

## Understanding Virginia Woolf's 1913 TLS essay on Jane Austen

Virginia Woolf in her 1913 essay is not frugal in her praise for Jane Austen, but I note that sandwiched in between passages of extolment, Woolf inserts a gentle critique of Austen's idea of what the novel could be. Austen, in Woolf's opinion, is not a rebel by disposition and does not write revolutionary literature. The political import of Austen's work is in this sense rather slight. Her conservatism extends, moreover, to the way she deals with gender. Woolf wants to suggest that perhaps Austen's fiction would have been yet finer had she dealt a little more with "pain and sadness", with "guilt and misery". A keen appraisal this may be, but fault-finding it is not. Was it not Brecht who said, "Reality alters; to represent it the means of representation must alter too"? Accordingly, I take Woolf's 1913 remarks to be not merely an apperception of some of the intellectual and social parameters Austen operated within (perhaps even pushed against), but an intimation of Woolf's own emerging vision for a new phase of the development of the novel.

In Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, for instance, the "means of representation", as Brecht would put it, are themselves represented as varying according to viewpoint and changing with time and mood. For the six year-old James Ramsay, words themselves manage to change his reality in an instant:

To her son these words conveyed an extraordinary joy, as if it were settled the expedition were bound to take place, and the wonder to which he had looked forward, for years and years it seemed, was, after a night's darkness and a day's sail, within touch.

In this curiously prescient sentence, something of the pattern of things to come is foretold. The expedition is indeed "bound to take place" as far as the text is

concerned, although not in the way James imagines here; he does indeed end up waiting for “years and years”; and the “night’s darkness” seems to prefigure the middle section of the novel, ‘Time Passes’, in which night “succeeds to night”, and a period of ten years slides poetically past in the space of a few pages.

In fact, the passage of time and its elasticity seem to be central to the way the novel produces its reality which seems, excepting the ‘Time Passes’ section, to be invariably the subjective reality of the characters. And the belated excursion in the concluding section, ‘The Lighthouse’, gives James a chance to reassess his perspective on the reality of the lighthouse - both how it seems to him “now” and how it *seems to have seemed* ten years earlier:

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; [...] So that was the Lighthouse, was it?  
No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other was the Lighthouse too.

One of the interesting aspects of this passage is that, rather than delivering a simple monologue, James seems to be involved here in a kind of philosophical dialogue with himself. This dialogue seems itself to be a representation of his own doubleness, a communication between his experiences as an infant and those he has now, as childhood recedes - a textual registering, perhaps, that he too has changed in the intervening years; yet he too is still the same: he is still James. Hence, in a reversal of subject and object, while he remembers the “eye” of the lighthouse looking out at him, he now sees the ‘I’ of “the tower, stark and straight”. The lighthouse has acted like a mirror: James’ contemplation of his perceptions of the lighthouse has led him to

a moment of selfhood when he finds himself asserting his thoughts about the world with a new certainty.

Hence, a surprising feature of this passage is the way it at first delineates sharply between the “misty-looking” lighthouse of James’ memory (ambiguously, the mistiness may or may not be taken to be a product of James’ own memory) and the “stark and straight” tower which presently confronts him, only to suggest a kind of metaphysical equivalence between the two. For James, and for the novel in its treatment of the idea of reality, this could be called a moment of epiphany, a point at which the mistiness of subjective experience is dispelled, albeit momentarily, by a sharply focused conclusion. An interval of ten years seems to have been transcended, as though echoing the sense of timelessness created in the ‘Time Passes’ section:

But what after all is one night? A short space, especially when the darkness dims so soon, and so soon a bird sings, a cock crows, or a faint green quickens, like a turning leaf, in the hollow of the wave. Night, however, succeeds to night. The winter holds a pack of them in store and deals them equally, evenly, with indefatigable fingers. They lengthen; they darken.

We find here that for the first time in the novel, the text has moved into the present tense, which helps to create a sense of abstraction from the events being described. The statement that “Night, however, succeeds to night” now takes on an important ambiguity: is it just referring to the years of the house’s delapidation, or is it referring generally to the passage of time? The result seems to be a kind of dream-like vagueness about the passage of time.

In this passage we are no longer looking back, through the lenses of the characters’ minds and memories, on the events of one afternoon and evening. Instead the narrative becomes anonymous, omniscient, and detached from the Ramsay family and their guests, as nature itself seems to become the protagonist of the text, and

nature's own periods of time - "Night", "The winter" - exert their influence on the deserted house. In this way the reality of the text, specifically the rate of the passage of time, has altered as a result of an alteration in the viewpoint of the narrative, discarding for a while the interior voices of the characters in favour of an omniscient and transcendent narrator, discarding a viewpoint which looks backwards on the past, and ceding to a voice which seems to live outside of time.

A further way in which the text of *To The Lighthouse* alters its means of representation of reality is by subtly switching perspective from one character to another:

Why take such a gloomy view of life? he said. It is not sensible. For it was odd; and she believed it to be true; that with all his gloom and desperation he was happier, more hopeful on the whole, than she was. Less exposed to human worries - perhaps that was it. He had always his work to fall back on.

The transition from "It is not sensible." to Mrs. Ramsay's viewpoint in "For it was odd..." occurs seamlessly, as though the text itself were recording Mrs. Ramsay's recollection of hearing her husband speaking, capturing the ebb and flow of her thoughts.

It also seems worth noting how the first sentence breaks away from a more conventional (and conventionally grammatical) wording, such as "He asked why one should take such a gloomy view of life". The text's actual phrasing - *Why take such a gloomy view of life? he said.* - seems closely related to the way *To The Lighthouse* formulates reality as *being* viewpoint. By placing the question first, without quotation marks, a sense of immediacy is created, as though Mr. Ramsay's very thoughts were being directly transposed onto the text.

Perhaps this passage also takes us close to the novel's philosophical heart. The characters Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay both seem to harbour internal paradoxes. Mr. Ramsay, superficially The Philosopher of the novel, and supposedly very much alive to ideas of "gloom and desperation", always happy to "talk "some nonsense" to the young men of Cardiff about Locke", seems to shrug off the substance of these ideas as academic abstractions. Mrs. Ramsay, on the other hand, the superficially content mother of eight, turns out in her private moments to be presciently anxious about her children's future ("Why must they grow up and lose it all? Never will they be so happy again.").

This disjunction in outlook between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, and their internal paradoxes, seem to be a means by which the text represents an underlying philosophical dialogue to do with coming to terms with a sense of ultimate futility in life.

How could any Lord have made this world? she asked. With her mind she had always seized the fact that there is no reason, order, justice: but suffering, death, the poor. There was no treachery too base for the world to commit; she knew that. No happiness lasted; she knew that.

This is Mrs. Ramsay's reality, her secret pessimism. The course of events in *To the Lighthouse* is aligned with the sense of tragedy in her viewpoint. It shows Woolf responding to an exigency to invent new ways of suggesting that darkness and unseen danger lie ahead. By the end, Mr. Ramsay, the once proud philosopher, appears Lear-like, diminished and pitiable.