

ENGLISH MISCELLANY

*A SYMPOSIUM OF HISTORY
LITERATURE AND THE ARTS*

EDITOR

MARIO PRAZ

Assistant Editor

GIORGIO MELCHIORI

19

EDIZIONI DI STORIA E LETTERATURA

ROME 1968

ESTRATTO

“TO THE LIGHTHOUSE”, MUSIC AND SYMPATHY

In *To the Lighthouse* Virginia Woolf achieved an almost perfect fusion of theme and form, and the result is one of the triumphant accomplishments of the English novel. What makes the achievement so remarkable is that *To the Lighthouse* affords the sympathetic reader that attainment of ecstatic self-obliteration which one does not usually expect to find anywhere but in music. Indeed, *To the Lighthouse* is an especially rare example of the success of musical techniques in literature, for the relationship between literature and music is tenuous, at best. One need only consider Joyce's « fugue » in *Ulysses* to see what a sham is apt to result from the supposed adaptation of musical techniques to literature. Virginia Woolf, on the other hand, was aware that the only significant similarities worth achieving between music and literature are emotional. Whereas Joyce's purely formal attempt to write a literary fugue is a strictly « Look ma, no hands » performance, ending with no teeth, Virginia Woolf's use of leitmotifs is an organic success. For just as Wagner uses melodic phrases over and over again, now augmented, now diminished, now joyous, now gloomy, Virginia Woolf makes use of phrases and images over and over in different contexts, the relationship between the phrase to one context and the phrase to the next producing the extraordinary emotional effects that we have come to experience in Wagner. One need only recall the various appearances of Mrs. Ramsay's shawl, or the question « What does it all mean? » and the variety of surroundings in which they appear to be convinced of the potency of literary leitmotifs when used for their emotional energy.

In addition to the recurrent motifs, Virginia Woolf used

other musical devices—the three movements of the novel as a whole, the outer movements cyclical, like the Franck and Chausson symphonies, making use of the same themes; the inner movement violently contrasting with the outer ones, not only in length, but in its occupation with Impersonal Nature as opposed to Psychological Reality. And within « Time Passes » there is the author's use of brackets to inform us, as part of the merciless flow of Nature, of the death of Mrs. Ramsay and two of her children, so impersonal, so understated and, perhaps, more shocking than almost anything in the English novel. The final effect of the book, whether one understands it or not, is emotional in the way that music is emotional: the main contrasts and main apprehensions are intuited clearly enough by a careful reader to enable him to feel the powerful emotional climax even if he cannot express intellectually what the book has « been about ».

This is not to say that the book is not about anything at all. Its themes, for all their subconscious working upon the reader, are clear, and except for a few pages of understatement of those themes at the end of the novel, all of the main strands of the book are completely woven by the time the pilgrims arrive at the lighthouse.

Before we turn to an examination of the themes, let us look a bit more closely at the question of « musical » elements in *To the Lighthouse*: insofar as literature can aspire to and achieve musical effects, these effects are produced by literary techniques which are *formally similar* to musical techniques but which in no sense can be understood to be actual musical techniques. The reason that Joyce's fugue is unsuccessful (success would be impossible) is that one is no more inclined to call that chapter of *Ulysses* a fugue than to call a little gray schoolhouse the Empire State Building because both exist, are made of corporeal substance, and have windows. Joyce's fugue has everything fugal about it except that it does not produce the emotional effect of a fugue (granting that it lacks the simultaneity of voices requisite to a fugue). Thus, it is not a fugue.

Whereas musical devices in literature are only formally similar to real musical devices and therefore apt to be totally ineffective in literature, when these musical devices *are* successful we must attribute their success to their production of emotional effects which are the same as the emotional effects produced by music. It is in this sense that *To the Lighthouse* can be called musical. True enough, the musicalness is partially due to Virginia Woolf's use of formal musical techniques, but it is obvious that formal musical techniques will not in themselves produce literature capable of affording a musical experience any more than use of matter and windows will produce an Empire State Building unless one actually builds an Empire State Building.

What entitles a reader to speak of the three sections of *To the Lighthouse* as « movements » without being subject to the charge of high-flown estheticism is that the emotional effects of the three sections are like those of music and, by the by, an imitation of musical forms has been used to help achieve those effects. Furthermore, the shock produced by the parenthetical reports of deaths is, as experienced emotionally, like the sudden crashes in a piece of music like, for example, the opening movement of Mahler's Resurrection Symphony. Lily's final stroke on her painting, recalling, as it does, but in a new emotional context, her moving of the salt shaker at dinner ten years earlier, is similar in its general effect, for example, to the difference between the Youth theme in *Das Rheingold* when Freia enters and the Youth theme when Freia is taken away by the giants.

At the risk, then, of seeming monomaniac, let me repeat that insofar as one claims to find musical effects in a piece of literature like *To the Lighthouse*, the effects are musical to the extent that the emotions they produce are like, or the same as, the emotional effects of music: that is, they are sub-rational, more frequently found in poetry than in the novel. This means that the mere presence of musical forms cannot be taken very seriously, since there is no necessary causal relationship between the imitation of musical forms in literature and the achievement

of musical effects. The forms in themselves guarantee nothing and, in fact, are more likely to produce an empty piece of virtuosity like Joyce's fugue than an experience like *To the Lighthouse*.

The main themes of *To the Lighthouse* are generated by the repeated question, both expressed and implied, « What is it, if anything, that unifies all of the discrete and disparate sensations of life and thereby makes life seem meaningful »? Concurrently with this, the same question is asked with respect to art: « What transforms a patch of colors and a heap of words into a unity entitled to be called a work of art? » Like Proust, Virginia Woolf answers the question both *in* the novel and *by* the novel.

The omnipresence of this question of what unifies disparate and « meaningless » experiences is dramatized through the characters' recurrent apprehension that familiar experience is totally unintelligible and meaningless as soon as one thinks about it. Mrs. Ramsay herself, at the start of the dinner scene in « The Window », feels that sudden isolation and lostness which we so commonly experience before a social activity in which we are to play a major role. Lily at dinner suddenly asks herself: Who are these people, what have I to do with them, why am I here and what does it all mean? This meaninglessness is also dramatized by implication (as opposed to actual awareness on the part of the characters) in the constant re-evaluations and changes of mind which each character experiences in relation to all the other characters. Lily dislikes and likes Mrs. Ramsay alternately, as do Tansley and Bankes, and Mrs. Ramsay alternates between communication with and complete isolation from her husband.

Thus, we are presented with a picture of life that is mostly, though not always, analytic, all of its elements hopelessly isolated from each other, desiring intensely to unite, to form a pattern, a meaning, but rarely able to do so. But the key moments of the novel are those in which the analysis *is* replaced by synthesis, and it is these moments which ultimately provide the answer to the book's recurrent question: What does this all mean? Remarkably enough, this answer is one of the genuinely

« musical » elements of the book, since it is not an intellectual, that is, *analytical* answer, but a *synthetic*, intuitive feeling of oneness with reality. It is, of course, the esthetic emotion.

The themes of *To the Lighthouse*, which are the materials out of which the answer to the question « What does it all mean? » is constructed, are pairs of opposing qualities of which the chief are Mr. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay. All of the other qualities are derived from or expressive of Mr. or Mrs. Ramsay. Perhaps, then, it would be best to consider Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay separately and in detail.

The themes or motifs associated with Mr. Ramsay are familiar elements of the male mind, some of which are given an unfamiliar twist by the author. Mr. Ramsay, as the novel's representative of men in general, is a philosopher and intellectual who is trying, by somewhat rationalistic and Cartesian methods, to get from the A to the Z of reality. For him reality consists of clear and distinct ideas. As a result, we find that he is analytical, literal, « factual ». Fittingly enough, he seems to be an idealist philosopher as he is described to Lily by his son Andrew:

She asked him what his father's books were about. « Subject and object and the nature of reality, » Andrew had said. And when she said Heavens, she had no notion what that meant. « Think of a kitchen table then, » he told her, « when you're not there. »

To Mr. Ramsay external nature is entirely dull — he praises some flowers to please Mrs. Ramsay and while he is sailing to the lighthouse reads a book, oblivious to the claims of the outside world. Thus, believing that only ideas are real and that the outside world exists for us only insofar as we have ideas of it, Mr. Ramsay is also isolated from most of his fellow men, except when they are discussing ideas. Being emotionally cut off, he rarely experiences the solidarity which makes one feel that one is part of a reality bigger than oneself. When Mr. Ramsay sees a hen and its chicks walk down the road when he reads Walter

Scott he is, we observe, moved and pleased, and even cries at the misfortunes of Scott's characters while enjoying « the astonishing delight and feeling of vigour that it gave him ». But this capacity for emotion in Mr. Ramsay is always due to ideas as opposed to sympathetic oneness with suffering and with pathetic objects, or with the human condition. Looking at a little island in the sea, he remarks, « Poor little place », with a sigh. But Mrs. Ramsay is not taken in and is able to give us the true explanation — that is, the explanation which Virginia Woolf endorses:

She heard him. He said the most melancholy things, but she noticed that directly he had said them he always seemed more cheerful than usual. All this phrase-making was a game, she thought, for if she had said half what he said, she would have blown her brains out by now.

For Mr. Ramsay ideas are always the medium of his apprehension of the outside world. This is not to suggest that direct knowledge of the outside world is possible or even an intelligible notion — but Mr. Ramsay's method is not the only possible method, for Mrs. Ramsay illustrates another means of knowledge: intuition, non-intellectual identity with external reality. A screen of neat and symmetrical ideas, clear and distinct, always interposes between Mr. Ramsay and the object of knowledge. Although emotions often result, they are emotions caused not by the situation before him, but by his conversion of the situation into a tableau, clear, ordered, intelligible. Mr. Ramsay's insensibility to emotional or intuitive reality is consistently imaged in his seemingly cruel destruction of James's hopes of making a trip to the lighthouse. The weather *won't* be fine, is a fact which no delicate sentiments can alter, though neither James nor Mrs. Ramsay seems to understand this.

With Mr. Ramsay's analytic, isolated, ideological qualities, Mrs. Ramsay, and undoubtedly Virginia Woolf herself, associates sterility — for, after all, according to the view of what provides « meaning » which the novel finally comes to accept,

the intellectual nature of Mr. Ramsay is essentially destructive, producing a chaos of analyzed and meaningless particles of reality.

It is Mrs. Ramsay who is the representative of fertility, of what we might call « hatching warmth ». Mr. Ramsay, for all his isolation and independence, yearns for sympathy, and it is that which Mrs. Ramsay is pre-eminently equipped to give. The symbols of masculinity-sterility and femininity-fertility are among the most prevalent motifs in the novel:

It was sympathy he wanted, to be assured of his genius, first of all, and then to be taken within the circle of life, warmed and soothed, to have his senses restored to him, his barrenness made fertile, and all the rooms of the house made full of life . . . they must be furnished, they must be filled with life.

Charles Tansley thought him the greatest metaphysician of the time, she said. But he must have more than that. He must have sympathy. He must be assured that he too lived in the heart of life; was needed; not here only, but all over the world.

James, standing between Mrs. Ramsay's knees,

felt all her strength flaring up to be drunk and quenched in the beak of brass, the arid scimitar of the male, which smote mercilessly, again and again, demanding sympathy.

Mrs. Ramsay, as the antipodes of Mr. Ramsay, is not sympathetic toward intellect and analysis or even toward speech:

Strife, divisions, difference of opinion, prejudices twisted into the very fibre of being, oh, that they should begin so early, Mrs. Ramsay deplored. They were so critical, her children. They talked such nonsense — inventing differences, when people, heaven knows, were different enough without that. The real differences, she thought, standing by the drawing room window, are enough, quite enough.

She is a protectress of the male sex, though her husband is deceived enough to think it is he who is protecting her. Her effect on people is like the effect of a work of art—they have

esthetic experiences over her, and even Charles Tansley, « the Atheist », is melted by the presence of Mrs. Ramsay when they go for a walk. Tansley—a diehard intellectual (as suggested by the utter rationality, as opposed to spirituality, of his atheist position) — even Tansley experiences the overwhelming he-knows-not-what when he spends the afternoon with Mrs. Ramsay:

With stars in her eyes and veils in her hair and wild violets — what nonsense was he thinking? She was fifty at least; she had eight children. Stepping through fields of flowers and taking to her breast buds that had broken and lambs that had fallen; with the stars in her eyes and the wind in her hair — He took her bag.

(The experience produced by a passage like this is what I have called the « musical emotion ». The main « idea » is never stated, but the « meaning » is clearly apprehended). It is made clear throughout the novel that sympathetic emotion and intuition are Mrs. Ramsay's modes of knowledge. She is the great synthesizer, who puts together the pieces which her husband casts behind him after analysis. Thus, she is fertile, synthetic, communicative, non-rational, sympathetic and her triumphs consist of fusions of discrete entities into harmonious organisms. It is from these harmonious organisms that the answer to « What does it all mean? » is derived.

The novel is held together by two major climaxes, springing from Mrs Ramsay's organic fusions: the first of these is the dinner in the first section of the novel and the second is the arrival at the lighthouse at the end of the novel. All of the « meaning » which the novel arrives at grows from the dinner and yearns toward the arrival at the lighthouse.

It is needless to labor the anthropological and social role of dinners—recollection of the Last Supper will suffice. This dinner, for all its unbroken ice at the start and for all the intense isolation of the characters (thinking what they will do after the dinner is over and somewhat sorry to have come in the first place), emerges a triumph. It is interesting that we are

unable to explain the triumph by means of analysis of the dinner, for it is analysis itself which isolates all the characters at the beginning, whereas it is Mrs. Ramsay's ineffable synthetic magic which transforms the dinner at the end. The cause of the success, not subject to analysis, is explainable no further than as a feeling of solidarity, of oneness, and, inevitably, of meaningfulness, which results from the presence of Mrs. Ramsay. The dinner is Mrs. Ramsay's work of art, as mysterious as art itself; it freezes into a moment of time a complex of emotions which can be referred to again and again in the lives of the participants; and its achievement is like Lily's achievement when she finishes her picture at the end. For Mrs. Ramsay, the dinner

partook, she felt, carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity; as she had already felt about something different once before that afternoon; there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures.

The solidarity is the achievement of communication through silence — or, at any rate, through something other than words. When Lily praises Mr. Ramsay's boots near the end of the novel, we feel it is not the words she speaks or even the subject she is speaking of, which matters; what does matter is the flow of unspoken sympathy between her and Mr. Ramsay, the relative meaninglessness of the words being entirely unimportant. Silence is the vehicle of meaning because the meaning is not ideological — it is felt. When Lily recalls an afternoon spent with Mrs. Ramsay — Lily with her arms on Mrs. Ramsay's knees — she thinks:

What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers? What device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object

one adored? Could the body achieve, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intricate passages of the brain? or the heart? Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge, she had thought, leaning her head on Mrs. Ramsay's knee.

It is silence (by which I also intend words which are not used to communicate ideas) which is the medium of the act of communication that ends the first section of the novel. Mrs. Ramsay sees her husband hovering by, waiting for sympathy:

Then, knowing that he was watching her, instead of saying anything she turned, holding her stocking, and looked at him. And as she looked at him she began to smile, for though she had not said a word, he knew, of course he knew, that she loved him. He could not deny it. And smiling she looked out of the window and said (thinking to herself) Nothing on earth can equal this happiness —

« Yes, you were right. It's going to be wet tomorrow. You won't be able to go. » And she looked at him smiling. For she had triumphed again. She had not said it: yet he knew.

Mrs. Ramsay, despite her greatness as a literary achievement, is a character about whom we know very little because she is a force to be intuited from her effects rather than a describable compendium of attributes. So vital is her force that when she leaves the room after the dinner is over, disintegration sets in. And when she dies, the house starts to fall apart. It is the revitalization of her power in part three that saves the house and enables the characters to reach the lighthouse and Lily to have her vision.

It is curious to realize that the opposing poles of the novel, as represented by Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay and their attendant images, are a remarkable suggestion of the philosophy of Empedocles, Mrs. Ramsay an incarnation of Love, giving unity to chaos, bringing together separate entities into organisms, pro-

viding meaning where only chaos or, to use Empedocles' term, Strife existed before; while Mr. Ramsay is Strife itself, analyzing, breaking down, rendering anarchy. The Love of *To the Lighthouse* is associated with intuitive knowledge, the knowledge of experience, and the communicative power of Sympathy. The Strife of *To the Lighthouse* is — of all things — intellect, the analytic, destructive, unsympathetic power of Mind.

This leads us to a brief consideration of the relation between Virginia Woolf's point of view and her use of the stream of consciousness technique. Only an idealist can use stream of consciousness successfully, for its employment is useful only when the writer believes that psychological reality is the only reality of any interest to human beings. It is clear that Virginia Woolf believed that reality, in any meaningful sense to us as finite creatures, is psychological. The outside world is brought into the novel only as stimulus for perceptions and ideas in the minds of the characters. In parts one and three there are no descriptions of the outside world for its own sake, because as a Thing-in-Itself the outside world is unknowable and does not concern us. The only section of the novel which attempts to treat Nature as a Thing-in-Itself (of course, this is really impossible) is « Time Passes » and here it is done to contrast the meaningful world of psychological values with the meaningless world of no values, of Nature, the Thing-in-Itself.

Because an objective reality is unknowable and the world of values is the only one that exists for us, we never obtain objective character portraits in *To the Lighthouse* but learn about each character from the contradictory thoughts of all the other characters. All the impressions, even when they appear contradictory to the very person who has them (everyone alternately likes and dislikes Mrs. Ramsay), are equally « true » and the characters are everything that is said about them. That is why the quest for objective meaning is so absurd and why the meaning that does emerge from the book has nothing to do with the law of contradiction. The trouble with Mr. Ramsay's Berkleian philosophy is that it limits knowledge to knowledge of ideas, whereas Mrs.

Ramsay's (and, by association, Virginia Woolf's) idealism does not involve ideas but intuitions.

The Lighthouse itself, the significance of which Virginia Woolf has not presented as clearly as one could wish, seems to be an image or symbol of external reality, Nature and the Thing-in-Itself. It is never known objectively by the reader, but only through the sensibility of one of the characters. Thus, it is an embodiment of the outside, unknowable world. This is surely implied in James's reaction to the Lighthouse as the boat gets closer to it:

« It will rain, » he remembered his father saying. « You won't be able to go to the Lighthouse. »

The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye, that opened suddenly, and softly in the evening. Now—

James looked at the Lighthouse. He could see the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see windows in it; he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry. So that was the Lighthouse, was it?

No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other Lighthouse was true too. It was sometimes hardly to be seen across the bay. In the evening one looked up and saw the eye opening and shutting and the light seemed to reach them in that airy sunny garden where they sat.

The Lighthouse, then, like everything else in the book, has to human beings no essence of its own, but is in some way given by the beholder. (When Lily explains to herself the fate of the Rayleys' marriage, she admits she is making it all up, just as our knowledge of other people is always « made up », that is, supplied by us). Only the force of Sympathy unlocks the prison gates of our own entity — and then, only rarely and momentarily. Mr. Ramsay's type of knowledge, it can now be observed, is always knowledge of oneself and one's own ideas and thereby gives us a feeling of isolation. But Mrs. Ramsay's knowledge — Intuition, Sympathy and Love — transcends the self and by so doing achieves meaning. The meaning is never expressible

in words, because of its non-ideological nature, and it is in this respect that Lily's artistic problems and Mrs. Ramsay's human-life problems are paralleled throughout the book. Lily, looking at her unfinished painting, which just refuses to come off, asks:

What was the problem then? She must try to get hold of something that evaded her. It evaded her when she thought of Mrs. Ramsay; it evaded her now when she thought of her picture. Phrases came. Visions came. Beautiful pictures. Beautiful phrases. But what she wished to get hold of was that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything. Get that and start afresh; get that and start afresh; she said desperately, pitching herself firmly again before her easel. It was a miserable machine, an inefficient machine, she thought, the human apparatus for painting or for feeling; it always broke down at the critical moment; heroically, one must force it on.

The novelist along with Mrs. Ramsay and Lily is experiencing the same problem.

The final arrival at the Lighthouse is the final triumph of Mrs. Ramsay's Sympathy, a force which pervades the third section of *To the Lighthouse* despite Mrs. Ramsay's absence. It enables Lily to give Mr. Ramsay the sympathy he craves, which, in some mysterious fashion, in turn enables Lily to complete her painting, suggesting that artistic genius is related to the capacity for sympathy.

The power of Sympathy (which is not to be mistaken for pity), the ability to « feel with », is the power which makes both art and life meaningful. Even if in the act of sympathy it cannot be said that we share or communicate, it can be said that we feel the same feeling as someone else and, in that respect, we *are* other people so long as we are experiencing the same psychological state as they. Thus sympathy is more than communication — it is identity, it is the water that becomes one with the jar, to use Lily's image. Naturally, it is an act of faith that assures us that the feeling we are feeling is identical with someone else's feeling, but since it is no more

an act of faith than belief in a transcendent reality or an electron, or in any first principles, for that matter, it is unimportant. What is important is that insofar as Mrs. Ramsay was a great woman, her greatness came from being able to experience the universal human experiences along with other people; insofar as Lily was successful as an artist, she was able to translate her sympathy into symbols of feeling. And insofar as Virginia Woolf is an artist, she has been able to achieve that act of sympathy in the reader. It is a sympathy not just between the reader and Virginia Woolf, but between the reader and human reality.

As the passengers near the Lighthouse, the arrival at which must be taken as the victory of Sympathy, Mr. Ramsay, for the first time, praises James (for his navigation), Mr. Carmichael (who seems to have had this Sympathy from the start and who is represented, therefore, as a *successful* poet) raises his arms in benediction, and Lily « laying down her brush in extreme fatigue » says: « I have had my vision ».

By the end of *To the Lighthouse* we have all experienced that extreme fatigue which comes after the unity of one psyche with another, through art. On close re-examination of the novel we find that it sustains a pitch of excitement for which few, if any, parallels can be cited in English literature. It is essentially a musical experience and does not communicate ideas. It does not reduce to the moral « Everybody should love everybody », or, indeed, to any moral at all. Every page is an experience in the way that each existing minute of a piece of music is an experience, enjoyable mainly for its own sake but also as part of a coherent, though not ideological, unity. In this respect, *To the Lighthouse* is a special success, for it comes uncommonly close to the goal of art: to communicate a meaning which transcends meaning. By means of so finite a process as the deployment and organization of words, Virginia Woolf has managed to get hold of « that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything ». The total achievement of the novel is the recreation of the split-second intuition which

caused it to be written. « For it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to man, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge ».

HAROLD FROMM

Brooklyn College, New York City.