

Theses of the Doctoral (Ph.D.) Dissertation

**THE BUTTERFLY'S WING CLAMPED TOGETHER WITH THE BOLTS OF
IRON—SENTIENT SPACES AND BODIES IN THE “FLESH” OF VIRGINIA
WOOLF'S *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE***

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Themes

The poetics of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) unquestionably attracts numerous interpretative approaches out of which one of the most apparent is the novel's visual embeddedness owing to its Post-Impressionist, formalist legacy. My analysis, however, focuses on the examination of the spatial, corporeal, as well as phenomenological relationship of the artist character, Lily Briscoe—a Cézanne surrogate or Roger Fry's imaginary disciple—with her primary artistic subject, that is, Mrs. Ramsay. Lily's most significant challenge is the realisation of the analogy between the spatio-corporeal relations of animate and inanimate entities inhabiting her immediate environment and the stylised blocks of colours, the "significant forms" (Clive Bell's term) on her canvas, hence her difficulty of transfiguring reality into the visual medium in a non-mimetic, non-representational Modernist manner. I propose that *To the Lighthouse* performs this correlation not only on a thematic but on a structural level too, consequently, Lily's canvas is a textually generated pictorial alter-ego of the entire narrative composition.

By tracing up the spatial network of characters, including her own position within it, Lily, primarily, is confronted with finding the proper visual equivalence for Mrs. Ramsay, which process ultimately signifies the difficulty concerning the knowability of the self and the other. The exploration of the apparent painterly dilemma eventually led to the imperative ontological concern of Woolf's work, that is, subject formation accomplished through the phenomenological apprehension of corporeal and pictorial spaces. This confluence of space and the self evoked the fundamental interpretative framework, namely, the spatio-existential philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

The introductory chapters of the dissertation explore the identical relationship between the pluralistic architectural spaces (physical and metaphorical alike), the architectonic constituents (stairs, corridors, windows, doors, frames) and Mrs. Ramsay's body. The common denominator of these spaces is their liminality, the way they simultaneously separate and link the opposing categories of external and internal, natural and cultural, chaos and order. I interpret the character of Mrs. Ramsay and her body as much a fluctuating and plastic spatial unit as the summer cottage, the window, or the dome-shaped beehive, all being emblematic spatial tropes of *To the Lighthouse*. The emphatic liminal quality justifies the employment of such philosophical categories as Levinas's separation and Sartre's distance, both supporting the process of becoming, the resurgence of the self.

Besides the analogy between the textual and the pictorial fabric, the texture of *To the*

Lighthouse produces similar bodily modulations as Mrs. Ramsay in “The Window” section. Partly, due to the strict compositionality, “Time Passes,” the central section, reduplicates the ontological function of Mrs. Ramsay. She serves as the Sartrean body to be surpassed and the Levinasian home into which the self can withdraw in order to become. “Time Passes” as a paradoxically atemporal, pluripotent non-space occupies the limen of the narrative and offers the potential of aesthetic fulfilment and a phenomenologically generated order and unity after the overwhelming sense of discrepancy and failure prevalent in the first chapter. It also incorporates the entwining of Mrs. Ramsay’s presence and absence, Lily’s primary vision and eventual design (to adopt Roger Fry’s terms here introduced in his seminal work *Vision and Design* [1920]) , and, ultimately, it designates the very chiasmic relationship of the framing chapters.

The engulfing darkness and reflective abysmal quality of the central section soon gives way to the closing chapter’s Merleau-Pontian synergy that defies the formerly dominant severance and disparity. The two dominant themes—the metaphorical reunion of the family at the Lighthouse and Lily’s finishing her second painting of Mrs. Ramsay—appear within the phenomenological framework of the closing section. In accordance with Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the body that is encrusted in the flesh of the world, I observe Lily’s canvas as one of the bodies inhabiting the very same space that Lily, Mr. Carmichael or the Ramsays are part of and integral with. The success of the painter’s artistic expression rests on the recognition of this organic concentration and oneness of bodies and their circumambient fabric. This results in an exceptionally fluid spatial sensation in which the borderlines of the external and internal or the self and the other are continually fluctuating and merging.

Methods of Research

The two major thematic concerns of *To the Lighthouse*, namely, subject formation and spatiality, delineated the employment of different, yet interrelated philosophical and theoretical approaches. Since “The Window” section is characterised by disparity, the interrogation of the (artistic) self—for the sake of formulating the adequate visual tropes for the entities of reality—or divergent emotional, social, and aesthetic pulls, the spatially conditioned existential theory of Sartre elucidated the necessity for intracorporeal distances. The same narrative section is also dominated by the presence of architectural and bodily spaces, which, on the other hand, called for Levinas’s concepts of dwelling, inwardness of the home and body, and separation.

The analysis of the various architectonic, corporeal, and pictorial structures and their function incorporated Plato's notion of *chōra* and Bachelard's spatial poetics. The evaluation of *chōra* prepared the ground for the introduction of Merleau-Pontian categories such as flesh or chiasm—primarily relevant notions for “The Lighthouse” section—and also contributed to locating and unveiling “Time Passes” in my thesis, which is the most subversive structural component of the novel. Bachelard's ideas enhanced a sensitive approach to apparently peripheral constituents, such as the open door, the erect, concentrated minimalism of the hut, and, subsequently, the Lighthouse or even Mrs. Ramsay, or the oneiric attribute of the summer cottage, as a means of spatial and temporal condensation.

The alterity of “Time Passes” necessitated the temporary suspension of the phenomenological stance of my criticism. Its unique structural locus and abysmal quality directed my attention to the elaboration of its reflective capacity, considering it as a complex verbal, as well as visual *mise en abyme* of *To the Lighthouse*. To unravel the intricacies of internal mirroring, I employed Lucien Dällenbach's exhaustive theory on the nature, classification, and function of *mis en abyme*.

The interpretative course took a different direction approaching the closing chapter that witnesses the accomplishment of order and unity, in its Modernist, visionary sense, formerly pursued by both Mrs. Ramsay and Lily. The centrality of Lily's artistic struggle with the gaping emptiness of her canvas and the novelty of her perceiving and experiencing space (as a dynamically transforming fabric that envelops her own body) offers a fertile ground for the Merleau-Pontian phenomenology. The confluence and interaction of the painterly space, the visible world, and the corporeality of the painter inspired other critics, who also adopted Merleau-Ponty's philosophy for the exploration of Modernist art. Laura Doyle, for instance, exhaustively discussed the interrelatedness of Woolf and phenomenology, whereas Alison Rowley examined the mutuality of Modernist fiction (including *To the Lighthouse*) and Merleau-Ponty only to lay the fundamentals of a thorough study of the American Abstract Expressionist painter Helen Frankenthaler's works. Although their works meant as a considerable inspiration and support for my own phenomenological criticism of Woolf, I exceeded their interpretative scope, neither of them inquiring the constellation of corporeal, architectonic, and pictorial spatiality profoundly enough.

Results

Spatiality, besides other thematic, structural or aesthetic concerns, impregnates the

entirety of *To the Lighthouse*. However, it primarily evokes the notion of domesticity that “[Wyndham] Lewis correctly identified the essence of Bloomsbury’s art” (Reed 4). As Christopher Reed observes, domesticity was meant to be a socio-political act against Continental avant-garde tendencies that advocated city life, masculinity, and heroism represented by Le Corbusier and the rebellious fellow artist of Fry and Woolf, Wyndham Lewis, the co-founder of Vorticism (4). The indispensability of the domestic sphere and the emblematic presence of the room in Modernist fiction, however, serve other aims, too. Michael Levenson first refers to the room as the space of creativity (4), which he later complements with the image of the room as the embodiment of its inhabitant as “the carapace of personhood,” “a figure for the mind, the apartment of consciousness” (5). *To the Lighthouse* almost exclusively takes place in the summer cottage of the Ramsay family, which might conjure up the Victorian house that Levenson calls “a fantasy of spatial equilibrium and social articulation” (4). Yet, its subversive openness—its being a site of fluid interaction between the external/natural/untamed and the internal/cultural/controlled—turns the house radically into the antithesis of the Victorian spatial design. The summer cottage, nevertheless, is not simply an open structure endangering the internal order. It serves also as a refuge for most of the characters, inviting them to produce their own separate inward spaces, cells, rooms in the interiority of the house. Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei evaluate the house-body analogy and claim that “houses and their accoutrements become living beings with names and personalities” (158), serving a more immediate interaction between the architectural structure and human consciousness. Although they touch upon several issues relevant for *To the Lighthouse*, too, they do not analyse the pictorial aspect of spatiality or respective interior spaces and architectonic forms of the house deeply.

In the first phase of my dissertation, I evaluated the diversity of natural, cultural, and artistic spaces, as well as their modernist and, more significantly, phenomenological interrelatedness. Viewing the house as a living organism, I attempted to exceed what the novel’s socio-cultural and aesthetic embeddedness would primarily suggest, touched upon by scholars mentioned above. Besides the reflexivity of spaces with respect to their inhabitants, their past, memories, and essential attributes, a thorough observation of the architectural structures outlined the spatio-existential philosophical foundation. The way Mrs. Ramsay, the focal character, is located within the house, a structure of multiple enclosures is generated, which evokes Levinas’s concept of dwelling as an essential mode of existence grounded on spatio-corporeal givenness. Mrs. Ramsay is also juxtaposed, and subsequently identified with the window—framed and displayed as a work of art herself—the drawing-room steps or the

stairs leading to the upper section of the house. All these architectural forms are situated on the threshold of conflicting spheres, even though they fulfil two contrasting functions simultaneously, namely, severance and linking. Liminality is an inherent quality of Levinas's notion of the body as the basis of human habitation and the resurgence of the self. Besides such intermediary components of the house, Mrs. Ramsay is introduced through a whole series of metaphorically presented spaces (dome-shaped hive, cathedral, tomb of kings, sealed vessel, intricate passages), all bearing the same ambiguous nature as the house itself. The emphatic visuality of *To the Lighthouse* provides the third pillar of its spatial configuration, played out in the painterly space of Lily's canvas as a confluence of the aesthetic, the corporeal and the architectonic aspects.

To accomplish Cézanne's and Fry's formalist unity and order of heterogeneous constituents Lily first has to map up the spatial relations of individuals and objects, including her own position within the intricate social and psychological network of the Ramsays' and their guests. This process is articulated through her meticulous measuring of distances and proximities "of masses, of lights and shadows" (Woolf 59) on her canvas. The house also experiences two oppositional forces: the centripetal mechanism of Mrs. Ramsay's relentless attempts to fuse the discrepant members of the company and to maintain the momentary bond between them, her act culminating in the dinner scene, one of the thematic axes of the narrative. The other direction defines a centrifugal dispersal forcing all entities to preserve separation and distance. These two essential modulations of existence delineate the philosophical framework of my analysis covering "The Window" section that is ruled by spatial and aesthetic pulls.

Separation calls for Levinas's notion of dwelling that he considers the very basis of existence. "[R]ecollection, a work of separation, is concretized as existence in a dwelling, economic existence" (Levinas 154). Levinas imagines recollection as a withdrawal from the exteriority of the world, as an emphatic inwardness that conditions the self to be at home with itself, and, subsequently, to be. Things of reality, one among them the self in its intimacy, become distinguishable from each other by the same mechanism of separation and recollection. The logic of Levinas's model necessitates a further inwardness beyond the boundaries of the home, namely, the interiority of one's own body. Thus, notions of external and internal become fluid and constantly redefined. The liminality of home and body characterises both the Ramsay house and Mrs. Ramsay's corporeality. The summer cottage endures the constant intrusion of the natural sphere, a process greatly enhanced by the Ramsay children, who habitually bring in elements of the local flora and fauna. The house,

however, yields to the external and/or natural forces metaphorically, too, primarily owing to its oneness with Mrs. Ramsay's body. The gradual deterioration of the house may also be suggested by Mrs. Ramsay's failure to fulfil her being a refuge for a homogeneous confluence of dispersed entities. Levinas's theory concerning the self's differentiation from the Other through separation supported the examination of Mrs. Ramsay's immediate relationship with the other inhabitants of the house, who form a collective subjectivity in contrast with the central female character. The alterity of Mrs. Ramsay remains elusive and rejects representation for all of them, a circumstance most sensitively influencing Lily's artistic struggle.

Besides Levinasian categories of dwelling and separation the thematic, aesthetic, and philosophical composition of *To the Lighthouse* is affected by another dynamism as well, that is, by the energy of distancing. This particular gesture appears as an ontological condition in Sartre's existential philosophy. "[B]eing-for-itself is to surpass the world and to cause there to be a world by surpassing it. But to surpass the world is not to survey it but to be engaged in it in order to emerge from it" (Sartre 326-7). First, the self has to make the world to be there, to create an existential distance for the sake of emerging from it. Its locus is conditioned by its being "engaged in" the fabric of the world. The self is not a scientist examining and, simultaneously, objectifying the world from the outside. Its position is integral, the world and ultimately its body within it, is to be surpassed from the interiority of its own reality.

The Sartrean disposition of distancing characterises the entirety of the novel, detachment and seclusion appears on the thematic, structural, and aesthetic levels, too. Whereas Mrs. Ramsay performs an essential role yet again, her being a referential point for the others, the inevitable condition of "to-be-thereness," for her the surpassable body appears doubly. On the one hand, her exclusive association with the Lighthouse causes the latter to appear as the body to be surpassed, on the other hand, as a secondary detachment—her extended corporeal being—she frequently imagines herself as the iconic "wedge-shaped core of darkness" (Woolf 69), which is beyond her other architectural and bodily occurrences. The notion of distance recurs with a renewed force in the closing section, too, yet with an altered function. Distance appears to be fundamental for the fulfilment of James's childhood wish of visiting the Lighthouse, whereas for Lily it is a unique means for accomplishing her second attempt at the visual transubstantiation of Mrs. Ramsay. As opposed to "The Window" section, distance is no longer approximated from Mrs. Ramsay's spatio-corporeal nexus that denoted a fixed and solid point of reference but returns as a fluid and constantly transforming spatial, hence existential, condition. This situation compels Lily to dynamically change her

position, in relation to her absent subject, i.e. Mrs. Ramsay, the house, the sight of the withdrawing Mr. Ramsay and his children in the boat approaching the Lighthouse, the accompanying Mr. Carmichael or her easel. The plasticity of space—including the hideously gaping emptiness of her canvas—surfaces as an apparently bigger challenge for Lily than the difficulty of finding the most expressive visual trope for Mrs. Ramsay, which prevailed her first creative phase.

The exploration of Mrs. Ramsay's bodily identity with her circumambient natural and cultural sphere and the confluence of her spatio-corporeal relations with the aesthetic considerations and realisations of Lily lead to the recognition of the novel's phenomenological legacy on a more universal scale. The spatially grounded existentialist analysis revealed that the textual fabric of *To the Lighthouse* performs the very same spatial and bodily transfigurations as the ones discussed in connection with Mrs. Ramsay. Cavernous spaces, divergent pulls, pulsating rhythm, and chiasmic relationships characterise the body of the text. Most tangibly "Time Passes," the central section produces such plastic modulations, even though seemingly temporality rules out spatiality. The chapter subverts the expected successive logic and suspends linear time, and it incorporates space in a very special sense. "Time Passes" embodies the lack of space proper while it also functions as a *camera obscura* for the entirety of the text. The dispersed fragments of reality, the loose thematic, social, artistic threads attain their fusion in the central section's abysmal darkness to be projected on the screen of the third chapter that simultaneously presents the union of the family and the painter's eventual accomplishment of vision into design. Owing to the outstanding focal position, "Time Passes" houses various thematic and structural mises-en-abyme. First and foremost, it reduplicates liminality of the introductory chapter, represented by the chapter's central trope, the window. It occupies the limbo between presence and absence, apparent order and constructive chaos, Sartrean distancing and Merleau-Pontian synergy. Without having light of its own, paradoxically, it turns visible what otherwise would remain veiled and, among other internal mirroring, it reflects the very chiasm of the framing chapters. Being a point of convergence and of emanation at the same time, it appears to be the node of the narrative. "Time Passes" performs structurally for the entire narrative what Mrs. Ramsay meant to execute socially, as well as existentially for the others in the first chapter. It generates the conditions for the accomplishment of fictional and painterly vision, the potential to come to terms with the verbal and visual expression of the absent Mrs. Ramsay.

The structural fusion prefigures Lily's phenomenological experience of a space marked out by the constantly withdrawing "brown speck of Mr. Ramsay's sailing boat," "the

rubicund, drowsy, entirely contented figure of Mr Carmichael” (who accompanies the painter, however, silently), “the edge of the lawn” (her point of viewing the sea), the “extraordinarily empty” drawing-room steps (a place, formerly, closely associated with Mrs. Ramsay), and her easel (Woolf 89, 166, 185, 194). Apparently, Lily is confined within this space of fixed points of reference, yet none of the framing units appears as solidified. She easily adjusts herself to the fluctuating distances by performing “a dancing rhythmical movement” (Woolf 172) that is, eventually, the elongation of the swinging movement of her brush. Lily employs her whole body to perceive her reality that surrounds her with the absence of the family, the emptiness left behind by Mrs. Ramsay’s death, the silence and aloofness of the poet, Mr. Carmichael, and the “uncompromising white stare” of her canvas (Woolf 171). For the sake of enabling herself to fill up the engulfing emptiness of the canvas,—that is, the final transfiguration of Mrs. Ramsay and, ultimately, the realisation of her own relationship with what the mother of eight children embodies (marriage, motherhood, social order)—Lily has to trace up and inhabit the space of her being, including her own body within that circumscribed segment of reality. She is exposed to a multisensory experience, in which seeing, touching, kinetic occurrences, and sonorous stimuli come together. Lily has to renounce the prerogative of seeing and her former position of being the scrutinizing viewer of the scene and her model, which automatically forced her to keep an exacting distance from her subject. Whenever she could establish a corporeally based communication with Mrs. Ramsay, she got an insight into “the chambers of the mind and heart” (Woolf 57), yet while she was barricaded by her easel, preserving the Cartesian, perspectival locus she was unable to find the proper combination of forms and motifs.

Mrs. Ramsay’s phenomenologically grounded presence established in the first part, keeps on affecting and assisting the life of those left behind. Her corporeal givenness is preserved and activated as, what Merleau-Ponty terms, “the thickness of the flesh” (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 135) by which he means an intercorporeal tissue of encroachments and invaginations of binary oppositions. Flesh functions as a fundamental condition of becoming, it “does not just clothe subjects, objects, and their relations with its touch; it doubles back on itself as the invisible underside of the visible” (Grosz 23). Its innate reflexivity is the repository of the subject’s spatial being, the apprehension of our oneness with the world.

Merleau-Ponty believed in the mutuality of different sensory fields and viewed the human being as sentient-sensible. The reciprocation of categories as subject and object originates in the intertwining of the seer and the seen, secondarily, of the visible and the tangible, the body being the ultimate place of such chiasmic relationships. Yet, the body is

encrusted in the world along with other bodies and things, similarly to the eye that is enveloped by the body, thus, visual perception and a tactile-kinetic experience come together. Merleau-Ponty endowed the figure of the painter with the ability to perceive and comprehend the “indivisible whole” of Being (Merleau-Ponty, *Sense* 15). Due to the synthesis of the diverse perceptive modalities, the world opens itself up in its primordial totality for the eye and the body of the painter. Since body and the world share the same texture, the entwining of opposing categories takes place and repeats itself within the body of the painter, as well as outside of that, where the borderline between the internal and the external is already blurred and fluctuating.

Even if “The Lighthouse” section is marked by the absence of Mrs. Ramsay and the tangibility of distance, emptiness, a social and emotional vacuum, Lily, for the first time in the novel, is the closest to “hold the scene – so – in a vice” (Woolf 218). Mrs. Ramsay’s non-being, the very lack of Lily’s model, and the remoteness of the representatives of the scientific, perspectival, exacting perception, that is, Mr. Ramsay, Charles Tansley, and Mr. Bankes, compel Lily to open a fresh eye on reality. She has to learn how to view the world not through a series of mediated images and conceptions but the manner in which the complexity of reality unfolds itself before the innocent eye of the painter. “One wanted, she thought, dipping her brush deliberately, to be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that’s a chair, that’s a table, and yet at the same time, It’s a miracle, it’s an ecstasy” (Woolf 218). Lily reveals the duplicity of her engagement in the world shortly before she makes the final touch on her canvas. On the one hand, she confesses her sharing a collective spatial sensation with the mundane simplicity of household items, rather from within, on the other hand, she formulates the necessity of the visionary stance, the one which happens simultaneously along with the former, from an external point of view.

The final confluence of the so far disparate spatiality (the corporeal of Mrs. Ramsay, the phenomenological of the house, and the aesthetic of Lily’s painting) rests on Lily’s apprehension of their identity and her own oneness with them. The empty drawing-room steps no longer mean a threatening lack to the painter, since she knows the interior of that emptiness through her own journey to the innermost dimension of the painting. The phenomenological presence of Mrs. Ramsay, finally, is conjured up by “an odd-shaped triangular shadow over the step” cast by the movement of “some light stuff behind [the window]” (Woolf 218). Mrs. Ramsay’s iconic triangular shape, her self-imposed trope, which undergoes several modalities, resurfaces, yet again, serving as the ultimate phenomenal stimulus for Lily’s vision.

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