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## “TO THE LIGHTHOUSE”, MUSIC AND SYMPATHY

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

In addition to the recurrent motifs, Virginia Woolf used

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

James, standing between Mrs. Ramsay's knees,

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

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

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

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