ALLISON PEASE

Introduction

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) is a landmark achievement in modernist fiction and one of the most widely read novels written in English. Readers turn to the novel for its radiant prose, its nostalgic depiction of familial love and loss, or its audacious rendering of the passage of time. Some revel in its feminist wit and resistance, its delicate and diffuse portrayal of minds in thought, or its masterful use of literary allusion. There are abundant pleasures to be found in the text. Yet for all of its pleasures, *To the Lighthouse* is not an accessible novel. First-time readers are frequently baffled by its apparent lack of plot and rapid shifts in perspective, and seasoned scholars can be overwhelmed by the amount of criticism one should know. With so many readers interested in *To the Lighthouse* and so much information available on it, this *Cambridge Companion* seeks to illuminate the novel's genesis, major ideas, and formal innovations while also summarizing and advancing important critical debate.

The novel opens on a September's day several years before World War I at the Scottish isle vacation home of an English family, the Ramsays. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay and their eight children host a number of guests, including two young women: Lily Briscoe, an unmarried dilettante painter, and Minta Doyle who, in the course of the opening section "The Window," becomes engaged to one of two young male guests, Paul Raley. Charles Tansley, the other young male, is an insecure and disagreeable working-class pupil of Mr. Ramsay's, eager to impress. The guest list is completed with Augustus Carmichael, an opium-addicted poet whose work later becomes popular during the war, and William Bankes, a widower whom Mrs. Ramsay hopes will marry Lily Briscoe. The action of the first section is limited: Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay disagree about whether the weather will permit a boat trip to the lighthouse that is visible from their home, a trip much desired by their youngest son James; Mr. Ramsay walks around the grounds of the house chanting poetry to himself and worrying over the limits of his intelligence and career; Mrs. Ramsay takes Charles Tansley into town with her to run errands and check in on an

ailing woman, then poses for Lily's painting; Lily and Mr. Bankes walk to the edge of the garden and look out over the sea; the children play on the lawn; Mrs. Ramsay knits a stocking for the boy at the lighthouse; the young people take a walk on the beach and, after getting engaged to Paul, Minta loses her grandmother's brooch. In the evening, the entire party convenes for dinner, after which Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay read and doze, and share small talk loaded with emotional intent before going to bed. It is in many respects an unremarkable day. But as any serious reader of *To the Lighthouse* will note, a recitation of the action of the first section of the novel misses entirely what "really happens" and what the novel is about. For more important than outward action are the inner lives of the characters, their private thoughts imbued with imagination, memory, and fear, and their frustration at their inability truly to communicate with – or know – the other characters. Shot through the first section and the third section of the novel is an acute awareness of what the middle section of the novel makes clear by its title, "Time Passes."

"Time Passes" creates a ten-year interval in the story, marked mostly by the passing of time through natural processes of destruction and decay that are brought to a close by the human agency of Mrs. McNab, a local servant who prepares the house for the visit by a reduced number of the original party. As the reader learns in short, bracketed sentences in the second section, Mrs. Ramsay, Prue Ramsay, and Andrew Ramsay have all succumbed to the forces of time and destruction and have died in this brief passage of time. Thus the third and final section of the novel, "The Lighthouse," centers on Mr. Ramsay and his two children Cam and James, now teenagers, finally taking the much-delayed family trip to the lighthouse by boat. Lily Briscoe watches the boat, the sea, and the lighthouse as she finishes the painting she began ten years before and Mr. Bankes looks on. Mrs. Ramsay's absence is a veritable presence for all of the characters in this section as each reconciles with loss, time, and the desire to capture, even momentarily, the essence of life and its meaning. But what things might mean, the novel consistently makes clear, is a matter of perspective, both in time and in space, and to capture that meaning, one needs, as Lily thinks, "fifty pairs of eyes to see with" (303). And so it is with *To the Lighthouse*: to capture its meanings, its beauties, its curiosities, one cannot rely upon a single perspective. Accordingly, this *Companion* has been arranged to provide a variety of perspectives and to come at the novel multiply.

To the Lighthouse has generated nearly nine decades of commentary, as Jean Mills chronicles in Chapter 13, and this volume mirrors the arc of that commentary by exploring (1) the novel in relation to Woolf's life, (2) its form and formal innovations, (3) its thematic and philosophical preoccupations, and (4) its political configurations of gender, race, and class.

Introduction

Unlike the work of say, T. S. Eliot or James Joyce, key modernist writers alongside whose works Woolf's novels of the 1920s have long been compared, literary criticism of Virginia Woolf's fiction is unusual for the degree to which it is informed by her biography, diaries, and letters. Those looking to understand *To the Lighthouse* frequently begin, as Anne Fernald does in the first chapter, with Woolf's diaries and notebooks in which she details her plans to write the novel and examines the biographical likeness of the Ramsay family to her own. Woolf was a meticulous literary record keeper and planner, and the fascinating documents she left behind can guide us as to her intentions. Yet inasmuch as Fernald's chapter informs us of the raw materials from which Woolf constructed *To the Lighthouse*, Fernald is quick to point out, as is illustrated clearly in Hans Walter Gabler's chapter on the genesis of the novel from draft to published text(s), that the novel is more craft than autobiography, and it is in the craftsmanship that *To the Lighthouse* becomes art.

To shape life into art, one must represent what one sees, and thus begins one of the novel's meditative pleasures. Who, in the novel, is doing the apprehending and the shaping? How does form shape meaning? Michael Levenson's chapter on narrative perspective identifies the novel's abundance of representational resources and "perspectival virtuosity" and guides us through the continuous acts of seeing, hearing, knowing, and being that occur in the novel. In his reading of Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts as she knits a stocking, he shows how mental acts of "reflecting, reconsidering, ruminating, feeling stuck, feeling sure" inform a sequence that "moves through phases analogous to chapters in plot based on exterior life" (p. 22) while also exposing the limits of narrative knowledge. Emily Dalgarno explains that it is the *representation* of reality and perception that is at the heart of the relationship between philosophy and literature in *To the Lighthouse*. Dalgarno's chapter shows us not just the literal relationships between philosophy and life as depicted in the novel's main characters, but as depicted in the centuries of ideas about representation and knowing that the novel and its critics have taken up. Further, she elucidates how questions the novel asks, such as "What does it all mean?" (225) or "What am I? What is this?" (196) are "like those of the Platonic dialogue in the sense that they ask for definitions as a means to engage the attention of the reader, and to prevent our taking for granted a vocabulary that includes not only *truth* but also *knowledge* and *love*" (p. 70). Suzanne Bellamy's chapter on the visual arts in the novel refines the representational focus to painting, centering on Lily Briscoe's painting as analogy and innovation in Woolf's verbal narrative. Bellamy shows us how Woolf's sister, Vanessa Bell, and the art critic Roger Fry influenced Woolf's ideas about formalist representation. This interest in

the symbolic and formalist nature of the novel has spawned a rich history of critique of the novel. Jane Goldman rounds out this volume's formalist consideration of the novel through a robust analysis of the novel's triadic structure, repeated motifs and words, and disarming use of parentheses and brackets. To comprehend Goldman's analysis of Woolf's use of the semicolon in the novel is to understand how a single hinge is responsible for holding up a cathedral.

Space and time are not just the shaping elements of *To the Lighthouse* but its thematic preoccupations. Paul Sheehan argues that Woolf's narrative creates a temporal regime outside of human jurisdiction in which time *is* the "main event." Comparing Woolf's use of time to other modern authors concerned with it, Marcel Proust, Walter Pater, and Henri Bergson, Sheehan shows that the narrative of *To the Lighthouse* is shaped by three different time orientations, the first section looking forward to the future, the second section oriented to the present, and the third section looking backward in time. Space represents a similar plenitude of possibility, as Melba Cuddy-Keane shows in her chapter on space and cognition. Against the claims of reviewers and readers that Woolf's characters were practically without bodies, Cuddy-Keane finds that bodies pervade *To the Lighthouse*, showing us how perception can play a central role in cognition and how the knowing body moves in space to communicate its understanding. Hans Walter Gabler's chapter on genetic criticism further contributes to attention to Woolf's bodily orientation by arguing that Woolf writes "from emotions of her body and her memory" (p. 151). Thus Cuddy-Keane and Gabler formulate an important departure from the structuralist paradigm of literary criticism. In asking the question "can perception play a central role in cognition, with no need for concept formation to be involved?" (p. 59), Cuddy-Keane elides language as the tool by which meaning is created, a question integral to *To the Lighthouse*.

While *To the Lighthouse* is a complex artistic construct that self-reflexively and philosophically questions its own status as an object of representation, it is also a product of its historical moment and a representation of the middle-class British culture from which it sprang. Thus examinations of the political configurations of the novel are very much rooted in the world as it existed in the first decades of the twentieth century. Ana Parejo Vadillo's chapter on generational difference reminds us that the novel is very much about generational change from Mrs. Ramsay's Victorian "Angel in the House" to the New Woman that Lily Briscoe represents. Parejo Vadillo provides biographical and textual evidence to argue that while the novel searches for the modern, it is "significantly hung up on the past" (p. 123). As Parejo Vadillo shows, the codes of behavior observed in the novel have specific Victorian and

fin-de-siècle origins and correlates to Coventry Patmore's Victorian poem, *The Angel in the House* (1854), and Victorian critic John Ruskin's essay "Of Queen's Gardens" (1865) on the duties of men and women. Gabrielle McIntire maintains in her chapter on feminism and gender in the novel that those codes of behavior, most notably marriage and cultural patriarchy, are exposed to critique not only through what is represented but also through the forms of representation. The novel, published just one year before Woolf delivered her lectures to Newnham and Girton Colleges that would later be published as *A Room of One's Own*, celebrates female imagination and productivity amid structural paucity while portraying men as sterile and selfish. Where race and class are frequently lumped into the same critique with gender, Urmila Seshagiri and Kathryn Simpson provide appraisals that confirm a complexity of attitudes in *To the Lighthouse*. Seshagiri finds that although *To the Lighthouse* is one of Woolf's least explicit works on race or Empire, the identities of the characters in *To the Lighthouse* are rooted in racial difference made evident through Empire. Seshagiri claims, "Reading Lily Briscoe's artistic development in the context of early-twentieth-century English formalism's racially derived doctrines reveals how *To the Lighthouse* transforms modern English selfhood" (p. 100). Lily Briscoe's "little Chinese eyes" elevate her artistically and inform her alternative vision. There is no getting around the fact that Woolf was a privileged woman who had servants her whole life and wrote very little about the working class in her novels. Yet despite claims that Virginia Woolf was a snob, a question Woolf famously asked of herself, Simpson finds her perspectives on class "inherently contradictory," self-reflexive, and illustrative of both Woolf's social status and artistic aspirations. Because Woolf was composing the "Time Passes" section of the novel in 1926 during a General Strike in which miners across Britain were joined by transport workers and other laborers in bringing the country to a halt, she may have been more alert to issues of class than otherwise. Many attribute Mrs. McNab's presence in the novel to this event.

The ever-replenishing meanings yielded by the novel resonate through all of the chapters in this volume. Each chapter offers a particular, if limited, vantage from which to approach the novel; each chapter recognizes the contradictions inherent in its own readings. If the novel's title teaches us anything, it is about indefinite closure. One ventures *to* the lighthouse again and again, in time, in place, in body, in perspective. What is best about each "vision" is that it need never be "simply one thing."

1

ANNE E. FERNALD

To the Lighthouse in the Context of Virginia Woolf's Diaries and Life

To the Lighthouse (1927) is Virginia Woolf's most autobiographical novel. Readers often find confirmation of the novel's autobiographical elements in Woolf's 1939 comment, "Until I was in the forties – I could settle the date by seeing when I wrote *To the Lighthouse* – the presence of my mother obsessed me. I could hear her voice, see her, imagine what she would do or say as I went about my day's doings" (*MB* 80). That parenthetical phrase linking the composition of the novel with the end of Woolf's obsession with her mother confirms what seems intuitively true: that *To the Lighthouse* is at once a formally innovative modernist text and a deeply personal account of a Victorian family. Woolf's comment encourages us to look for parallels between the Stephens and the Ramsays. Still, Woolf wrote those words linking Mrs. Ramsay to her mother in 1939, more than a decade after publishing *To the Lighthouse*. In investigating the links among Woolf's diary, her life, and the novel, we may begin with this late autobiography, but to understand the novel's genesis, our investigation should linger in the texts Woolf wrote during and before 1927. While this essay begins by tracing the biographical links, especially as recorded in Woolf's diaries, it moves on to explore how the diary reveals other information about the novel, Woolf's creative process, and the transformation of experience into art. In the end, the asymmetries between art and life have as much to teach us as the correspondences do.

Woolf's writing life began with her parents' deaths: Julia's in 1895, when Woolf was thirteen, and Leslie's in 1904. The Greek lessons that her father offered as solace when Julia died began Virginia's training as an intellectual. They fed her imagination and prepared her for the life of a serious reviewer. Leslie's death in 1904 freed Woolf to seek publication.[1] Nevertheless, her parents' early deaths mean that the diaries do not often provide daily descriptions of what it was like to be in the Stephen family as a child. While it is easy to find documentation of Woolf's mother's beauty and her father's stern intelligence, it can be hard to grasp their personalities. Two brief anecdotes from Woolf's private writing, both written long before either parent

was ill, help capture a taste of the parents whom Woolf commemorated in *To the Lighthouse*.

In the *Hyde Park Gate News*, a family newspaper, primarily written by the young Virginia, we hear of Mrs. Stephen, as she is called, shedding tears of pride when good school reports come for Thoby, and disputing with neighbors over an ill-behaved dog. In 1892, Virginia wrote about how the family came to get its own dog: "Mrs. Leslie Stephen though she is an ardent lover of rats is somewhat 'riled' by the way in which her favourites eat her provisions and therefore she has determined to get a dog. 'Not for pleasure but for business' as she told her offsprings."[2] Here, we see the dry twinkle of a mother who, pages before, has been complaining about a neighborhood dog and now finds herself needing one. We can almost hear her admonish the children ("her offsprings") not to think of this dog as a mere pet: he has a job. In *To the Lighthouse*, when Mrs. Ramsay reminds herself of her own private nicknames for Minta Doyle's parents, "the Owl and the Poker" (91), Woolf gives her character her mother's sly humor.

Anecdotes about Leslie Stephen's difficult character are easy to find; less common are simpler ones like this moment, from a letter to her half-brother George in 1900, in which Leslie Stephen appears as an irascible but affectionately tolerated old man: "Father is stretched at full length snoring on the sofa, and this annoys me so much that I can't write sense … He *must* go to a dentist. Could you not write and tell him so?" (*L*1 31). This image of his vulnerability and stubbornness and of Virginia's care for him helps us see why, in the midst of describing his tyranny, she also makes sure to include William Bankes's memory of him exclaiming "Pretty-pretty" over a "covey of little chicks" (37). Thus, when Lily and Mr. Ramsay arrive at "the blessed island of good boots" (238), we can deplore his unceasing demands for sympathy and be glad that he has gotten some.

Leslie Stephen (1832–1904) was a Victorian patriarch and intellectual whom Woolf both resented and revered. It is possible – and amusing – to construct a composite portrait, so that a biography of Leslie Stephen might include a description of Mr. Ramsay in confirmation of a character trait or, more commonly, a description of Mr. Ramsay might incorporate elements of Stephen's biography.[3] Reading *To the Lighthouse*, it is amusing to see the first editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* depicted as an anxious intellectual who views thought as "like the alphabet" (56), as if Woolf's father's dictionary dictated the simile in the fictional father's mind.

One of Mr. Ramsay's least attractive traits is his insistence that "it won't be fine" (12) tomorrow, that James will not be able to go to the lighthouse. This seems not to have been entirely based on Leslie Stephen. In 1892, the regatta in St. Ives was rained out, and it poured "with such a vengeance

that even Mr Stephen could not say that it was only 'a mere drizzle.'" Here, it is the children who "gave up all hope of going down to the beach," and Mr. Stephen who, when it clears, invites them to "come with him to see the matches,"[4] which they do, in spite of Julia Stephen, who "remonstrated that it was pouring."[5]

What was Julia Stephen like and how is Mrs. Ramsay like her?[6] In "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf writes, "there she was in the centre of that great Cathedral space which was childhood" (*MB* 81). In the third section of *To the Lighthouse*, Lily thinks back to sitting on the beach with Mrs. Ramsay and watching her silent and glad to be so: "Lily […] felt as if a door had opened, and one went in and stood gazing silently about in a high cathedral-like place, very dark, very solemn" (264). For a writer raised by celebrated Victorian agnostics, this placement of her mother at the heart of a cathedral – once in fiction, later in memoir – attests to the power of sacred imagery of the mother and of Woolf's desire to elevate her mother. It also preserves the fact that, because of Julia's great beauty, she was Edward Burne-Jones's model for his *Annunciation* (1879), a painting he completed the year after her marriage to Leslie Stephen.

Julia Prinsep Duckworth Stephen (née Jackson, 1846–1895) was a widow when she met Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, a widower. Her first husband, Herbert Duckworth, died in 1870 and left her with three small children (the youngest, Gerald, was just six weeks old). That first marriage had been happy, and Julia's grief at her young husband's death was intense, complete. Similarly, a legend of a prior life of intensity lies behind the link between Mrs. Ramsay's beauty and her sadness: "What was there behind it – her beauty, her splendour? Had he blown his brains out, they asked, had he died the week before they were married – some other, earlier lover, of whom rumours reached one?" (49). Woolf took pride in her mother's beauty, attaching meaning to it, as her characters attach meaning to Mrs. Ramsay's beauty. Moreover, Woolf consciously sought to capture this meaningful beauty in depicting Mrs. Ramsay. So, during a 1926 conversation with Rose Macaulay, Woolf reports herself having said, "Because she was so beautiful, I said, proud that R. M. should know this; & felt rather queer, to think how much of this there is in To the Lighthouse, & how all these people will read it & recognize poor Leslie Stephen and beautiful Mrs Stephen in it" (*D*3 61).

In her grief, Julia turned to charity work, especially focused on visiting the sick, a trait that Woolf also gave to Mrs. Ramsay. Julia's 1883 *Notes from Sick Rooms* offers a raft of advice for those laypeople who care for the sick. Practical and brisk, Woolf's mother offers her opinions on the irritation of having to listen to a nurse's inane remarks, how to bathe an invalid, and on

the miseries of dirty sheets: "Hairs are not so bad as crumbs, but they are very tormenting bed-fellows."[7] In making Mrs. Ramsay similarly charitable, similarly impatient – "No hospital on the whole island. It was a disgrace. Milk delivered at your door in London positively brown with dirt. It should be made illegal" (92–93) – Woolf gives a feminist point to the slightly random order in which her mother organized the short text of *Notes*: instead of writing a book, Mrs. Ramsay carries "a note-book and pencil with which she wrote down in columns carefully ruled for the purpose wages and spendings, employment and unemployment, in the hope that thus she would … become, what with her untrained mind she greatly admired, an investigator" (20). Elsewhere, Woolf has little patience for the charity work of aristocrats, but her discussion of Mrs. Ramsay's charity work emphasizes the paucity of opportunities for a bourgeois woman to make a contribution.[8]

To the Lighthouse's portrayal of Woolf's parents has frequently been noted; less commented upon is the extent to which she wrote herself into the novel in Cam, the second-youngest child in a family of eight. The outstanding exception is Elizabeth Abel's chapter on the siblings in *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis*, which emphasizes the psychoanalytic rather than the biographical parallels. Cam, whose nickname refers to the river that runs through Cambridge, has a lot in common with Woolf, who was once a tomboyish girl longing for an education.[9] In James, the youngest son bearing an Oedipal jealousy of a powerful father, Woolf depicts Adrian Stephen, her underappreciated younger brother who grew up to be a psychoanalyst.

As early as 1905, when she and Adrian made a pilgrimage back to Cornwall and Woolf recorded the trip in her diary, Woolf was writing to recapture her childhood summers. From 1882, the year of Woolf's birth, until 1894, the Stephen family had a lease on Talland House in Cornwall for the summer. Julia Stephen, Woolf's mother, died in May 1895, and no one in the family returned until Adrian and Virginia made that 1905 trip. Although at this time in her life, diary keeping is still an irregular habit, Woolf's diary of this journey is fairly complete. She took the time to record her first impressions of the place, and the house, upon her return: "It was dusk … so that there still seemed to be a film between us & the reality. We could fancy that … we should thrust it [the gate] open, & find ourselves among the familiar sights again" (*PA* 282). The fancy is a pleasant one, and Woolf sustains it for a few more sentences, detailing the "stone urns, against the bank of tall flowers," among other details unchanged since her childhood, "But yet, as we knew well, we could go no further; if we advanced the spell was broken" (*PA* 282). So, too, the returning guests think that the Ramsays' house looks "much as it used to look" (220) at first, but, even in sleep, Lily stirs, restless

at the prospect of facing the sad changes in daylight: "[S]he clutched at her blankets as a faller clutches at the turf on the edge of a cliff" (221).

On that 1905 trip, Woolf and her brother went for a sail, visited, somewhat reluctantly, some of the people who remembered them – the farmer's daughter who brought the family their chickens, the washerwoman (*PA* 286) – but the most moving encounter was a chance one in the local church. There, a woman tentatively recognized them as Stephens and shared her memories of Julia, prompting Woolf to meditate on the tribute: "To have left so deep an impression on a mind not naturally sensitive to receive it, so that after eleven years tears will start at the thought of all the beauty & charity that are recalled by a name [Julia Stephen][10] seems to me perhaps the purest tribute which can be paid" (*PA* 285). Woolf reaches beyond the significance of the encounter to make a claim for the meaning of her mother's life. That project of making meaning of a life – especially the life of a woman without obvious public achievements – continued to occupy Woolf for much of her career, reaching its culmination in her depiction of Mrs. Ramsay.

From the diaries, then, we find direct parallels between the Ramsays and Woolf's family. Beyond this, the diaries have much to teach us about the composition of the novel, showing us how current events and contemporary figures affected her writing, as well as how she carved out time to write, free of distractions from her busy life. *To the Lighthouse* took shape quickly: by July 1925, it was fully conceived as a three-part novel, beginning with a window, moving to "seven years passed," and ending with "the voyage" (an echo of the title of Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915; *D*3 36). Woolf writes of having:

> a superstitious wish to begin To the Lighthouse the first day at Monks House. I now think I shall finish it in the two months there. The word "sentimental" sticks in my gizzard … But this theme may be sentimental; father & mother & child in the garden: the death; the sail to the lighthouse. I think, though that when I begin it I shall enrich it in all sorts of ways; thicken it; give it branches & roots which I do not perceive now. It might contain all characters boiled down; & childhood; & then this impersonal thing, which I'm dared to do by my friends, the flight of time, & the consequent break of unity in my design. That passage (I conceive the book in 3 parts: 1. at the drawing room window; 2. seven years passed; 3. the voyage:) interests me very much. (*D*3 36)

Here, Woolf already knows the tripartite structure and the theme of the book; she also predicts, accurately, that "Time Passes" will be difficult to write.[11] Furthermore, we see her pondering the challenge of writing about family without being sentimental. The charge of sentimentality was a serious one in Woolf's mind. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa thinks, "She owed him words: 'sentimental', 'civilized,'"[12] and the larger context of the novel makes