THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE

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for uncannily capturing the mood of the war in spite of its having been composed largely before the war began.

See “Reminiscences”: “She might go hand in hand with him through the shadows of the Valley” (MB 31), which combines Milton with the 23rd Psalm; see also the conclusion of A Room of One’s Own: “if we look past Milton’s bogey ... if we face the fact, for it is a fact, that there is no arm to cling to” (174).

Abel, Fictions, p. 47.


For a discussion of the emblematic nature of this diary entry, see Lee, Virginia Woolf, p. 486. Lee notes the “gap between the tone of their letters, and the drier, more reserved accounts of the relationship in Virginia’s diary” (486). For all the diary illuminates about Vita’s effect on To the Lighthouse, it remains but a partial chronicle of the affair and friendship.

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MICHAEL LEVENSON

Narrative Perspective in To the Lighthouse

Any new reflection on the narrative techniques of To the Lighthouse must start with acknowledgment of Erich Auerbach’s discussion of the novel in the last chapter of Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature (1946). In a few short pages, Auerbach laid out synthetic judgments on the fate of realism as he found it enacted within Woolf’s novel. He saw the work as a compendium of changing forms of narration, marking the threshold into a demanding cultural modernity. The authority of the writer and conventions of representation had decisively changed: “The writer as narrator of objective facts has almost completely vanished,” with the result that the author regards her characters “not with knowing but with doubting and questioning.” The leading novelists of the previous century had no such doubts.

That more remains to be said is due in part to the complexity of To the Lighthouse, which exceeds even the magisterial judgments of Auerbach, but also due to contrasting terms of approach that Mimesis generates in spite of itself. The questions of “objectivity” and “external reality” are indeed important; they will play a role in what follows. But the emphasis here will not follow the vectors of disappearance and loss. For all its detachment from the univocal stability of representation, the novel is abundant in representational resources. It generates stories at a prodigious rate; it multiplies incidents; and it demands refinement of our concepts. One way to formulate the question is to see that two problems are condensed in our subject of narrative perspective. On the one side, it raises the Auerbachian question of the narrator, its personhood, its capacities and certainties. But on the other side, perspective invites attention to acts of seeing and telling, interpreting and representing, that create a texture of plenitude, not diminishment.

The term “perspective” has a productive range of connotations of its own. Most immediately, it evokes visual process and visual representation, activities pervasive in To the Lighthouse. Seeing from an angle and at a distance and then representing what one has seen – these are prominent on both
literate and figural planes. By taking a painter as a central character, Woolf casts the question in physical and technical terms: "Lily stepped back to get her canvas – so into perspective" (265). Within the act of painting, Lily Briscoe frets about depth, surface, and frame: "It was a question, she remembered, how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left. She might do it by bringing the line of the branch across so; or break the vacancy in the foreground by an object" (86); at moments of difficulty, she is moved "by some instinctive need of distance and blue" (279).

The tasks of seeing, moreover, fall not only within the province of the painter. Whether on a tennis lawn, around a dinner table, or upon a boat making for the lighthouse, characters perpetually look and also think about looking. Cam gazes back at the island, finding it "more distant and more peaceful." But then the boat slows on calm water and "Everything became very close to one" (281). As they sail closer to the lighthouse, James summons his image of a "silvery misty-looking tower" but then looks up and sees it "stark and straight," "barred with black and white; he could see windows in it; he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry. So that was the Lighthouse, was it?" But the question brings him to the telling realization: "the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other was the Lighthouse too" (286). Once freed from a norm of objective reality drawn from the conventions of Balzac or Zola, the work of perspectival vision does not deplete but multiplies the "true."

In this respect, vision and narrative intersect throughout the novel, each offering perspectives on the perspective of the other. Just as characters must continually adjust to the changing look of objects, distant or near, connected or severed, in sun or under cloud, so the narrative asserts the multiple dimensions of life in time. Here we come to a second connotation in perspective, as in the account of what the Ramsay children dislike in Charles Tansley: "It was not his face; it was not his manners. It was him – his point of view" (18). Tansley cannot be content, "until he had turned the whole thing round and made it somehow reflect himself and dispare them ..." (18). Perspective in this sense – his "point of view" – moves from the visual to the ethical. The trouble with Tansley is that he reduces perspective to the circle of his egoism. He sees only one lighthouse, and his reduction constitutes ethical failure because it can only lead to the brutality of self-assertion. Mr. Ramsay risks this same confinement, and Mrs. Ramsay also worries that she gives way to a domineering will. Indeed, rather than the problem that Auerbach identifies – the loss of the external world, the retreat of the confiding narrator – the more abiding difficulty is the lapse into the single perspective of egoism.

Then, too, Auerbach's assertion of narrative withdrawal is greatly overstated. To speak of the "narrator" of To the Lighthouse – in the sense of a coherent person behind the words or even a continuous voice – is unpersuasive. Unlike many of her nineteenth-century predecessors, indeed unlike her first two novels, Woolf offers no signature or sign of a narrating presence, no consistent tone or angle from which characters and their plots are seen and heard. But the assertion of the privileges of omniscience is everywhere. Words penetrate bodies and retrieve the inmost thoughts of one character after another; the eyes and ears can perceive through time and across space. In striking ways, these powers are greater than Woolf's nineteenth-century precursors, just to the extent that the narrative authority here is unconstrained by resemblance to a finite human voice. Rather, it leaps across time and space, between the inside and outside of characters, and casually avails itself of changing tones and physical domains. The aspect that Auerbach stresses, the "abdicatition" of privileged insight, is only one of the many modes that can be assumed from the position of this penetrating, identity-traversing, doubting then asserting, power. For every passage such as the one that Mmesia enshrines ("Never did anybody look so sad.") with its "doubtful, obscure suppositions," there is another that describes the world without a hint of doubt: "his son [James] hated him" (61).

The novel is of course celebrated for adopting the inner perspective of emotions (love, anxiety, hope, bewilderment) and cognitions (assuming, suspecting, predicting). But inner life in To the Lighthouse is not simply a vessel of mental states. Importantly, it has an extensive temporal dimension. Unlike Joyce's contemporaneous experiments, consciousness is not above all consciousness of its present situation; rather, in Woolf, the narrative of mental life moves quickly, and almost inevitably, away from present stimulus into memory and anticipation. So William Bankes looks at Mr. Ramsay and recollects the long, faltering history of their friendship; and Lily mourns the dead Mrs. Ramsay as she paints in Part Three, painting to remember, and remembering to paint. The novel's first paragraph tells us that young James belongs "to that great clan which cannot keep this feeling separate from that, but must let future prospects, with their joys and sorrows, cloud what is actually at hand" (71). Then beyond the intersections of three tenses, there remain all the recurrent dispositions: what happens repeatedly, regularly. Having been told of Mr. Ramsay's philosophic inquiry into subject, object, and reality, Lily now "always saw, when she thought of Mr. Ramsay's work, a scrubbed kitchen table" (40). And of Mr. Bankes's devotion to Mrs. Ramsay and her beauty, we learn that "always, he thought, there was something incongruous to be worked into the harmony of her face" (50). "Always" is a sign of the abiding mental modes that belong to the matrix
of perspectives. Genette calls such modes the "iterative": they narrate once what has happened many times. Part of the inner drama staged in the novel depends on the stress between such repetitive or chronic states – including all the brooding attention circling around the same objects: the greenhouse in need of repair, the painting that isn’t yet right, the father who oppress – and the movement toward resolution: as in Lily’s final acceptance of her painting’s impermanence.

Accustomed as we are to thinking of narrative as the unfolding of events, we can be surprised by such events of thought in Woolf’s fiction. It is common to say that incidents are few and everyday in To the Lighthouse, but the acts of reflecting, reconsidering, ruminating, feeling stuck, feeling sure – these constitute some of the most audacious acts of narrative perspectivalism. In the celebrated eleventh section of Part One, Mrs. Ramsay withdraws from the others to “be herself, by herself,” “to think; well, not even to think” (99). But the mind will not rest; she looks to the lighthouse; she thinks how the end will come and then adds, “We are in the hands of the Lord.” The next paragraph begins with her annoyance at herself “for saying that” (101). As her reverie continues, she muses over her “insincerity” and then helps herself back to the world by looking at the steady beam of the lighthouse, “as if it were with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight, she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness” (103). The sequence is narrative-in-miniature, the staging of a thought/emotion complex that quickly moves through phases analogous to chapters in a plot based on exterior life.

That Mrs. Ramsay turns to the lighthouse to summon her back to the company of others reminds us that even such celebrated inwardness lives within the midst of the social and natural world. The most complex cases are perhaps those moments at the intersection of mind and world, as for instance in the remarkable sequence in which Lily weeps up her reactions to Mr. Ramsay. She knows him as “petty, selfish, vain, egotistical,” “spoilt” and a “tyrant,” but also as possessing “fiery unworldliness” and a love of dogs and children. We read that all of this danced up and down, like a company of gnats, each separate but all marvellously controlled in an invisible elastic net – danced up and down in Lily’s mind, in and about the branches of the pear tree, where still hung in effigy the scrubbed kitchen table, symbol of her profound respect for Mr. Ramsay’s mind, until her thought which had spun quicker and quicker exploded of its own intensity; she felt released; a shot went off at hand, and there came, flying from its fragments, frightened, effusive, tumultuous, a flock of starlings.

Thoughts dance quickly, until her mental release is matched by a physical gunshot (Jasper’s) that scatters starlings, with the continuity of images (the gnats and the flock of birds, the explosion of thought and the gun) eroding boundaries between inward and outward. As so often, the sentence establishes a long-running rhythm that carries the narrating eye across the wavering line between mental and physical spaces. This oscillation can obliterate the distance between the “elastic net” of the mind and the tennis net on the lawn.

One other feature of the passage is salient, namely, the language in which the mental universe is rendered. Although Woolf often works within the mature tradition of free indirect discourse, letting the narrative tones merge with the signature voice and viewpoint of the character, here they come apart. We have no reason to think that Lily herself has devised the simile of dancing gnats in an invisible net. And even as the sentence draws on her bank of images (the table in a pear tree), its perspective and tone remain outside her own. One of the provocations of To the Lighthouse is to excite inner life intimately and yet to move quickly from terms by which the character understands herself to terms that come from who knows where.

The speed of shifting focalization is conspicuous. It’s not simply that perspective keeps changing in the novel but that it changes abruptly and frequently. Here we live within Lily’s net only until the sentence concludes. Again and again, the ends of paragraphs invite the shift to another focal consciousness. When the dinner party is over, Lily watches Mrs. Ramsay rise to leave the room and thinks about the change in mood (“from poetry to politics” 174) that follows her departure: “Where, Lily wondered, was she going so quickly?” The next paragraph begins, “Not that she did in fact run or hurry; she went indeed rather slowly. She felt rather inclined just for a moment to stand still after all that chattering, and pick out one particular thing; the thing that mattered; to detach it; separate it off” (174). It’s a characteristic moment of perspectival virtuosity. We wonder with Lily; we pass to neutral description; then the description merges into Mrs. Ramsay’s point of view (“She felt rather inclined”). Much of the difficulty for first readers lies in transitions such as these, especially in the elusive ambiguity of a phrase like “went indeed rather slowly,” carefully balanced between a purposive agency and the judgment of an observer.

Relying on a concept such as “interior monologue” obscures the varied dimensions of such narration. It’s not only that interiority can lose its voice in favor of other and outer terms (above all, metaphor and simile); it’s also that the inner world is so often concerned with other inner worlds. Much, if not most, of our information about any character comes from the reflected points of view of other characters. Mrs. Ramsay thinks of Tansley as “that
young man they laughed at" (20); as they walk together, she indicates the view "that her husband loved" (25). Characters sympathize and speculate about one another; they fill in details of another's past (as Mrs. Ramsay tells Tansley of Carmichael); they take on another's modes of seeing and remembering. In its parallels between visual and narrative perspective, the novel dramatizes this mirroring of attitudes. So when Lily is about to comment upon Mrs. Ramsay critically, she notices the direction of Bankes's glance: "For him to gaze as Lily saw him gazing at Mrs. Ramsay was a rapture, equivalent, Lily felt, to the loves of dozens of young men ... Looking along his beam she added to it her different ray, thinking that she was unquestionably the loveliest of people (bowed over her book); the best perhaps; but also, different too from the perfect shape which one saw there" (77–79).

The game of glances – Lily sees what Bankes sees and adds her different ray – captures the reverberating, oscillating narrative gaze. It offers nothing so straightforward as the monologue of a self but locates individuals within a network of glancing reactions, suggesting that identity is a perpetual negotiation.

These powers of the roving narrative eye and all-listening voice – to plumb interior intimacies and also to follow the rays of social relation, to employ indirect discourse conforming to the language and self-understanding of the characters, but then to use another language, often figural, that understands character from somewhere outside – can go still further. They can see past the distinction between individuals and bring separate minds into synthetic consciousness. In the finale to Part One, when Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay join the end of the day, reading separately and then growing close again, the narrative confronts the puzzle of human separateness that Lily Briscoe had formulated: How "did one know one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were?" (84). The climax of the late scene occurs when Mrs. Ramsay is able to show her love for her husband without having to express it in words ("He could say things – she never could" 190). She turns, looks at him, smiles, and tells him he was right about the next day's bad weather. By so doing, "She had not said it, but he knew it. And she looked him smiling. For she had triumphed again" (191). The "triumph" turns on mutual recognition, on knowing without saying. But part of what makes the moment extraordinary is that we don't know whether the last words are from a point of view, namely Mrs. Ramsay's. If they are, then it's not precisely knowledge but the assertion of knowledge. What saves the scene is the other possibility: that knowledge is sealed by the force of omniscience.

Just a few pages earlier, we had read how "Their eyes met for a second; but they did not want to speak to each other. They had nothing to say, but something seemed, nevertheless, to go from him to her" (184). Here, omniscience ensures what finite points of view can never guarantee: the existence of something held in common, the passage of something between them. It's this power to establish a shared truth, a power only available to a larger-than-individual perspective, that ensures the glory at the end of Part One.

Perhaps the most striking case occurs in a slightly early sequence, the stumbling beginning to the dinner party. The narrative has moved with its usual speed across the viewpoints of the assembled guests, each of whom feels socially disengaged and personally uninspired. Then the angle of vision elevates.

All of them bending themselves to listen thought, "Pray heaven that the inside of my mind may not be exposed"; for each thought, "The others are feeling this. They are outraged and indignant with the government about the fishermen. Whereas, I feel nothing at all." (146)

Each feels alone in dissatisfaction, but this is what they have in common. The pan-audial ear can listen through difference; it can convert difference into identity. Here the basis for community is negative, but as the mood thaws and the party gains animated spirits, the tone reverses. The guests now sense themselves as a hand-bound, resisting the encroachments of the night, while preserving "order and dry land": 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? (151–152). This power to disclose not only deep inward consciousness but also simultaneous transpersonal states ("each other" with the Ramsays and this "all" among the dinner guests) is a distinguishing mark of the narrative ambitions of To the Lighthouse. Against the explicit threats of solipsism, an all-listening voice emerges to secure a bond, even if it remains unconscious for the individuals who compose it.

This act of perspectival will prepares for the audacities of Part Two. Woolf famously spoke of the "Time Passes" section as "this impersonal thing, which I'm dared to do by my friends, the flight of time, & the consequent break of unity in my design" (D3 36). Genette again suggests useful terms and distinctions. He refers to the varying speeds of prose fiction – that is, the "relationship between a temporal dimension and a spatial dimension."

"The speed of a narrative will be defined by the relationship between a duration (that of the story, measured in seconds, hours, days, months, and years) and a length (that of the text) measured in lines and pages." In Part One, the pace had slowed with an almost infinite patience: long reveries unfolded during brief physical acts (strolling across a lawn, eating soup). But when To the Lighthouse shifts from its patient record of a few hours
on a summer's day to the passage of ten years, it accelerates in a way that disrupts convention and startles readers.

"But what after all is one night?" asks the text, and answers, "A short space" (198). As Genette has taught us to notice, it will also require only a short space to traverse many years. For Woolf, though, more is at stake than acceleration. She refers to the "impersonal thing," and certainly the shudder created by "Time Passes" is its elevation beyond personhood. In Part One, Mr. Ramsay had bitterly reflected, "the very stone one kicks with one's boot will outlast Shakespeare" (59). This standpoint is massively enlarged in "Time Passes" in an attempt to see from the perspective of the inorganic world: wind and water, the light and "stray airs" (250). They enact the process of time as remorseless, indifferent to the meager span of human life.

The deaths of characters, whom we once knew through the inner rhythm of long sentences, now expire within parentheses, hardly interrupting the passing of time.

Night after night, summer and winter, the torrent of storms, the arrow-like stillness of fine weather, held their court without interference. Listening (had there been any one to listen) from the upper rooms of the empty house only gigantic chaos streaked with lightning could have been heard tumbling and tossing, as the winds and waves disported themselves like the amorphous bulks of leviathans whose brows are pierced by no light of reason, and mounted one on top of another, and hunged and plunged in the darkness or the daylight (for night and day, mouth and year ran shapelessly together) in idiot games, until it seemed as if the universe were battling and tumbling, in brute confusion and wanont last aimlessly by itself. (208-109)

Part of the force of such passages lies in their paradox. To the Lighthouse now assumes the perspective of eternity: the eye floats above the cloud line, surveying all the inhuman weather. But here we arrive at a new turn to Auerbach's old question: Whose eye is this? And whose ear? "[H]ad there been anyone to listen," asks the passage, forcing us to hear the paradox. "[I]t seemed" – but to whom?

"How describe the world seen without the self?" – Bernard's question in The Waves is the loan of postreligious omniscience that also haunts To the Lighthouse. At a decisive moment in Part One, Mrs. Ramsay recoils from her brief religious reflex, asking herself, "How could any Lord have made this world?" (152). In the context of this skepticism, the all-seeing point of view of "Time Passes" shows, and knows, itself to be imaginary. The lure of omniscience, after all, had always been its promise to escape the very finitude that defines us. Woolf allows herself to enact that paradox in To the Lighthouse and to test the reach of perspective. At a moment of thematic disenchancement – the sudden death of characters who had grown slowly – the author does what her friends have "dared" her to do and achieves the formal ascendancy of a view from nowhere that lets us see everywhere.

When the novel turns again and begins its third part, it may appear to offer recovery of the techniques developed in Part One. In fact, though, subtle changes have been wrought after the passage through "Time Passes." Focalized narrative returns, but with the diminished cast of characters, its mobility is strongly reduced. It soon resolves into the side-by-side accounts of Lily painting on the lawn, casting her view out to sea, and the tense family of three sailing toward the lighthouse after too long a deferral. The question of distant viewing is now sharply etched. So much depends, thinks Lily, "upon distances: whether people are near us or far from us; for her feeling for Mr. Ramsay changed as he sailed further and further across the bay. It seemed to be elongated, stretched out; he seemed to become more and more remote" (293-294). Carn in the boat sees the faraway island "wrapped in its mantle of peace": "They have no suffering there" (362). The narrative eye, still exeracting its mastery, overcomes the separation of such distant views and brings them close on the page. Yet the effect is to enforce the limits of finite perception. Omniscience still penetrates personality. No thought is too intimate for access. But after narrating the glories of Part One (the unity around candlelight, the silent exchange of love), our conductor now leaves individuals to guess the secret lives of others and declines to relieve the burden of uncertainty.

Part One gives "magical" solutions to the problem of solipsism. Against the thrones of loneliness, the fiction of omniscience offers consolation: "She had not said it, yet he knew." But after the break in design of "Time Passes," omniscience appears chastened. The thematic catastrophes – the trauma of sudden death, the devastations of war – bring a formal humbling. The growing ambitions of perspective in the early part of the novel, with the double climax of group unity and married love, are shrunk, even reversed.

The work of perspective is left almost entirely to the characters, who must see (and learn what they can) from within the boundaries of their finitude.

A striking sign of the change appears in Lily's story of the married life of Minta and Paul Rayley. She pictures them in a "series of scenes," Minta eating a sandwich, Paul speaking violently, he "withered, drawn; she, flambouyant, careless," and concludes that the marriage had turned out poorly. Then, as the paragraph changes, Lily considers how "what we call 'knowing' people, 'thinking' of them" is no more than inventing such scenes: "Not a word of it was true; she had made it up; but it was what she knew them by all the same." She builds a "whole structure of imagination" around an offhand remark (167), and these details are never settled by the descent of omniscience. They remain unmoored, merely hypothetical. The characteristic and
reassuring motion of Part One—in which isolation is finally overcome by an assertion of intersubjectivity—languishes and wanes. It is replaced by near-total reliance on a few individuals (Lily, Cam, James) who depend on hints and guesses and often resort to the conjectural narrative that Lily indulges with the Rayleys.

As the novel approaches conclusion, the strain on narrative knowledge is marked. When the little boat at long last reaches the lighthouse, Cam and James look at their father, wondering what “he sought so fixedly, so intently, so silently”: “What do you want? they both wanted to ask. They both wanted to say, Ask us anything and we will give it you. But he did not ask them anything. He sat and looked at the island and he might be thinking, We perished, each alone, or he might be thinking, I have reached it. I have found it; but he said nothing” (318). The conundrum of perspective reaches an epitome here. Again, omniscience secures a transpersonal connection; two children share the identical desire (“They both wanted”). But at the very moment when boundaries between brother and sister are overcome, we return to blurted opacity (“he said nothing”). The pulse of recognition/isolation, communion/concealment throbs quickly as the novel ends.

A last turn in perspective occurs in the novel’s concluding tableau. As Lily realizes that the Ramsay trio must have reached the lighthouse, she speaks aloud, “He has landed”; “It is finished.” At this moment, Mr. Carmichael appears beside her, Carmichael who had stood at the limit of comprehension, his thoughts occluded, his attitudes obscure. But now he speaks, echoing her words, “They will have landed,” and she felt she had been right. They had not needed to speak. They had been thinking the same things and he had answered her without her asking him anything” (319, emphasis added). Lily hears what the Ramsay children only long for: the verbal confirmation of a hope. But her assurance is qualified by the quiet erosion of “felt.” It seems, it feels as if their thoughts had merged, but the narrating authority abstains.

At the novel’s moment of final recognition, the angles of perspective continue to interrupt one another. “Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision” (320). The first and last five words of glory are Lily’s own: we have no reason to doubt their sound. But “she thought” is not something she thought, and more strikingly, the fatigued release of the brush is an act of the aging body (which we are invited to see) not the inspired mind (which we overhear). An innmost self and an outermost view divide the sentence. Between them, though, beats the rhythm of strong accents (yes, thought, brush, fatigue, vision) binding the differences that pull apart. The novel ends with this last subtle tremble among perspectives, and isn’t that, too, a form of vision?