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# RE-CREATING THE PAST
## Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and the Poetics of Loss, Grief, and Reconciliation

*The evocation of the escapade to the lighthouse, both a physical and spiritual journey, communicates an essential truth about nostalgia's hidden power. The pull of nostalgia directs our thoughts not just to recollect but to restore. Recalling the bygone is not a mere act of lamenting what is out of reach; it can also be a life-awakening and life-affirming experience, helpful in working toward reconciliation.*

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*[1] (1927) is a profound, lyrical narrative of British modernism. Through perceptive explorations of loss and memory, Woolf constructs in this novel an intricate poetics of grief and reconciliation. In response to the traumatic experiences of death and bereavement, her characters are deeply engaged in re-imagining the past as a means for understanding their anguish and drawing new insights from their experiences on the path toward restoration and reintegration. The novel's tripartite structure—titled "The Window," "Time Passes," and "The Lighthouse," each evoke a distinct element of the human condition: hope (because executing a promise is possible but conditioned), the passage of time, and the recuperation of what was lost, respectively. The fulfillment of the conditional promise is pivotal to understanding how Woolf dramatizes the connections between nostalgia,[2] destruction, time, and memory. Drawing on her personal history, *To the Lighthouse* is Woolf's poetic form of healing the wounds incurred by the deaths of her parents. These

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[1] See Virginia W o o l f, *To the Lighthouse*. https://opentextbc.ca/englishliterature/wp-content/uploads/sites/27/2014/10/To-the-Lighthouse-Etext-Edited.pdf.

[2] For insightful comments on Woolf's treatment of nostalgia, see, e.g., Mary J a c o b u s, "'The Third Stroke': Reading Woolf with Freud," in *Virginia Woolf*, ed. Rachel Bowlby (London: Routledge, 2016), 102–20; Sarah E d w a r d s, "'Permanent Preservation for the Benefit of the Nation': The Country House, Preservation, and Nostalgia in Vita Sackville-West's *The Edwardians* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*," in *Modernism and Nostalgia: Body, Locations, Aesthetics*, ed. Tammy Clewell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 93–110; Sonita S a r k e r, "Three Guineas, the In-corporated Intellectual, and Nostalgia for the Human," in *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. Pamela Caughie (London: Routledge, 2000), 37–66.

nuanced revisitations of the past—the novelist's fictional re-imaging of her past[3] and the structurally determined re-turn, in the narrative's final part, to the initial hope—aptly express the significance of the nostalgic re-viewing and re-creating of the bygone.

*To the Lighthouse* is an artistic meditation on the human capacity for recovery, atonement, and renewal. Written as a domestic epic[4] with deep autobiographical undertones,[5] the novel champions the (un)heroic, prosaic life of a married couple and their children vacationing on the Isle of Skye. Woolf gives attention to moments of clarity (*Augenblick*) that are found within dailiness. She describes the visionary moments in which the transcendent reveals itself within the everyday as "moments of being."[6] Accordingly, the novel focuses on the themes of temporality, death, recollection, and revival in humanity's moments of banality and grandiosity alike. With lyrically rich imagery, Woolf demonstrates how the psychological, nostalgic journey back into one's memory generates the yearning to understand life and find its purpose, sensitizing us, at the same time, to curiosity for a purpose as a trigger for nostalgic feelings. Notably, for her characters, the interpretative process through which they come to an understanding of the past involves an embracing of finitude. The tension between death's inevitability and reality's unpredictability requires a reconsideration of a stable, uniform understanding of human existence.

Woolf conceives of self-understanding and of one's being-in-the-world as dictated by the present moment, which is, however, entrenched in reminiscences. Her

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[3] Woolf confessed that writing *To the Lighthouse* gave her an opportunity to exorcise her own past and reconcile herself to the painful memories of her parents. For an analysis of the writing of this novel as a self-therapeutic process, see, e.g., Randi K o p p e n, "Embodied Form: Art and Life in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*," *New Literary History* 32, no. 2 (2001): 375.

[4] See Nick M o u n t, "Nick Mount on Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*," recorded January 22, 2009, Innis Town Hall, University of Toronto, June 13, 2015, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ULFotqofhNk.

[5] For the intersections between Woolf's biography and her fictional writings, see, e.g., Barbara L o u n s b e r r y, *Becoming Virginia Woolf: Her Early Diaries & the Diaries She Read* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2014); Barbara L o u n s b e r r y, *Virginia Woolf, the War Without, the War Within: Her Final Diaries and the Diaries She Read* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2018); Małgorzata H o ł d a, "The (Self)portrait of a Writer: A Hermeneutic Reading of Virginia Woolf's (Auto)biographical Writings," *Analyses/Rereadings/Theories: A Journal Devoted to Literature, Film and Theatre* 6, no. 1 (2020): 52–66.

[6] By a "moment of being," Woolf means a moment of authentic being as opposed to "non-being"—the daily, trivial occurrences. She makes the distinction between the moment of being and non-being in "The Sketch of the Past." See Virginia W o o l f, "The Sketch of the Past," in Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being: A Collection of Autobiographical Writing*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 83–84. For a survey of the affinities between Woolf's "moment of being" and the philosophical and theological idea of an epiphanic moment, see Małgorzata H o ł d a, *On Beauty and Being: Hans-Georg Gadamer's and Virginia Woolf's Hermeneutics of the Beautiful* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021), 157–58.

profound evocations of nostalgia, sorrowfulness, and mourning recall the reader's own temporality, encouraging us to dwell within the present moment, which meaningfully integrates past experiences. In her poetic imaginings on human experience, Woolf contemplates its relationship to death. She explores both the death of the Other and the truth about and prospect of one's own mortality in a manner that brings to mind Heidegger's hermeneutic-phenomenological model of Dasein: our being-there as oriented toward death (*Sein-zum-Tode*).[7] Being-toward-death tailors the flow of our own thoughts: back to the past, thinking of those who passed away, and forward, to our own departure. Acknowledging the interconnectivity between these seemingly separate aspects of time prompts us to recognize nostalgia's inalienable role in forming and transforming our way of understanding.

In Woolf's rendition of recalling, remembering, and reimagining as integral to an apprehension of the meaning of life, we see an affinity with Heidegger's philosophy of facticity.[8] Furthermore, one can view the gradual unfolding of the meaning of loss and grief in the novel as testifying to Heidegger's philosophy of interpretation, which holds truth as *aletheia*—the interplay of concealment and unconcealment. Exploring Woolf's poetics of nostalgia through the prism of Heidegger's notion of *aletheia* encourages us to notice how Woolf's capturing of the layered fabric of reminiscences partakes in the ongoing veiling and unveiling of truth while her characters reach out to understand the past. This perspective on Woolf's novel interconnects with a hermeneutic understanding of the significance of the passage of time, of recollection, and of the (im)possibility of recuperation through the lens of the meaning-laden notion of a promise. Woolf's integration of a conditional promise into the novel's structural pattern—the hoped-for (and realized ten years later) trip to the lighthouse—serves as the narrative's fulcrum. Woolf's employment of a conditional promise as both a structural and conceptual tool juxtaposed against Paul Ricoeur's ethics of promise enhances our understanding of reconciliation as an impossible possibility.

The evocation of the escapade to the lighthouse, both a physical and spiritual journey, communicates an essential truth about nostalgia's hidden power. The pull of nostalgia directs our thoughts not just to recollect but to restore. Recalling the bygone is not a mere act of lamenting what is out of reach; it can also be a life-awakening and life-affirming experience, helpful in working toward reconciliation. This essay reviews Svetlana Boym's distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia as a vantage point that illuminates

[7] See Martin H e i d e g g e r, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 265–68; see also Martin H e i d e g g e r, *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 19.

[8] For an extensive study of Woolf's oeuvre through the lens of Heidegger's ontological hermeneutics, see, e.g., Emma S i m o n e, *Virginia Woolf and Being-in-the-World: A Heideggerian Study* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

our apprehension of Woolf's penetrating embodiment of nostalgia. Drawing on the complementing theories of Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Boym, a hermeneutic reading of Woolf's narrative allows us to uncover the state-of-the-art ways in which the novelist explores trauma from loss and grief and reveals nostalgia's power to help in the process of reunion and integration.

## MEMORY, THE DISCLOSURE OF MEANING, AND THE CONDITIONAL PROMISE

The narrative of *To the Lighthouse* begins in *medias res*, bringing us instantly into the psychological depths of a conversation between the novel's protagonists, Mrs. and Mr. Ramsay, over the seemingly mundane issue of a visit to a lighthouse. The actual expedition happens only after the Ramsay family descended into tragedy. Mrs. Ramsay dies suddenly, their daughter Prue's life is taken away while she gives birth to her child, and their son Andrew dies at war. Articulating a deep apprehension of the inevitability of death and loss, Woolf's narrative invites us to probe the meaning of life and consider its finite nature. Stranded between finitude and infinity, human existence is marked by an ongoing effort to seek answers as to its meaning. This drive is profoundly influenced by the death of others and a vision of one's own passing away. Double-fold thinking—reflection on the death of the departed and the awareness of one's own mortality—impacts our understanding of ourselves and our being-in-the-world.

Woolf's poetic meditation on the influence of death and loss on human existence shows an astute understanding of the seminal impact that humanity's situatedness as being-toward-death has on the way we exist as beings-in-the-world. Her poetics of loss, grief, and reconciliation integrates the exigency of a return to the past to understand the present moment and be open to the future. The vision of an existence oriented toward death embodied in Woolf's narrative is a literary expression of Heidegger's being-toward-death. For both Woolf and Heidegger, understanding is formed within the intersecting paths of the past, present, and future. The last section of *To the Lighthouse* focuses more specifically on a nostalgic search for the lost time. It is separated from the inaugural part by an interlude whose purpose is to render the inevitable passage of time. In such a meticulously structured narrative, predicated on and thematizing time, Woolf demonstrates that our reaching out and coming to an understanding of our existence is dictated by and embedded in our temporality.[9]

[9] See Jesse M a t z, "Time," in *The Oxford Handbook of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne E. Fernald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Julia B r i g g s, *Reading Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

A similar grasp on an understanding of human life as entrenched in temporality is shared by Heidegger, who, as Giulia Bovassi observes, views understanding as "a phenomenon that is expressed in the present as a '*Seindes* been-presenting.'"[10] She emphasizes that "through this, he [Heidegger] indicates how thought contains within itself the three temporal dimensions, without ever being able to be alienated from each of them."[11] In their respective works, Woolf and Heidegger both acknowledge the significance of the indissoluble connection between the seemingly separate dimensions of time in our existence.[12] A perception of this connection facilitates an acknowledgment of the indisputable role of nostalgia—the imaginative bridging of time perspectives—in relation to the way we understand ourselves and the temporal reality we live in.

The novel's recollective journey back in time begins with a trip to the lighthouse, which bears deep symbolic implications for the plot. The apparently trivial matter of an expedition to the lighthouse plays host to many of the novel's underlying tensions: between the rational and irrational, subjective and objective, and feminine and masculine, as epitomized by the Ramsay couple. The dream of a voyage cherished by James Ramsay, harshly curtailed by his father, and fulfilled years later, provides an axis to the narrative's embodiment of human desire. Woolf allows us to relish the subtleties of longing, nostalgia, and reverie through a heartwarming portrayal of a child's deep-seated yearning. James has a craving for what he does not comprehend but imagines it being the source of happiness. Brooding on the intertwining trajectories of desire, irony, and epiphany, Adam Potkay emphasizes the interplay of the real, the imaginary, and the impelling in the realization of James's boisterous hoping and waiting:

> Approaching the lighthouse, James has an extra-temporal epiphany: "So that was the lighthouse, was it? No, the other [his earlier, distant, enchanted vision of it] was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing" (277). But in yet another irony, James next discovers that, closer to the lighthouse, the edifice, stark and severe, "satisfied him" (301), without need for the supplemental and unsatisfied satisfaction of hope and expectation. It's as if it had been what he hoped for without knowing he

[10] Giulia B o v a s s i, "Philosophy and Nostalgia: 'Rooting' within the Nostalgic Condition," in *Intimations of Nostalgia: Multidisciplinary Explorations of an Enduring Emotion*, ed. Michael Hviid Jacobsen (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022), 39.

[11] Ibidem.

[12] Bovassi draws our attention to the complexity of Heidegger's understanding of temporalization in the context of nostalgia in the following way: "The same concept of 'temporalization' in Martin Heidegger demonstrates the correlation between the nostalgic phenomenon and access to knowledge that he interposes in the investigation of the 'historicity of being-there,' where there is an attempt to 'show that this entity is not «temporal» because it «is in history», but vice versa it exists and can exist historically, just because it is temporal at the bottom of its being.'" Ibidem, 38.

> hoped for it. James is satisfied even though what he gets is not what he imagined he wanted. The object of desire and the nature of the desire shift in dynamic relation to one another, so that the actual is also the aspirational.[13]

Illustrating James's complex emotions, Woolf deeply probes the psychological aspects of a burning desire and the moment when it is satisfied.

James's fancy serves as the foundation for a sense of fulfillment and that is continually put to the test, representing the insatiable nature of human aspirations. Returning to his dream and reflecting on it, he discovers that immersing himself in the past by dwelling on it enables him to look forward and perceive life as meaningful. The lighthouse he encounters in adulthood appears different than he imagined it, as the passing of time produces a modified understanding of reality. This stimulates James to muse on the question of meaning as such. An apprehension of versatility intensifies his pursuit of meaning, regardless of, or perhaps due to, the ambiguity that is involved in the quest. The moment the dream comes true, it becomes a new opening and its epiphanic force unveils the depth and beauty of the unexpected, testifying to the fecund pathway of human effort and risk-taking.

The nostalgic movement backward in time that Woolf conjures engenders a weighty interpretative process intended to untangle the meaning of life. Woolf's intuition accords with Heidegger's take on understanding that integrates *aletheia* (disclosure). Using the Greek word for truth, Heidegger claims that the revelation of truth is characterized by the interplay of unconcealment (*Entbergung*) and concealment (*Verbergung*).[14] The unveiling of meaning is of a boundless nature; the truth that shines forth calls for new understandings and interpretations. James's sense of loss and nostalgic craving to retrieve the past not so much provoke a re-discovery of meaning—the excavation of the symbolic meaning of the lighthouse—but commence an unfolding of meaning. In this humbling process, James learns to acknowledge that the search for meaning is precisely about the gradual unfurling of meaning and one that does not seek finite certainties or codes of belief.

The understanding that meaning unveils through time is enhanced by Woolf's ingenious construction of the novel which revolves around a conditional promise of going to the lighthouse. The issue of promise, treated thematically, is inseparably connected with the idea of the passage of time as the enactment of the word occurs in time. In its deep underlying meaning and by its very nature, a promise is pronounced (to promise—*Ver-sprechen*) before it happens but continues to live on into the present. Keeping a promise entails

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[13] Adam P o t k a y, *Hope: A Literary History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 273–74.

[14] See Martin H e i d e g g e r, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 41.

the bridging of temporal realities and the upholding of the pact of words, uttered or written, in an unaltered form. In the event (*Ereignis*) of making a vow, the promised reality belongs to the now that becomes the past and, simultaneously, to the future—the time of fulfillment. The promised word dwells in the continuity of the present and the future. A promise puts a claim on the one who promises, and thus, it holds an ethical value, as a failure to keep it up is viewed as ethically wrong.[15]

Although the ethical aspect of keeping the promise is vital in the narrative of *To the Lighthouse*—thwarting a child's dream impedes the healthy parent–child relationship—it is the time constituent of promise that is of key importance for us here. Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self helps us focus on the quintessential significance of the temporal dimension of the execution of promise: "So to speak up is to make my initiative have continuation, to have this initiative truly inaugurate a new course of things; in short to make the present not just be an incident but the beginning of a continuation."[16] The suspended realization of the promise in *To the Lighthouse* is not only an artistic device that spans the novel; it invites the reader to delve deeper into the interweaving of past and future and to understand the phenomenal power of the declared word. Such declarations impact the integrity of individual human beings and help sustain the coherence of communal life. They also grant aliveness to a reality that is worthy of being affirmed, continued, and realized.

Ricoeur pinpoints the efficacy of promise to "give the present the force of preserving, in short, of enduring."[17] In promise, the present moment lasts into the future, and thus, the connection between the past and the present is meaningfully alive and life-giving. In the opening line of the novel, Mrs. Ramsay's reassuring "yes,"[18] expressive of an ardent wish to promise and execute what was promised, comes true in the expedition to the lighthouse in the story's ending. This "yes," which is a "yes" to life, is, however, followed by a conditional clause: "if it is fine tomorrow,"[19] which conveys the possibility of a failure in executing the promise.[20] In its pervasively haunting nature, this

[15] See Paul R i c o e u r, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 232–49; see also, e.g., Leonard L a w l o r, *Imagination and Chance: The Difference Between the Thought of Derrida and Ricoeur* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 74; Małgorzata H o ł d a, *Paul Ricoeur's Concept of Subjectivity and the Postmodern Claim of the Death of the Subject* (Kraków: Ignatianum University Press, 2018), 151.

[16] R i c o e u r, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, 322.

[17] Ibidem, 233.

[18] W o o l f, *To the Lighthouse*, 1.

[19] Ibidem.

[20] For a discerning explanation of Woolf's use of the conditional mood and its impact on the novel's central conflict and its structure, see, e.g., P o t k a y, *Hope: A Literary History*, 269–74.

"yes" is a symbolic affirmation of human existence, which is satiated, though, with a sense of frailty and precariousness. Resounding in the narrative's denouement, Mrs. Ramsay's "yes" effectively counterpoints the calamitous negativity of wartime, which is the thematic texture of the novel's middle part. The actual voyage to the lighthouse, a long-awaited triumph, is tinged with nostalgia, which is both a heart-rending and elevating force. The nostalgic looking backward is the very source of bringing back to life the bliss of accomplishment and the metaphysical sense of unity and purposefulness of life, even if diluted by the passage of time. As a compelling literary expression of the philosophical idea of the eternal return,[21] the depiction of the pilgrimage to the lighthouse encapsulates a vision of human existence not only as apprehensive and respectful of the past and hopeful of the future, but also as resilient to the forces of destruction and capable of self-restoration.

Musing on the title of the novel and its triple structure, Stevenson and Goldman note a still different subtle dimension of Woolf's weaving of a promise into her narrative:

> The novel's title, furthermore, is not Mrs. Ramsay, but *To the Lighthouse*, a title promising a journey to enlightenment (not a postmodernist gesture towards, but a modernist sense of arrival). This promise shapes our expectations. After the title, the contents page prepares us for the novel's triadic shape and its movement from light ("The Window") to darkness ("Time Passes") to light again ("The Lighthouse"). The sense of mortality suggested by "Time Passes" surely prepares us for death; just as historical knowledge of the war surely informs most readings.[22]

The triad of light, darkness, and a return to light, which could otherwise be understood as order, dis-order, and re-order, renders the reality of harm, sadness, and mourning that call for reconciliation. The realized dream offsets the demise of happiness and reinstates a longed-for meaningfulness counterbalancing the years of destruction and fear.

## SORROWFULNESS AND LOSS
## NOSTALGIA AS THE MEANS FOR PRESERVING THE MOMENT

The theme of nostalgia is captivatingly entwined in the novel with motifs of mourning and excruciating sadness. In "The Window," the novel's first part,

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[21] The ancient philosophical idea of the eternal return was popularized by Friedrich Nietzsche. For the basic history of the origin of the idea, see, e.g., Claire H a l l, "Same as It Ever Was? Eternal Recurrence in Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy," *The Public Domain Review*, May 15, 2024, https://publicdomainreview.org/essay/same-as-it-ever-was/.

[22] Randall S t e v e n s o n and Jane G o l d m a n, "'But What? Elegy?': Modernist Reading and the Death of Mrs. Ramsay," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 26 (1996): 178.

life is depicted as being regulated by the calm and leisurely pace of beach vacationing. Amidst this, Woolf incorporates Mrs. Ramsay's deep awareness of life's terrible and perilous realities and Mr. Ramsay's worries and persistent fretting. And, thus, in a clandestine way, Woolf introduces the sense of the gravity of human experience and the poignancy of loss. Negative sensations are shown as gently woven into life's tapestry, and the affirmative force of existence is subtly decomposed. Mrs. Ramsay's practical wisdom, mingled with her scintillating romanticism, enables her to both appreciate adulthood and foresee its dangers. Her irrational wish that James would remain a child is not a manifestation of overprotective motherhood. Rather, contemplating childhood as the most blissful and carefree stage of life, Mrs. Ramsay resists the inevitable passing of time and nostalgically fancies preserving the moment:

> Oh, but she never wanted James to grow a day older! or Cam either. These two she would have liked to keep for ever just as they were, demons of wickedness, angels of delight, never to see them grow up into long-legged monsters. Nothing made up for the loss. When she read just now to James, "And there were numbers of soldiers with kettledrums and trumpets," and his eyes darkened, she thought, Why should they grow up and lose all that?[23]

Although "The Window" has, as Sheehan accentuates,[24] a proleptic quality at the structural level, its thematic content revolves around viewing the future through the prism of the qualities associated with an analeptic brooding on the past: the fleetingness of time, its ever-escaping nature, the lamentable loss of innocence, and the inevitability of experience. Such sentiments are discernible, for instance, in a telling scene of Minta losing a brooch on the beach when she gets engaged to Paul. The irretrievable loss and the irresistible sensation of time passing are imbued with a deeper sense, though. A touch of nostalgia creeps in, creating an aura of inexorableness whence the sustenance of one's former life and self is impossible. Crying over the loss of a piece of jewelry, Minta mourns the loss of her innocent *self*—her naiveté. This turning point in her life leads simultaneously to a gain of knowledge. The momentous, profound desire and the feeling of an impossibility to be who she was in the reality of the *now* is nostalgia's dexterous way of maintaining the lure of a positive and blithe existence against life's vicissitudes.

Loss and gain in Woolf's lyrical narrative are frequently sensed in connection to intimate human relationships. Such is the case with Paul and Minta's liaison as well as Lily's tender kinship with Mrs. Ramsay. The irrational power

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[23] W o o l f, *To the Lighthouse*, 40.

[24] See Paul S h e e h a n, "Time as Protagonist in *To the Lighthouse*," in *The Cambridge Companion to "To the Lighthouse,"* ed. Allison Pease (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 51.

of Lily's fascination with the older woman—a maternal figure—adds a special tint of nostalgia to her protracted attempt to see this relationship in a way that satisfies her craving for love but does not transgress the established societal mores. Lily does not fulfill her boisterous wish to be truly close to Mrs. Ramsay. She stumbles against the impossibility of having access to Mrs. Ramsay's mind.[25] After Mrs. Ramsay's death, Lily nostalgically returns to the image of her hostess, seeking to conjure her up in the portrait she paints.

## RE-IMAGINING THE PAST THROUGH ARTISTIC CREATION

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf depicts the artistic endeavor of painting a portrait as a trip across time. Creating her painting, Lily not just revisits but reclaims and reassesses her former harmony and happiness. Her nostalgic looking backward constitutes a hermeneutic pathway of interpreting and understanding what is no longer present. On this journey backward in time, she comes to an understanding of past bliss through the lens of her present grief-stricken reality. Woolf's narrative reveals that creating is a matter of re-iterating. Capturing reality on the canvas is viewed as a twofold process: a productive return to the already bygone through the materiality of the painting process and, simultaneously, a recollective re-turn to the self through introspection. Musing on the interweaving of memory and creative activity in Lily's painting process, Rojas notices: "Lily's painting seems to symbolize her grasping of the essence of her past through the transformation of her involuntary memory of what has been lost through the passage of this content downloaded from time into a voluntary reminiscence that enables her to transcend her strong suppressed attachment to Mrs. Ramsay and her terrible agony at losing her."[26] The need to satisfy the creative urge is concomitant with an attempt to release the tension of not understanding. Lily's self-examination informs her painting, and it serves as the foundation for self-understanding: "And as she lost consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance, and whether Mr. Carmichael was there or not, her mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting over that glaring, hideously difficult white space, while she modeled it with greens and blues."[27]

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[25] See, e.g., Martha C. N u s s b a u m, "The Window: Knowledge of Other Minds in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*," *New Literary History* 26, no. 4 (1995): 731–32.

[26] Yuko R o j a s, "Proustian Reminiscence in *To the Lighthouse*," *Studies in the Novel* 41, no. 4 (2009): 462–63.

[27] W o o l f, *To the Lighthouse*, 182.

Years later, after Mrs. Ramsay's death, Lily resumes working on the picture she started painting in the novel's opening section. In this way, Woolf spans the narrative through creative activity. The painterly (Lily's picture) mirrors the writerly (Woolf's narrative). Artistic creation involves reaching out for the real and conjuring of the supposedly real—the people and places as they used to be and remain in memory: "And this, Lily thought, taking the green paint on her brush, this making up scenes about them, is what we call 'knowing' people, 'thinking' of them, 'being fond' of them! Not a word of it was true; she had made it up; but it was what she knew them by all the same. She went on tunneling her way into her picture, into the past."[28] Challenging us to dive deeply into how relevant art is for understanding ourselves and the world, Woolf invites us to notice the not always easily discernible yet quintessential difference between our imaginative world and sheer facts. Creating a family portrait, Lily reevaluates the former equilibrium. On her artistic journey she comes to an understanding of past bliss.

Although *To the Lighthouse* thematizes the idea of using art to preserve life, it also subtly prompts us to consider how art might help us see and comprehend life's frailty and our perpetual need to vent the most excruciating emotions of mourning and grief. In a bout of nostalgic feelings, Lily wishes Mrs. Ramsay were brought back to life. Nostalgia here is overwhelming and forbidding. Loss hurts, and time is something that cannot be regained:

> Could it be, even for elderly people, that this was life?—startling, unexpected, unknown? For one moment she felt that if they both got up, here, now on the lawn, and demanded an explanation, why was it so short, why was it so inexplicable, said it with violence, as two fully equipped human beings from whom nothing should be hid might speak, then beauty would roll itself up; the space would fill; those empty flourishes would form into shape; if they shouted loud enough Mrs. Ramsay would return. "Mrs. Ramsay!" she said aloud, "Mrs. Ramsay!" The tears ran down her face.[29]

Mrs. Ramsay cannot be brought back to life, no matter how strong Lily's wish to do so is. Lamenting Mrs. Ramsay's absence seems to be beyond the powers of mollification. Only tears can express the poignancy of the lack of presence.[30] In her futile attempt to "summon" Mrs. Ramsay, Lily is a nostalgic, aptly defined by Boym: "The past for the nostalgic is not a duration but a per-

[28] Ibidem, 120.

[29] Ibidem, 125.

[30] A meticulous study of the embodied grief in *To the Lighthouse* is offered, for instance, by James Krasner (see James K r a s n e r, "Doubtful Arms and Phantom Limbs: Literary Portrayals of Embodied Grief," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 119, no. 2 (2004): 218–32).

fect snapshot of a moment, with no before and after."[31] Lily wishes the present moment to mirror the essence of her relationship with Mrs. Ramsay. Treasuring this impossible possibility, she lures herself by believing the empty space can be filled. Lily's nostalgia arises from lack; it is a longing for what she did not experience but what drives her into a sense of fullness. Jacobus puts this kind of longing that becomes Lily's obsession thus: "Missing Mrs. Ramsay is the theme of Lily's meditation, as she works on her picture, years later. Another name for this emptiness, this missing of the mother, might be nostalgia, or the longing to possess something one never had. Lily's cry of desolation ('to want and want and not to have,' p. 229) recognizes the impossibility of assuaging desire."[32] Lily's sense of loss is unspeakably painful as she realizes her love for Mrs. Ramsay cannot be reciprocated and, therefore, is agonizingly hurtful.

## NOSTALGIC MOOD, THE INEVITABILITY OF CHANGE, AND THE REALM OF FANTASY

The novel's pensive and nostalgic mood is oftentimes articulated via the rather unexpected interplay of pain and pleasure. Woolf navigates the poignancy and blissfulness in the characters' experience by means of poetical choreographing of the individual experience against the backdrop of the universe. In the novel's middle section, "Time Passes," an attempt to recollect and to understand by collecting anew is amplified by nature's presence in the existential alliance of imagination and vision: "As summer neared, as the evenings lengthened, there came to the wakeful, the hopeful, walking the beach, stirring the pool, imaginations of the strangest kind—of flesh turned to atoms which drove before the wind, of stars flashing in their hearts, of cliff, sea, cloud, and sky brought purposely together to assemble outwardly the scattered parts of the vision within"[33]. The image of assembling afresh "the scattered parts of the vision within" is the most touching expression of some impersonal force that operates beyond characters and is able to impact and orchestrate their inner experiences. The strength regained in the sparkling vivacity of the spring anticipates the fruition of the summer (marred though it becomes by the sudden, tragic, and premature death of Prue). With long, hopeful evenings, the world outside offers a magnified possibility of returning to and recollecting that which is gone but resurfaces as the most desirable. The cliffs, the sea, and the clouds are metaphorically brought together to participate in reclaiming life

[31] Svetlana B o y m, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 49.
[32] J a c o b u s, "'The Third Stroke': Reading Woolf with Freud," 104.
[33] W o o l f, *To the Lighthouse*, 93.

and re-expressing the inner stirrings of the soul. The outer reality resounds and is heard in the magnanimity of the human heart.

Nostalgia makes the necessary, provisional, alas unstable, connection with the past when the summer brings back the former beauty and makes it alive and flourishing in the imaginative world of the mind. Nature sustains and nurtures humanity's need to appreciate beauty, yet it also envelops the moment of being in darkness and facilitates its passing, evoking nostalgia. To feel a pull of nostalgia in the seascape—the novel's setting, which calls to mind images where time flirtatiously plays the role of both a creator and destroyer—seems to be natural. Woolf invokes the microcosm of a secluded island life, one lived according to nature's rhythm: the sea eats away the land; the waves, incessantly folding and unfolding, embody the alchemical reciprocity of constancy and changeability; bad weather prevents outdoor activity and prompts the inevitable concentration on one's interior life. The magnetizing power of the coastal area triggers a yearning for happiness, wholesomeness, and life-affirmation. What might have been and did not materialize fuels the realm of fantasy and is imaginatively reenacted in the characters' thoughts as they yearn for the past.

Woolf's experimentation with time in *To the Lighthouse* is a weighty factor contributing to the aura of nostalgia. She does not just endorse the idea of time's circular rather than linear nature but makes time the center and texture of the narrative:

> Woolf effectively launches a new temporal regime, bolstering and advancing modernist resistance to the hegemony of clock-time. That regime is generally seen as a nonhuman one in the sustained view it provides of the object world (the decaying interior of the Ramsays' summer house) and of the natural realm that surrounds and invades it. Evacuated of human presence, it follows that both these domains are also bereft of narrative order, sense impressions, and memory and of the network of associations on which all three are, to a great extent, mutually reliant.[34]

In "Time Passes," the disastrous forces of the war cause grief and suffering. Woolf infuses her portrayal of the Ramsays' summer cottage with deep hues of sadness and darkness, recalling the terror of conflict and the gloom of the loss of life. The aura of ominousness and despair surrounds the family house. As time and human lives cannot be regained, days and nights take on a cataclysmic value. David Sherman argues that Woolf develops in "Time Passes" an inimitable poetics of alterity, accentuating her understanding of time as one that is viewed through the prism of the death of the other.[35] He

[34] S h e e h a n, "Time as Protagonist in *To the Lighthouse*," 47–48.

[35] See David S h e r m a n, "A Plot Unraveling into Ethics: Woolf, Levinas, and 'Time Passes,'" *Woolf Studies Annual* 13 (2007): 160.

notices that "the fragile stillness and delicate lyricism around the absences of 'Time Passes,' are not abstract, but they convey 'the poetics of the subject's intuition of its responsibility towards others and especially of its involvement in the deaths of others.'"[36] In this way, according to the critic, Woolf anticipates philosophies that consider "the subject's response to the death of the other as the origin of time."[37]

"Time Passes" is the nostalgia part of the novel par excellence. Satiated with a longing for the household's former grandeur and liveliness, the image of the Ramsays' ruined house encapsulates the uncanny dimension of the bygone and the quintessential haunting nature of the past—its lingering into the present. The following passage illustrates how Woolf evokes feelings of misery and mournfulness that not just permeate the house but also indicate the inevitability of things passing:

> So loveliness reigned and stillness, and together made the shape of loveliness itself, a form from which life had parted; solitary like a pool at evening, far distant, seen from a train window, vanishing so quickly that the pool, pale in the evening, is scarcely robbed of its solitude, though once seen. Loveliness and stillness clasped hands in the bedroom, and among the shrouded jugs and sheeted chairs even the prying of the wind, and the soft nose of the clammy sea airs, rubbing, snuffling, iterating, and reiterating their questions—"Will you fade? Will you perish?"—scarcely disturbed the peace, the indifference, the air of pure integrity, as if the question they asked scarcely needed that they should answer we remain.[38]

The intense, repeated, both voiced and unvoiced, question of life's dual nature of ephemerality and durability reverberates in the physical typography of the abandoned house. As the place is uninhabited, the question arises: who feels nostalgic? Whose compassionate attitude to home is powerfully expressed in "Time Passes"? The world of inanimate objects—jugs and chairs—participates in an existential dance with the elemental forces of the sea and wind and seems to contemplate the incessantly posed yet unanswerable query of what remains. Nature, oblivious to the past and indifferent to the future, takes on a personified solemnity, as if it understood the irresolvable distinction between "now" and "after." Integrity is strongly felt in the all-at-once human and non-human milieu, as if the issue of preserving or letting go were not perturbing anymore.

Transcendent tranquility engulfs the Ramsays' seaside residence while the sea wind intermittently asserts its presence, rendering the house susceptible to both the creative and destructive forces of the seascape. If it is suggested that

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[36] Ibidem.
[37] Ibidem.
[38] W o o l f, *To the Lighthouse*, 91.

time is the protagonist in *To the Lighthouse*,[39] the Ramsays' house can be viewed as the novel's character, on a par with humans and likely to change. In the anthropomorphized portrait of the house, time tosses the household's spirit, and the nonphysical element in the physical shape of things nostalgically partakes in the reenacting of the past. Yet now, the summer home is silent in the wordless voicing of the presences that are gone. Nothing can disturb a moment of recollection. Witnessing the present and the past, the cottage represents the bittersweet amalgamation of all at once possible and impossible. Can it retain whatever happens in the same, unadulterated form? Like a human being who ages and gets crooked and dismal, the house seems to cling to its "inner life"—the most welcome ghost of past grandeur. The summer's vivacity is met by the autumnal dread of passing away. Still alive and no longer buoyant, the summer chalet is a remnant of the past, silently imploring for the reconsideration of the passage of time. To preserve and arrest in time what is fleeting is a dreamer's task. However, the irredeemable takes its own, unforeseeable route to exist and to solidify.

The gradual, overwhelming darkness pouring into the Ramsays' summer house touches every spot and object. The metaphorical abysmal dark relentlessly deprives the interior of the house of any sign of humans dwelling in it.[40] It is the impenetrable night of not belonging, of the evil power that obscures vision and impairs understanding. The Great War exerts its calamitous effect on the house when its inhabitants depart. Gradually, signs of human presence are no longer discernible, and obscurity reigns:

> Nothing stirred in the drawing-room or in the dining-room or on the staircase. Only through the rusty hinges and swollen sea-moistened woodwork certain airs, detached from the body of the wind (the house was ramshackle after all) crept round corners and ventured indoors. Almost one might imagine them, as they entered the drawing-room questioning and wondering, toying with the flap of hanging wall-paper, asking, would it hang much longer, when would it fall?[41]

Quenched is not only the light of the lamps and the moon but, equally dramatically, the light of the human heart and mind. Years later, Cam, James, and Mr. Ramsay nostalgically return to their summer house, formerly enjoyed as a place of gaiety and carelessness. The house ceased to be the space of a joyous dwelling and is rather a place haunted by the reminiscences of former blissfulness. This peculiar homecoming, however, takes on a deeply symbolic

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[39] See S h e e h a n, "Time as Protagonist in *To the Lighthouse*."

[40] For a thorough study of Woolf's use of language to evoke boundless and inexorable darkness as a symbol of the irrevocability of death, see, e.g., Sally M i n o g u e, "Was It a Vision? Structuring Emptiness in *To the Lighthouse*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 21, no. 2 (1997): 288–89.

[41] W o o l f, *To the Lighthouse*, 89.

meaning as its aim is to make James's childish dream of the expedition to the lighthouse come true.

Woolf draws a picture of the house in which the human presence is expected to be strongly felt and yet, on a physical, experiential level, is no longer there:

> So with the lamps all put out, the moon sunk, and a thin rain drumming on the roof a downpouring of immense darkness began. Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness which, creeping in at keyholes and crevices, stole round window blinds, came into bedrooms, swallowed up here a jug and basin, there a bowl of red and yellow dahlias, there the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers. Not only was furniture confounded; there was scarcely anything left of body or mind by which one could say, "This is he" or "This is she." Sometimes a hand was raised as if to clutch something or ward off something, or somebody groaned, or somebody laughed aloud as if sharing a joke with nothingness.[42]

The clash between the assumed obviousness of presence and the painful emptiness discerned in every nook and cranny of the household reminds us of the Heideggerian notion of absence as a mode of presence.[43] Absence is here not a lack but rather an elusive yet paradoxically perceived presence. Even though the house is deserted and vacant, the physical absence of people is profoundly felt as a lingering, eerie presence that establishes the location as a human home.

The specific nature of absence in presence in relation to nostalgic feelings is effectively articulated by Roberta Rubenstein. She speaks of nostalgia in terms of the "dis-ease"[44] of different "degrees of intensity and yearning"[45] and defines it as

> painful awareness, the expression of grief for something lost, the absence of which continues to produce significant emotional distress. Most individuals experience such loss not merely as separation from someone or something but as an absence that continues to occupy a palpable emotional space as a presence—what I term the *presence of absence.* The felt absence of a person or place assumes form and occupies imaginative space that may come to possess an individual.[46]

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[42] W o o l f, *To the Lighthouse*, 88–89.

[43] See H e i d e g g e r, *Being and Time*, 343. For further insights on Heidegger's understanding of absence as a mode of presence see, e.g., Richard P o l t, *Heidegger on Presence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025); Ted S a d l er, *Heidegger and Aristotle: The Question of Being* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000), 77–78; Andrzej W i e r c i ń s k i, *Existentia Hermeneutica: Understanding as the Mode of Being the World* (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2019), 493.

[44] Roberta R u b e n s t e i n, *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women's Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 5.

[45] Ibidem, 5.

[46] Ibidem.

The strongly felt *presence of absence* and *presence in absence* are two important sentiments that Woolf evokes in her deeply lyrical narrative and allows us to discern as constitutive of nostalgia's poignancy.

Significantly, in "Time Passes," the sensation of absence, which seems to mean presence, is juxtaposed against the all-pervading dilapidation and desolation. The combined effect of absence and emptiness produces nostalgic feelings of a rather intolerable nature. All the sounds of nature, heard in the unoccupied house, appear to be folding into this matchless silence and barrenness:

> Nothing it seemed could break that image, corrupt that innocence, or disturb the swaying mantle of silence which, week after week, in the empty room, wove into itself the falling cries of birds, ships hooting, the drone and hum of the fields, a dog's bark, a man's shout, and folded them round the house in silence. Once only a board sprang on the landing; once in the middle of the night with a roar, with a rupture, as after centuries of quiescence, a rock rends itself from the mountain and hurtles crashing into the valley, one fold of the shawl loosened and swung to and fro. [47]

The "swaying mantle of silence" perfectly expresses the overriding impact of life departing the Ramsays' summer house. This poignant landscape, stigmatized by the shattering forces of death and loss, like a living human being, is cognizant of the occasional ruptures and sounds, and its monotonous, repetitive aliveness is encapsulated in the image of a shawl loosened and swinging back and forth. The silent, almost unnoticeable to-and-fro movement is part of the overall pattern of Being, whence repetition is constitutive of its core and nostalgia is a form of rebellion against the passage of time.

The incomprehensibility of the loss of life in Woolf's novel reveals the aporia of mourning: "The deaths in 'Time Passes' put us in the position of failed ethical subjects, removed from the mortality of the other but pained by this removal. This pain is the animation of ethics itself. Woolf gives us our ethicality, not simply as our mourning for the other, but as our mourning for our own ethical limitations, our failure to enter into the mournful exteriority of living."[48] The many deaths in the family—Mrs. Ramsay's, Prue's, and Andrew's—impair the joy of James's dream of an expedition to the lighthouse coming true. To convey the unconveyable reality of nature and humans' participation in the nostalgic reconstruction of the past, Woolf uses the satiated with poetic lyricism image of the human and the non-human entangled paths: "paths and the lawn, thick and knotted with the lives they had lived there."[49] These seminal words encapsulate not only the cohabitation of the human and

[47] W o o l f, *To the Lighthouse*, 91.
[48] S h e r m a n, "A Plot Unraveling into Ethics: Woolf, Levinas, and 'Time Passes,'" 176.
[49] W o o l f, *To the Lighthouse*, 116.

the natural world in Woolf's narrative but her artistry in eliciting nostalgia through the psychological projection of the states of the mind onto a scrap of land that becomes the "living" testimony to life's occurrences.

## THE FLEETING MOMENT AND THE EXIGENCY TO MEDITATE ON THE PAST

The necessity to arrest the moment in its profound meaning and perfectibility is rendered in Woolf's poetic language through compelling imagery. In the excerpt below, she employs the touching yet paradoxical semblance of an act of burying (protecting) and humanity's desperate longing to preserve the bygone. The past shines like the Biblical precious pearl, which a merchant finds and buries to make it last (see Matthew 13:46, KJV). Nostalgia feeds the human desire to question and violate the pastness of the past, to illuminate the bygone so that it may beam a new light. In a futile attempt to make the moment last, Mrs. Ramsay "buries" it in a hole in the sand. This action expresses the irresistible desire to preserve the fecundity of the life-giving presence of the present moment in its passing:

> Mrs. Ramsay sat silent. She was glad, Lily thought, to rest in silence, uncommunicative; to rest in the extreme obscurity of human relationships. Who knows what we are, what we feel? Who knows even at the moment of intimacy, This is knowledge? Aren't things spoilt then, Mrs. Ramsay may have asked (it seemed to have happened so often, this silence by her side) by saying them? Aren't we more expressive thus? The moment at least seemed extraordinarily fertile. She rammed a little hole in the sand and covered it up, by way of burying in it the perfection of the moment. It was like a drop of silver in which one dipped and illumined the darkness of the past.[50]

The symbolic act of covering the hole in the sand is evocative of nostalgia's secret power to create a recollection that will stand out in memory firmly, irradiated by the imagination.

It is noteworthy to see how the fundamental impossibility of capturing the fleeting moment is conveyed in the novel also through the characters' potent reflections. Cam's rumination, which follows her falling into a reflective mood, is an instrument of communicating nostalgic tension. Viewing the Ramsays' former place of dwelling through her eyes—the one who survived the war—we are invited to enter the whimsical terrain of nostalgia:

[50] Ibidem, 119.

> But Cam could see nothing. She was thinking how all those paths and the lawn, thick and knotted with the lives they had lived there, were gone: were rubbed out; were past; were unreal, and now this was real; the boat and the sail with its patch; Macalister with his earrings; the noise of the waves—all this was real. Thinking this, she was murmuring to herself, "We perished, each alone," for her father's words broke and broke again in her mind, when her father, seeing her gazing so vaguely, began to tease her.[51]

Cam's reflective cogitation aptly attests to Boym's understanding of nostalgia, whose differentiation between reflective and restorative nostalgia[52] sheds light on our human necessity to both re-collect and restore the bygone. The focus on the sheer physicality of the experience of the trip to the lighthouse helps render an attempt to reinstate the reality that is gone. And the juxtaposition of the past, which is unreal, with the present, described as alive and real, aids the reader in acknowledging the gravity of this recuperative journey.

The line from "Castaway," a poem by William Cowper (an English poet and hymnodist) that Cam is murmuring, amplifies the pervasive sensation of time passing and people passing away. The poetic voice here expresses the grandeur of human solitude in dying. The impact of Cowper's poem and the poet's personal history on Woolf's creation of the novel's mood and the character of Mr. Ramsay cannot be overestimated. As Lund notes:

> So powerful is Cowper's story, symbolically embedded in "The Castaway," that in a variety of significant ways it serves as a literary precursor to Woolf's portrait of Mr. Ramsay, a soul who seems similarly tortured by his own fears of failure and isolation. The association of Ramsay, his real-life model Leslie Stephen, and William Cowper came easily, since Stephen, like his daughter, was deeply drawn to Cowper's history. Stephen's fascination with this peculiar poet is revealed even in The Dictionary of National Biography. While Stephen often dispenses with dukes, generals, and other notables in a column or two, his entry on Cowper runs to several pages.[53]

Tracing the intricate intertextual connections between Woolf's narrative and Cowper's poem, Lund gives a meticulous account of the story behind her choice of the seemingly insignificant poem that exerted an enormous influence on the development of her narrative.

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[51] Ibidem, 116.

[52] Boym differentiates between the two faces of nostalgia in the following way: "Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance" (B o y m, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41).

[53] Roger D. L u n d, "We Perished Each Alone: 'The Castaway' and *To the Lighthouse*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 16, no. 1 (1989): 80.

The echoes of Cowper are inasmuch surprising as they genuinely enhance the sense of despair and forebodingness that permeate the novel. Lund explicates the influence of Cowper on Stevens, Virginia's father, and how this is reflected in her novel in the following way:

> Critics have briefly noted parallels between Cowper's account of nautical heroism in "The Castaway" and Ramsay's own heroic fantasies, but no one has yet observed just how closely Cowper's spiritual despair (articulated in "The Castaway") approximates the self-absorption and self-pity of Mr. Ramsay, or the extent to which Woolf's allusions to "The Castaway" remind us that behind the portrait of her father lies the history of William Cowper as a kind of biographical precursor.... Like "poor William Cowper there at Olney," Stevens suffered from private terrors, incommunicable (if nonetheless irritating or baffling) to his friends and family. This pathetic self-indulgency was felt with special poignancy by his daughter, Virginia, who condemns her father for "the self-dramatization, attitudinizing, the histrionic element, breast beating, the groaning which played so large a part, so disgusting a part in these scenes" (Woolf, 125).[54]

There is no doubt that Woolf extensively drew on Cowper's poem while creating Mr. Ramsay. "The Castaway" features in her narrative as a multifaceted, symbolic expression of the fear of dying, which occasions an invocation of the novelist's own tragic family backdrop and urges us to consider the human predicament of incommunicability and self-absorption as lasting consequences of trauma.

The knowledge of the rich history behind Woolf's use of "The Castaway" helps us better understand Mr. Ramsay's overemotional behavior and how mesmerizingly his drama affected other characters. Reciting Cowper, Cam is gazing vaguely, as if stupefied by the impossibility of apprehending the terrors of war along with the emptiness of the present time without her mother and the unexpected closeness to her father. Now she is able to see the human face of the tyrant who has become compassionate and not only demanding compassion: "He was shabby, and simple, eating bread and cheese; and yet he was leading them on a great expedition where, for all she knew, they would be drowned."[55] Cam remains alarmed, as she knows that the nostalgic longing for what might have been accomplished but did not happen magnifies the terror of death if the risky trip to the lighthouse ends up in calamity.

Cowper's words: "We perished, each alone," which ominously intensify the fear of death, recited both by Mr. Ramsay and Cam, sensitize us to the many meanings imbued in the expedition to the lighthouse, which is as much a danger as a chance for the consummation of the seemingly (im)possible.

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[54] Ibidem, 82.

[55] W o o l f, *To the Lighthouse*, 143.

It is precisely the inter-weaving of excitedness, precariousness, and the sense of the dream coming true that bespeaks the uncanny aspect of the excursion years after it was longed for. The nostalgic recreation of a child's frenzy is the very fabric of the sanity of the present time. The bereaved father, his depleted circle of children, and Lily constitute a group of survivors touched by the unspeakable inevitability of passing away and desperately longing for the wounds of the past to be healed. The healing, however, presents itself more as a mirage. As Sherman avers, in the novel "time passing is the untraceable signature of the other, especially of the other's death, in which the self is involved in ways that it cannot fully represent it to itself."[56]

Cam's vision is clouded by the intense feeling of regret. Oddly enough, her incantatory, repetitive murmuring of the poem's line also serves a therapeutic purpose. Facing the family tragedy anew (the death of Mrs. Ramsay, Prue, and Andrew mar the family reunion), she resorts to the formulaic mantra—the rhythm of the poetic word—to find solace and oppose the forces of darkness that have brought destruction and grieving. The act of re-citation is nostalgia's work in re-opening the reality that is terrifying and untamed and paving a way to possibly conquer and apprehend it. The possibility of reflection—the central motif of the novel—is cogently encapsulated in Mrs. Ramsay's question: "But what have I done with my life?"[57] Has she lost her life carrying out innumerable duties? Has she found love and fulfillment? In the metaphysical oneness with the light coming from the lighthouse,[58] Mrs. Ramsay recognizes the ultimate importance of reviewing the past. A perfect socialite and communicator, Mrs. Ramsay is also a heart-rending contemplative. Meditating on the meaning of her existence, she sees life's ephemerality as measured against its tangibility. Her query, which suggests an introspective journey by addressing the topic of life's purpose and the threat of the existential abyss, challenges us to reflect on the past and re-establish a connection with the potential for self-realization.

Mrs. Ramsay's anxious doubt reverberates in the actual expedition to the lighthouse. It expresses necessity but also the possibility of re-collection and reflection on living out the tension related to the dialectical nature of the *eventing* of human existence: potentiality and actuality. Mrs. Ramsay's self-inspection and the recollective and restorative pilgrimage to the lighthouse encourage us to view the past not merely as a finite figuration of that which was, but rather as forever open to the prospect of re-figuration. With the backdrop of the compelling force of Mrs. Ramsay's dilemma, the journey to the lighthouse takes

[56] S h e r m a n, "A Plot Unraveling into Ethics: Woolf, Levinas, and "Time Passes,'" 162.

[57] W o o l f, *To the Lighthouse*, 58.

[58] For an exploration of the meaning imbued in Mrs. Ramsay's experience of the metaphysical oneness with the beam of light coming from the lighthouse, see H o ł d a, *On Beauty and Being*, 66–72.

on a symbolic value, highlighting the quintessential significance of human agency and the meaningfulness of life. The many ways in which Mrs. Ramsay's uncertainty can resonate with us disclose nostalgia as an opportunity to seize the unseizable pastness of the bygone and to deeply understand ourselves and our identity. Nostalgia is neither austere, distant, secondary, nor dilutes the significance of comprehending life's core. On the contrary, it perfectly fits with the human exigency to revisit, reorient, and self-understand.

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An exploration of Woolf's evocations of loss, grief, and reconciliation in her novel *To the Lighthouse* sensitizes us to the open-ended nature of re-imagining the past. The past re-lived in the present begets an opportunity for new understandings to arise. The analysis of Woolf's narrative reveals that re-imagining the past is a way forward that works toward an understanding of affliction and building reconciliation. Reconciliation, however, is not a facile acceptance of the past but, rather, a new opening that enables us to reorient our sadness and despair and reconsider the meaning behind the traumatic events of death and loss. The novel's tripartite structure—"The Window," "Time Passes," and "The Lighthouse," evoking respectively conditional promise, the passage of time, and the recuperation of what was lost—is pivotal for an understanding of Woolf's dramatization of the intrinsic connection between nostalgia, loss, time, and memory.

Woolf's novel shows how the past is retrieved in a variety of ways, including through the rambling avenues of memory, misfortune, fantasy, meditation, regret, and spiritual suffering. The novelist allows us to travel with her characters on two important, nostalgic journeys: the aesthetic one, which is accomplished through a creative process, and the physical (alongside the psychical) to the location of one's dreams. Woolf reveals how the process of creating a painting she depicts in her narrative partakes in the disclosure of meaning. Grief and nostalgia paint Lily's painting. Much like the meaning of the lighthouse, the truth in her picture is not something inherently present or to be assumed, but it is gradually being unveiled.

Choosing to epitomize the reconciliatory paths of a nostalgic look backwards through two kinds of recollective voyaging, Woolf shows the possibility of the wounded self to heal and be reconciled. Lily attains peace of mind by completing a work of art. Her artistic, recuperative enterprise is paralleled by a physical journey—an expedition to the lighthouse, enacted years after it had been dreamed of. James's crushing disappointment is healed when he re-enters his memory and, through accomplishing what was out of reach for him

in his childhood, reframes his perspective. The recollection of the hoped-for and formerly unrealized dream of a trip to the lighthouse is both daunting and stimulating. The realization of the dream enables him to face the past. The aesthetic and existential re-imagining and reconsidering of the past in Woolf's narrative is a hermeneutically informed process in which the unveiling of truth is characterized by the interplay of unconcealment and concealment. Using Heidegger's notion of *aletheia* allows us to see Woolf's inimitable way of showing how meaning is disclosed in the interaction of unveiling and veiling of truth.

James harbors his boyhood aspiration within his heart for years to learn that the lighthouse—representing his quest for knowledge—conveys a complex message wherein each revelation is concurrently the space of new concealments. James's significant discovery regarding the process of perception, cogitation, and comprehension is matched by one that accompanies the act of artistic creation in the novel. The evolution of the artistic endeavor—Lily painting the family portrait—constitutes a two-fold re-visitation. Lily reexamines and reassesses her work each time she approaches her easel and when she resumes painting the portrait in the novel's third section. Every moment of unveiling that she experiences while painting is also a moment of veiling when the seized reality speaks anew, generating new senses. The truth about the past appears as a space that is to be inhabited and reread rather than as a monolithic reality.

Lily and James's reconciliation with what is no longer present acknowledges the boundaryless nature of understanding. Re-visiting the past begets new interpretative avenues and understandings. Instead of an unsettling—as nothing seems to be resolvable—and apparently final farewell to the bygone, nostalgic reminiscing generates a tangible possibility to understand the past anew, differently, and more deeply. Woolf discloses how mental recreation of the past aids us to come to terms with it. The nostalgic, creative movement backward is, at the same time, an imaginative movement forward. Her supremely rich poetics of loss, torment, and reconciliation testifies to the intricately intermingling pathways of sorrow, regret, and pain, which, through memories and imagination's powerful work, can reinvent the past and make a particular moment live into the present. By interlacing threads of memory and creativity, Woolf demonstrates the immense ability of the human spirit to recover, find solace, and surpass its own limitations. Understanding, as unfolding in time and time-dependent, prompts us to take a closer look at the importance of the novel's axis—the conditional promise whose fulfillment happens in time. By applying Ricoeur's ethics of promise, we can more deeply apprehend the significance of time as an element construing the reality of the declared word, which one expects to come true. Scrutinizing the promised

word and time interdependence enables us to better understand the possibility of experiencing consolation in the face of an acute sense of loss.

Thematizing the possibility of preserving life via art, *To the Lighthouse* calls on us to meditate on art's role in expressing the agonizing feelings of mourning and regret in a nostalgic return to the past. Her drawing on Boym's distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia prompts us to recognize in Woolf's narrative the significance of nostalgia's recuperative power. Through Cam's contemplative attempt to re-collect but also to see the re-imagined in its power to restore, Woolf emphasizes nostalgia's capacity to bridge the past that is no longer real and the present that is tangibly alive. Recalling the bygone is shown as a life-uplifting and life-affirming activity that works towards restoration. While the narrative progresses, we learn that nostalgia helps intuit and understand life's fragility and can serve as a revitalizing power that makes atonement possible. Recollecting the painful past in Woolf's narrative is, thus, not narrowed down to lamentation, resentment, or grievance. Human life as *existentia hermeneutica* is open and opens itself to examining the past repeatedly as a means of interpretation that heals, redeems, and enlivens.

Engaging with the ideas of Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Boym in the hermeneutic reading of Woolf's narrative advances our understanding of her poetics of nostalgia and her intricately nuanced depictions of grief and anxiety. The three perspectives, complementing each other, sensitize us to locate the creative re-imagining of the past as happening within nostalgia's healing and reinvigorating power. Nostalgia's capacity for reconciliation of the present with the past—its revitalizing aptitude (Boym)—interconnects the apprehension of life in its finite nature (Heidegger) with the significance of a promise that demands transcending the constriction of time that overpowers human existence (Ricoeur). The reading of Woolf's poetic narrative alongside those philosophies discloses how, in the torture of loss, human existence remains the space of renewal and gratitude. Remembrances and grief, when re-addressed and re-imagined, touch the center of our being as humans and entreat us to broaden our interior realms. Woolf's lyrical embodiments of nostalgia reveal that although we cannot remain unscathed throughout life, re-imagining the past, paradoxically, also the heartbreaking one, uncovers new pathways of comprehension, reaching beyond the self-imposed boundaries and originating unexpected opportunities for recovery.

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## ABSTRACT / ABSTRAKT

Małgorzata HOŁDA, Re-Creating the Past: Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and the Poetics of Loss, Grief, and Reconciliation

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The article explores Virginia Woolf's poetics of loss, grief, and reconciliation in her novel *To the Lighthouse.* Woolf uses her meticulously structured narrative to examine the implications of humanity's propensity and exigency to revisit the past. The retrieval of the bygone permeates the novel in multifarious ways: through memory's meandering pathways, sorrowfulness, fantasizing, meditation, regret, and spiritual pain. Above all, Woolf invites us to embark, alongside her characters, on two recollective journeys: aesthetic, via a creative process, and a psychical-physical trip to the place of one's dreams. Both aesthetic and physical voyaging prompt a possibility to reconsider the past; to examine, interpret, and understand. This essay draws upon diverse angles of vision to hermeneutically and, thus, inclusively investigate the theme of nostalgia in the novel. It draws on Martin Heidegger's philosophy of facticity and *aletheia* alongside Paul Ricoeur's conceptualization of promise. The essay also uses Svetlana Boym's distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia. Employing these perspectives furthers the still underdeveloped study of the poetics of nostalgia in Woolf's oeuvre.

Keywords: Heidegger, Ricoeur, Woolf, Boym, loss, grief, nostalgia

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Małgorzata HOŁDA – Rekonstruowanie przeszłości. Poetyka straty, smutku i pojednania w *Do latarni morskiej* Virginii Woolf
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W artykule poddano analizie poetykę utraty, smutku i pojednania w powieści Virginii Woolf *Do latarni morskiej*. W misternie skonstruowanej narracji Woolf penetruje konsekwencje doświadczanej przez człowieka konieczności i skłonności do powracania do przeszłości. Odzyskiwanie tego, co minione, przenika powieść w różnorodny sposób: w krętych ścieżkach pamięci, smutku, fantazjowania, medytacji, żalu i duchowego bólu. Przede wszystkim Woolf zaprasza czytelnika do wyruszenia wraz z jej bohaterami w dwie podróże wspomnieniowe: estetyczną, poprzez proces twórczy, i duchowo-fizyczną do miejsca wcześniejszych marzeń. Obie zachęcają do ponownego rozważania przeszłości, do wniknięcia w nią, interpretowania i zrozumienia. W eseju wykorzystano różne perspektywy krytyczne, aby hermeneutycznie, a zatem inkluzywnie, zbadać temat nostalgii w powieści. Odwołano się do Martina Heideggera filozofii faktyczności i koncepcji prawdy (jako alethei), a także do konceptualizacji obietnicy zaproponowanej przez Paula Ricoeura. Wykorzystano również dokonane przez Svetlanę Boym rozróżnienie nostalgii refleksyjnej i odradzającej. Zastosowanie tych perspektyw ma na celu pogłębienie wciąż niewystarczających badań nad poetyką nostalgii w twórczości Woolf.

Słowa kluczowe: Heidegger, Ricoeur, Woolf, Boym, strata, żałoba, nostalgia

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