

**THE “ONE-LINE-PORTRAIT” IN
TO THE LIGHTHOUSE BY VIRGINIA WOOLF:
FREEING THE COUNTER-NORMS**

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Abstract: *At the Ramsay’s Scottish summer home, where guests are promised an illusory trip to the lighthouse, Lily Briscoe, a post-impressionist painter, indulges into portraying Mrs Ramsay. Throughout the novel, the portrait changes forms, starting as a moving tree in the first section ‘The Window’ and ending, after Mrs Ramsay’s death, as a single line in the very last page of the novel where Lily Briscoe sees it as completed. The “passage into abstraction” satisfies her for she executes the vision she had. The plot follows the same scheme, unfolding through shifting perspectives and oscillating between the figurative and abstract stream of consciousness of each character. It thus reflects Lily’s unstable portrait and paves the way for a deterritorialised writing. This paper will analyse how the “actes graphiques” (the drawn as well as the written items) mutate into an abstract – and therefore non- or a-gendered – line in order to release the un-articulated and un-lived anti-mainstream love between Lily Briscoe and Mrs Ramsay.*

Keywords: *Counter-Norms, Disfiguration, Gender, Iconoclasm, textual Iconography, deterritorialised Writing*

“A line is a dot that went for a walk”, Paul Klee

Introduction

Published in 1927, Virginia Woolf’s three-chapter novel *To the Lighthouse* depicts the Ramsay family and its guests on the Isle of Skye: a sedentary milieu “infiltrated” by temporarily visiting nomads. Indeed, the Scottish summerhouse the Ramsays own oppositely echoes the distant regions the guests originally come from and will return to as well as, of course, the unreachable mirage-like lighthouse, dangling off the coast, everyone looks at through the window and dreams to travel to in the endless first chapter, “The Window”. James, one of the Ramsays’ children, constantly asks “will we go to the lighthouse?” and the answer he always gets is: “Yes, of course, [we’ll go to the lighthouse] if it’s fine tomorrow”

(Woolf 1996:9). The voyage out to the lighthouse is subject to conditions, "... if it's fine tomorrow". And, of course, it is never fine enough the day after.

Two key female figures emerge out of these two distinct spheres: Mrs Ramsay, the lady of the house, of the inner intimate and sedentary sphere, and Lily Briscoe, an invited painter from the outside world. The first one opens up the novel, the second one closes it. So the two of them frame it in their attempt to communicate with one another via the picture Lily endeavours to paint from the very beginning to the very last page: Mrs Ramsay's pseudo portrait she will only complete when drawing a final line, after Mr Ramsay and two of his children have finally reached the lighthouse: "It was done, it was finished" (Woolf 1996:306). Until then, the portrait will constantly be formed, deformed and reformed. Until then, it remains an (art) object under construction, out of real reach like the lighthouse.

This paper mainly deals with the making, the transformation and the meanings of Lily's mannerist and minimalist picture and wonders whether it could be seen as a way out of the figurative, deconstructing and deterritorialising the writing in a Deleuzian sense, thus making Woolf's narrative prematurely poststructuralist and experimental. It therefore intends to analyse the interaction between the pictorial and verbal tools at stake while insisting on the mnemonic aspect of drawing. Jacques Derrida pointed out in *Mémoires d'aveugle* that one can only draw if what is supposed to be drawn has previously been memorised (Derrida 1990:58). Therefore, being drawn on the final page, Lily's line is due to hold everything preceding it in time and space, like a vast memory bank made of pictorial as well as of textual components. Lily's line, fishing in the vicinity of the beloved lighthouse, will be the detail swallowing and encompassing the whole, acting like an anthropophagic and "textoclastic" metonymy liberating the unsaid and unlived (between her and Mrs Ramsay).

2.1 Empowering the hand

The portrait of Mrs Ramsay is a picture in which the eye does not govern the hand any longer. The hand directs the eye and, doing so, takes its distance from classical painting. It goes back to a more mannerist manner in favour of abstraction and ruptures. What Lily Briscoe sees and observes within the Ramsays' world is therefore impossible to be laid onto the canvas the way it really is. Lily is very much aware of this "should-be and yet not-taking-place-transfer": "She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked: it was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed. [...]" (Woolf 1996:32); "When, looking at the picture, she was surprised to find that she could not see it." (Woolf 1996:263). She neither can transcribe in forms and colours what she sees around her nor decipher what

her hand autonomously paints onto the canvas. It is as though it had frozen the usual ordering activity of her brain.

Lily's hand manipulates and reforms what it uproots to vision. Being held relatively close to the edge of the canvas, the painting brush is both a way in and a way out, an entering and a vanishing point into and from the abstract form on the verge to be conceived. It is interesting to note that Lily herself constantly stands on the edge of things as though she was about to step into something else (on the edge of cliffs, Woolf 1996:212; on the edge of the lawn, Woolf 1996:216, 237, 296; on the edge of the painting, Woolf 1996:261). As a matter of facts, hands prevail throughout the novel, no matter whether it is Lily's hand mixing the colours she will dip her brush into or Mrs Ramsay's hand stroking her son's hair whose head lies on her lap or knitting stockings for the lighthouse keeper's son whose hair is supposedly red (Woolf 1996:11).

Would it be too far-fetched to assume that these "reddish-brown hairy stockings" undergo a partial personification within the first chapter? Stockings are indeed – once they are finished – worn by legs on the move, which might at this point embody a driving human force likely to drag along anyone whose hand has interacted with them to their promised destination, the lighthouse, and might thus be seen as Mrs Ramsay's mirage ticket for a voyage off the coast.

The big framed window of the Ramsay's country house – echoing Lily's painting's frame – opens onto the outside world and, of course, onto the lighthouse, letting the inside sphere, crowded with people, family, guests, and objects, progressively fade away. An invasive darkness, paving the way for the dramatic changes to come, slowly swallows it up. In the second chapter, "Time passes", acting as a go-between, night falls and total blindness takes over. Language ceases to exist because it ceases to be "speakable" and repeatable so that the text has no other choice than to limit itself to a rather small number of pages (25 instead of 186 in the first chapter).

The hand, which had been painting, stroking and knitting, temporarily freezes into the hand of the housekeeper, Mrs MacNab, dusting the past away, leaving very little behind and somehow indirectly threatening Lily's painting with a similar fate, in other words encapsulating beforehand the pre-programmed shrinking of its contents. Forms will also have to cease to exist. However, before reaching that point, they are due to indulge into various metamorphoses: this is why the wild and nomadic mass turns into a tree-like face, the tree-like face into an archaic fleeing vegetation and the archaic fleeing vegetation into a line. One should never trust what one – apparently – sees.

2.2 Splitting up with the figurative

At the beginning of the novel, Lily's painting is limited to a shape (Woolf 1996:32), completed later on by "a few random marks" (Woolf 1996:75). The "shape" then turns purple and triangular (Woolf 1996:81) and loses the few human attributes it might have had: "No one could tell it for a human shape"; "But she had made no attempt at likeness" (Woolf 1996:81). Then the "shape" is called a "mass" (Woolf 1996:83), transforming itself into a "tree": "I shall put the tree further in the middle" (Woolf 1996:128). "I must move the tree to the middle" (Woolf 1996:130). "Move the tree to the middle, she had said" (Woolf 1996:216); "she would move the tree to the middle and need never marry anybody" (Woolf 1996:258). Then the leafy mass finally mutates into a line: "she drew a line there, in the centre [where the tree should have been]" (Woolf 1996:306). Lily expresses, at that point, two very unusual desires, which deserve special attention: first, she is obsessed with pictorial centrism, having an urgent need to move everything she paints to the middle. Secondly, she relates this move to the blissful freedom of not having to marry anyone and, obviously, to unite with Mrs Ramsay. "Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs Ramsay one?" (Woolf 1996:79, 152). Lily and Mrs Ramsay do have an intimate though very discreet relationship embedded in an almost non-verbal communication. A soul kinship and tender "side gestures" nourish the bond that invisibly developed between them: Mrs Ramsay's love for flowers, in particular lilies, for instance (Woolf 1996:257/266) or Mrs Ramsay secretly calling her "her little Brisk" (Woolf 1996:78), thus tacitly approving the brisk and rhythmic *ductus* of her painting brush.

As for pictorial centrism, it could symbolise either perfection, being at the heart of what matters, or "rootlessness", dangling in the middle of nowhere and undetermined by any coordinates, or – last not least – iconoclasm / "*textoclasm*", freely floating after having radically split up with a "pre-established" pictorial and textual order. This subversive act would be conducted by Lily's autonomous brush. First, it unexpectedly and surprisingly draws instead of painting, "she drew a line with her brush" (Woolf 1996:306). Secondly, it always represents Mrs Ramsay bodiless, or dismembered. Its nervous strokes, hither and thither, blurrily sweep away any attempt. "She began precariously dipping among the blues and umbers, moving her brush hither and thither" (Woolf 1996:233). Thirdly, it is constantly rejected, replaced or even mixed up with other painting brushes: "she rejected one brush; she chose another" (Woolf 1996:219), "she had taken the wrong brush in her agitation [...] she made her first quick decisive stroke. The brush descended." (Woolf 1996:231). It also

trembles between her fingers (Woolf 1996:219). Besides, it seems worth mentioning that the brushing of the canvas is once related to the brushing of the hair – “as she brushed her hair, she found herself painting that picture” (Woolf 1996:230) – as well as with the act of “brushing the dead aside” (Woolf 1996:256). Someone brushing his/her hair puts it back into form. Someone “brushing the dead aside” gets rid of the past. Therefore, Lily’s brushing act simultaneously re- and decomposes (something). It slyly pervades the textual discourse and finally exerts a firm and growing grip on the text as a whole. It inserts unorganised and chaotic pictorial sequences at various narrative stages, thus strongly disrupting the textual units, which might otherwise have wisely complied with a linear order. In other words, the text, as well as the story it is telling, is just a pretext. Only Mrs Ramsay, Lily, the painting and the lighthouse – and may be James, Mrs Ramsay’s son, because he is obsessed with the lighthouse – matter. All the other characters are extras, puppets who play a minor role. The fact that, in the first chapter, the narrative – very accurate indeed – magnifies the quite insignificant daily happenings of all these peripheral characters, and dwells on them, aims at elasticising the writing space. Through this hyperbolic swelling, the text turns into a huge spatial refuge, into a stage for anamorphic and tectonic happenings, a temporary *hortus conclusus* in which counter-norms await to be liberated. The drawing of the final line will release them. It will flatten all demands and materialise a neutral state in which nothing will be compulsorily pre-determined, in which no gender role will be pre-prescribed. A flat line, right in the middle, would be a-gendered, that is to say genderless. This is why it has to be drawn. There. At the end.

However, readers might wonder why it has to be a line. Actually, anyone pondering about the real nature of lines will soon find out that lines are nothing but magnetic spots where dots gather and align, and that a dot is nothing but a *punctum*, which is “a sting, a cut, a little hole – and also a cast of a dice. A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident that pricks... (but also bruises... [and] is poignant...)” (Barthes 2002:809). Concisely, a *punctum* is accidental (or non-accidental) and bi-functional for it happens to cut and to injure. Therefore, when drawing the final line, Lily reunites all the icono- and *textoclastic* “cutters” she had set free throughout the novel in order to topsy-turvy the norm impeding her and Mrs Ramsay to be happy in their oneness. Her final line is an “epiphanic” remembrance. She re-members, bringing the cutting dots together, and she remembers, recalling Mrs Ramsay who passed away. In fact, drawing is a spectral heritage, a mnemonic art resulting of a disappearance (Derrida 1990:69). A draftsman always acts blindly, no matter whether s/he is permanently or just temporarily blind. Memory interacts with the drawing hand, dictating what has to be

visualised. In other words, it is nothing but a mental game of hands. The line has its own dynamic, it “walks up”, so to say, towards a limit it will of course never reach but which throws it into an invisibility we are due to mentally anticipate and visualise beyond the frame. Indeed, if the limit does not really exist, it duly exists: “La limite existe en droit” (Derrida 1990:58). This means that if the drawing hand does not concretely lead to it, it always points to its inaccessibility (Derrida 1990:58). In this context, Derrida relates to the “théologie négative”, the sphere of a non-representable, non-nameable, invisible – or at least hidden – and insensitive God one cannot worship as an icon and about whom one does not know anything but who nevertheless duly exists (Derrida 1990:58).

Somehow, Mrs Ramsay is this non-representable, non-nameable and invisible God one cannot worship as an icon. Besides, there is no visible limit to Lily’s line. Still, it certainly duly exists. We do not know where it heads to although the chapters’ names might be read as geo-pointing hints for they clearly refer to either verticality or horizontality: “The Window” is – through its frame – both vertical and horizontal, “Time passes” solely horizontal, and “The lighthouse” solely vertical, as the lighthouse rises high up in the air. In the first chapter, the longest of all (186 pages), both directions mix up. Space and time mingle, no matter how brief time actually is, before being dissociated in the second chapter with a very small number of pages (only 25). Ten tragic years, stamped by war and by Mrs Ramsay’s death, have elapsed between the two, a much longer time than the time spent at the summerhouse within the nearly 200-page first chapter. What is short in time occupies a larger writing space and vice versa.

In the end, the lighthouse has been reached and the novel successfully “closes” on an ascending note. It certainly has a happy ending. It does not end on Lily’s mourning as various scholars wrote in the past years. In her article, « Métaphore et métamorphose dans *To the Lighthouse* », Catherine Lanone sees Lily’s completed picture as a metaphor for mourning (Lanone 1997:147): un « tableau [qui] permet aussi de donner une forme métaphorique au travail du deuil ». So does Barbara Lambert in « Du vent dans les branches de l’orme » (Lambert 1997:115). According to her, the drawing of the line first dissolves the static tree Mrs Ramsay had echoed, and then insufflates new energy into the painting: a wind symbolically attached to Mr Ramsay, blowing through the leaves of the extinct tree. Moreover, still according to Barbara Lambert, if Lily has replaced Mrs Ramsay through Mr Ramsay, she cannot but mourn. As Liliane Louvel underlines in “Love with a Fruit-Dish. *Nature morte avec l’amour en plâtre*: an Instance of Pictorial Eroticism” (Louvel 1997:38) [the eroticism Liliane Louvel refers to takes place between Mrs Ramsay and the poet,

Augustus Carmichael via a fruit-dish which is intensely visualised, and not between Mrs Ramsay and Lily], Lily Briscoe sees her picture as a “survival kit” to “avoid emotional turmoil”. Avoiding emotional turmoil means not needing to marry anyone and, according to me, be finally reunited with Mrs Ramsay. If the art object is for the artist – both for Lily Briscoe and for Virginia Woolf – a life jacket, it is bound to live on beyond time and space borders, even if it ends up in the attic as Lily mentions it right before completing it. Briefly, there is no real death but an extended new life. The only probable form of mourning one encounters in the novel is the dying away of a metaphorical homoerotic relationship Lily and Mrs Ramsay have experienced via the picture. The leafy rounding Lily flattens against the canvas, the colours she nervously mixes and squeezes, her trembling hands she hardly controls for it is “all Mrs Ramsay’s doing” (she was dead!) (Woolf 1996:219), the phallic needles conducted by Mrs Ramsay years before constantly penetrating the red hairy stockings “under construction” as well as Mrs Ramsay fully absorbed in her knitting until she loudly implored: “It’s enough! It’s enough!”. “The ecstasy burst in her eyes [Mrs Ramsay’s eyes]” (Woolf 1996:100) and finally Lily “dip[ping] her brush deliberately [shouting out loud] it’s a miracle, it’s an ecstasy” (Woolf 1996:296). All these references illustrate it clearly enough.

3. Conclusion

Lily’s painting is like that “little patch of yellow wall” (in Vermeer’s *View of Delft*) turning out bigger than the whole it is embedded in. Its final line disrupts, disfigures and swallows the text preceding it. Finally, it contains it, acting like the memory of what has just been told as well as anticipating what will be told next, in other words the text is not only a pretext but a pre-text of the next text to come. It is a passage from the Un-done to the Re-done. In a perfectly orchestrated showdown the blunt edge of Lily’s dots, echoing the cutting triptych form of Woolf’s three-chapter novel, reminds the reader one last time that Lily’s picture has been a challenge all along. The little Brisk has taken risks till the very end. She killed Mrs Ramsay’s figure, deterritorialised Woolf’s text and immortalised both of them in genderless abstraction. Thanks to Lily’s artful vision, they had their voyage out, to and past the lighthouse.

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