'But what? Elegy?': Modernist Reading and the Death of Mrs Ramsay

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I am making up 'To the Lighthouse' — the sea is to be heard all through it. I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant 'novel'. A new — by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?[1]

R.S. In his celebrated Fringe production of *Hamlet*, Stephen Berkoff killed the king at prayer. Claudius knelt with eyes closed; hands clasped, head bowed. Remarking 'now might I do it pat', Berkoff neatly ran him through from behind. The king pitched forward, inert. Spectators were surprised. Most of them, probably, knew the play and were wondering what Berkoff aimed to do with Acts IV and V. Even those who did not were puzzled to find such a conclusive action occurring only a couple of hours into a performance billed to last for nearly four. Then, with a nod and an ironic grin at this puzzled audience, Berkoff agreed 'that would be scanned', pulled the king upright again, and carried on with the play as usual, Claudius's murder banished for the moment as unscannable and unplayable.

What has this to do with strategies of reading, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, or the death of Mrs Ramsay? In one way, not so much. Reading a novel and watching a play are obviously different sorts of experience, and depend on different strategies for establishing their sense of an ending, for example. However strong their expectations, Berkoff's audience had no means of being completely sure that his idiosyncratic production would not end with this premature murder of the king. Novels, on the other hand, offer means of establishing expectations and judging the timing of endings which are much more reliable — in one way, almost absolutely so. As David Lodge suggests,

> a novelist cannot conceal the timing of the end of the story (as a dramatist or a film-maker can, for instance) because of the tell-tale compression of the pages [...] as you're reading, you're aware that there's only a page or two left in the book, and you get ready to close it.[2]

We are grateful to Jackie Jones of Edinburgh University Press for her advice and encouragement.

[1] Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1980), III, 34.
[2] *The Art of Fiction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), pp. 224, 227.

A reader of almost any novel, certainly of *To the Lighthouse*, has its remaining thickness as a clear indication of the existence, and extent, of material still to come. Indeed, Woolf seems to use quite deliberately this kind of awareness to make her readers think about the imminent closure of *To the Lighthouse*. Its penultimate chapter begins with an account of Mr Ramsay's progress towards the Lighthouse, and also towards finishing 'the little book with the shiny cover mottled like a plover's egg'[3] which he peruses during the journey:

> Mr. Ramsay had almost done reading. One hand hovered over the page as if to be in readiness to turn it the very instant he had finished it [...]. He was reading very quickly, as if he were eager to get to the end. Indeed, they were very close to the Lighthouse now. (p. 311)

Rather like Lily Briscoe's painting, Mr Ramsay's reading seems correlative, and might be assumed to be coterminous, with the novel in which he appears. The passage quoted, along with 'tell-tale compression of the pages' — only half a dozen remain at this point — encourages readers to consider that their book, like Mr Ramsay's, may end when the lighthouse is reached. This anticipated conclusion directs particular attention upon the actual conclusion of the novel, which is significantly delayed a little longer.

Mrs Ramsay's death is a conclusion, if it is one at all, that cannot be anticipated in this or other ways. There is no introduction, preamble, or warning for the lines that follow in Chapter 3 of 'Time Passes', the novel's second part:

> [Mr. Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty.] (pp. 199–200)

This is one of the most disturbing moments in twentieth-century fiction, for reasons aesthetic as well as emotional. Finding an event of such emotional import apparently so marginalized, readers are bound to register painfully the implications of those square brackets — the inconsequentiality of even the richest life. And what the brackets contain is disturbing in form as well as meaning. In describing stumbling along a passage, the first sentence of the parenthesis is itself a passage readers are bound to stumble over because of its fractured temporality and the odd, almost a-syntactic way it is expressed. In particular, that 'but' suggests that the sentence's last clause should establish a supplement or contrast to the first: instead, it provides only a repetition of what is stated at the start, and the clause introducing Mrs Ramsay's death offers an emotional rather than logical explanation for the confusion. Cause and effect, logic and consequence are deranged in ways which suggest an almost incomprehensible aspect to the death itself.

[3] *To the Lighthouse* (London: Hogarth Press, 1927), p. 291. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

The fractured construction of this individual sentence also emphasizes a disruption in the wider syntax of the novel itself. Mrs Ramsay's death disturbs not only readers' emotions, but their expectations of the path the story will follow and the structure and logic it can use to reach its end. At least on a first reading of *To the Lighthouse*, what that moment of Mrs Ramsay's death does share with Berkoff's glib despatch of Claudius is a sense of thorough departure from the expected, and of bewilderment about what can possibly happen next.[4] Rather as audiences of that *Hamlet* asked themselves 'But Stephen Berkoff ... how are you going to end the play?' readers of *To the Lighthouse* must pause to wonder for a moment 'But ... Mrs Woolf, where is this novel going?' For of course it remains clear that it has a long way to go: 'tell-tale' extension of succeeding pages suggests that nearly half the novel's substance is still to come. Yet now that Mrs Ramsay has gone, what can be left? For readers are surely entitled to have assumed, up to this point, that the substance of the novel will be formed by continuing attention to her: hitherto, she has been very much its protagonist.

If it is difficult to think of *To the Lighthouse* continuing and ending without her, it may also be difficult, at this point, to think of its ending at all without some of the capacities the novel has shown belonging to her, and which may now vanish from the world it presents. In particular, 'The Window' shows Mrs Ramsay endowed with many of the inclinations of a novelist — at any rate, a conventional Victorian or Edwardian novelist — especially in her concern with social harmony and the establishment of relationships firm and satisfactory enough to ensure continuity and a secure future. 'People must marry; people must have children' (p. 96) she believes, and even shows some of a novelist's omniscience and omnipotence in securing her wishes for Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle. Paul reflects of his unannounced engagement that Mrs Ramsay 'knows all about it. I need not say anything', and of his earlier proposal that 'when he asked Minta to marry him [...] Mrs. Ramsay [...] was the person who had made him do it' (pp. 180, 123). 'Always she got her own way in the end' (p. 157), Lily believes. With Mrs Ramsay as its presiding intelligence, 'The Window' does end much as a Victorian or Edwardian novel might — with the disparate constituents of the Hebridean household drawn into amicable unity at her dinner party, and her own marriage settled into triumphant stability again while her brilliant children sleep soundly upstairs.

One effect of Mrs Ramsay's death is therefore to shock readers into questioning the validity of this kind of comedic conclusion. This interrogation is further focused by the perfunctorily-recorded deaths of her children — Andrew in the trenches; Prue in childbirth, after a single summer of

[4] Differences of effect between first and subsequent readings obviously raise a range of questions about strategies of reading, perhaps especially in relation to modernist fiction. This essay does not have the scope to pursue these, though it would be interesting to know how many of its readers can clearly recall their first encounter with *To the Lighthouse*.

marriage — and by some of Lily Briscoe's reflections in the novel's third part, 'The Lighthouse'. Thinking about the failure of Paul and Minta's marriage, and her own avoidance of William Bankes, Lily finds that in the post-war world 'Life has changed completely' and that

> Mrs. Ramsay has faded and gone, she thought. We can override her wishes, improve away her limited, old-fashioned ideas. She recedes further and further from us. Mockingly she seemed to see her there at the end of the corridor of years saying, of all incongruous things, 'Marry, marry!' (p. 269)

In the same passage, Lily seems to diminish the significance of death as much as of marriage:

> Oh the dead! she murmured, one pitied them, one brushed them aside, one had even a little contempt for them. They are at our mercy. (p. 269)

In a period which had just witnessed death on the scale that it had — not only Andrew Ramsay, but multitudes of 'young men [...] blown up in France' (p. 204) — some retreat such as Lily's from the full meaning of death was perhaps inevitable. But her scepticism of the significance of both marriage and death dramatizes the problem faced by novelists at the time, finding neither conventional comedic nor tragic conclusions any longer viable, but part of a 'form which will no longer serve';[5] a 'stuff of fiction' which properly required to be 'a little other than custom would have us believe it'.[6]

Lily, however, not only indicates some of the problems experienced by contemporary novelists, but in her activity as an artist suggests a solution for them. This is emphasized by the particular attention, discussed above, which Woolf draws to her own ending by reference to Mr Ramsay's reading, which concludes, as expected, with the lighthouse almost reached. But readers do not follow Mr Ramsay on to the rock, and are not told how much, if at all, landing at the Lighthouse is experienced as a consummation or a conclusion for those who actually complete the journey. And the novel itself does not conclude there. Instead, there is a small but significant space between the end of Mr Ramsay's reading, his reaching the lighthouse, and the end of Woolf's novel, a space beyond conventional reading which shows actual experience and the actual world, its failures or completions, translated into another domain; melting into air, dissolving into a vision sustained apart. For Lily,

> the Lighthouse had become almost invisible, had melted away into a blue haze, and the effort of looking at it and the effort of thinking of him landing there [...] seemed to be one and the same effort. (pp. 318–19)

[5] T. S. Eliot, 'Ulysses, Order, and Myth' (1923), in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode (London: Faber, 1975), p. 177.

[6] Woolf, 'Modern Fiction' (1919; revised 1925), in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1986–), IV, 161.

The event in reality, landing, principally serves looking, thinking, and ultimately the artistic vision of Lily the painter, staring across the bay with the poet Augustus Carmichael at her shoulder, holding in his hand a novel like 'a trident' — as tripartite, in other words, as the one in which he appears. This ending is typical of a modernist fiction which in art, writing, vision, or its own practice looks for a sense of completion, order, and stability which society and history — events in reality — no longer seem able to provide.

To the Lighthouse is thus partly divided between two forms of fiction: 'The Window' still haunted by the Edwardian age it represents, still shaped and concluded partly in terms of its conventions; while 'The Lighthouse' is representative of some of the priorities of the modernist age of the twenties. As Woolf suggests in her diary, *To the Lighthouse* is in this way a supplanting of the traditional novel, and a kind of enactive elegy for it: a recognition of its death, in the war if not before, and a movement towards possibilities and pastures new. So the shock to expectations created by Mrs Ramsay's death is pivotal and entirely necessary, alerting readers to a transition between two sets of priorities, almost two literary periods. The odd construction of that sentence recording the death itself might even be seen as the result of a challenge to authority over the text consequent upon the death of an author; at any rate, of the figure closest in outlook to a novelist of a certain kind — the Victorian or Edwardian novelist of happy social conclusions, now redundant in the modern age. Mrs Ramsay's death forces readers to ask not only where this novel is going, but where the novel in general should go, and why. They need to stumble over her death in order to consider what can be 'scanned'; what can be resolved; how far art can contain the 'world of strife, ruin, chaos' the war left behind (p. 232). Yes?

J.G. No! You make Mrs Ramsay the centre of *To the Lighthouse*, and her death its culmination. But for me, Lily Briscoe is the focal character, the artist at the centre of a *künstlerroman*; and Mrs Ramsay's death a necessary point of transition, not a shockingly premature ending. Your analogy with Berkoff's *Hamlet* therefore suggests to me a different point. The trick with Claudius seems explicitly to dramatize an implicit aspect of the scene: killing the king in this way would be, for Hamlet, 'hire and salary, not revenge'. Claudius's tyranny would be somehow strengthened and perpetuated, not overcome; and Hamlet might be merely another Claudius, replicating his tyranny. Or can he become a new kind of sovereign-subject? If *Hamlet* explores subjectivity in terms of manhood, majesty, and divinity, *To the Lighthouse*, I suggest, explores these issues in relation to gender.

Like many feminists, I read *To the Lighthouse* as charting an emergent feminist subjectivity. Such readings think of Lily Briscoe as overcoming Mrs Ramsay and her complicity with an old-order status quo. She is an 'Angel in the House', who must be despatched if women (writers) are to express what

they 'think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex'.[7] Mrs Ramsay is nevertheless both an inspiration to Lily and 'an obstacle in her design' (p. 269), marking the Victorian social position of women she seeks to transform. The resolution of Lily's picture depends on her overcoming this woman's position as a shadowy aspect of her husband. Just as the 'phantom' Angel 'was always creeping back when I thought I had despatched her',[8] so Mrs Ramsay returns to haunt Lily. Of course, Lily does not actually murder Mrs Ramsay but she does defy the prospectus of this arch propagandist for marriage.

To the Lighthouse, I agree, is an elegy; but it is a feminist elegy marking a transition from a patriarchal model of subjectivity (exemplified in the dominance of 'the couple' — in Hélène Cixous's sense — the Ramsays in 'The Window') to a collective one (the constellation of differently organized subjects in 'The Lighthouse'). It marks the social and political gains made by women during and after the war. 'Time Passes' explores the events around the Great War in relation to the emergence of this new sense of subjectivity: in this transitional context, Mrs Ramsay's death conforms with traditional elegy. After the idyll ('The Window'), comes the untimely fall ('Time Passes'), then the 'fresh woods and pastures new' ('The Lighthouse'). Finally, *To the Lighthouse* celebrates the survival and flourishing of its own 'uncouth swain', Lily Briscoe.

The novel's title, furthermore, is not *Mrs Ramsay*, but *To the Lighthouse*, a title promising a journey to enlightenment (not a postmodernist gesture towards, but a modernist sense of arrival). This promise shapes our expectations. After the title, the contents page[9] prepares us for the novel's triadic shape and its movement from light ('The Window') to darkness ('Time Passes') to light again ('The Lighthouse'). The sense of mortality suggested by 'Time Passes' surely prepares us for death; just as historical knowledge of the war surely informs most readings.

When and where enlightenment occurs, of course, may be debated; and the bare 'externality of the plot' may make us wonder why it takes 320 pages to arrive: 'A group of people plan to sail in a small boat to a lighthouse', Arnold Bennett summarizes: 'At the end some reach the lighthouse in a small boat.'[10] Reading for this plot, we may find 'Time Passes' a tiresome interruption! But the novel itself questions such methods: does the reader experience enlightenment as envisioned by the alphabetically obsessed Mr Ramsay, who forsees his 'own little light would shine, not very brightly, for a year or two, and would be merged in some bigger light, and that in some bigger still' (p. 59)? Or, as Lily does: 'The great revelation perhaps never did

[7] Woolf, 'Professions for Women', *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), p. 151.
[8] 'Professions for Women', p. 153.
[9] See p. vii. The recent Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics (1992) and Oxford World's Classics (1992) paperback editions also include it; but Penguin previously did not (1964 to 1973).
[10] Arnold Bennett, review, *Evening Standard*, 23 June 1928.

come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one' (p. 249). As well as making a linear journey to the Lighthouse, we experience the novel in a triadically arranged patchwork of moments: each part is subdivided into short chapters in which occur further parenthetical subdivisions, and these, although read in linear fashion, may be understood as simultaneous. Perhaps each part stands alone and complete ('Time Passes' was itself published separately).[11] Reaching the final page, do we sense an accumulation into one big light, or merely another fragmentary moment of illumination, perhaps like 'fragments [. . .] shored against [. . .] ruins'?

The '"artistic" idea', which we find exemplified in the self-reflexive aesthetics dominating 'The Lighthouse', may spoil the fun for conventional readers, as Henry James observes:

> Its hostility to a happy ending would be evident, and it might even in some cases render any ending at all impossible. The 'ending' of a novel is, for many persons, like that of a good dinner, a course of dessert and ices, and the artist in fiction is regarded as a sort of meddlesome doctor who forbids agreeable aftertastes.[12]

The 'happy ending' at the close of 'The Window', which is not happy for Lily but frustrating, is surely belied by her very positive aesthetic vision at the novel's close. Her final declaration, 'I have had my vision' does not disappoint. Perhaps visionary, aesthetic reward has after all successfully supplanted the more conventional 'distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies'.[13] But Woolf's ending is not a refuge in aesthetics, a haven from the real world, as you suggest. For me it reflects, on the contrary, real historical and political changes.

In connection with this, I want to consider further the novel's references to reading processes. 'To read a book well', Woolf advises,

> one should read it as if one were writing it. Begin not by sitting on the bench among the judges but by standing in the dock with the criminal. Be his fellow worker, become his accomplice. Even, if you wish merely to read books, begin by writing them.[14]

To the Lighthouse, in its many allusions to other literary works, its pictorial analogies, and its exploration of different examples of reading practice, certainly encourages the reader's writerly engagement. Like Lily's picture, these elements feed into the novel's self-conscious aesthetics, but they also make us aware of various dimensions to our own act(s) of reading. In 'The Window', we find 'a good deal of reading' and reciting: Mr Ramsay's histrionic declamation of Tennyson, Mrs Ramsay's reading to her son of a

[11] See James M. Haule, '"Le Temps passé" and the Original Typescript: an Early Version of the "Time Passes" Section of *To the Lighthouse*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 29 (1983), pp. 267–94.
[12] Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction' (1888), in *The Art of Fiction and Other Essays*, ed. by Morris Roberts (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 7.
[13] James, 'The Art of Fiction', p. 7.
[14] 'How Should One Read a Book?', *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, IV, 390.

fairy tale, the couple's more private and silent reading of Scott and Shakespeare, and so on.[15] In 'Time Passes' Mr Carmichael puts out the candle on his bedtime reading of Virgil, and later we learn he himself has brought out a volume of poems, the war having 'revived [people's] interest in poetry' (p. 208). This is a turning point.

This is where my reading begins to depart from yours: I find the novel's engagement with aesthetics to be informed by the central question of gender, and this affects the reader's negotiation of its form. *To the Lighthouse*, for me, undermines the notion of a transcendent art with a universal subject. It is not only asking 'how far can art contain the world?', but also demanding 'look what is happening to art and the world when a woman occupies the position of artist, subject'. All those examples of people reading, then, invite us to think about reading as a social act, and about the politics and gender significance of reading positions.

Significantly, all the literary works mentioned are written by men. The invasive nature of male literary discourse is dramatized by Mr Ramsay's recital of 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' impinging on Lily's attempts to produce her own art — 'Indeed, he almost knocked her easel over' (p. 32). Consider the effect of her reading of 'The Fisherman and His Wife' on Mrs Ramsay: it confirms in her a sense of dutiful self-effacement, uxorial subordination — 'she did not like, even for a second, to feel finer than her husband' (p. 65).[16] Look at the lighthouse beam's sinister infiltration in her son's eyes as they finish the story; its ability to inscribe in her mind alien thoughts; and her husband's similarly oppressive shadowing of her mind as they sit reading.

The pre-war idyll of 'The Window' presents, then, a far from harmonious view of art's relation to the world: we see how (patriarchal) texts sinisterly interpellate men as aggressive patriots and women as self-effacing social subordinates; how one reading may occlude another; one expression suppress another. Lily's struggle with the Ramsays begins here; it does not suddenly occur in the final part of the novel. I think you read a certain reading of Eliot's *The Waste Land* into Woolf's novel: one that focuses on the horror of the Great War as an intrusion on a previously harmonious world, and that assumes a notion of art as previously transcendent and unified. But Woolf's novel explores the war and its impact on social relations as a consequence of tensions in the old world; one has to read against its grain considerably to find *To the Lighthouse* a hymn to family values lost to the deluge of war and partially restored to a cosmic unity at the close.[17]

[15] Ian Gregor, 'Virginia Woolf and Her Reader', *Virginia Woolf: A Centenary Perspective* (London and Basingstoke: St Martin's, 1984), p. 43.

[16] Gillian Beer, 'Hume, Stephen, and Elegy in *To the Lighthouse*', *Essays in Criticism*, 34 (1984), 33–55 (pp. 54–55): 'The end of *To the Lighthouse* performs the experience of ending which has already happened in Mrs. Ramsay's reading aloud of Grimm's tale.'

[17] See Thomas Beattie, 'Moments of Meaning Dearly Achieved: Virginia Woolf's Sense of an Ending', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 32 (1986), 521–24 (pp. 521–22).

Let us look again at Mrs Ramsay's death. Mrs Ramsay, as her name reminds us, is not really a subject herself, but more properly an aspect of her husband's sense of selfhood. This is reflected in the parenthetical record of her death, a succinct account of the transition in models of subjectivity described in the larger sweep of the novel. You see the reader as 'stumbling' with Mr Ramsay across Mrs Ramsay's death, but for me this image perpetuates the rather critical, and comical, view of the man established in 'The Window': he appears a self-obsessed, rogue-elephant of a man whose moods and turns have to be accommodated by every one else, chiefly his wife. He is always clumsily intruding on others, blind to them. As a 'wedge-shaped core of darkness' (p. 99), a subordinate shadow to her husband's luminous intellect, Mrs Ramsay is complicit in maintaining this appalling and risible social persona Mr Ramsay. She is his dark foil; so it seems quite appropriate that his arms seek her 'one dark morning', and that she dies in the night. In a sense, she has withdrawn her support. Briefly recounted in parenthesis, this dark event is a microcosm of the epic 'down-pouring of immense darkness' (p. 195) characterizing 'Time Passes'. A particle in the wave of a huge social and political tide, it also stands for that larger movement.

Lily refuses to step into Mrs Ramsay's subordinate role; and a new constellation of subjects emerges at the end of *To the Lighthouse*: the married couple no longer dominates social relations.[18] The last part, far from redundant, is an exploration of these new relations: to end with the death of Mrs Ramsay would be to end with a gap which by 1927 women were filling in very different ways. In keeping with elegiac convention, *To the Lighthouse* ends in lyric consolation and transformative vision; but it maintains a notion of art as contestive, not transcendent. Lily's final central line marks a moment of transition, not one of permanent stability.

R.S. It would be difficult, for the reasons you give, altogether to regret the passing of the world depicted in 'The Window', or the kind of 'happy endings' it offers. But it would be difficult altogether to rejoice in its demise, either, especially given what follows. Woolf talks in her essays about the Great War coming 'like a chasm in a smooth road',[19] suggesting that there were worthwhile aspects of stability and continuity in that pre-war world, and she shows disappearing in 'Time Passes' much more than just Edwardian family life and its values. That middle part traces a passage not necessarily from an idyllic world, but from one that can at least be more or less understood and thought of coherently, to one that cannot be; one where, in a kind of collapse or inversion of the values of pastoral, Nature is quite

[18] See Rachel Blau Duplessis, 'Feminist Narrative in Virginia Woolf', *Novel: A Forum in Fiction*, 21 (1988), 323–30 (pp. 327–28).
[19] 'The Leaning Tower' (1940), in *The Moment and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1947), p. 111.

indifferent to what humanity advances; one in which 'contemplation was unendurable; the mirror was broken' (p. 208). Any attempt to bring 'the night to order and [make] the world reflect the compass of the soul' (p. 199) can no longer rely on social, political, natural or other orders discoverable in reality, but has to retreat into art, into vision or imagination; hence the need for Lily to provide for the novel, through her painting, the kind of unity and completion you mention. Your quotation from Henry James is useful in emphasizing this necessary change. It reminds us that *To the Lighthouse* is a novel that ends not in a dinner but in a vision, and that Jamesian and post-Jamesian fiction more generally chose to move beyond conventional conclusions (marriages, pensions, prizes, or whatever) and towards something more aesthetic, finely exemplified in Lily's final vision.

Any enlightenment it offers, however, any 'lyric consolation' or 'transformative vision' might in a modernist novel, as you say, need to be seen as fragile and fragmentary. This, too, could be thought of in the context of elegy. For elegy, traditionally, cannot do much more than construct, often in art, some fragile compensation for a world or person whose absence and loss are still disturbing, still regretted — more or less what I see happening in *To the Lighthouse*. Your argument, on the other hand, if pressed to its limit might suggest that there is not much scope for regretting the loss of Mrs Ramsay and her world at all: the order it offered an old order, as you say; its status quo a stifling one. But wouldn't an absence of regret on this scale make for an odd sort of elegy? What about the regret Lily herself experiences in 'The Lighthouse'? In the middle of Chapter 6 she finds Mrs Ramsay 'faded and gone', but by its end she is still hoping, in pain and anguish, that 'if they shouted loud enough Mrs. Ramsay would return' — an anguish heightened for the reader by that odd interlude with the mutilated fish in Chapter 7. How does this relate to the conflict you suggest, and the need to dismiss Mrs Ramsay? Is there not also a kind of covert complementarity, which Lily feels herself, and which readers see at moments such as Mrs Ramsay's toying with still-life vision of the fruit dish at her dinner party?

We might consider this through loose analogy with the relation between Bloom and Stephen in *Ulysses*. If there is 'a touch of the artist about old Bloom' there is also about Mrs Ramsay, as I suggested earlier, even beyond the scene with the fruit dish. Like Bloom she sees personal relations as a possible antidote to 'force, hatred, history, all that',[20] but force, hatred, history, and mortality outstrip and deny this possibility, leaving Lily's and Stephen's vision or conscience or whatever (at any rate something abstracted from the immediacy of life and history) as the only alternative. Like Stephen's union with Bloom, partially-achieved at best, Lily's apparently simultaneous rejection of and regret for Mrs Ramsay figure a wider crisis for modernism: that artists could achieve shape and coherence in their work only at some

[20] James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), pp. 302, 432.

exiled or cunning remove from the society and world they envisage, but whose misty distance they nevertheless regret. Mrs Ramsay's death shocks us into recognizing the passing of an old fictional aesthetic dependent on achieved social harmony and conclusive actions and events. It is only with Lily, at the end of *To the Lighthouse*, that we realize how much, or how little, can be put in its place; what can supplement the old kind of reading represented by clumsy Mr Ramsay in his boat. As the journal *transition* proclaimed around this time, 'the novel is dead, long live the novel'.[21] Mrs Ramsay's death is the clearest moment of modernist transition between worlds, between forms, between novels.

J.G. We agree on less than you say. You seem to think of elegy as eulogy whereas I would argue that Woolf's novel subscribes to the elegiac conventions of satirical political commentary, reflection on the art of poetry, and celebration of the surviving poet's talents flourishing in the wake of the departed.[22] Of course it suggests mixed feelings about the departed. Mrs Ramsay marks the space previously occupied by the feminine which Lily seeks to change, but she is also the origin of the feminine, something Lily acknowledges both as an inhibition and as a source of artistic strength. Mrs Ramsay, I agree, is an artist of sorts but one diminished to the role of muse, object, and servant; Lily's historical position perhaps allows her to convert her potential.[23] I have been a little hard, I concede, on Mr Ramsay, who represents enlightenment traditions which are adapted rather than altogether rejected in the final part: for Cam he is both a tyrant to be resisted and an important source of knowledge.

My understanding of elegy also allows for a different interpretation of 'Nature' in this novel. Yours seems a more Romantic, at times perhaps even an existentialist reading. But 'Time Passes', in places strongly echoing Virgil's *Eclogues*,[24] may be read as an allegory, rather than as an account of the natural object world.[25] What do you make of the tantrum thrown by 'Divine Goodness' who 'covers his treasures in a drench of hail, and so

[21] Harry Crosby and others, 'The Novel is Dead Long Live the Novel', *transition*, no. 18 (November 1929), 239.

[22] See Eric Smith, *By Mourning Tongues: Studies in English Elegy* (Ipswich: Boydell Press, 1977), pp. 110–11.

[23] See Woolf's foreword, *Recent Paintings by Vanessa Bell*, The London Artists' Association, Cooling Galleries (London, 1930), repr. in *The Bloomsbury Group: A Collection of Memoirs, Commentary and Criticism*, ed. by S. P. Rosenbaum (London: Croom Helm, 1975), pp. 169–73, where she compares the modern woman artist, Mrs Bell, with her Victorian ancestor.

[24] Compare 'Nothing stirred in the drawing-room or on the staircase' (p. 196) with Virgil, Eclogue v, lines 23–28, *Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I–IV*, trans. by H. Rushton Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1915), pp. 36, 37; and 'A thistle thrust itself between the tiles in the larder' (pp. 212–13) with Virgil, Eclogue v, lines 34–44, pp. 36–37, and with Theocritus, 'Thrysis' Lament for Daphnis': 'May violets grow on thistles, | may they grow on thorns'. See Stevie Davies, *Virginia Woolf: To the Lighthouse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), pp. 121–22.

[25] See for example, Kate Flint, 'Virginia Woolf and the General Strike', *Essays in Criticism*, 36 (1986), 319–34 (p. 326).

breaks them, so confuses them that it seems impossible that their calm should ever return or that we should ever compose from their fragments a perfect whole or read in the littered pieces the clear words of truth' (p. 199)? Is this about natural disaster or political conflict? We can be more specific about the 'mere anarchy' you identify in the war period and about 'Time Passes' than its grand but vague terms — nature and chaos — may suggest.

'Time Passes' explores a crisis in pastoral language brought about by the figure of the woman elegist, herself a reflection of historical change, as much as by the horror of war. This raises the important factor of the 'pathetic fallacy'. If nature is personified as feminine and other in this tradition, how can a woman elegist's lyric celebration of self function without reinscribing her as part of the object world?[26] The allegoric structure is thrown into collapse, for allegory depends on the otherness of its vehicle; the vehicle cannot also be the tenor ('the thing in itself' as Woolf puts it). Yet elegy may also be about that very crisis in language: it cannot substitute what is lost — the dead, *pace* Vanessa Bell (who congratulated Woolf on resurrecting their parents in *To the Lighthouse*), are not raised.[27]

Unlike you, I tend to read the passages about the thinker on the beach, then, as ironic. How do you account for the marked shift in the gendering of nature that occurs in the middle of 'Time Passes'? The passage you cite begins, 'Did Nature supplement what man advanced? Did she complete what he began?' which implies nature as a feminine foil to masculine subjectivity, therefore denying the feminine the status of subject, but it ends with the information that 'the mirror was broken' (p. 208), after which Woolf no longer genders 'Nature' as feminine. This informs Mrs Ramsay's absence: she is no longer there to reflect her husband's sense of self.

Let us now return to Mr Ramsay's reading in the boat: the view you quote is associated with James. This is Cam's:

> He read, she thought, as if he were guiding something, or wheedling a large flock of sheep, or pushing his way up and up a single narrow path; and sometimes he went fast and straight, and broke his way through a thicket, and sometimes it seemed a branch struck him, a bramble blinded him, but he was not going to let himself be beaten by that; on he went, tossing over page after page. (pp. 292–93)

This entertainingly self-reflexive reminder of the artificiality of pastoral language reflects on our own reading of 'Nature' in 'Time Passes'. Ramsay's mastery over pastoral imagery seems gradually to slip: the 'natural' vehicles of thought, the branch and bramble, offer resistance. Cam's admiration for her father's learning, we might conclude, is mixed with indications of its decline. As she goes on 'telling herself about escaping from a sinking ship'

[26] See Peter Knox-Shaw, '*To the Lighthouse*: The Novel as Elegy', *English Studies in Africa*, 29 (1986), 31–52 (p. 32).

[27] See Vanessa Bell, Letter to Virginia Woolf, 11 May 1927, *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, ed. by Regina Marler (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), p. 317. Woolf, on the other hand admits to having exorcised the ghosts of her parents in writing *To the Lighthouse*. See *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, III, 208; Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 2nd edn, ed. by Jean Schulkind (London: Sussex University Press, 1985), p. 90.

(p. 293), we may detect perhaps a potential for feminist emergence from this dying patriarchy.

The novel's allusions to art suggest engagement with, not retreat from, the world. When Woolf calls the Great War a 'chasm in the smooth road', she is summarizing its impact on 'nineteenth-century writers'. This privileged group 'had leisure; they had security; life was not going to change; they themselves were not going to change'. Ignoring politics, they were absorbed, rather like the Ramsays, in 'abstract speculation [. . .] the search for truth, aesthetic emotions, and personal relations'. Woolf cites Desmond MacCarthy, Rupert Brooke, E. M. Forster, and G. K. Chesterton as representative of the writer's position before the 1914 war. It is *their* 'smooth road' that the chasm interrupts. Out of this abyss come new generations of writers, starting with the more class-conscious 'Auden, Spender, Isherwood, MacNeice and so on', leading, Woolf hopes, to writers of the 'novel of a classless and towerless world' where 'money is no longer going to do our thinking for us. Wealth will no longer decide who shall be taught and who not'.[28] Recognizing the paradox of her own privileged position, she predicts the future of the novel penned by working-class writers. She does not reject totally the older generation, but she does consider their education built on 'criminal injustice' and looks forward to a more democratic distribution of their privileges. Similarly, the chasm of 'Time Passes' may engender, in 'The Lighthouse', a less élitist prospectus for art and politics than is possible in 'The Window'.

Woolf herself locates significant socio-political upheavals well before 1914, nor does she seem necessarily to abhor these changes. Her famous remark that 'on or about December 1910 human character changed' touches on the political crises of that unstable period before the Great War which led to the dissolution of government against a background of violent conflict between troops and striking miners, police and suffragettes.[29] Political gains for working-class men and women, fought for before the war, were won after it. *To the Lighthouse*, published in the bitter aftermath of the General Strike and just before the full enfranchisement of women, looks back to that earlier period of struggle.

The shift in human relations, 'those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children', prompts Woolf to focus on working-class women:

> The Victorian cook lived like a leviathan in the lower depths, formidable, silent, obscure, inscrutable; the Georgian cook is a creature of sunshine and fresh air; in

[28] Woolf, 'The Leaning Tower', p. 214.

[29] Woolf, 'Character in Fiction' ('Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown') (1924), in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, III, 421. See Ian Dunlop, *The Shock of the New: Seven Historic Exhibitions of Modern Art* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972), p. 132; George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London: Constable, 1936), pp. 63–64.

and out of the drawing room, now to borrow the *Daily Herald,* now to ask advice about a hat.[30]

Women's movement from dark, subliminal, creaturely existence to luminous liberation is also reflected in Mrs McNab's depiction as 'a tropical fish, oaring its way through sun-lanced rocks' (p. 206). This working-class woman's restoration of the house at the novel's centre is itself a vital intervention in the transition from Mrs Ramsay's to Lily Briscoe's vision. Woolf celebrates, then, material improvement for women, and their emergence from intellectual darkness into enlightenment.[31] 'The Lighthouse' explores these new relations: Cam, a feminine presence not specified for the first journey, now joins her brother, father, and the Macalisters in the voyage to the lighthouse, their arrival coinciding with Lily's completion of her picture in the presence of Carmichael. Lily's visionary celebration of self connecting to this network of still contesting subjects, suggests a departure from the hierarchized model of subjectivity, dominated by Mr Ramsay, shown in the novel's first part.

R.S. So, marking as it does a decisive transition in women's roles, what Mrs Ramsay's death requires from us is a specifically feminist reading strategy, rather than principally the kind of modernist shift of attention towards art and aesthetics I began by identifying?

J.G. I would hesitate to disentangle entirely Woolf's modernisn from her feminism. Yet, its feminist politics do not obscure the sensuously aesthetic pleasure the novel brings. As James Ramsay looking at the lighthouse discovers, 'nothing was simply one thing' (p. 286). Woolf's observations on reading Elizabethan poetry seem appropriate to readings of her novel: it is 'rich, too, with more than one can grasp at any single reading. So that, if at last I shut the book, it was only that my mind was sated, not the treasure exhausted'.[32]

[30] 'Character in Fiction', p. 422.
[31] Woolf's tone may suggest also a sense of discomfort at the cook's infringement of traditional class demarcations. Her diaries show her own sometimes fraught relations with domestic servants. Yet Woolf's contradictory feelings about class (something she explores in 'Memories of a Working Women's Guild') may not necessarily undermine the portent of her imagery here; for she includes examples of women from higher up the social order (mythical and historical) as oppressed and servile: Clytemnestra and Jane Carlyle.
[32] 'Reading', *Collected Essays*, ed. by Leonard Woolf, 4 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), II, 21.