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‘That fluidity out there’ -

Epiphanies and the Sea in Virginia Woolf’s
To the Lighthouse

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Introduction

Reading Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) entails being close to the sea. Set on a small island in the Hebrides, the sea is always present in the narrative as the characters are walking the beach, listening to the waves or simply looking out at the horizon. Its sounds, smells and physical manifestations permeate the novel. This presence is in itself powerful, but, as this essay will argue, also more profound. It is manifested in the very structure of the novel as well as in the thematic content.

To Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* was an experiment in literary form as well as a way of dealing with issues from her childhood. Already in the earliest stages of conceiving *To the Lighthouse* Woolf decided 'to have father's character done complete in it; & mothers; & St Ives; & childhood; & all the usual things I try to put in – life, death &c.' Writing *To the Lighthouse* became for Woolf something of a 'psychoanalysis', having been 'obsessed by her mother' all her life, the process of writing *To the Lighthouse*, the expression and explanation of emotions, had finally enabled her to let her parents rest in her mind (Woolf, 'Sketch' 90). However, the autobiographical aspects of *To the Lighthouse* are not to be the focus of this essay; structural and thematic aspects are. John Mepham points to the significance in Woolf's fiction of formal innovation; how every novel is a new experiment in its own right even if certain 'modernist' features can be traced throughout her works (Mepham 91). Writing in her diary in while devising *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf states her wish to invent a new name for her books which will supplant 'novel' (Woolf, *Diary* 80). Ralph Freedman provides something in the way of a new term in his *The Lyrical Novel*. A 'lyrical novel' to Freedman is 'a hybrid genre that uses the novel to approach the function of a poem' (Freedman 1). Trading on the narrative expectations of the novel, the lyrical novel reshapes its components into patterns of imagery which render a 'lyrical point of view': perceptions transformed into a network of images. *To the Lighthouse* proves to be a very useful example of this method and Freedman sees in Virginia Woolf an accomplished lyrical novelist: 'The lyrical quality of *To the Lighthouse* lies in its translation of the ordinary methods of fiction – such as character and action – into imagery which derives from the perceptions and memories of the protagonists' (Freedman 243).

Freedman's claim is a point of departure for this essay because it derives its method from the same basic assumptions, the importance of imagery and how it relates to perceptions and memory. I will focus on the perceptions and how they interact with imagery by focusing on

the most frequent image: the sea. It will be approached from three different angles, or, as I will call it, as having three different facets: a physical, a spiritual and a symbolical one. These facets are seen as interacting with epiphanies, moments of clarity and vision in which the characters realize important things about themselves and the world. Freedman sees the 'moments' in a different light than I will, but nevertheless recognizes their significance in fashioning inner experience (Freedman 193).

Epiphanies constitute an essential aspect of Woolf's fiction, as well as her ideas about fiction. In *To the Lighthouse* they are part of the structure, but also part of the experience of life, how the flux of existence is perceived. This is best illustrated in the novel when Lily has an epiphany *about* epiphanies: 'What is the meaning of life? ... The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. [...] In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing ... was struck into stability' (175-176). This is a significant passage because it seems to reveal the way in which epiphanies function and give hints about the content of the novel as a whole. This essay will not only focus on the 'little daily miracles' which replace a great revelation, but also on the nature of the chaos, the passing and flowing, in which they occur. Here the sea becomes important, as a presence which interacts in various ways with the characters, shaping their thoughts and affecting their world view.

My thesis is that flowing thoughts interrupted by epiphanies form the structure of the novel; that this structure rests on certain philosophical conceptions of thought, memory and time; and that a careful observation of the sea and how it relates to the epiphanies is a relevant point of departure for an interpretative reading of the novel. The interpretation will not be conclusive, but it may yield an understanding of and illuminate certain aspects of *To the Lighthouse*; the interaction between perceptions and thought/memory; the presence of a particular world-view; the significance of imagery in illustrating and enhancing thematic content.

The essay is divided into two parts; part one introducing and discussing the conceptual framework used in part two, the analysis proper.

Part 1 – Conceptual frameworks

As stated in the introduction above, the sea is the point of departure for the essay and my reading of the novel. Before introducing its function and place in the analysis it is important to note the traditional symbolic functions of the sea. Being the powerful force of nature that it is, the sea has sparked the imaginations of people throughout the history of the world and become a presence heavily laden with symbolical connotations. In Ad de Vries's *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* no less than 19 categories of interpreting the sea are listed, including references to various types of mythology and different abstractions: for instance time, liberty and the collective unconscious (de Vries 405-407). Extending the search to concepts such as water and waves will yield further interpretations that are salient to the essay: chaos, transition, masses, maternity and death (de Vries 493-494). De Vries mentions Woolf as a literary reference for the sea as a symbol of time and waves as symbol for maternity/death. While my analysis will present other symbolical functions of the sea it is nevertheless important to bear in mind the connotations that are inherent whenever the sea is studied as something more than water.

The word epiphany derives from the Greek *epiphanein*, to manifest, to show and *epiphanea*, appearance, manifestation, and denotes, when capitalized, a Christian church festival (6 January) celebrating the appearance of Jesus to the Magi. It is also used to denote any appearance of a divine being, but has, in a more general sense come to mean a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something, 'when you suddenly feel that you understand, or suddenly become aware of, something that is very important to you or a powerful religious experience' (Cambridge Online Dictionary).

Tracing the development of the epiphany from religious experience to literary technique, Ashton Nichols demonstrates a progress in which the epiphany comes to be seen less as a sudden manifestation of an external divine agency and more of an inner process of the mind. Having been used almost solely in its theological sense until appropriated by Joyce in a literary capacity, 'epiphany' as a literary phenomenon can nevertheless be traced to Wordsworth and a change in the notion of inspiration (7, 11). Nichols suggests that a new kind of epiphany emerges with Wordsworth that possesses no stated meaning, leaving the interpretation of the strong feeling in a moment to the experiencing subject. The understanding derived from such a moment, once attributed to a divine agency, becomes an individual process (16). As a literary technique this places emphasis on the author's

inspiration, seeing something in a new way, but also the reader's ability to evaluate this experience (31). Often mentioning Woolf, Nichols states that 'as a narrative technique, epiphany provides a way of moving from one intense perception to the next and thereby presenting independent truths of character rather than universal truths of nature' (141). By the time Woolf applied epiphanies in her fiction (although under a different name), Joyce had coined the literary use of the term and many writers already employing epiphanies in their fiction had ascribed various terms to the significant 'moments'.¹

Virginia Woolf describes epiphanies, as she conceives them, as 'moments of being' which are contrasted with 'non-being'. In 'A Sketch of the Past' Woolf reflects that a great part of life is lived unconsciously, 'embedded in a kind of nondescript cotton wool' (Woolf, 'Sketch' 79). While living in the wool, people sometimes experience exceptional moments which bring with them some kind of revelation and/or strong feeling. Woolf tentatively described as her philosophy the idea that behind the cotton wool there is a pattern, a wholeness, which becomes briefly visible in a moment of being. The perception of the epiphanies, as well as the need to 'explain' them, is what Woolf felt made her a writer and she was deeply concerned with methods of conveying the being as well as the non-being (Woolf, 'Sketch' 81). However, as Morris Beja points out, while significantly important to her work, Woolf, unlike Joyce, never evolved a theory proper about epiphanies; our understanding of them has to be derived from fragments in diaries, essays and, of course, her fiction (Beja 212). Consequently, Virginia Woolf has no final term denoting the epiphanies. 'Moment of being' and 'moment of vision' are used alongside each other in Woolf's writings, 'moment of being' apparently suggesting a focus on the strong emotion and 'moment of vision' a focus on the revelation. The different terms do, however, denote basically the same idea, that of a significant moment of experience. Placing Woolf's epiphanies in the literary history context presented by Nichols, I will in the analysis consistently use the word epiphany, with the understanding that the term here specifically denotes an epiphany in the 'Woolfian' sense.

Of great importance to the understanding of epiphanies as well as to the philosophical context in which I wish to place Woolf are the concepts of thought and time. As maintained in the thesis statement above, my assumption is that the structure of the novel, its flowing thoughts, rests on certain philosophical conceptions. In order for an epiphany to take place we need a mind experiencing it and remembering it; the concept of memory necessitates a

¹ Nichols mentions Coleridge's 'flashes', Shelley's 'best and happiest moments', Browning's 'infinite moment', Arnold's 'gleaming moments' and Pound's 'imagistically focused instants' (Nichols 5); John Mepham points to Hardy's as well as Conrad's use of 'moment of vision' (Mepham 76).

discussion on the experience of time. In short, if an epiphany constitutes a break in the everyday 'cotton wool' we must understand that which it is a break in, the everyday flow of perception.

Philosopher and psychologist William James, famous for coining the phrase 'stream of consciousness', opposed the then prevailing view of the mind as made up of spatial units. He saw the consciousness as a continuously reshaping river experiencing life and adding impressions to its masses. Hence 'no state of mind can recur and be identical with what it was before' (James 230), since, like a Heraclitean river flowing, the mind is not stagnant. While James and Woolf are famous for their connection with the literary technique of stream of consciousness, the affinities between their thinking run deeper. To Woolf, the stream of consciousness technique was not, as for Joyce, interesting for its own sake, but rather as a means to transcend 'trivial details of the material life' (Mephram 73) and render the inner world as *interacting* with the outer. Therefore, the most prominent feature of Woolf's writing is not the concept of the stream of consciousness as portraying a shower of impressions and an endless stream of thoughts, but a portrayal of the transformability of the mind, the interaction between impressions and responses to them which reach down to the depths of life, the pattern beneath. Freedman points out that the lyrical use of the stream of consciousness is a 'design of images and motifs [which] emerges from associations of the mind' (Freedman 11). If the mind is transformable and never the 'same river', this is due to memory. Our ability to remember allows us to experience past events again, juxtapose them with the present and let them interact with it. In this light, the memory of a 'moment of being' can be felt as stronger and more present than an ongoing moment of 'non-being' and Woolf illustrates this in 'A Sketch of the Past': she can practically relive moments from her childhood but not remember what she discussed with her husband at tea (Woolf, 'Sketch' 75). At work here is a very personal view of time.

Stephen Kern, in his *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918*, traces a development in the perceptions of time in which a growing preoccupation with standardised time functions alongside representations of personal experiences of it. He links James's theories of thought to the theories of time presented by French philosopher Henri Bergson (Kern 24-25). Analyzing Bergsonian philosophy and its influence in early 20th Century Britain, Mary Gillies describes how Bergson resisted the spatiality ascribed to time. Rather than artificial, spatial units such as clock minutes, time is a quality, a flow, experienced inside the self. Similar to James's ideas of the consciousness, inner time is conceived by Bergson as a continual flux of experience in which 'no states ever remain permanent and no states ever recur' (Gillies 12).

Any spatialization of time exists for the convenience of human beings in need to describe and control their environment. The official, public, clock time is called *l'étendu* and the private, experience of time, *durée*. While favouring the *durée* as the 'real' time, Bergson nevertheless recognizes that a combination of the two is necessary for the 'total experience of living' (Gillies 11-13). Important to the idea that we live with the inner *durée*, trying to reconstruct it with *l'étendu* is the concept of memory as 'the bridge between the perception of an event or object and the recollection of it' (Gillies 16). Memory, retrospective distance, will allow a reconstruction of life as moments; the moments that ultimately constitute the flux of *durée* but that cannot be perceived by the mind as a succession of moments while experiencing them (Gillies 51).

The process of remembering is described in *To the Lighthouse* as a 'search among the infinite series of impressions which time had laid down' (184); a process of reconstruction in the Bergsonian sense as well as a way to relive a moment. Time, in the middle section of *To the Lighthouse*, forms a bridge between its other two parts and memory becomes the unifying link. Public, spatial time (10 years) passes between the first and last section, creating a distance between the events of the sections. However, personal time and memory allow past and present events to exist simultaneously and interact with each other, thus linking the events of 'The Lighthouse' with those in 'The Window'.² Important to this idea are epiphanies. A useful example of the process can be found in Lily contemplating the composition of her painting. Deciding to paint the picture she never finished ten years ago she suddenly remembers the moment of revelation she had at the dinner party, solving the problem about the foreground of the painting. The memory of this epiphany sparks another one and suddenly she knows what she wants to do (161). The significance of that past moment returns to her as she paints and she sees it as the defining moment of her career, enabling her to focus on her work and not marry (191). While the epiphany at dinner no doubt was important at the time, it has in Lily's memory, due to hindsight, taken on extreme proportions. Her memory forms a link between the event and her present situation, and in the interplay between past and present something new is created: a new moment, a new epiphany.

We have thus returned to the starting point: moments. Life as a succession of moments experienced inside the mind and reconstructed by memory. It is in this sense that Bergsonian philosophy may yield a deeper understanding of the form as well as the subject of *To the*

² Adrian Velicu has pointed out that the unity of the novel owes much to the cyclical structure suggested by the order of the episodes and the way they are placed in a day: part one containing an afternoon and an evening and part two a morning. The cycle is completed by events being frozen in memory. (Velicu 58, 65)

Lighthouse.³ Using Bergsonian terminology, the ‘cotton wool’ described by Woolf can be seen as the *durée* and the pattern underneath as the moments that constitute it. A ‘moment of being’ is an important moment, experienced in the flux but also outside it as it reveals the pattern of moments. Life stands still and in a moment the mind can perceive the depths; the moment then becoming a powerful memory that continuously reshapes the mind as it interacts with the present. Drawing on James as well as Bergson, the flux that is consciousness allows for different ‘times’ to exist simultaneously, each new moment interacting with past moments. As Lily is painting in ‘The Lighthouse’ there is a moment when the simultaneous times are explicit; she is painting and she feels, at the same time, as though she is sitting next to Mrs Ramsay on the beach. Remembering the moment of intimacy with Mrs Ramsay makes her feel as though Mrs Ramsay is there and in the dialogue between her memory of the moment and the present moment something happens that helps her to paint. The perfection of the moment becomes ‘a drop of silver in which one dipped and illumined the darkness of the past’ (187). Lily paints away and the description of the painting process has as much to say of the process of memory: ‘Out and out one went, further and further, until at last one seemed to be on a narrow plank, perfectly alone, over the sea. And as she dipped into the blue paint, she dipped too into the past there’ (187). The interaction between past and present, epiphanies and the consciousness, is explicit in this passage, but it is my argument that the interaction is always implicit in the novel and it will be in my analysis.

The sea is also of importance in the passage above, since it becomes a symbolical element that unites the past and the present. As Freedman points out (see quote above), the moment is rendered as an image; imagery supplanting plot. The sea functions on several levels: Lily is standing by the sea, remembering a moment by the sea, constructing her thoughts with sea imagery and the sea becomes the unifying element, to Lily as well as to the structure of the moment. The sea is thus worthy of close study, not only because it is the most common image in the novel but also because it is a fluid element. To James, Bergson and Woolf herself fluidity is necessary as a metaphor for illustrating the features of thought, time and experience of life. In its capacity as fluid element the sea carries great potential for illustrating the ideas both on the level of form and of function. Water becomes the element that holds it all together, just as the sea becomes a unifying presence in the novel. Ultimately, the sea is a

³ Ever since the first critical works on *To the Lighthouse* appeared there has been fervent debate among critics regarding the influences (of Bergson and others) on Woolf. My inclusion of Bergson’s ideas in the essay is less of an act of positioning myself in this debate – after all this is not an essay about ‘the influence of somebody upon something’ – than a result of the honest belief that his ideas can illuminate the underlying structure of *To the Lighthouse* and be a useful tool in an analysis, whether Woolf read Bergson or not.

relevant point of departure for studying epiphanies, not only because they frequently occur in relation to it, but because the sea interacts with and affects the world-view of the characters. Focusing on epiphanies related to the sea will reveal the conception of a fluid world which the characters have to deal with: an important theme of the novel as a whole.

The analysis which follows in the second part of the essay will focus on what I have chosen to call three different facets of the sea. The characters in *To the Lighthouse* relate to the sea on different levels, experiencing epiphanies with different nuances. While some reveal 'the pattern' in a very personal way, for instance by way of a strong emotion, some reveal 'the pattern' in a more general way, showing the characters the nature of the world and their place in it. However, it is not in order to differentiate between different *kinds* of epiphanies that the facets are introduced. Rather it is to analyze the various *processes* by which epiphanies occur, every process linked to and interacting with the perceptions of different facets of the sea.

The first facet is the physical presence of the sea, how the very presence of the masses of water affects the characters and their moments. The second facet is the spiritual facet of the sea, by which I mean the relationship that the characters themselves create with the sea, bestowing it with near-human traits and looking to it for spiritual guidance. The third, and final, facet is the symbolical presence of the sea, where the sea transcends its capacity as a natural force and becomes a symbol of the chaotic world. All the facets will be analyzed, with some examples from the novel, in terms of how they affect and interact with the epiphanies of the characters, based on the philosophical framework presented above.

Part 2 – Analysis

The physical presence of the sea

The first facet of the sea that I wish to address is its physical presence and how it, in this capacity, interacts with the perceptions of the characters. The physical presence is felt in many ways; the sound of the waves which intrude in the thoughts of the characters, the smell of salty water on towels, sand from the beach which makes Mrs Ramsay feel as though the beach is brought into the house as well as its actual presence, visible from the garden. The overpowering presence of the sea, felt acutely due to the fact that the characters are on a small island, surrounded by it, is manifested in (and implicit to) all aspects of my discussion. On this first level, however, the focal point lies in the interaction between the characters'

perceptions of the sea and the ensuing imagery of their epiphanies. My argument is that the presence of the sea affects the nature of the epiphanies, in terms of *content* as well as *form*.

An epiphany while being by the sea comes to Nancy, one of the Ramsay daughters, during the outing in chapter XIV of 'The Window'. Leaving the others for a while she plays with a little pool of water on the beach, close to the sea. Looking at the tiny creatures in it she feels gigantic, like a God able to bring darkness (putting her hand over the pool) and light (removing it) to millions of beings. While doing this she looks out to the sea and becomes hypnotized by the simultaneous feeling of vastness (in comparison to the tiny creatures in the pool) and tininess (in comparison to the world). The epiphany of perspectives, realizing something about the world and our places in it is so strong that she feels 'bound hand and foot and unable to move by the intensity of feelings which reduced her own body, her own life, and the lives of all the people in the world, for ever, to nothingness' (83). The impression of being reduced to nothingness, or at least of being very small in comparison with the vast world is a recurring theme in *To the Lighthouse*. Being on a small island, surrounded by the sea, triggers similar emotions in other characters.

The word 'hypnotized' returns when Cam sits in the boat on the way to the lighthouse in chapter V of 'The Lighthouse'. Cam is here even closer to the sea than Nancy since she is actually on it.⁴ Sitting in the boat she becomes hypnotized by the power and depths of the sea and feels exaltation, as though she has escaped from her life (180). The island and the houses seem unreal; the moment is so strong that her entire past seems gone, she exists only in the present (181). Past and present merge, in interplay with the sea, and create an epiphany. Cam realizes that she has never seen the island from the sea before, and this shift in perspective makes her see how small it is, like a little leaf in an enormous mass of water. Finally, as the island becomes ever more distant, Cam seems to surrender herself to the element: 'the sea was more important now than the shore' (207). Surrendering essentially means closure as Cam, at the end of the novel, has combined the different perspectives: the adventure of being on the sea is merged with the familiar feeling of being at home in the study. The merging of perspectives and memories initiates a final epiphany that closes a circle in the novel: reconciliation with her father.

⁴ Interestingly there seems to be a slight shift in the perceptions of the sea in 'The Lighthouse'; seen from the island the sea takes on different meanings than seen from the position of a boat *on* the sea. The trip to the lighthouse makes James realize that the lighthouse is two things, the mystical object of his youth and the stark tower on an island that he sees before him; similarly Cam finally seems to realize that 'the depths of the sea ... are only water after all' (193-194). The sea thus takes on different implications depending on the observer's vantage point.

Norman Friedman argues that the merging of perspectives into what he calls a 'double vision' constitutes a dialectical process that forms the essential thematic structure of the novel. It is in this light that he sees the water imagery: as an element of transition to which one surrenders in the process of achieving the 'double vision' (Friedman 151). The concept of surrender is noteworthy here, as is the idea of a changed perspective. As I argued above, the transformability of the mind is of great importance in the novel and the obtaining of new perspectives is indeed a significant theme in the novel. I would, however, add two things to Friedman's argument: the importance of epiphanies to the process of vision and an upgraded role of the sea. While not specifically mentioned in Friedman's article, epiphanies in some form are implicit to his argument as the moments of intuition when characters receive the double vision. The sea, however, is seen merely as part of the general water imagery. My argument is that the sea plays a role in its own right; a presence which not only illustrates the transitions but that actually inspires them. As will be discussed below, Cam's surrendering to the elements is only one of many ways of dealing with the sense of being on a small island, surrounded by fluidity and the sea inspires different thoughts in different characters.

In chapter III of 'The Lighthouse', when Lily finally manages to start painting her picture is also a good example of how the presence of the sea sparks an interrelation between impressions and creates an important moment constructed with water imagery. The presence of the sea is indisputable. While not the subject of Lily's painting, it is present behind her and beside her where she stands in the garden and she is continually looking at it while Mr Ramsay's and James's trip to the lighthouse finally takes place: 'she felt curiously divided, as if one part of her were drawn out there' (171). While distracted by the sea and her friends on it, she starts to focus on her canvas, which seems to have 'floated up' before her. The epiphany that Lily experiences in this chapter is that of putting the first brush stroke on her canvas and then, after a moment of doubt, the feeling that she has found her rhythm and knows what she is doing.

As Lily contemplates where to put the first mark on the canvas, she likens the process, the 'commitment to irrevocable decisions' to the complexity of waves. Waves, she feels, look symmetrically arranged when they shape themselves from a cliff top, seen from a certain distance, but to a swimmer that is among them they are a terrifying combination of 'steep gulfs and foaming crests' (172). Lily is using the metaphor that is closest at hand; while looking for the right place to start the painting, she is also looking out towards the sea, seeing the waves. The presence of the sea not only affects her choice of imagery, however, it induces a feeling in her so strong that she starts to imagine herself as being in the sea. The process of

painting becomes similar to swimming, being pulled in and out by waves, as Lily finally makes the mark: ‘with a curious physical sensation, as if she were urged forward and at the same time must hold herself back, she made her first quick decisive stroke’ (172). While painting, she looks again at the sea, seeing wave following upon wave, just as each stroke she makes creates the need for another one. After a brief moment of doubt something happens, ‘some juice necessary for the lubrication of her faculties’ is squirted (a telling description) and the wave-like rhythm that she has created is ‘strong enough to bear her along with it on its current’ (174). This epiphany, the shedding of doubt and the feeling of purpose as the painting begins to take shape, becomes a moment during which Lily loses consciousness of the things around her and perceives her mind as a fountain which spurts out ideas over the canvas.

The broader sense of interrelation between stability and fluidity is worthy of some attention. Lily feels naked just before starting to paint, like an unborn soul, and the transition is described as a process where she ‘exchanged the fluidity of life for the concentration of painting’ (173). The significance of fluidity in life will be dealt with below; remarkable is the concept ‘concentration of painting’ here. Since the act of painting has resembled fluidity more than anything else, ‘concentration’ ultimately means controlling that fluidity. If painting is, as Lily describes it, being among the gulfs, crests and currents, then mastering it means learning to swim. The rhythm that Lily feels (quoted above) is the rhythm of arms and legs swimming in control of themselves and in harmony with the element that surrounds them. For Lily, painting is the only activity she can master in this way; with regards to other aspects of life, other elements, she has not learnt to swim. As Lily later takes a break, steps out of the process and looks at the picture this is described as ‘coming to the surface’ (193), a completion of the metaphor that painting is like being in water.

The spiritual presence of the sea

While the physical facet of the sea dealt with the sea as a presence that had an impressionistic effect on the characters, the spiritual facet will focus on the character’s relationship with the sea in its own right. As I suggested above, the sea not only illustrates epiphanies but actually inspires them. Under the heading of ‘spiritual presence’ I will trace the process of characters actively looking for answers, epiphanies, by the sea. The beauty and sheer magnitude of the sea lends it an aura of mystery and almost transforms it into an animate being, which in this capacity is sought for spiritual guidance. However, any guidance obtained from the sea will

invariably come from within the self as the sea cannot offer any: the sea becomes a mirror, in which people can see the aspects of themselves that they want to see. Focusing on this facet of the presence of the sea, and the epiphanies that follow in its wake, it is possible to trace a development within the novel, a shift in attitude between its parts. This development mainly takes place in 'Time Passes', but is begun and completed in the first and last sections.

In 'The Window' Lily and William Bankes habitually take walks to the beach. Escaping Mr Ramsay's shouting recitation of Tennyson, they find there a moment of detached closeness, a sense of togetherness in their solitary musings:

They came there regularly every evening drawn by some need. It was as if the water floated off and set sailing thoughts which had grown stagnant on dry land, and gave to their bodies even some sort of physical relief. [...] They both felt a common hilarity, excited by the moving waves; and then...felt come over them some sadness...because distant views seem to outlast by a million years the gazer (24-25).

The reason for going to the beach and the ensuing guidance/epiphanies are subtle here, but significant nonetheless. While Lily ponders her own mortality as well as that of humankind at large and William Bankes has an epiphany about his feelings for his old friend, Mr Ramsay, the significance of the passage seems to lie in the iterative frequency of epiphanies. Every evening Lily and William Bankes go to the beach, because they experience something similar every time. The water 'sets sailing thoughts which have grown stagnant'; meaning that being in the presence of the sea will bring out thoughts, giving them freedom – sails –to roam the world and thus providing the experiencing subject with an epiphany. While these epiphanies take place wholly inside the characters, the sea is the necessary catalyst.

In 'Time Passes', this relationship between people and the sea becomes more explicit as well as more general, since we do not follow the Ramsay's and their friends other than in short comments. Instead we witness the gradual destruction of the Ramsay's house, as it stands abandoned for years, left open to the forces of nature.⁵ This narrative is interwoven with the shift in attitude of the people who seek the guidance of the sea, a shift that, just as the guidance, is created by humankind itself: the war. While Mrs McNab, the housekeeper, is tending less and less to the needs of the house, 'the mystic, the visionary, walked the beach, stirred a puddle, looked at a stone, and asked themselves "What am I?" "What is this?" and suddenly an answer was vouchsafed them (what it was they could not say): so that they were warm in the frost and had comfort in the desert' (143). Somewhat ironic in tone, describing

⁵ Sharon Kaehele and Howard German point out that the force of time and the chaos of life assaults the house and the lives of the Ramsays *in various forms of flux*: 'floods of darkness, curious winds, drenching rain' (Kaehele/German 197). The importance of flux as symbol of chaotic life will be discussed below.

people who feel as though they have received an answer from the sea even if they do not know what it is, the narrative still informs us that the relationship between the people and the sea is stable. Unclear as it may be, the sea has delivered an answer to those who were looking for it and they do not realize that it comes from inside themselves.

Soon, the narrative hints that something is happening. The people are running around, looking for some absolute good, believing that nature itself declares that 'good triumphs, happiness prevails, order rules' (144). Nature is still seen as a source for information, one that cares about the people living in it. But there is a change in the description of the seekers, they are more troubled and their seeking has a new sense of foreboding: 'In those *mirrors*, the minds of men, in those pools of uneasy water, in which clouds for ever turn and shadows form, dreams persisted' (144, my italics). In this passage the concept of the mirror is introduced, emphasizing the fact that the dreams are just that, self-reflecting dreams. Just as the sea is a mirror in which people see themselves and think that the sea is telling them something, their own minds are also mirrors, pools of water, in which things are reflected endlessly. The use of the sea and water to construct a mirror image is very telling here, because unlike a mirror made of glass, a mirror made of water has depths and is very unstable.

Finally, the disturbing presence is concretized and the war is a fact:

At that season those who had gone down to pace the beach and ask of the sea and sky what message they reported or what vision they affirmed had to consider among the usual tokens of divine beauty ... something out of harmony with this jocundity, this serenity. There was the silent apparition of an ashen-coloured ship for instance, come, gone; there was a purplish stain upon the bland surface of the sea as if something had boiled and bled, invisibly, beneath (145-146).

The war is introduced here as an intrusion in nature, and thus, by extension, into the minds of men which ultimately leads to a loss of illusions. The mirroring effect has up to this moment been one of satisfactory confirmation, that the beauty of the world mirrored the beauty of the mind perceiving it because it was a part of it. But now something has intruded and destroyed the complacent mirroring; the intrusion is man-made and the fundamental difference between humankind and nature becomes evident. Humans are not as good and beautiful as the mirror suggested and nature, the sea, cannot help in times of need: nature is not, after all, a thinking force. 'With equal complacence she saw his misery, condoned his meanness, and acquiesced in his torture' (146). The shock to find that the very force relied upon to supply answers, to care for people, is oblivious and nothing more than beautiful landscape sparks a new and terrible epiphany:

That dream, then, of sharing, completing, finding in solitude on the beach an answer, was but a reflection in a mirror, and the mirror itself was but the surface glassiness which forms in quiescence when the nobler powers sleep beneath? Impatient, despairing yet loth to go (for beauty offers her lures, has her consolations) to pace the beach was impossible; contemplation was unendurable; the mirror was broken. (146)

It is interesting, and very typical of the novel, that the loss of illusions, grief and pain that war causes is portrayed in this way, as an epiphany in relation to the sea. The mirror is broken, in different senses of the word: not only is the mirroring movement impossible, but something has broken inside the very 'mirror', the minds, in terms of ideals and faith.

The novel, as well as life, does, however, offer a mild reconciliation. While 'pacing the beach' may be impossible for some time in the aftermath of the complete loss of illusions, time heals wounds and when peace finally comes the relationship with the sea can be renewed. In the short chapter leading up to 'The Lighthouse' peace has come and Lily returns to the house. The voice of the sea is there, and its attraction has not diminished in power as Lily and other sleepers hear the waves in their sleep. However, the change in the relationship is still visible: the sea is still conceived as beautiful and even as a speaking voice, but now there is a realization that the meaning of the words of the sea may be plain (154).

The symbolical presence of the sea

As hinted above, the sea seems to interact not only with the characters' perceptions on a physical and spiritual level, but also with their worldview. Returning to the passage presented in the introduction, it is time to focus on the 'eternal passing and flowing' (176) which life is perceived to be. In that passage Lily contemplates the moment as a sudden stable point in the chaos and the passage is telling not only because it describes the function of epiphanies, but also because it illustrates a central theme in the novel: finding stability in a chaotic world. The chaotic world, just as the 'chaos' of thoughts and inner time, is invariably constructed as fluid; sometimes purely threatening but other times as an element to which one can surrender oneself by merging with it. As I mentioned above, traditional symbolical connotations of the sea include, according to de Vries: chaos; 'primordial creation, the immensity from which everything proceeds and to which everything returns'; 'time, flux ... something our fish-souls swim to'; and eternity (de Vries 406). These symbolical functions of the sea all seem to be at work in *To the Lighthouse*; however, not only as generally accepted symbols but constructed anew in the interplay between the actual presence of the sea and the characters' feelings about

the world and their place in it.⁶ Epiphanies become moments of revelation, revealing to the characters something about their places in the world and ‘the pattern’.

The most important visualization of the fluid chaos, as well as an important thematic centre of the novel as a whole takes place at the dinner party scene towards the end of ‘The Window’. In it, all the characters are brought together, and all relationships and conflicts surface. But perhaps the most important function of the scene is the ‘bringing together’ of a group of people around a centre: a table, a meal, a common enterprise (if, indeed, eating can be called an enterprise). The centre is not just the table, however, it is the person behind the party: Mrs Ramsay. Throughout the novel she is perceived as a person who brings order and purpose to the social sphere of the characters. When she leaves a room, ‘a sort of disintegration set in; they wavered about, went different ways’ (122). This role is one she realizes and accepts, sometimes joyfully, sometimes exasperatedly, and at the beginning of the party, when there is still a lacking in unity between her guests she feels that ‘nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her’ (91). The significance of the imagery will be elaborated on below, for the moment it will suffice to observe that Mrs Ramsay has, if not a full-scale epiphany then at least a moment of realizing her role. She accepts the challenge and does create a sense of unity as the party, almost in spite of itself, becomes successful. At first it appears that nothing can unite a group of people as radically different from each other as those assembled at the Ramsay house, and a lasting unity is certainly not achieved. However, as the characters start enjoying themselves (due to Mrs Ramsay’s skilful promptings) and as the light changes, something happens:

Now all the candles were lit, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candle-light, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table, for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterily. Some change at once went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there. (106)

Not only the sense of unity is significant here, but the fact that the situation creates a ‘common cause’, a threat that they all recognize and immediately relate to: the ‘fluidity out

⁶ Gillian Beer calls *To the Lighthouse* a ‘post-symbolist novel’, arguing that symbolism is used as well as questioned and that the act of symbolizing puts the human at the centre, by way of being the acting subject (Beer 41). This is an interesting observation, and it supports the idea that the symbolical qualities bestowed upon the sea come from the characters themselves, being the acting subjects that are trying to make sense of that which surrounds them.

there'.⁷ It is an epiphany, important because it is a collective one: as the light changes the vision of the characters they all realize something. The chaotic world, in which we have to find our place, learn to cope and create a sense of stability, is constructed as a fluid 'other', an element which has to be mastered. Neither the image nor the passage are, however, quite as simple as that. The sense of being on an island, surrounded by fluidity, in a metaphorical sense is of course echoed by and even affected by the fact that the characters *are* on an island, surrounded by the sea. The mirroring concept introduced earlier is also of some importance here, as the glass windows create an 'outside' in which the inside is reflected *in a distorted way*. Neither the world outside (the sea) nor the scene inside is seen accurately, but warped by reflections back and forth, rendering the truth ungraspable. The formulation that inside the house '*seemed to be order and dry land*' contains further intricacy with regards to the truth. It should be fairly obvious that there is dry order inside a house, but in the metaphorical sense it is not and this is due to the complexity with which the concepts of fluidity and order are used.

While often constructed as a symbol for the threatening, chaotic world, fluidity is also a symbol for the merging of fragments. As seen above, the creation of unity that Mrs Ramsay strives for is described as a merging and flowing, rendering the image of little streams that merge and become a flowing river. Once this has happened, the focal point is moved (by an epiphany of realization) to the outside world, the threatening fluidity *compared to which* the united stream inside *seems to be order and dry land*. Important to both images is the need to master the element. As seen in the example of Lily's painting process above, finding stability in the world (when seen as a fluid element) means learning to swim in it. It is in this sense we can understand the phrase about exchanging the 'fluidity of life for the concentration of painting' (173) and further understand the passage from the party quoted above. Because even if the merging of the human 'fragments' into a united party seems to be a good thing, it means, seen in the image of streams merging into a river, creating a new element in which it again is possible to loose oneself. Water is not an element that can have separate parts, it is mass that encapsulates that which is poured into it: when streams have merged into a river, one cannot tell which 'water' is the one or the other. Therefore, learning to swim, to maintain

⁷ It has been pointed out by Josephine Schaefer (Schaefer 124) that the image created here is that of a lighthouse, a house lit with candles in the surrounding darkness. An elegant observation, and in line with my argument as the house is perceived as being surrounded by fluidity, just as a lighthouse necessarily is surrounded by water, the sea. Schaefer also remarks on the fact that parties in Woolf's novels generally serve as 'moments of being' when life stands still and reveals something (Schaefer 28). Michael Whitworth points to the significance of the word 'composed', suggesting that the party at the table form an artistic composition (Whitworth 114). A discussion on the relation between art and life in the novel is not within the scope of the essay, but it may be interesting to observe how art relates to epiphanies in the sense that a painting (or, indeed, a novel) may capture and perpetuate a special 'moment'; Lily's own painting being the most noteworthy example of this idea.

one's identity while being merged into a social unity, is of great importance. Ultimately, in a group as diverse as the party, no permanent merging into a new element is possible, only a temporary sense of unity, prompted by Mrs Ramsay and the feeling of threat. As soon as the party is over, the table is broken and Mrs Ramsay is out of the room, disintegration sets in again (see passage quoted above). Mrs Ramsay's ability to create unity is also an important aspect of the passage which opened this section: after all, Lily's revelation comes when she realizes that Mrs Ramsay had made the moment permanent, forced life to 'stand still' (176).

To Mrs Ramsay herself moments of stability are also important and she perceives one during the party, an epiphany about unity: 'It partook, she felt... of eternity; ...there is a coherence in things, a stability ...in the face of the flowing, the fleeting [...] Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that remains for ever after. This would remain' (114). The flowing world and the significance of finding stability are joined here with the word 'eternity'. Rather than just focusing on the moment as a stable point, an epiphany revealing coherence, Mrs Ramsay believes that it will remain. The idea that a moment will remain is linked to the importance of memory: as long as something is remembered it will, indeed, remain. Rather than being lost in the fluid element one becomes a part of a greater whole in which one can be contained: humanity. Ironically, in this sense the merging may bring a feeling of stability since one is neither alone nor forgotten. After the party Mrs Ramsay realizes this in a new epiphany; while pondering the events and her need to 'stabilize her position' she thinks that the events of the evening will be remembered by those who were there and that she will be present, forever, in their memory. There is a merging of people's lives and Mrs Ramsay feels 'that community of feeling with other people which emotion gives as if the walls of partition had become so thin that practically (the feeling was one of relief and happiness) it was all one stream' (123). In the general feeling of interconnectedness learning to swim is not important, as the level of abstraction has been raised. Even Lily, otherwise reluctant to merge with anyone⁸, has an epiphany to this effect. While painting and looking at the sea in 'The Lighthouse' she realizes that there is a common, human feeling holding it all together: 'she seemed to be standing up to the lips in some substance, to move and float and sink in it, yes, for these waters were unfathomably deep. Into them had spilled so many lives' (208). The epiphany that to Lily yields the feeling of unity with other people is, just as Mrs Ramsay's, not one that contains a threat of losing oneself: it is simply a

⁸ In 'The Window' Lily, the spinster, contemplates love and its mystery, wondering if there is a secret she is not privy to, a 'device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored' (57). While 'learning to swim' when it comes to her profession, love and marriage remain mysteries to her as she stays single and continues to paint during the ten year span of the novel.

feeling that something unites humankind. The sea is present in the entire passage leading up to Lily's epiphany, and is certainly instrumental in constructing the imagery as deep waters.

This awareness does not come to everyone with the same ease, however. Mrs Ramsay may have realized that her life is connected to the lives of the people that she has known and that she for this reason will be, if not immortal, at least remembered, but Mr Ramsay finds it harder to come to terms with his mortality. Sharing a 'stream' or 'waters' with other people does not satisfy his need to be important, remembered. Time becomes the deciding factor for Mr Ramsay, his need to be remembered is not satisfied by being remembered by his contemporaries and a few generations more – or even two thousand years. He cannot come to terms with the fact that 'the very stone one kicks with one's boot will outlast Shakespeare' (41). Eternity alone seems to satisfy him. While contemplating his lot in life he often returns to the sea, and it generally seems to appear unfriendly to him. To Mr Ramsay the threatening chaos of the world is the feeling of being forgotten regardless of how much he may achieve and it is in this sense he sees the sea. Here the image of the sea as a threatening, fluid 'other', about to swallow that which it surrounds, returns. Just as the sea could swallow up the entire island that he stands on, Mr Ramsay feels he could become engulfed in the flood of human ignorance and disappear, forgotten.

Looking at the bay he sees himself physically and symbolically as standing on a 'spit of land which the sea is slowly eating away' (50). This is of course prompted by his impressions; he is standing on a small piece of land, looking at the vast and powerful sea. In the symbolical sense he, his mind, *is* the small piece of land and the vast sea is 'the dark of human ignorance'. He perceives it as his 'job' (as well as his way of coping with the world) to be a stake, something 'marking the channel out there in the floods alone' (50) and for this he will receive reverence and gratitude. But just as the small island seems hopelessly lost in the floods, it seems hopeless to Mr Ramsay that he will ever achieve the greatness he wants. The sea (and, in its symbolical sense, the flood of ignorance) is too powerful and Mr Ramsay does not see the world or humankind as something with which to merge. In his perception the threat is something that has to be fought and beaten, rather than an element one might be able to learn to swim in. Ultimately, however, he seems to find comfort in the same things as Mrs Ramsay and Lily: the healing presence of other people, especially his family. But unlike the women he does not feel a sense of unity, instead he sees his children as a sort of weapon: 'they would stem the flood a bit. That was a good bit of work on the whole – his eight children. They showed he did not damn the poor little universe entirely, for on an evening like

this, he thought, looking at the land dwindling away, the little island seemed pathetically small, half swallowed up in the sea' (76).

This epiphany comes after a passage where Mr Ramsay remembers how much more he used to be able to work before he had a family, able, as he was then, to wander off and think for whole days. But he reminds himself that he has no right to think such things and that his children are great. Being a father of eight children counts for something, perhaps for even more than reaching the philosophical goal of 'X', because he contributes to the universe instead of 'damning' it. The image of the sea swallowing up the island is back, but this time it is joined with the image of something 'stemming the flood', his offspring. In this sense, Mr Ramsay has really come to the same conclusion as his wife and Lily⁹, although formulated in a different way: that there is comfort in the idea of a shared human experience and that other people, in this case the children, will carry on one's work and remember.

As the examples above have shown, epiphanies that reveal the 'pattern' interact with the sea and construct a pattern of fluidity, a fluid worldview. While similar in nature to all characters, the conception of the world as fluid inspires many different ways of dealing with it, making sense of the world and finding a stable place.

Conclusion

A brief return to Ralph Freedman's claim, quoted in the introduction, that *To the Lighthouse* 'translates the ordinary methods of fiction ... into imagery which derives from the perceptions and memories of the protagonists', will conclude the essay. It was my intention to analyze the process outlined by Freedman, how the perceptions of a character become imagery. My assumption was that the structure of the novel rests heavily on a stream of consciousness which interacts with the outer world and perceptions of it and that epiphanies are a significant part of this structure. Studying the moments when epiphanies occur yields an understanding of the process and limiting the study to epiphanies related to the most frequent image clarifies the method.

The sea should neither be seen simply as a presence in the novel nor simply as a part of the imagery. Rather it is the interplay between the sea as a presence and the imagery used that

⁹ There is, of course, a significant parallel between Lily and Mr Ramsay here; he wants to be immortal with his philosophy, she with her art. A discussion on the differences and similarities between their ways of perceiving the world (philosophy/art, male/female) is not within the scope of the essay. I differentiate between them (even if they both grapple with issues of 'immortality'), however, because Lily has a direct epiphany about a shared human experience and Mr Ramsay does not.

will yield an understanding of the underlying philosophical conceptions. Dividing the presence of the sea into three different facets is a way to illuminate the different processes by which epiphanies occur. The facets are interdependent and should therefore not be seen as separate entities; the most important being the physical presence which of course is always implicit. What they illustrate is rather different aspects of the same thing: how the characters come to experience epiphanies by somehow relating to the sea. Under the heading of physical presence was introduced the idea that the sea inspires epiphanies both in terms of content and form simply by being there. Discussing a spiritual presence we saw that the achievement of epiphanies may be an active process of the experiencing subject, an attempt to find answers by relating to the sea. Finally, the symbolical facet showed how the sea is instrumental in the process of constructing worldviews and seen with different symbolical connotations.

The division into facets allows us to discern patterns of processes, but equally important is the fact that the general processes involve individual interpretations. Similar situations (standing by the sea, for instance) may inspire very different interpretations in different characters, as we have seen above in the examples with Mr and Mrs Ramsay, but even the same character can interpret similar situations in various ways. In this sense the concept of the transformable mind becomes significant, the same person can respond differently to similar circumstances because something in the mind, the reshaping river, has changed.

To the Lighthouse is in many ways a formal experiment in how to fashion inner experience, and focusing on certain structural aspects has been a tool for interpretation. Analyzing imagery can generate an understanding of thematic content, such as finding stability (and learning to swim) in a chaotic, fluid world. Just as the sea is the uniting factor of this essay, it functions in the novel as the element that holds it all together. Fluidity is the best metaphor for the underlying 'patterns' in the novel; for time, thought and memory the sea provides a potent image. Whether as a symbol of the chaos that surrounds us or as a symbol of that which unites us, the presence of the sea in *To the Lighthouse* is felt and remembered by any reader.

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