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## *Nec Tecum Nec Sine Te:* The Inseparability of Word and Image in Virginia Woolf

# ABSTRACT

This article explores the interaction of verbal and visual art in Virginia Woolf's fiction, exemplified by her novel, *To the Lighthouse*. The narrative of the novel not only features scenes of the painting of the Ramsays' portrait, but it unfolds as the creative process advances and concludes with Lily's final stroke of her brush. While words are used to enact the process of creation, visual art serves as both a frame and a basis for the verbal. The synergistic movement of storytelling and the act of painting a picture "within the narrative" is more than an interesting instance of ekphrasis. In *To the Lighthouse*, words operate like pictures—according to Horace's maxim, *ut pictura poesis*—and pictures work like words. Art's resonance in the novel extends beyond depicting the process of painting. I examine Woolf's aesthetic sensitivity and creative talent in relation to Paul Cézanne's and Paul Klee's art. The proximity between Woolf's novel and the works of the two painters encourages us to view the role of shape and color in the two seemingly separate arts as the space for uncovering some vital truth about our being-in-the-word.

**Keywords:** art, language, philosophical hermeneutics, Virginia Woolf, Paul Klee, Paul Cézanne.

## INTRODUCTION

The lengthy history of the literary criticism of *To the Lighthouse* demonstrates its status as “a work of art about art—as are *Hamlet* and *Don Quixote*, as is much of the production of artists as diverse as Yeats, Braque, Pirandello, Mann” in a variety of ways (Cohn 127). The ekphrastic<sup>1</sup> co-existence of the visual and the verbal in this novel has become a constant source of critical interest.<sup>2</sup> Woolf (1882–1941) is undeniably one of the greatest British literary artists whose dual commitment to words and images has provoked ongoing academic debate. She resides at the top of this list, alongside William Blake, the visionary Romantic poet and painter (Greg). Blurring the distinction between the representation of ideas through words and images, Woolf weaves together the literary and the visual commendably in the medium of her art. In *Moments of Being*, she echoes Shakespeare’s iconic words “All the world’s a stage”<sup>3</sup> and famously states that “the whole world is a work of art; . . . we are parts of the work of art” (*MOB* 72). Her fictional imaginings thematize this statement—Woolf creates a work of art while writing about art. Artistic creation transpires in her fiction both as a motif *sensu stricto* and as a theme embracing life as art. Woolf was fascinated with the art created by her contemporaries, especially that of Paul Cézanne. She was profoundly influenced by her sister Vanessa Bell, whose paintings were “winsome, sly, French Impressionism and Post-Impressionism as filtered through an English gaze” (Sasseen), as well as by the art critic and painter, Roger Fry and the bohemian lives and artistic output of other members of the Bloomsbury Group.<sup>4</sup> Woolf potently entered the conversation with art and, more specifically, the artistic assumptions of her close circle of artist friends, sharing her thoughts on art with the readers of her fiction.<sup>5</sup>

The devaluation of pre-World War I forms of expression is crucial in modern literature. In the face of world strife, modernists no longer believe that language can portray the untranslatable truth of human suffering, loss, disorientation, and existential nothingness in its traditional way. Undoubtedly, Woolf’s inimitable integration of visual art into her writing interlocks with her modern stylistics, which like that of other great English modernists (e.g., Joyce and Eliot) and Americans (Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost), embraces a renewed interest in language. Her

<sup>1</sup> According to ThoughtCo.: “Ekphrasis is a rhetorical and poetic figure of speech in which a visual object (often a work of art) is vividly described in words.”

<sup>2</sup> Cf. e.g., Caracciolo. See also Bellamy or Olk.

<sup>3</sup> See Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, scene VII, line 139 (47).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. e.g., Humm (“Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury Aesthetics”). See also Maude and Nixon.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. e.g., Humm (“Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury Aesthetics”). See also Maude and Nixon.

modernist language experiments include notable disruptions of regular syntax (often resulting in obfuscated structures), unorthodox use of lexis and punctuation, sentence duration and punctuation testing, as well as the usage of a new language or typeface (sentences taken in square brackets) (cf. Richter). Importantly, Woolf also defies established conventions by treating her readers to writing that incorporates elements characteristic of visual arts (painting and photography)<sup>6</sup> into the flow of the story.

Woolf brings the sister arts together in a way that rests on the hermeneutic recognition of their inclusive, transitional spheres. As a result, her modernist fiction provides a refreshing insight into the old topic of the distinction/oneness of the verbal and the visual arts. This cogent interrelationship—the visual as residing in word pictures and ideas as inhabiting pictorial images that can be transcribed into words—counterpoints the reductive oversimplification of the rigorous separation of the two arts. The extant scholarship takes notice of the multifarious art influences on Woolf in creating *To the Lighthouse*: Renaissance religious paintings, pre-Raphaelite art, Victorian photography, as well as paintings and photographs of her mother, Julia Stephen (cf. de Gay 1).<sup>7</sup> Due to its immense concentration on subtle, impressionistic responses to reality, as well as an imitation of the elements of painting techniques, *To the Lighthouse* is said to be the reading counterpart of an impressionist picture.<sup>8</sup>

The exigency to situate *To the Lighthouse* within a broader art context seems to be well-grounded, given the role art plays in its narrative. Examining the intersections between the verbal and the visual in the novel, most critics focus on the painter Lily Briscoe and her art. Her portrait of Mrs. Ramsay and her son James serves as the pivot of the storyline, binding its parts together.<sup>9</sup> The creation of the figure of the artist vividly shows the impact

<sup>6</sup> A comprehensive survey of the impact of photography on Woolf's writing is offered e.g., by Humm ("Virginia Woolf and Photography").

<sup>7</sup> On the impactful intersections between Woolf's fiction and works of art see, e.g., Gillespie and Hankis, and Reid.

<sup>8</sup> For more on Woolf's modern aesthetics as reliant on impressionistic painting see, e.g., McWilliams, who detects the affinities between some famous impressionist artworks: Claude Monet's Rouen Cathedral paintings, *Regattas at Argenteuil*, *Storm at Belle Ile*, or post-impressionist painting of Gustave Courbet *The Wave* and Woolf's narratives. He fully acknowledges her impressionistic strategies, impressionist memory, and the ways in which her background made her lean towards impressionism and molded her as a master of "narrative impressionism": "In Woolf's hands, impressionism permits the interior life to float through the narrative like black ink in a basin of water, creating slowly shifting forms rather than hard lines, which seems about right if the goal is to explore the amorphous nature of the inner self."

<sup>9</sup> On the complementariness of the verbal and pictorial in Woolf's fictional imaginings see, e.g., Lacourarie, who aptly accounts for the creative possibilities that arise from the co-influences between different media of artistic expressiveness: "Reading Woolf with pictorial aims

of art on Woolf's fiction.<sup>10</sup> Critics agree that Lily is a fictional counterpart of Vanessa with whom Woolf had a loving but complex relationship. On the one hand, the two sisters were close collaborators; Vanessa illustrated Virginia's books and created covers for them, and Virginia was a model for her sister's pictures.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, there was some underlying rivalry between them. Virginia's fascination with modern painting not only stimulated her new and mature aesthetic vision but also resulted in shaking up the sisterly bond when she grew in affection for Vanessa's husband, Clive Bell (cf. e.g., Sasseen; Reid 99–100; McParland 2).

Woolf's keen interest in visual art extends beyond evident associations. Her focus on the intertwining character of the two arts embraces more than the evocation of a creative process and modeling Lily on Vanessa. Rather than offering a stoppage or interpolation, which are the traditional functions of descriptive sections, the novel's imagery adopts the characteristics of a picture, animating, shaping, or even structuring the story (cf. Lewis 152). The central scene of the banquet in the novel is a good example that illustrates the narrative's saturation with word pictures in their molding function. Woolf's art hinges on following her writing talent against the backdrop of a painterly sensibility that is present in her creative consciousness. I propose to view the interaction between the verbal and the visual from two perspectives. Firstly, I examine the impact of Paul Cézanne's paintings on Woolf's writing. Secondly, I explore the affinities between Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Paul Klee's painting *The Grey Man and the Sea* on the grounds of its thematic and structural closeness to the pivotal image of Lily's painting in *To the Lighthouse*.

## WOOLF, CÉZANNE, AND THE "GEOMETRY" OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The art of Paul Cézanne (1839–1909), a well-known post-impressionist, has exerted an important influence on the narrative of *To the Lighthouse*.<sup>12</sup> The process of examining the similarities between Woolf's writing

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and means in mind enables the reader to throw a new light both on her linguistic idiosyncrasies and underlying philosophical and epistemological motives. Painting accounts for the way her works transcend their own limits by meeting another medium" (66). See also Torgovnick.

<sup>10</sup> An original and highly comprehensive study of Lily and other women artists (for instance, Jane Austen's Emma, Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier, Anne Brontë's Helen Huntingdon, or Mary Gordon's Monica Szabo) featuring in fiction can be found e.g., in White.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed analysis of the collaboration between Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa see, e.g., Federici.

<sup>12</sup> More on the impact of post-impressionism on Woolf's writing can be found e.g., in Hodgkinson.

style and Cézanne's paintings yields intriguing results in terms of the hermeneutically rich meanings suggested by the two artists. Woolf's ardent interest in incorporating what is characteristic of Cézanne's artistic technique can be traced in the affinities between the descriptions of still life (fruit, shell, and skull) in the novel and the painter's artwork, *Still Life with Apples* (1895–98), which is exemplary of his craft. Despite its deceptively faithful rendition of ordinary objects and food, Cézanne's art captures human sensations rather than focusing on the mimetic representation of daily life. He is interested both in physical perceptions and how they concord with internal sensations.<sup>13</sup> A depth of emotions lurks behind the facade of simplicity, or even primitiveness, in Cézanne's art. Typically of his artistic taste, *Still Life with Apples* is satiated with a curious fondness for trivia, which does not uphold the prosaic for its own sake, but rather intuitively the universal beauty of everydayness.

Woolf achieves in *To the Lighthouse* something similar to Cézanne's effect of concentration on contemplative nuances. A sense of immediacy and closeness, which characterizes Woolf's modern consciousness, engages us with what her characters feel and experience in mundane situations. The narrative's central scene of the banquet mirrors Cézanne's geometrical and seemingly uncomplicated art.<sup>14</sup> This episode reads like a "narrative painting" that resembles Cézanne's art, focusing on the multi-perspectival rendition of objects. The passage below exemplifies his influence on Woolf's style in creating apt descriptions of objects and nature:

No, she said, she did not want a pear. Indeed she had been keeping guard over the dish of fruit (without realizing it) jealously, hoping that nobody would touch it. Her eyes had been going in and out among the curves and shadows of the fruit, among the rich purples of the lowland grapes, then over the horny ridge of the shell, putting a yellow against a purple, a curved shape against a round shape, without knowing why she did it, or why, every time she did it, she felt more and more serene; until, oh, what a pity that they should do it—a hand reached out, took a pear, and spoilt the whole thing. (*TTL* 76)

The language used by Woolf is suggestive of geometrical, post-impressionist art à la Cézanne: "putting a yellow against a purple, a curved shape against

<sup>13</sup> See "Paul Cézanne: The Father of Modern Art."

<sup>14</sup> In the banquet scene, Woolf uses the technique of moving slowly from guests at dinner to objects and then to guests again while Mrs. Ramsay, with an eye of an artist, contemplates the picturesque plate of fruit arranged by her daughter Rose. This camera-like technique reminds us of one used in cinematography.

a round shape.”<sup>15</sup> The verbal image of the fruit speaks powerfully not only to our sense of sight but evokes tender feelings of the wish to protect its beauty from perishing. For Mrs. Ramsay, a dish of fruit is far more than delicious food, she perceives it as an art that invokes a human being’s immersion in beauty. Desiring to make its attractiveness last, she seems to bring into realization Keats’s manifesto of art as not only memorializing beauty but acknowledging its everlastingness, expressed in his famous “Ode on a Grecian Urn”—a poem extolling a piece of ancient pottery whose beauty resides outside of the conventional understanding of time.<sup>16</sup>

As an onlooker, Mrs. Ramsay partakes in the mental process of creating art, which effectuates for her a remarkable change; it brings about peacefulness. Significantly, like Lily, she both creates and contemplates art. Mrs. Ramsay is not just the classic Angel in the House but a domestic artist: “Woolf celebrates the genuine creativity of Mrs. Ramsay’s in the way that she circles her family and friends about her and makes something beautiful of domestic life” (White 18).<sup>17</sup> Mrs. Ramsay attempts to arrest beauty, to make it last. In a similar vein to Lily, she focuses on immortalizing the world of beauty (cf. e.g., Hirsch 112). The view of Mrs. Ramsay as an artist is not shared by other scholars, though. For instance, a distinct division between art and life that Lily and Mrs. Ramsay represent is claimed by Ruby Cohn who points to the significance of the first as “artistic” and the latter as “living.” This divide is also noticeable in the novel’s structure: life dominates in Part One, art is the main motif in Part Three when Mrs. Ramsay is no longer alive (Cohn 129).<sup>18</sup> However, the intersecting paths of the verbal and the visual in the novel have even led critics to observe that the novel’s dinner party presided over by Mrs. Ramsay, the perfect hostess, can be compared to Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* (Beach 1).<sup>19</sup> If

<sup>15</sup> For more on the intersections between post-impressionist art and Woolf’s fiction see, e.g., Stewart.

<sup>16</sup> See Keats.

<sup>17</sup> I offer a detailed analysis of Lily’s combination of creating artwork and tarrying in front of it in the light of H. G. Gadamer’s hermeneutic aesthetics in *On Beauty and Being: Hans-Georg Gadamer’s and Virginia Woolf’s Hermeneutics of the Beautiful* (2021).

<sup>18</sup> An illuminative explication of life and art in the novel is proposed by Randi Koppen who writes: “[I]t is possible to read Woolf’s aesthetic transmutation of life into art in *To the Lighthouse* in light of a conception of art as at once disembodied and embodied, as a conversion/turn away from life and as experientially grounded” (378).

<sup>19</sup> The spiritual dimension of the banquet induces a continuing critical interest, which results in a growing scholarship on Woolf’s secular mysticism. One such inquiry is Richard Kearney’s reading of the party’s Eucharist-like character, in which he advocates for a new form of spirituality discernible in the age of modernism that is troubled with the declining force of institutionalized religion. This tendency is reflected prominently in modern novelistic writing (275–77). Kearney’s notion of atheism (God-after-God), which seeks to theorize the new forms of spirituality, pinpoints an approach to the Christian religion

the dinner scene can be interpreted as a painting and the whole novel as a “reading version of a post-impressionist picture,” Woolf may be thought to have deployed here a literary correlative of a picture within a picture technique used in fine arts. Employment of the inside and the outside story, composed either of pictures or words, nears the visual and the verbal mode of expression to one another in the novel.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf alludes to yet another painting by Cézanne, *Still Life with Skull* (1890–93). Strangely enough but typically for many of his paintings, Cézanne depicts a skull, the terrifying object, in the vicinity of apples and pears that symbolize liveliness, lushness, and joyfulness. The oddity of a boar’s skull kept in a children’s room in Woolf’s novel resonates with the bizarre proximity between fruit and the human skull in Cézanne’s picture. In the novel, Mrs. Ramsay covers the skull with her shawl to mollify the children’s fear before they fall asleep, and persuades them into thinking that the skull is not what it is but many other things:

[S]he quickly took her own shawl off and wound it round the skull, round and round and round, and then she came back to Cam and laid her head almost flat on the pillow beside Cam’s and said how lovely it looked now; how the fairies would love it; it was like a bird’s nest; it was like a beautiful mountain such as she had seen abroad, with valleys and flowers and bells ringing and birds singing and little goats and antelopes and. . . She could see the words echoing as she spoke them rhythmically in Cam’s mind, and Cam was repeating after her how it was like a mountain, a bird’s nest, a garden, and there were little antelopes, and her eyes were opening and shutting, and Mrs. Ramsay went on speaking still more monotonously, and more rhythmically and more nonsensically[.] (*TTL* 81)<sup>20</sup>

Mrs. Ramsay’s incantatory projection of multiple realities onto the frightening object to dematerialize the terror it causes corresponds to Cézanne’s displacement of the awesome reality that the human skull invokes by situating it next to apples and pears, whose luxuriance and colorfulness recall the elated, blissful, and Edenic state of being. The row of nonsensical “names” attributed to the skull and Mrs. Ramsay’s wish to make them sink into Cam’s mind illustrate the narrative’s disclosure of a perichoretic encounter between the verbal and the visual—the indivisible oneness of the said/written and the pictured.

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that topples the distinction between the sacred and the profane and embraces a renewed interest in the holy and the mystical amongst human everydayness. For a further analysis of the Eucharist-like nature of the dinner party in the novel, see, e.g., Holda (*On Beauty and Being* 63–66).

<sup>20</sup> An engaging interpretation of the importance of the skull as a pictorial element that joins Woolf’s narrative and Cézanne’s painting is offered by Lewis (154–57).

The shift in the novel from Lily's first painting that features Mrs. Ramsay to the second in which she does not figure corresponds to the juxtaposition of the symbols of life (luscious fruit) and death (the human skull) in Cézanne's paintings of still nature. Cézanne attempts to grasp the intricacy of the relationship between life and death through the outlandishly opposing images. Woolf emphasizes the intimate connection between human finitude and infiniteness through Mrs. Ramsay's absence, which is more presence than absence: "[Y]et this painting is even more directly dependent on Mrs. Ramsay's life, and upon that larger, more profound and tragic vision of life, that includes death" (Cohn 131). In *To the Lighthouse*, life leads to art and art leads to life.

The visual art—Lily's painting—translated into words gives rise to questions regarding the meaning of the triangular shape and the purple color that she chooses to paint Mrs. Ramsay. Randi Koppen observes that "*To the Lighthouse* proceeds from the autobiographical but 'transcends' this base through various processes of aesthetic deflection, tropological and narratological" (375). The critic points out that the evidently therapeutic role that the writing of the novel played for Woolf entails "'the aesthetic (con)figuration of life' that uses shapes, tropes, and structures, and reminds us of the novelist's seminal words: 'I . . . got down my depths and made shapes square up'" (375).<sup>21</sup> Could Mrs. Ramsay—the purple triangular shape—express the impossible possibility of grasping the essence of Woolf's mourning for her mother; the grief that is both concrete and acutely abstract, deeply humbling in its impasse to be pinned down, and is, at the same time, shaped (a triangle) and unshapely (the human figure cannot be discerned)?

The narrative of the novel encourages us to delve deeper into the meaning of Lily's portrayal of Mrs. Ramsay as a triangle rather than a realistic human figure. Why did Woolf choose this geometric figure to represent the female protagonist in the novel? If Mrs. Ramsay is a fictional counterpart of Woolf's mother, it seems that the aporia of precision and imprecision—the concrete shape of a triangle that bears no relevance to a mimetic representation of a human being but rather focuses on the intermingling roles of color and shape—relates to the misty recollection of the mother whom Virginia lost at the age of thirteen.<sup>22</sup> However, more importantly, it seems that Mrs. Ramsay in Lily's picture is part of Cézanne's impact on Woolf's fictional writing. The use of the geometric figure is an expression of her fascination with his art. Even if one agrees

<sup>21</sup> See "7 Nov." in Woolf's *Diary* (203).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. e.g., Holda, "The (Self)portrait of a Writer: A Hermeneutic Reading of Virginia Woolf's (Auto)biographical Writings" (59).



that Woolf was preoccupied with the embodied existence of her characters: “What is evident is that Woolf in her memoirs shapes herself (her history/biography) as a body in space, a body with spatiotemporal relations to other bodies and objects with an acute awareness of sensory information, a body whose organic growth is directly linked to, in fact, constitutive of, the growth of feeling and mind” (Koppen 380), one still senses that the rationale behind the way of rendering the portrayal of Mrs. Ramsay is the result of the appeal of post-impressionist art.

The portrait of Mrs. Ramsay and James bears even more marks of Cézanne’s influence on Woolf’s narrative art. Lily’s minimalistic, economized in hue and shape, and, at the same time, profoundly ambiguous painting reflects the novelist’s interest in Cézanne’s style:

Illuminated by her associations and memories, her semantically rich and elastic “purple triangular shape” expresses a complex reality; mother and child; the child merged with the mother; and the difference of being that unfolds in the triangulation of desire for every subject—including the mother, herself “a wedge-shaped core of darkness,” “invisible to others” (*TL* 62) The figure of Mrs. Ramsay foreshadows Woolf’s later remark that “it would be as difficult” to portray her mother’s personality as “it should be done, as to paint a Cezanne” (*MB* 85). (Froula 146)

Drawing on post-impressionism under the influence of Roger Fry, Woolf adopts writing techniques expressive of her new artistic sensibility and skillfully combines her vision and design. Chantal Lacourarie emphasizes Woolf’s keen interest in the interconnections between shapes, masses, lights, and shadows, which resembles Cézanne’s:

Cézanne’s forms are simple, geometric, sometimes distorted shapes. According to him, nature should be treated with cylinders, spheres, and cones, pointing the way towards cubism (*Conversations* 120). Lily works with this precept, as well as Fry’s concept of significant form in mind “the question being one of the relations of masses, of lights and shadows” (*To the Lighthouse* 53). This explains why Mrs. Ramsay is represented as a “triangular purple shape” (52). The referent is far from Lily’s mind, plastic rhythm is what matters. (75)

It is not only Cézanne’s use of masses, lights, shadows, and distorted shapes that is evidently inspirational for Woolf. She attempts to demonstrate the loosening of the connection between the signified and the signifier, and the post-impressionist art of Cézanne comes as a meaningful stimulus of how this can be approached. Furthermore, the way the interplay of color and shape is present in the novel makes one also think of Cézanne’s paintings.

Lacourarie notices the significance of Woolf's emulating Cézanne's unity of drawing and coloring. Inasmuch striking as the similarity between Cezanne's painterly technique and Woolf's writing is, it highlights the appeal of his avant-garde art and her aim to employ what she considers as expressive of the modern spirit:

For Cézanne, drawing and coloring are not distinct processes. You draw as you dab colors on the canvas; the more harmonious colors become the more precise drawing gets; when color is rich, form is full. Drawing and relief thus depend upon contrasts and relations between contiguous shades (*Conversations* 80). This is exactly the way Lily Briscoe tackles her work: "Then beneath the color, there was the shape" (*To the Lighthouse* 22). She reaches a design by structuring colors, "putting a yellow against a purple" (100). (Lacourarie 75)

496

Purple in Lily's picture anticipates Mrs. Ramsay's death, which symbolizes the demise of the contemplative way of understanding reality. Later, in Mr. Ramsay's re-direction of his life force and restored relevance of *vita contemplativa*, this style of being is rediscovered. The use of the triangular shape (in its regularity and boldness) suggests Woolf's defiance of the requirement that an aesthetic achievement should be complex in its design to be appealing, which can be regarded as an element of the post-impressionist legacy in her writing.

## VIRGINIA WOOLF AND PAUL KLEE—COLOR AND OUR BEING-IN-THE-WORLD

The artistic message of *To the Lighthouse* potently resonates with that of the surrealist paintings by Paul Klee (1879–1940) and their immense attentiveness to color. Although there is no direct reference to Klee's influence on Woolf's writing in Woolfian scholarship,<sup>23</sup> the novelist and the painter were contemporaries, and some elements of their modern aesthetics seem to coalesce and inspire us to ponder the closeness between verbal and visual art. The interconnections between the novel and Klee's art can be traced to the example of his picture *Der Graue und die Küste* (*The Grey Man and the Coast*) (1938). Woolf's novel

<sup>23</sup> In her book, *Modernism and Phenomenology: Literature, Philosophy, Art* (2017), Ariane Mildenberg investigates the relationship between modern art and literature. She examines several modern painters and artists, including Klee and Woolf, stating that Woolf develops her innovative stylistics and creates modernist aesthetics by employing some elements of visual art (see especially 73–102).

shares with Klee's painting, which offers a simplistic but impactful image of the sea and a human being, an important fascination with the seascape. The influence of the sea on the characters' lives in the novel is more than evident in the portrayals of the Ramsays' lifestyle, scenes of the time spent on the beach, and, above all, in an excursion to the titled lighthouse. More significantly, though, Lily's striving to locate the central point in the family portrait she creates brings to mind the overpowering concentration on the color grey in Klee's painting and his notion of the "grey point."

Klee's art eclipses any easy classification and is usually located somewhere between cubism, impressionism, and surrealism.<sup>24</sup> Born in Switzerland, a German national, the key artist of the generation of painters in Germany after the Great War, Klee was fascinated with the theory of color and, most significantly, with "the notion of the grey point." He employs this term to name the moment of a painting's genesis—some intermediary point not only of black and white but of all color, which provides a transition between point and line, and is, at the same time, an axis in giving a start to a painting (cf. Vellodi). Much like the Swiss artist, the fictional character of Lily in *To the Lighthouse* is wholly engaged with isolating some central point in her picture. This point serves not just to determine a sense of direction for how to complete the picture, but signifies her search for a reality that transcends the confines of the feasible she endeavors to captivate and heralds the emergence of order from chaos. Lily's portrait and Klee's *Der Graue und die Küste* seem to encapsulate overlapping messages. They evoke an artist's yielding to the call to show the transcendent amid human everydayness, to mirror and traverse the actual to capture the lived experience.

Klee's picture invites us to acknowledge the intimate connection between a human being and the sea. A similar kind of closeness between humans and the sea is noticeable in *To the Lighthouse*. In Klee's painting, the waves, zigzagging and interfusing with the figure of a man bathing in the sea indicate the moment of an uncanny oneness between the sea's elemental force and human reality. At the same time, one can sense that the human being is not surrendering completely to the power of the waves. Part of the evocative strength of the picture comes from its ambiguity and the displacement of the power play between the human and the elemental. Inasmuch as the sea is the key motif in Woolf's narrative and Klee's painting, the two do not give a univocal answer to the question of the interrelationship between the sea and a human being, but rather manifest its enigmatic nature.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. "Paul Klee at Tate Modern."

The man in Klee's picture seems to enter some secret oneness with the sea in which the domineering or subservient role of the elemental and the human cannot be easily distinguished. The human figure is "the perceiving subject" and, at the same time, "a reflected object."<sup>25</sup> In a much similar vein, in the novel, Mrs. Ramsay identifies herself with the light of the lighthouse, the object whose light guards over the precariousness of a sea journey. The creation of Mrs. Ramsay, whose reality seems to be undifferentiated from the celestial reality of the light in its quivering, transient quality, seems to express in words the messages that accord with the concentration of the visual art on the interplay of light and shadow. The flatness of the waves and their retreating movement in Klee's painting suggest a strong co-belongingness, as well as a blurring of the subject-object boundary, which can also be seen in Woolf's portrayal of the oneness of Mrs. Ramsay and the lighthouse's light:

[S]he looked at the steady light, the pitiless, the remorseless, which was so much her, yet so little her, which had her at its beck and call (she woke in the night and saw it bent across their bed, stroking the floor), but for all that she thought, watching it with fascination, hypnotized, as if it were stroking 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[.] (*TTL* 42)<sup>26</sup>

Importantly, *To the Lighthouse* reveals Woolf's fascination with the interconnection between space, presence, and language. Next to the factor of light, the way she uses space is another element of her evocation of human feelings and sentiments:

Impressionistic space—be it in the form of big skies, hovering churches, fields of haystacks, or an expanse of lily pads—becomes the capacious room for Woolf's largest questions. Fearlessly, she plunks these queries into the novel like stones in a pond, confident that the ripple effects won't displace too much: *Is it good, is it bad, is it right or wrong . . . What does one live for . . . What does it all mean . . . What is the meaning of life . . . What am I? . . . Who knows what we are, what we feel?* (McWilliams)

Hermeneutic ambiguity and the absence of a univocal message pervade both Klee's painting and Woolf's novelistic discourse, pointing to something important about our human condition: namely, the complex

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Klee, *The Grey Man and the Coast* (1938). <https://www.zpk.org/en/sammlung-forschung/sammlung-archiv/highlights-aus-der-sammlung/der-graue-und-die-kuste-343.html>

<sup>26</sup> I offer a reflection on Mrs. Ramsay's mystical unity with the beam of light in *On Beauty and Being* (66–77).

reality of understanding our being-in-the-world; the subject's dissolution in a reality greater than him/herself.

The color grey, which conjures his theory of the grey point—the dividing line between chaos and order in an act of creation<sup>27</sup>—cogently illustrates the closeness between Klee and Woolf. Lily's obsession with finding the central point from which all meaning radiates concurs with Klee's preoccupation with the grey point. The importance of focusing on this crucial point in Woolf's story and Klee's art reflects an unwavering search for an adequate response to a call to create that goes beyond the conventional understanding of mimetic representation and recognizes the ontological dimension of creation. Lily's fervent search for the central point reveals a need to locate something integral to her creative self and project towards the transcendent reality beyond her. Lily's need for a central point and Klee's fixation on the grey point articulate a vow to aesthetically reconcile the ontological and the existential, the impressionist and the realist, the lived and the projected. Lily is attempting to establish her creative self against the patriarchal, condescending attitude toward women artists, which drives them to either escape, conceal, sublimate, or transcend the position of a lovely "home adornment," as she struggles to isolate the major point in her painting (cf. White 18–19). Undoubtedly, in the creation of Lily and her picture, Woolf combines image and text in a way that encourages us to fully acknowledge the remarkable results that can be achieved via the hybridization of art forms. Such creative endeavors are also effective in emphasizing women's striving to push themselves upward from the liminal and the marginal to the legitimate spaces in creating art.

Revealing a profound engagement with color, Woolf's narrative can be viewed as a correlative of Klee's artistic credo—his firm belief that color alone is all that a painting needs.<sup>28</sup> The color purple not only dominates Lily's picture but is, at its very core, a capable expression of the similarity between Woolf's and Klee's art. The image of the enigmatic purple triangle concurs with the quintessential elements of Klee's artistic program, hinting, at the same time, as discussed earlier, upon Cézanne's geometrical images. Blue is another color that both dominates Klee's picture and excessively features in *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf uses color and distance to invoke and atone for human feelings, to create an evocative structure that would best render the workings of the human psyche. The complex nature of the characters' inner lives—the personal, the intimate, and the erotic—is brought to the surface via color, which helps capture the sense of estrangement and connection, the longing for fulfillment, and the consummation of this longing.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. e.g., Caliadro.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. "Paul Klee at Tate Modern."

Woolf's penchant for using color and distance to communicate can be seen, for example, in the scene where Lily regrets not complimenting Mr. Ramsay during the boat trip to the lighthouse:

But as she watched "the boat now flatten itself on the water and shoot off across the bay," she changed her mind. "The sympathy she had not given him weighed her down." To alleviate her guilt, to now reach out to Mr. Ramsay, Lily "dipped into the blue paint." As Woolf notes, she reached for art because "the problem of space remained." So the gap between them—which Woolf describes as "a fine gauze which held things"—needed to be closed. But, significantly, only painting had the power to do that. (McWilliams 3)

500

Woolf's engaging of the reader with the quaint and the remote, as well as the domestic and the idyllic, is conveyed in the novel through the power of sketching, capable of accounting for what is blurred, or not fully shaped, for the evanescent realities that hover and vacillate but bespeak something genuinely true about our being-in-the-world.

## WOOLF AND THE PLURIVOCITY OF THE VERBAL AND THE VISUAL

Woolf's fervent pursuit of the plurality of senses expressed via images runs parallel to her exploration of the boundless possibility of meaning enshrined in words. Laura Salisbury's interpretation, which focuses on the interconnections between materiality, corporeality, and neurology, encourages us to delve deeper into the versatile meanings of the novel's scene in which Mrs. Ramsay covers the skull with her shawl. Salisbury explains the act of covering "the matter of the skull with another material" as intended to defy the object's terrifying materiality. It is worth noticing that Mrs. Ramsay does not just cover the materiality of one object with that of another, but, much more importantly, she eclipses it with the power of the immaterial—with words. The words and the image interfuse, touch, and inform one another. Imagination capable of creating pictures needs language to conjure impossible realities—to think the unthinkable, to traverse the symbolic only to create new symbolic meanings. The hermeneutic, and thus, the inclusive encounter between image and word in Woolf's narrative testifies to the boundless reality of language which both *in-vokes* and *pro-vokes* meaning, summoning a different state of being.

All of Woolf's fictional writings potently express her dexterous crossing of the boundary between the verbal and the pictorial. Her openness to language's boundlessness intermingles with the meaning-suffused reality

of the visual art that she explores. The novel's focus on language's potential to produce multiple senses, discerned in the moment of Mrs. Ramsay's conjuring up other and powerful meanings, is strengthened throughout the narrative. Lily voices an assertion of the plurivocity of meaning in visual art when she talks to Mr. Bankes about her painting:

But the picture was not of them [the Ramsays], she said. Or, not in his sense. There were other senses too in which one might reverence them. By a shadow here and a light there, for instance. Her tribute took that form if, as she vaguely supposed, a picture must be a tribute. A mother and child might be reduced to a shadow without irreverence. A light here required a shadow there. (*TTL* 37)

Mr. Bankes is the only character in the novel who can enter into an intellectual conversation about art with Lily. Although they disagree (Mr. Bankes describes a painting by John Lavery that exemplifies the kind of art that Lily would not like to create), they are truly engaged in discussing art (*TTL* 36, 49–50, 122–23). Lily's picture is a family portrait, and, at the same time, it is not what it seems to be at first sight, but much more a pictorial reality that continually germinates new but also contradictory meanings. Her painting could be said to replicate many pictures of the Madonna and Child, but it equally brings to mind completely unexpected visions, thoughts, and sensations because it attempts to capture the enigmatic and multilayered meanings inhering in the interrelationship between color and shape—"the purple triangle." The sustained process, in which Lily both creates and interprets her art, can be viewed as evoking Hans-Georg Gadamer's aesthetics and his explication of the encounter with an artwork, in which the lingering or tarrying with art is the heart of its reception.<sup>29</sup> Woolf's embodiment of the intimacy of the aesthetic encounter is marked with a deep awareness of the multitudinous meanings that are born in the actualization of art; its true *being* comes into being in the process of contemplation.

The novel's continuous engagement with the polyvalence of meanings evoked through words and images is cogently encapsulated in James's meditation over the image of the lighthouse:

The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye, that opened suddenly, and softly in the evening. Now—James looked at the Lighthouse. He could see the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see windows in it; he could even see washing spread on

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Holda, *On Beauty and Being* (134–46).

the rocks to dry. *So that was the Lighthouse, was it? No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other Lighthouse was true too.* It was sometimes hardly to be seen across the bay. In the evening one looked up and saw the eye opening and shutting and the light seemed to reach them in that airy sunny garden where they sat. (*TTL* 216, emphasis mine)

Rich in colors and shapes, James's deliberation expresses something vital about the human response to reality, perceptibility, and understanding that are always conditioned and provisional. Words and images, satiated with meaning, reveal in the novel the hermeneutic interplay of the concealment and unconcealment of Being.<sup>30</sup> Being discloses itself through language. Significantly, James's seminal words: "So that was the Lighthouse, was it? No, the other was also the Lighthouse" (*TTL* 216) not only express different perceptions of external reality because of time passing but remind one of Heidegger's use of the Greek word *Aletheia*—the truth which is revealed.<sup>31</sup> Our seeing and understanding follow the trajectory of concealment and unconcealment—to remain in awe of the ever-new revelations of Being is part of our human condition. The vacillating borderline between fascination and disillusionment in James's interpretation of the image of the lighthouse discloses the tension between the veiled and the unveiled in the revelation of truth.

The encounter between the literary and the visual art in the novel takes on various ways of realization which demonstrate Woolf's limitless fascination with color and form. The interaction between color, space, form, and meaning is exemplified in the passage below:

[T]he whole bay spread before them and Mrs. Ramsay could not help exclaiming, "Oh, how beautiful!" For the great plateful of blue water was

<sup>30</sup> I refer here to the fundamental precept of Heidegger's ontological hermeneutics. Heidegger argues: "Being eludes being noticed by unconcealing itself in a being. This holds true for its truth, in the same way. Keeping to that way is the earlier way of its unconcealment. The early way of keeping to that way is *Aletheia*. By bringing the unconcealment of a being, the early way makes the concealment of Being possible. Yet the concealment remains in the course of keeping itself to itself, by way of refusing to let go of itself. We can call this illumining of its keeping-to-itself in the truth about its nature" (333–34).

<sup>31</sup> Heidegger's revalidation of *Aletheia* draws our attention to the interplay of concealment and unconcealment in the disclosure of Being: "Understanding ἀλήθεια as unconcealedness, places it in the dialectic horizon of concealment (*Verbergung*) and unconcealment (*Entbergung*) and opens up a world in which things are made intelligible for human beings in the first place. Dasein is always lost into the world since it is always concealing when it unconceals. It is the mystery of language, which allows us to capture the nature of Dasein as disclosure. Disclosing itself to itself points to Dasein as disclosing its own possibilities" (Wierciński 314).



before her; the hoary Lighthouse, distant, austere, in the midst; and on the right, as far as the eye could see, fading and falling, in soft low pleats, the green sand dunes with the wild flowing grasses on them, which always seemed to be running away into some moon country, uninhabited of men. (*TTL* 14)

With the zest of a “painterly writer,” thanks to her focus on multiple colors, Woolf pursues the possibilities of evoking various realities. Like words, color in her novel both reveals and conceals meaning, sensitizing us to the polyvalence of the human experience of being in the world.

## CONCLUSION

Modern literature witnesses a seminal devaluation of the forms of expression that prevailed before the Great War. Facing the calamity of global conflict, modernists no longer find language in its conventional use capable of conveying the unconveyable reality of human sufferance, loss, disorientation, and existential void, potently diagnosed by Eliot in his landmark *The Waste Land* (1922). For modernists, the abiding forms of employing language as a medium to communicate the human condition cease to retain their validity, and thus, they seek new ways of expression. Woolf’s creative response to visual art contributes to her modern writerly technique. As she becomes increasingly aware of the insufficiency of capturing reality through the established modes of using language to meet the demands of the modern era with its new challenges, Woolf hermeneutically blends the possibilities that inhere in the verbal and the visual. She acknowledges the various pathways of human expressiveness that serve the same end of disclosing the ontological oneness of beauty and Being. Through the integration of what visual art has to offer, the narrative of *To the Lighthouse* illuminates the possible trajectories of the encounter between the verbal and the visual and decentralizes the classic distinction between those two modes of artistic expression.

The hermeneutic investigation of Woolf’s novel encourages us to locate the trans-disciplinary potential of those two provinces of art without a sense of losing their distinct merits and aesthetic value. Woolf’s recourse to the visual arts is not merely a facile appreciation of the new cultural trends but a fully-fledged engagement with the mutual enrichment of the seemingly separate modes of artistic expression. It is also a potent reaction to contemporaneous debate about color and form within the artistic context of the novel’s genesis. Going beyond the recognition of

the peaceful coexistence of the visual and the verbal, Woolf thinks the incommensurate, making it possible for the art of words and images to meet, touch, and meld, with the result of creating exceptionally appealing instances of an ekphrastic representation of art. Even more importantly, however, *To the Lighthouse* discloses a hermeneutic understanding of the affinities between the two arts; it points to their oneness. The simultaneity of the creative processes that the novel encompasses, with its storyline progressing alongside the prolonged act of creating a picture and ending when Lily lays down her brush, indicates Woolf's hyper-consciousness of the indivisible unity of the visual and verbal cultures.

The narrative of *To the Lighthouse* underlines the pertinence of the hermeneutic thinking of the art of words and images coming together into a meaningful union, exemplifying a magnificent entwinement of the sister arts. Woolf's narrative reveals that the exclusive province of one of those arts is a fake concept that does not find confirmation in the artistic practices across time and place. Woolf's adoption of Cézanne's artistic techniques gestures towards the meaningful interrelations between the literary and the painterly. In her writing, the hermeneutic fusion of those two horizons of human creativity works to the effect of eradicating formal divisions between visual and verbal art. Viewing *To the Lighthouse* from the perspective of post-impressionist art provides a unique lens for experiencing the hermeneutic entanglement of literature and visual art in practice (*Hermeneutik im Vollzug*). Likewise, tracing the commonalities between Woolf's novel and the contemporary art of Klee sensitizes us to her inimitable hybridization of the writerly and the painterly. Woolf's fiction, as a meeting point for literary and aesthetic imaginations, encourages us to seek and appreciate a broader and more nuanced range of possibilities for text to picture and image to text translation.

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