

"THE PULSE OF COLOUR" IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S 'TO THE LIGHTHOUSE'

by **Shaun McCarthy**

...First, the pulse of colour flooded the bay with blue, and the heart expanded with it and the body swam, only the next instant to be checked and chilled by the prickly blackness on the ruffled waves. Then, up behind the great black rock, almost every evening spurted irregularly, so that one had to watch for it and it was a delight when it came, a fountain of white water; and then, while one waited for that, one watched, on the pale semi-circular beach, wave after wave shedding again and again smoothly a film of mother-of-pearl.....

Virginia Woolf's novels are commonly held to be in almost an exemplary sense the product of a refined theoretical intelligence and, as such, in a high degree revelatory of an individual, if not idiosyncratic, critical philosophy. This is, of course, a pompous way of putting it — but appropriate enough in the present context, since the suggestion comes as a frequent corollary that the critical philosophy in question tends to outweigh the narrative dynamic of her fiction, lending it a quality of pretentiousness that many readers find unacceptable, loading the description of quotidian events and scenes with a depth of significance that it may seem unreasonable they should bear. As will be seen, I do not dismiss this suggestion at the outset as merely Philistine, nor do I deny the truth of the proposition upon which it rests; indeed, it seems to me fully applicable to her criticism as well, and notably so when she deals with authors whose remoteness from the Woolfian aesthetic canon may seem apparent — such as Chaucer, Montaigne and Joseph Conrad. As an example I might cite her comment on one of Conrad's most successful character creations:—

.... Nor did Marlow live entirely wreathed in the smoke of his own cigars. He had a habit of opening his eyes suddenly and looking — at a rubbish heap, at a port, at a shop counter — and then complete in its burning ring of light that thing is flashed bright upon the mysterious background. Introspective and analytical, Marlow was aware of this peculiarity. He said the power came to him suddenly. He might, for instance, overhear a French officer murmur, "Mon Dieu, how the time passes!....." (1)

She continues by quoting Marlow/Conrad directly:—

"Nothing could have been more commonplace than this remark; but its utterance coincided for me with a moment of vision. It's extraordinary how we go through life with eyes half shut, with dull ears, with dormant thoughts..... Nevertheless, there can be but few of us who had never known one of these rare moments of awakening, when we see, hear, understand, ever so much — every-

(1) "Joseph Conrad," *The Common Reader*, (1925), pp. 286—7.

thing — in a flash, before we fall back again into our agreeable somnolence. I raised my eyes when he spoke, and I saw him as though I had never seen him before.....”

There is much in this passage, and in Woolf's comment upon it, that is relevant to some of the chief preoccupations of “modernist” authors — to the Joycean epiphany, to Eliot's “one end, which is always present,” to D. H. Lawrence's monotony of exasperation; much also that is relevant to the tenets of the Impressionist painters; but above all there is much that is even more obviously and directly relevant to the narrative techniques of Virginia Woolf herself, which relate notoriously to the description and depiction of just such “moments of awakening” — this to the extent, indeed, of often involving the nigh-total abandonment of traditional narrative methods, as commonly categorised. We may be reminded, however, of the usage that we now regard as characteristically Proustian — that of mining an incalculable wealth of implication from just such “commonplace remarks” as that of Conrad's French officer — “Mon Dieu, how the time passes!”, from just such everyday sights as those which Woolf remarks; “a rubbish heap, a port, a shop counter.” And certainly we may wonder if her observations may not be tinged with a certain subjectivity — whether Marlow is indeed as “subtle, refined and fastidious” as Woolf finds him, or whether — as so often happens — she detects these qualities in him because her modernistic theoretical arguments necessitate their presence. If so, she will again, and in a different sense, be investing statements with a significance that they should not bear.

In Marlow, however, these characteristically feminine virtues are (if present) qualified by what she calls the Conradian “double vision,” which is levelled at distinctively masculine qualities, those of the Whalleys and Singletons: “To praise their silence one must possess a voice. To appreciate their endurance one must be sensitive to fatigue.” Within the masculine/feminine dichotomy she in this way uncovers a profound structural paradox, clearly affecting our response to such “virile” writers as Faulkner, Hemingway and Mailer and affecting, in reverse, our response to Woolf herself, since it will disable us from viewing her novels as a characteristically feminist contribution to modern literature — however other of her writings may encourage such a judgement.

We should rather, I think, accept the sense, if not the wording, of Thomas Vogler's assessment, wherein he maintains that Woolf-

.....explores both the masculine and the feminine with a profound sense of their interdependence in the economy of mental as well as biological existence..... (1)

But bearing in mind also the more detailed observation of Jean Guignet:—

(1) T. A. Vogler, intro. to *To The Lighthouse: 20th Century Interpretations*, ed. Vogler, (1970), p. 19.

No doubt Virginia Woolf would be the first to protest against the artificial element in the traditional oppositions between men's and women's natures. Yet she usually respects their broad lines, and in **To The Lighthouse** she stresses the opposition and exploits it..... (2)

Thus it is that "the passage to that fabled land" calls upon qualities that we may think of as characteristically Conradian or Faulknerian, "courage, truth, and the power to endure," "endurance and justice, foresight, devotion, skill..... Qualities that would have saved a ship's company exposed on a broiling sea with six biscuits and a flask of water," all invoked not altogether ironically to Mr. Ramsay's aid but also to that of Mrs. Ramsay herself:—

.....In pity for him, life being now strong enough to bear her on again, she began all this business, as a sailor not without weariness sees the wind fill his sail and yet hardly wants to be off again and thinks how, had the ship sunk, he would have whirled round and round and found rest on the floor of the seas..... (3)

Movement is constantly contrasted to rest, the impulse of the sea-voyage to the static rhythms of the painting, the male dynamic to the female kinetic, yet always with "a profound sense of the inter-dependence" of these binary poles.

Certainly no characters may seem to be further removed than those of Woolf from that struggle against the elemental and unrelenting forces of nature that dignities the creations of Conrad, Hardy, Giono and Faulkner; yet these references, like her comments on Marlow, testify in some measure to a common interest, a shared approach, and such considerations may lead us to suppose that natural forces, or a natural force, indeed create those points of structural tension, of conflict and of ultimate reconciliation, upon which the integrity of the Woolfian narrative depends. Firbank's concern has been said to be "the preservation of impeccable surfaces" at a time of acute spiritual and material crisis, and Woolf's novels and stories may seem to reflect, in a very different way, this same concern; yet the whole point of the Firbankian philosophy is that such a preservation is impossible — "the centre cannot hold," the agents of destruction make their due appearance, like the murderers in **Macbeth**. The enemies of Firbank are the enemies of the homosexually-inclined aesthete — old age, ugliness, death; similarly, the enemy to Virginia Woolf is the eternal enemy of femininity, as duly recognised by Shakespeare — **time** is the natural force against which the Woolfian heroine struggles, as desperately as may the Conradian mariner against the encroaching sea.

.....They could not all be drowned. And again she felt alone in the presence of her old antagonist, life..... (1)

(2) Jean Guiguet, "To The Lighthouse," in **To The Lighthouse: Casebook**, ed. Beja, (1970), p. 239.

(3) **To The Lighthouse**, p. 97. (Page references in this article are to the Penguin edition).

(1) **To The Lighthouse**, p. 91.

"Life," for Mrs. Ramsay, is temporal reality; the "moment of awakening" that at various points she experiences is, for her creator as for Proust, a moment of refuge; yet refuge of a peculiarly non-passive kind, in that the possibility of refuge from the omnipotent action of temporality is taken to be a clear indication of the further possibility of final transcendence. In this sense, neither Proust nor Woolf are as pessimistic as they have sometimes been held to be.

Such a refuge from the unending ebb-and-flow of the life force may be encountered in the static patterns of the atemporal art forms; we may say in Lily Briscoe's paintings, precisely, but also in those many scenic descriptions designed as formal compositions and thus echoing, so to speak, visual perspectives on the printed page:—

.....But here, the houses falling away on both sides, they came out on the quay, and the whole bay spread before them and Mrs. Ramsay could not help exclaiming, "Oh, how beautiful!" For the great plateful of blue water was before her; the hoary Lighthouse, distant, austere, in the midst; and on the right, as far as the eye could see, fading and falling, in soft low pleats, the green sand dunes with the wild flowing grasses on them, which always seemed to be running away into some moon country, uninhabited by men.

That was the view, she said, stopping, growing greyer-eyed, that her husband loved..... (1)

The device through which this scene is at once invested with an illusory sense of movement — "falling," "wild," "flowing," "running away," — and simultaneously held up to our inspection as if within the confines of a picture-frame — a "view" — is characteristic. And in passages where the movement may take the more violent form of conflict (that, for example, between waves and shore, sea and land, in the citation heading this article) the violence may be held in check by the invocation of more static dichotomies — darkness and light, black and white, "black rock," "white water"; and the starkness of this contrast further modified by the introduction of "the pulse of colour" — blue, green, purple, others more subtle — which again impose on the inner struggle the external staticity of a painting. In this act of subjugation the ordered complexity of Woolf's stylistic, with its inversions and multiplicity of parentheses, plays a very evident part. The flux of language itself is related to colour and hence both released and restrained:—

.....Slowly those words they had said at dinner, 'the China rose is all abloom and buzzing with the honey bee,' began washing from side to side of her mind rhythmically, and as they washed, words, like little shaded lights, one red, one blue, one yellow, lit up in the dark of her mind, and seemed leaving their perches up there to fly across and across, or to cry out and to be echoed; so she turned and felt on the table beside her for a book..... (2)

(1) *To The Lighthouse*, p. 16.

(2) *ibid.*, p. 136.

Furthermore, there is a constant underlying suggestion — conveyed, as I think, chiefly through our sense of the enormous resources of “words” — that the world revealed to the painter’s eye, as to our own, is a world of appearances only, of “apparitions”: “Our apparitions, the things you know us by, are simply childish. Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by.....” (1) Joyce, of course, makes an identical point in the opening paragraph of **The Portrait of an Artist**; and we will further be aware of the Conradian analogies when Mrs. Ramsay elsewhere speaks of her own inner being as a “wedge-shaped core of darkness, invisible to others” — invoking here, perhaps, the interlocking cones of Cusanus. (2) This is to say that in **To The Lighthouse** the description of character, like that of the natural scenery, seeks to descend constantly below the level of externals; Woolf’s characters have, in consequence, a quality quite other than that which “characterisation,” in the normal sense, reveals.

We feel them, rather than see them..... In fact, we remember the characters less than their aura. Their faces glow with an internal light, their essence radiates outwards from them like that mysterious halo carried by Minta Doyle. They live..... but the life they reveal is different from the kind of life that novelists usually represent..... (3)

Character, to Woolf, is essentially an extra-temporal phenomenon; this indeed is the crucial point of the essay that Guiguet rightly calls “pivotal,” **Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown**. The meaning of character is, to Woolf, inseparable from the meaning of episodic narration; we may say of her as she says of Marlow.

.....To him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.....(4)

— which reflection must bring us back again to our point of departure, to the Woolfian “epiphany,” the “rare moment of awakening” wherein ordinary objects and ordinary people are invested — as in the great Impressionist paintings — with a transcendental profundity. So it is with Lily’s famous “kitchen

(1) **To The Lighthouse**, p. 73.

(2) In this passage Mrs. Ramsay’s “wedge-shaped core” is contrasted to the cone of light, “the long steady stroke,” emanating from the lighthouse; a Yin-and-Yang principle is again invoked. On the light/darkness dichotomy, vd. McNichol, **To The Lighthouse**, (1971), pp. 48—52.

(3) Blocker, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

(4) “Joseph Conrad,” *ante cit.*

table," symbolising "subject and object and the nature of reality"..... "Think of a kitchen table..... when you're not there." Thus also in human terms is Lily's experience of "staying with the Ramsays" conveyed:—

Directly one looked up and saw them, what she called "being in love" flooded them. They became part of that unreal but penetrating and exciting universe which is the world seen through the eyes of love. The sky stuck to them; the birds sang through them. And, what was even more exciting, she felt, too, as she saw Mr. Ramsay bearing down and retreating, and Mrs. Ramsay sitting with James in the window and the cloud moving and the tree bending, how life, from being made up of little separate incidents which one lived one by one, became curled and whole like a wave which bore one up with it and threw one down with it, there, with a dash on the beach..... (1)

"Curled and whole like a wave....." To say that the sea in **To The Lighthouse** "symbolises" temporal reality is of course to make far too facile an identification; similarly, to speak of Woolf's apprehension of reality as "mystical" (2) or to perceive in it "a mystical centre of some kind, momentary in duration and ecstatic in quality" (3) is to say little more (though certainly it is to say **something** more) than that in her fiction the characteristics of time are shown to be other than merely sequential. The inner conflicts and resolutions of her characters, their altered attitudes and "changes of mind," are not established as the results of an anisotropic, chronologically-patterned series of events, as traditionally "narrated," but seek to reflect instead, in Woolf's own well-known phrase, "the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness." (4)

Thus while engaged in the re-writing of **To The Lighthouse** we find her noting in her diary:—

.....I have no idea yet of any other to follow it: which may mean that I have made my method perfect and it will now stay like this and serve whatever use I wish to put it to..... Yet I am now and then haunted by some semi-mystic very profound life of a woman, which shall all be told on one occasion; and time shall be utterly obliterated; future shall somehow blossom out of the past. One incident — say the fall of a flower — might contain it. My theory being that the actual event practically does not exist — nor time either..... (5)

(1) **To The Lighthouse**, p. 55.

(2) See on this topic Morris Beja, "Matches Struck in the Dark; Virginia Woolf's Moments of Vision," **To The Lighthouse; A Casebook**, pp. 210—30.

(3) S. P. Rosenbaum, "The Philosophical Realism of Virginia Woolf," **English Literature and British Philosophy**, ed. Rosenbaum, (1971), p. 332.

(4) Virginia Woolf, **Collected Essays**, vol. 2, p. 106.

(5) Entry for Tuesday, 23rd November, 1926, **A Writer's Diary**, ed. Leonard Woolf, (1953).

The "method," or more precisely technique, is that of allowing — again in Woolf's own words — "one thing (to) open out of another" (1);

Memory is the seamstress, and a capricious one at that. Memory runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither. We know not what comes next, or what follows after. Thus, the most ordinary movement in the world, such as sitting down at a table and pulling the inkstand towards one, may agitate a thousand odd, disconnected fragments, now bright, now dim..... (2)

In essence intuitive, we may nevertheless perceive an underlying structural balance, and hence the basis of a firm discipline, in the very invocation of temporal movement **through** staticity; it is, after all, only in terms of movement that staticity can be defined. Woolf thus appears to exploit, in literary terms, the Einsteinian paradox that, while the speed of light must be given a constant value, such a value can only be established in terms of time (e.g., miles per second) — which relativity theory, no less of necessity, must hold to be subjectively established and hence a variable. If light be equated with modes of perception, the parallel is remarkably exact; in the Woolfian "moment of perception," is it the "moment" or the "perception" that constitutes the constant? The above-quoted diary entry unequivocally suggests, neither; Woolf here clearly forestalls Sartre's argument that the Jamesian "privileged observer" can have no place in any post-Einsteinian 'univers romanesque.'

.....La theorie de la relativité s'applique integralement á l'univers romanesque..... Dans un vrai roman, pas plus que dans le monde d'Einstein, il n'y a pas de place pour un observateur privilegié..... Dans un système romanesque, pas plus que dans un système physique, il n'existe d'experience permettant de décèler si ce système est en mouvement ou en repos..... (3)

The diary entry previously quoted, however obscure, establishes beyond all doubt Woolf's awareness of having evolved, in the writing of **To The Lighthouse**, a particular and distinctive method and that this in itself constituted some kind of achievement; from the phrasing of the diary entry, as from the other references cited, we may certainly conclude that the "method" relates to the means of representing in fictional terms this rather disconcerting "vision" of reality, and not to the mere selection and modulation of subject-matter, but this is not to say that we can be completely sure of what Woolf supposed her "method" to consist and we must feel that she herself would have had great difficulty in further defining it. The kind of structural balance achieved, however, in **To The Lighthouse** between "subject" and "object" may indicate that the Woolfian "method" ultimately rests on the ambiguity that results when these concepts are

(1) op. cit., p. 23.

(2) Virginia Woolf, **Orlando**, (1928), p. 46.

(3) cit. Maurice Nadeau, **Le Roman Français depuis la Guerre**, (1970), p. 241, q.v.

thus — so to speak — relativistically viewed; to describe this ambiguity, critics have coined such phrases as “double vision” (1) and “modulation of perspective” (2) and these, no doubt, are all very well — it is significant that it is to properties of **vision** that these phrases usually refer, and Hafley’s coinage is fortunate at least in its implication that it is precisely variations in perspective, rather than a Huxleyan multiplicity of viewpoint, that creates the Woolfian enigma (to which the “problem” of Velazquez’s **Las Meninas** offers a surprisingly exact analogy). (3)

If we turn, as now we must, to particular cases, we have already noted that while Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay may be held to represent opposing masculine and feminine principles, these oppositions are in no sense clear-cut; we see, for example, that Mrs. Ramsay, though from one “perspective” very evidently demonstrating — like Molly Bloom or Rosie Gann — a specifically feminine and affirmative vital force, is basically pessimistic — life is “her old antagonist”; while Mr. Ramsay, bluntly illustrative throughout of the “hostility, the sterility of men” (4) is nevertheless, like old Mr. Emerson, at bottom and incorrigibly an optimist. (And we will further notice that, having formulated the matter thus, we will immediately wish to protest at the gross over-simplifications involved). It is not — and herein lies the difficulty — that our concept of Mrs. Ramsay is changed as we see her “through the eyes” of the other characters in the book; such a “method” would be fictionally perfectly traditional, and would imply the possibility of fixed observation platforms from which accurate sightings, however briefly, might be obtained. This possibility Woolf seems to deny as emphatically as does Einstein; it is as though we are forced to rely on the reports of a dozen Jamesian observers, all of whom are themselves constantly shifting their positions.

One of the persistent features of these images is that they do not last; they give way in the minds of the characters to a flux where there is no possibility of a clarifying image, of a formal link with the world outside of mind..... (5)

Even the commentators are trapped into unintended paradox — the idea of a “persistent” feature of an image that “does not last” can be in no way easy to grasp. But then neither is the position of Bernard in **The Waves**:—

I am not one person: I am many people: I do not know who I am — Jimmy, Susan, Neville, Rhoda or Lewis: or how to distinguish my life from theirs.....

(1) Norman Friedman, “Double Vision in **To The Lighthouse**,” **Casebook**, pp. 149—68.

(2) James Hafley, “The Creative Modulation of Perspective,” *op. cit.*, pp. 133—48.

(3) Vd. for discussion Antonio Buero Vallejo, **Tres Maestros ante el Publico**, (1965).

(4) **To The Lighthouse**, p. 96.

(5) Thomas A. Vogler, **20th Century Interpretations**, p. 29.

"Here's Bernard!" How differently different people say that! There are many rooms — many Bernards. There was the charming, but weak; the strong, but supercilious; the brilliant, but remorseless; the very good fellow, but, I make no doubt, the awful bore; the sympathetic, but cold; the shabby, but — go into the next room — the foppish, worldly, and too well dressed. What I was to myself was different; was none of these..... (1)

As a second example, the reference to Bernard's "many rooms" may remind us of Woolf's often-observed fondness for "room and window symbolism" and the connection established, in *To The Lighthouse*, between the window and the painting. Arguably the latter, when framed and as normally hung, mimics the window in offering us, in many cases, an exterior view or, in many others, an interior scene; in the second instance, the effect may well be that of looking from one room into another, and this effect may be exploited (as in *Las Meninas*) in terms of mirror-images to create a kind of puzzle or riddle in which the relationships of viewer and of viewed, of "subject" and of "object", (the pet field of study, of course, of Mr. Ramsay), can be called into question. The literary devices of the "book within the book" and the "play within the play" (as variously demonstrated by, e.g. *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (2) and *Hamlet*) offer a sufficiently precise parallel to the "room within the room"; as Gaetan Picon observes of Proust's usage,

Histoire d'une vie, *A la recherche du temps perdu* est aussi l'histoire d'un livre. On voit quelqu'un — le héros — avancer dans l'existence, recherchant ce qui est de l'ordre de l'existence: un bonheur, le Souverain Bien..... En même temps, on voit le héros — que est aussi le narrateur — chercher le sujet d'un livre qu'il veut écrire. Ce sujet se découvre à la fin de l'oeuvre: au moment ou cesse la narration de la vie. Lorsque le second mouvement..... reçoit son objet, il annule le premier mouvement..... ou plutôt il en inverse le sens: de progressif, ce mouvement devient regressif..... Ainsi, l'oeuvre trouve son élan et son unité dans la perspective qui fait du mouvement progressif un mouvement illusoire..... (3)

We may say that Woolf, in *To The Lighthouse*, offers a subtle and effective variant to this device by perceiving an analogue between the novelist's and the painter's art. "In this mode, the "life" character..... lives or represents the human reality, and the narrator or observer..... tries to get at the form and essence of the story through art." (4) But this, again, is an over-simplification; Lily Briscoe's position in the novel is comparable to that of the painter in (and of) *Las Meninas*, the writer in (and of) *La Recherche* — observer or observed, the presenter or the presented?..... Very obviously, both. Does the novel conclude when her painting is completed, or is her painting complete when the novel is concluded?..... Again, and no less obviously, both; each movement annuls the other; *il en inverse le sens*. Of course it is not precisely a painting that Lily Briscoe executes, but several — here also the perspectives are subject to constant modulation— yet in the end,

(1) *The Waves*, p. 223.

(2) And, on a more superficial level, by *Cakes and Ale, A Room with a View and Those Barren Leaves*.

(3) Gaetan Picon, *Lecture de Proust*, (1963), p. 7.

(4) Thomas Vogler, loc. cit., p. 7.

.....It was done: it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision..... (1)

In the painter's "vision," as in the author's — both generally and in this specific case — the unity of the various is achieved. Cézanne's paintings present many different objects and are executed in several different styles, yet all are "Cézannes" — we attribute to the painter a singularity of "vision" that no one work of his will reveal. We are asked to accept Woolf's many-perspectived "vision" as possessing a comparable integrity, and to accept her novelistic structure as securely based upon it. To say that *To The Lighthouse* has some of the qualities of a painting is to offer a valuable interpretative clue; Woolf insists on the inter-relationship of all contemporary arts, and sometimes memorably.

Even if all modern painting were to be destroyed, a twenty-fifth century critic could deduce the existence of a Matisse, a Derain, a Cézanne, a Picasso, from the evidence of the prose of Marcel Proust..... (2)

It should not, of course, be forgotten that Virginia Woolf, by virtue of her family and social connections, is of all modern writers almost certainly the best-informed (3) about the artistic movements and critical theories of her time. The Post-Impressionist — like all painters — faced at the outset the problem of the resolution of movement and stasis — the representation of the former in terms of the latter; as with the great Impressionists, perception is for him primarily achieved in terms of the qualities of light, and, in consequence, the structure that is recognisable as such at a certain distance may become, when closer viewed, a chaos of confusing and at times conflicting blobs and flecks of colour.

So much depends then, thought Lily Briscoe, looking at the sea which had scarcely a stain on it, which was so soft that the sails and the clouds seemed set in its blue, so much depends, she thought, upon distance..... (4)

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- (1) *To The Lighthouse*, p. 237. These are the sentences with which the book in fact concludes.
 - (2) Gunter Blocker, *Die Neuen Wirklichkeiten*, (1961), p. 107, for further discussion of this point.
 - (3) With the possible exception of Zola. Like most Bloomsburians Woolf seems, on the other hand, to have taken very little interest in music, the most temporal of all artistic modes.
 - (4) *To The Lighthouse*, p. 217.

It is this hidden internal clash and swirl of complementaries that gives the best Impressionist painting its remarkable fugitive quality, grants to the viewer the sense of glimpsing a scene forever on the point of change, about to disappear, to become transmuted.

.....But the wind had freshened, and, as the sky changed slightly and the sea changed slightly and the boats altered their positions, the view, which a moment before had seemed miraculously fixed, was now unsatisfactory..... (1)

The characteristic Woolfian scene possesses this same quality, and to an unprecedented degree; it is achieved — allowing for the vast differences between the word and the brushstroke as media of communication — through a somewhat similar means, a kind of **pointillisme** in prose through which many different complementaries, symbolic polarities — male/female, light/darkness, land/sea, life/death — are drawn into “Virginia’s web” of ambiguity and constant flux.

Thus the initial interpretation of the Briscoe-Woolfian model may seem at first to be Huxleyan, offering the presentation of familiar objects from an unusual and perplexing point of view:—

Taking out a penknife, Mr. Bankes tapped the canvas with the bone handle. What did she wish to indicate by the triangular purple shape, “just there?” he asked.

It was Mrs. Ramsay reading to James, she said. She knew his objection — that no one could tell it for a human shape. But she had made no attempt at likeness, she said. For what reason had she introduced them then? he asked. Why indeed? — except that if there, in that corner, it was bright, here, in this, she felt the need for darkness. Simple, obvious, commonplace, as it was, Mr Bankes was interested. Mother and child then — objects of universal veneration, and in this case the mother was famous for her beauty — might be reduced, he pondered, to a purple shadow without irreverence..... (2)

Mr. Bankes, though a sympathetic observer, would clearly be in literature an adherent to the Wells-Bennett fictional school. “The largest picture in his drawing-room, which painters had praised, and valued at a higher price than he had given for it, was of the cherry trees in blossom on the banks of the Kennet.” (3) The comment is of course ironic and the irony might be called Forsterian, were it not so characteristically subdued; how indeed is the non-expert to judge, other than in terms of size, of material value, or by accepting the opinion of those who are experts? Lily’s “method” is self-confessedly intuitional; she “feels the need” for darkness as a complementary polarity; when Bankes asks for further enlightenment, she finds more detailed explanation impossible.

(1) op. cit., p. 219.

(2) **To The Lighthouse**, p. 61.

(3) op. cit., p. 62.

What then did she wish to make of it? And he indicated the scene before them. She looked. She could not show him what she wished to make of it, could not see it even herself, without a brush in her hand. She took up once more her old painting position with the dim eyes and the absent-minded manner, subduing all her impressions as a woman to something much more general: becoming once more under the power of that vision she had seen clearly once and must now grope for among hedges and houses and mothers and children — her picture. It was a question, she remembered, of how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left..... (1)

Lest we should suppose that it is merely the painter's traditional inability to express himself verbally that Woolf is here invoking, let us consider the account given of her working methods in her diary, again as **To The Lighthouse** nears completion:—

The novel is now easily within sight of the end, but this, mysteriously, comes no nearer. I am doing Lily on the lawn: but whether it's her last lap, I don't know. Nor am I sure of the quality; the only certainty seems to be that after tapping my antennae in the air vaguely for an hour every morning I generally write with heat and ease until 12.30; and thus do my two pages. So it will be done, written over, that is, in 3 weeks, I forecast, from today. What emerges? At this moment I'm casting about for an end. The problem is how to bring Lily and Mr. R. together and make a combination of interest at the end. I am feathering about with various ideas..... (2)

"How to bring Lily and Mr. Ramsay together"..... "How to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left"..... In what sense I have described the Woolfian "method" as **intuitional** with complete justice may emerge yet more clearly when we compare with the foregoing an equally revelatory (and equally puzzling) statement by the Spanish novelist Gabriel Miró:

There are emotions that are not fully such until invested with the lyric force of the word — the true, exact word. A clearing with a single tree in it remains merely part of the landscape, divorced from myself, until I say to myself: "Warm earth, fresh green tree." Once a bird was singing on a still, bright afternoon; I grasped, I possessed that song completely when someone said, "Clarity." It was as if the bird was transformed into a luminous glass, vibrating light from a great distance..... (3)

What Miró here stresses, and through a remarkably Woolfian imagery, is the primitive, incantatory role of language as a means of establishing a dominance over external reality; the aim of all literary method is to "grasp," to "possess," to impose order through linguistic structures. The reality that Woolf faces is often dangerously inimical — "terrible, hostile, and quick to pounce on

(1) **To The Lighthouse**, p. 62.

(2) **A Writer's Diary**, entry for Friday, 3rd September, 1926.

(3) Miro, cit. Jorge Guillen, **Lenguaje y Poesia**, (1956), p. 146, q.v.

you" (1) — like Blake's tiger; and, like Blake, she seeks to encompass its fearful symmetry in a network of balanced polarities. She records in her diary an experience somewhat analagous to that of Miró:—

Many scenes have come and gone unwritten, since it is today 4th September. A cold grey blowy day, made memorable by the sight of a kingfisher and by my sense, waking early, of being again visited by 'the spirit of delight.' "Rarely, rarely, comest thou, spirit of delight." That was I singing this time last year; and sang so poignantly that I have never forgotten it, or my vision of a fin rising on a wide blank sea. No biographer could possibly guess this important fact about my life in the late summer of 1926. Yet biographers pretend they know people..... (2)

Coupled here with the image of the kingfisher, the "spirit of delight," "vibrating light from a great distance," is the "vision" of the dark triangular fin, the shark, the tiger, "a signal of disaster..... One of her recurrent images..... Possibly," (according to Quentin Bell), "these recollections are associated with another diary entry headed "A State of Mind" which she made on 15th September, 1926:

Woke up perhaps at 3. Oh it's beginning, it's coming — the horror — physically like a painful wave swelling about the heart — tossing me up. I am unhappy, unhappy! Down — God, I wish I were dead. Pause. But why am I feeling this? Let me watch the wave rise. I watch. Vanessa. Children. Failure. Yes; I detect that. Failure, failure. (The wave rises). Oh they laughed at my taste in green paint! Wave crashes. I wish I were dead! I've only a few years to live, I hope. I can't face this horror any more..... (3)

It must, I think, be at once conceded that this inner recording of the frightening effects of manic depression is quite inconfundible with that "measurement of emotional temperature" that Huxley attributes to Mary Thriplow; it is of Blake, of Holderlin, of Hopkins, of Rimbaud that one is rather reminded, and it is Virginia Woolf's unusual, though not unique, distinction that she seeks to dominate her vision through the rhythms of prose, the structures of narrative, rather than through those of poetry. The kind of struggle for "authenticity" that the work of James and Forster reveals takes on a new and even more vital importance when the struggle, in fact, is for that kind of integrity of the personality to which we give the name of sanity; Woolf's "possession" of her visions through fictional structure has to be accounted such an enterprise.

(1) *To The Lighthouse*, p. 70.

(2) cit. Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf*, (1972), II. 109.

(3) Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

Here in the few minutes that remain, I must record, heaven be praised, the end of **The Waves**. I wrote the words **O Death** fifteen minutes ago, having reeled across the last ten pages with some moments of such intensity and intoxication that I seemed only to stumble after my own voice, or almost, after some sort of speaker (as when I was mad). I was almost afraid, remembering the voices that used to fly ahead. Anyhow, it is done..... Whether good or bad, it's done; and, as I certainly felt it the end, not merely finished, but rounded off, completed, the thing stated — how hastily, how fragmentarily I know; but I mean that I have netted that fin in the waste of water which appeared to me over the marshes out of my window at Rodmell when I was coming to an end of **To The Lighthouse**..... (1)

(1) Diary entry for 7th February, 1931, cit. Bell. op. cit., p. 157.