, 'subject and object and the nature of reality' takes shape in her mind as 'a scrubbed kitchen table'. Paradoxically the philosopher's cipher is the more reductive. His alphabet is mere notation, and touchingly associated with childish learning. The kitchen table is a rich and solidly imagined phantom of thought, however unexpected and ungainly. Its very posture offers a challenge: 'one of those scrubbed board tables, grained and knotted, whose virtue seems to have been laid bare by years of muscular integrity, which stuck there, its four legs in the air' (p. 17).

The wooden table perched like a partridge in the pear tree is both ludicrous and magical. A strong comic streak runs through *To the Lighthouse*, challenging and energising but not disabling any serious reading. At the opening, for instance, the six-year-old James is cutting out pictures from the Army and Navy Stores catalogue when a sensation of joy comes to 'crystallise and transfix the moment' (p. 3), an effect which 'endowed the picture of a refrigerator as his mother spoke with heavenly bliss'. So the child's vision, a momentary epiphany, is caught with simple textual irreverence between the bathetic and sublime. Such illuminations are transient, and this is demonstrated by the casual cut from contentment to rage as James's father puts paid to the hope of going to the lighthouse next day.

Where James used scissors for play, the scene now bristles with weapons. Mr Ramsay is 'lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one' (p. 3). James longs for 'an axe handy, a poker, or any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and killed him'. Child and father, male and female clash. To his wife's 'delicious fecundity' (p. 27) given in symbols from nature as a 'rain of energy' or a 'rosy-flowered fruit tree laid with leaves and dancing boughs' Mr Ramsay opposes a 'beak of brass', the 'arid scimitar of the male, which smote mercilessly, again and again, demanding sympathy' (p. 28). The violence of these images is obvious, but the archaic, alliterative and repetitive phrasing carries an ironic rhetorical comment on its futility. Mr Ramsay's ferocity is a conceit, and so is his wife's grace. These images of beauty and carnage come cheek by jowl with those of Mrs Ramsay knitting: 'Flashing her needles, confident, upright . . .' This icon of domesticity is in turn transformed into a figure of power, perhaps like Lily Briscoe another analogue for the author within the text: ' . . . she created drawing-room and kitchen, set them all aglow.' Then, as the flow of words grows extravagant, the writer takes control, asserting her own spare rhythm, making her point with triumphant concision: 'She laughed, she knitted.'

To the Lighthouse is not an encoded text with a hierarchical system of signs like a fixed elaborate alphabet but more like Mrs Ramsay's boeuf en daube, a syntagmatic soup swimming with simultaneous differences. Individual ingredients are rich and various and the combined effects are unpredictable. Speech, thought, quotation, verbal resonance, pure sensation, are tossed in. As the children go off to bed:

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. [p. 4]

This single-sentence paragraph shows how Woolf uses poetic effects

of rhythm, alliteration and figuration to conjure up the extravagance, the sheer otherness, of childish imagination through the echoes of medieval romance ('sought', 'stags', 'fastnesses'), but then qualifies this strain in adult language and with adult concerns ('there was no other privacy to debate anything'). She captures the abrupt coding of masculine chat ('Tansley's tie'), and passes swiftly to national politics ('the passing of the Reform Bill') without notice of the change in scale, and without commenting on the parallels between such political concerns and the family's struggles for power and representation. Instead the sentence flits to another focus, perhaps a feminine line ('seabirds and butterflies'), and from here to 'people'. This string of overhearings is illuminated, located, and orchestrated by the specific setting: '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'. The use of the comma after 'attics', the abstention from a comma after 'heard', the connective 'and' where an unsuspected parallel is to be inferred between the different sites of isolation and silence in the valley of death or the sunlit attics, are masterly but unobtrusive techniques of stylistic control. Here is 'life, death' (*Diary*, iii, p.18) brilliantly staged in the fragmented shelter of domestic space. And here too Woolf adds her '&c.' in graphic detail, metaphorically redolent of mortality ('the skulls of small birds'), art ('ink-pots, paint-pots'), perhaps immortality (which beetles signified in ancient Egypt), and then returns to the specific site of this novel, where the sea is the land's edge, giving another great image of alienation.

This paragraph is light-footed, like the stealthy stags. The holiday house is neither overwritten nor lost from sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell; but it is dramatised as sharply as a setting from a Chekhov or Ibsen play, acquiring a symbolic status, creating the topography of isolation and vulnerability for humans alone or collectively, just as certainly as 'the skulls of small birds'. More than domestic architecture, this is a phenomenal space, subject to natural law, where the sun has 'poured in' like water, while the sea has retreated leaving gritty sand, and frilled strips of seaweed convert the attics into a species of tidal pool, where strange forms of life appear grotesquely magnified.

Woolf's work has been approached in many ways: stylistically, especially as an example of modernism, using the stream-of-consciousness technique; ideologically, as a feminist claim for the needs and strengths of women, unquestionable in the case of the author of *A Room of One's Own*; culturally, with a recognition that

opposition to patriarchy entails too the questioning of empire and its engines of government and war. Psychological approaches deriving from Melanie Klein's interest in the mother figure, or more recently following Cixous or Irigaray's celebration of *écriture féminine*, have also proved productive. What close reading demonstrates, however, is how the text responds flexibly to a sequence of critical demands. It is not bland or indiscriminately receptive, but rather many-faceted, rapidly proposing shifts of stance and tone, and rewarding responses in different modes and keys. The work is challenging in style as it is in its ideas. It is more than a fiction of protest or debate probing 'the woman question', and it is more than an aesthetic exercise proposing art as an alternative to rational thought in investigating 'life'.

The figure of Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, neglected amongst the guests but significant to the reader, enables Woolf to explore both these issues, feminism and aesthetics, quite openly, for Lily considers both in a serious and prolonged debate with herself on her painting, which stands as a parallel to the art of fiction which contains her. It is Lily who articulates the difficulty of 'this passage from conception to work' (p. 14), and who asks, 'What does it mean then, what can it all mean?' (p. 109). She is the one for whom 'like everything else this strange morning the words became symbols' (p. 110) as the narrative reopens in 'The Lighthouse', and the one who confronts 'this formidable ancient enemy of hers - this other thing, this truth, this reality' (p. 118) in the presence of her canvas. When 'It was done' (p. 154) the text too can close. Yet Lily Briscoe's vision is not identical with that of the novel, and cannot be taken for an encrypted answer to its questions. For her vision is blacked out just as Mrs Ramsay is written out and the house abandoned in the central section of the novel, where the idea of consciousness as the route to truth is reversed.

'Time Passes' is the most adventurous and mysterious movement of the work, and the one which most clearly foreshadows Woolf's later experimental novel, *The Waves*. Here 'a downpouring of immense darkness began' (p. 93): but it is not completely impenetrable. Snatches of dialogue are still heard, although they sound more like ritual chanting than conversation, carrying the rhythm of poetic symbolism:

'Well, we must wait for the future to show,' said Mr Banks, coming in from the terrace.

'It's almost too dark to see,' said Andrew, coming up from the beach.

'One can hardly tell which is the sea and which is the land,' said Prue.

'Do we leave that light burning?' said Lily [. . .]

'No,' said Prue, 'not if everyone's in.'

'Andrew,' she called back, 'just put out the light in the hall.'

One by one the lamps were all extinguished [. . .] [p. 93]

In this darkness, mental as much as physical, the text takes on a different dimension of being: not conscious, not human, but highly animate, beneath the annihilation of 'body or mind':

Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness which creeping in at keyholes and crevices, stole round window blinds, came into bedrooms, swallowed up here a jug and basin, there a bowl of red and yellow dahlias, there the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers. Not only was furniture confounded; there was scarcely anything left of body or mind by which one could say, 'This is he,' or, 'This is she.' Sometimes a hand was raised as if to clutch something or ward off something, or somebody groaned, or somebody laughed aloud as if sharing a joke with nothingness. [p. 93]

From 'Nothing' to 'nothingness', the text in effect 'uncreates' its own world. 'Nothing happened,' would be one way of putting it; but Woolf's way is more unusual, uncanny: above all, more energetic. The prose is peopled with bizarre images created by a Frankenstein-like revival of dead metaphors: '*darkness stole round window blinds . . . swallowed up a jug*'. The bodiless dark becomes the subject of a string of active verbs. A grotesque hand clutches; somebody groans. The text revels in a virtual gothic drama: 'somebody laughed aloud as if sharing a joke with nothingness'. Wind follows darkness, and 'random light' directs the movement of the text. 'Night, however, succeeds to night' (p. 94), and in this passage, 'Almost it would appear that it is useless in such confusion to ask the night those questions as to what, and why, and wherefore, which tempt the sleeper from his bed to seek an answer' (p. 95). Throughout 'Time Passes', the impulses of consciousness are frustrated, by darkness, absence, death, and instead the text celebrates a kind of existence which persists regardless:

But there was a force working; something not highly conscious; something that leered, something that lurched; something not inspired to go about its work with dignified ritual or solemn chanting. [p. 103]

This force is not the cleaning ladies, Mrs McNab and Mrs Bast, though they share some of its qualities, and this is what lends them resilience when the others are in eclipse. Rather, it is the irreducible otherness of Lily Briscoe's 'old antagonist, life' (p. 57). What 'Time Passes' celebrates, and acknowledges rather than describes; what resists analysis; what requires strange modes of utterance, from the gothic to lyric styles, is something beyond words, beyond story, even beyond a joke. The purpose of the lighthouse is of course to shine: but it is the blank darkness between its sweeps of light which defines that need. Virginia Woolf's 'impersonal thing' (*Diary*, iv, p. 36), the 'break of unity' in her design, is the definitive element in this extraordinary work: the one through which finally, 'It was done.'

NICOLA BRADBURY
University of Reading

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PART ONE

The Window

