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Lily Briscoe's Work of Art¹

According to Paul Ricoeur, poetic metaphors are “literary icons”, working as dynamic vehicles of creation in a text with an existential or religious dimension.² I see such an icon in *To the Lighthouse* - the Madonna icon related to Mrs Ramsay.³ I see this in a way of writing that comes from the wish to make experiences in the past—the death of Mrs Ramsay—transcend all temporal borders. To bring these experiences into the present means fully to explore, by painting and writing about them, the “limit-experiences” of the pain and grief that death causes, and the joy and suffering connected with artistic creation.

The triangle functions in this connection as the narrative figure or metaphor of a process of artistic creation or writing, imposed on a narrative form of elegy. In the icon of Mrs Ramsay that Lily produces in commemoration of her death, the triangle is the figure which offers the completion and balance required for this enterprise. Just as the triangle is the figure that will balance and complete Lily's painting, elegy is the genre chosen for its capacity to complete and balance the narrative events evoked by this painting. In accordance with the synecdochic relation between painting and novel, what the elegy unfolds is analogously unfolded by the triangle.

The point in studying *To the Lighthouse* as an elegy conforms, as Peter Knox-Shaw points out, with Virginia Woolf's diary entry on the question “whether

¹ This text is based on my doctoral thesis, *Iconicity in the Writing Process: Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse and Gerald Murnane's Inland* (Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 2004).

² In a reference to Paul Ricoeur's *Rule of Metaphor*, Earl R. MacCormac says that metaphors have a “literary function as icons” (193).

³ All references are to Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1927).

‘elegy’ might supplant ‘novel’ in the description of her books” (699). According to Knox-Shaw, the “received ordinance of pastoral elegy supplies a vehicle for a private attitude towards death”, and the pastoral elegy’s “relatively strict conventions [. . .] offer the only satisfactory paradigm of a highly variable literary form” (700).⁴ Knox-Shaw’s gives the following definition of the elegist’s three stages of mourning in *To the Lighthouse*: in “The Window” a description of Mrs Ramsay’s life, in “Time Passes” a record of the “impact of [her] death” on the elegist’s life and, in “The Lighthouse”, the elegist’s “return to the present, finally with renewed affirmation” (701). These definitions of elegy underlie my reading of *To the Lighthouse*.

I find W. David Shaw’s definitions of “generic veiling” and his reference to John Keble’s statement that “all epic dramatic genres are displacements of the poet’s lyric impulse, which, like Virgil’s is often elegiac in origin” to be especially valuable in connection with the subtext that I see in *To the Lighthouse*.⁵ As an “evolving genre”, elegy is suitable for “generic veiling” also in post-Romantic time (Shaw 252-253).

However, there are at least three layers of cultural context in *To the Lighthouse*: Greek, Roman, and Christian. Although there are no explicit references to any particular text written by Homer or Virgil, references to these authors are frequent and adapted to their extension into a Christian framework of ideas. This is obvious above all in the description of a central scene—the dinner, where Mrs Ramsay assembles her family and guests—in a Eucharist or Christian thanksgiving that merges here with an offering to Neptune.⁶ The presentation of Virgil in connection with a central character—the poet Augustus Carmichael—is significant of this and similar expressions of embedded or co-existent cultures in *To the Lighthouse*. Virgil’s

⁴ In “*To the Lighthouse: The Novel as Elegy*”, Peter Knox-Shaw refers, in this context, to Milton’s *Lycidas*, Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, and Shelley’s *Adonais* (699-701).

⁵ Qtd. in W. David Shaw, *Elegy and Paradox* (1994), 252-253.

⁶ A number of critics have noted the juxtaposition of cultures in connection with the dinner scene in *To the Lighthouse* (cf. for example Peter Knox-Shaw, Hermione Lee, Introduction. *To the Lighthouse*, Susan Dick, and Marianna Torgovnick).

“Underworld” in Hades has of course previously been transferred by way of simile and allegory into the Christian context of later literary works. A primary example of this is Dante Alighieri’s transfer of this “Underworld” into the Christian framework of ideas present in his *Divina Commedia* (14th c.), since he clearly took this concept from the *Aeneid* by choosing Virgil as his guide through Hell and Purgatory. We may recall such transfers of Classical notions into Christian contexts as we consider the theme of mourning in *To the Lighthouse*, for it is in this novel that the poet Augustus Carmichael is reading Virgil (cf., e.g., 198) when Lily Briscoe gathers her thoughts into a work of modern art.

I regard Lily’s painting as an act similar to that of a Classical hero, comparable in its risk-taking to the mission of Aeneas. Since the triangle is a powerful ancient figure of creation, the elegiac aspects of the *Aeneid*⁷ are realized in *To the Lighthouse* by the structural power of the triangle in Lily’s painting. The form of closely interrelated tripartiteness implied by the triangle complies with the elegy’s three stages of mourning, reflected by the three sections of *To the Lighthouse* and by a similar structural division of its Classical subtext, the *Aeneid*.

On the narrative surface *To the Lighthouse* is the journey to the lighthouse prepared and considered in different ways by the characters in the novel’s first section, “The Window”, which ultimately becomes a “real” journey undertaken by Mr Ramsay, James, and Cam in “The Lighthouse”. The progress of their brown boat matches that of Lily’s artistic work. The lighthouse, carrying its message from the “other” side of life (i.e. where Mrs Ramsay is), conveys all colours enclosed by its white light to the pastoral landscape of the island where Lily is. On the summer-house island, there is a similar pictorial function in the hedge, which Lily conceives of as a greenness enclosing two other colours: a green “cave of blues and browns” (147).

⁷ All references are to Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Random House, 1983).

The first five books of the *Aeneid* represent, like “The Window” in *To the Lighthouse*, the elegy’s first stage of lamentation. They describe Troy through Aeneas’ memories, the golden history prior to the destruction of Troy, and Anchises’ important part in this history. Aeneas’ ships are tried by gods that rule the weather and the sea. Calls to these gods for wind are frequent: the “spread canvas” of Aeneas’ ships “calls for wind” to arrive at their goal. The canvas of Aeneas’ ship(s) could be compared to the significance of Lily’s canvas in *To the Lighthouse* and the circumstance that its completion, due to the synecdochic relation between painting and novel, relies on the direction of winds on the sea that must be crossed by the lighthouse expedition to reach the shore of a future island. Anchises—Aeneas’ adviser, with the guidance of the gods at his disposal—dies.

The fifth book of the *Aeneid* ends with an emphasis on the importance of having people properly buried, putting their ghosts to rest in Hades: Aeneas’ steersman, Palinurus, has fallen overboard, overwhelmed by Night’s brother, Sleep, and now lies “naked on some unknown shore”. There is an association with this role of Sleep as Death’s brother in the instant that closes “Time Passes”, when Lily, after a “dive” into a sea of darkness, of black night, wakes up in the summer-house, determined to complete the project of the painting.

In accordance with the same elegiac process, the second and central section of the novel, “Time Passes”, represents the elegist’s (Lily’s) second stage of mourning, to “record the impact of death” (cf. Knox-Shaw 701). Here, Lily confronts the fact of Mrs Ramsay’s death. According to the triangular arrangement of characters in the novel, Lily encounters the fact of death through “Night’s” eyes, which means that there are no colours; darkness reigns here until the concluding dawn.

At the level of narrative, the second section is about Lily’s return to the abandoned summer-house after Mrs Ramsay’s death, together with the poet Augustus

Carmichael “late one evening in September”. The description of the house is governed here by an idiosyncratic seasonary imagery, in which winds make things fall apart, with the exception of the empty bed and a wild boar’s skull that is nailed on a wall in the nursery upstairs as steadfast, unwavering signs of Mrs Ramsay’s death. Left at the mercy of mighty winds, Lily’s forthcoming painting bides its time in the abandoned summer-house. This time comes when the summer-house is visited, once more, by members of the Ramsay family. Lily arrives to finish her painting in silent co-operation with the poet Augustus Carmichael, who “reads Virgil”. After one night, a dreaming Lily wakes up to the sound of a prophetic voice—the voice of the “beauty of the world” foreshadowed in the preceding section. Proposing a peaceful future, this voice “soothes” her. This event, which concludes the second section of the novel, also constitutes the beginning of its last section. It is as if everything in this section is at rest until Lily finds herself ready to complete her painting.

Here, the purple triangle “rests” on Lily’s canvas, waiting, as it were, for its activation in the final section, where Lily thinks and paints in silent co-operation with Augustus Carmichael and the boat triad consisting of Mr Ramsay, James, and Cam.

The sixth book of the *Aeneid*, where Aeneas crosses over “Stygian water” to see the ghost of his dead father Anchises in “the world below”, presents, as does “Time Passes” in *To the Lighthouse*, elegy’s second stage of a confrontation with death in the encounter with the deceased in Hades. The afflicting phases of the mental journey realized through the work on the painting that Lily has to endure in order to envision the departed Mrs Ramsay might be compared with Aeneas’ hardships in connection with his visit to Anchises in the underworld to learn the truth about his future through Anchises’ prophecies. He is assisted and accompanied by the Sibyl who lives at Cumae, at the foot of a mountain. Aeneas is told to receive her oracles orally so as not to risk having her writing them down on “leaves”, which would be scattered by the

wind the moment he opens the door to her cave. In Proserpina's golden tree, he finds the "golden bough", which he needs to conquer the intricacy of the dark forest that guards the entrance of Hades. Focusing on Aeneas' heroic role, Anchises tells him the history of Troy and Italy. Similarly, Mrs Ramsay, a modern Sibyl, writes letters that are scattered to the winds—letters that Lily, assisted by Charles Tansley, tries to rescue from the sea of oblivion created by the years of Mrs Ramsay's absence from the world of the living.

The final and third section of the novel about the realized journey to the lighthouse is accordingly entitled "The Lighthouse". According to Knox-Shaw's definition of elegy's three stages of lamentation, this final section of the novel also constitutes the elegist's "return to the present, finally, with renewed affirmation" (701). It is at this stage of lamentation—near the end of the third and last section—that the poet Augustus dreams on the lawn where Lily paints and Mrs Ramsay reappears as a ghost in the summer-house, for the purpose of filling the vacant centre of Lily's picture. After a long and problematic mental journey, which is synchronized with the lighthouse expedition, Lily is then able to imagine Mrs Ramsay as a "woman in grey" at the summer-house entrance, the drawing-room step, the way the scientist William Bankes would have seen her. When Mr Ramsay, Cam, and James arrive at the lighthouse, Lily draws the line that finishes the painting, noticing at the same time that the summer-house door-step now is empty.

The elegiac work figured by the nature of completion and enclosure of the purple triangle is finished in this section: the triangle appears here for the last time as a shadow on the summer-house door-step as if confirming the completion of everything initiated by its first appearance on Lily's canvas ten years before. As this step symbolizes the limen between death and life, absence and presence, it is this event that basically closes the novel. At the plot level this means that Lily draws the last line on

her painting at the same time as the expedition to the lighthouse lands on its island: creation and narrative are then completed.

Elegy's last stage of lamentation—the elegist's return to life—is present also in the last six books of the *Aeneid*. These books are about Italy and the wars fought there by Aeneas before his experiences of his past—Troy—can be imposed on the new land, his future. Aeneas receives a very special shield to protect him in combat: a shield made by Volcano and ordered by Venus, his mother. Aeneas' shield is, like Lily's painting, a work of art that reaches beyond its spatial restriction in the present—from past history, to future life.

More precisely, it is the strong and consistent tripartiteness in the theme and structure of elegy, developed in *To the Lighthouse* by Lily's triangular figure of creation, that provides the basis for my discussion of similarities between *To the Lighthouse* and the *Aeneid*. Both works are about a heroic character's attempt to deal with the death of someone through an act of crucial importance. We can see this in the relationships between Lily, Mrs Ramsay, Aeneas and Anchises. Mrs Ramsay is a symbol of maternity which converges with the image of a Madonna. Aspects of the function of the pastoral shepherd add to this dimension of sacredness in Mrs Ramsay's character. It is her duty to reconcile family members and summer-house guests—to put together what has gone astray. Her appearance in the communion-like dinner act in "The Window" illustrates these features. Also Aeneas' father Anchises—the glorious Trojan hero—recalls this shepherd figure, perhaps most conspicuously when he encounters his son Aeneas on the Elysian fields in the underworld. Lily needs Mrs Ramsay's participation in her creative act of painting her picture, just as Anchises' advice conditions Aeneas' future life in a new country. *To the Lighthouse* includes a journey to "the world below" (in a classical context), to Hades, where Mrs Ramsay functions in relation to Lily as a shepherd and prophetess, as does Anchises in relation

to his son Aeneas in the *Aeneid*.

Not only has Mrs Ramsay the outer appearance of a classical figure—“Greek, blue-eyed, straight-nosed” (50), and “in her veins the blood of that very noble, if slightly mythical, Italian house” (19)—she is also the care-taking shepherd of “fallen lambs” in pastoral “fields of flowers” (27). It is significant that these flowers, flowers mentioned in connection with Lily’s mission of seeking advice beyond death in her remembrance of Mrs Ramsay, are flowers of mourning. Lilies are flowers of mourning (and also an attribute of the Virgin Mary), which are mentioned in a significant context in *To the Lighthouse*: Lily sees Mrs Ramsay, “stepping with her usual quickness across fields among whose folds, purplish and soft, among whose flowers, *hyacinths or lilies* she vanished” (279; emphasis added).⁸ Aeneas also has a vision of lilies as he sees his father in Hades. Around them there are “souls of a thousand nations” gathering like “bees” on “snow-white lilies” (*Aen.* VI.684-713). On this occasion, Anchises prophesies the future of Aeneas and his descendants. Mourning flowers appear in Anchises’ speech when he regrets the premature death of one of Aeneas’ descendants, Marcellus: “[. . .] Let me scatter lilies, / All I can hold, and scarlet flowers as well, / To heap these for my grandson’s shade at least, / Frail gifts and ritual of no avail” (*Aen.* VI:868-896). Considering the lily as a classical attribute of mourning, the name Lily in *To the Lighthouse* gains a particular significance and emphasizes the novel’s aspect of mourning.

Both stories have a classically heroic dimension. *To the Lighthouse* and the *Aeneid* are stories invested with the elegiac theme of seeking advice beyond death itself—of making a journey to Hades in order to gain life anew. All stages of this journey reflect the coherent tripartite structure of elegy.

Lily’s painting is initiated by the loss of Mrs Ramsay. Completing her

⁸ Lilies are also associated with the “chastity and purity represented by the Madonna” (see Jane de Gay 17-18).

pictorial representation of this bereavement from a vantage point in the present, Lily “addresses old Mr. Carmichael again”, in the hope that Mrs Ramsay will “return” if only “they shout[] long enough”. With “tears [running] down her face”, she cries out Mrs Ramsay’s name (277). Mrs Ramsay “returns” then to the world of the living by appearing, for the last time, in the summer-house window (310).

Aeneas shows a similar grief in relation to his father’s death. Seeing Anchises in the underworld after his encounter with the dangers afflicting those who have the courage to visit the “world below”, Aeneas “stretched out both his hands in eagerness / As tears wetted his cheeks” (*Aen.* VI:684-713). In answer to the quiet remark that he was expected to come there sooner or later, Aeneas, with “tears brimmed over”, tells Anchises that it was his “sad ghost” that led him to Hades (*Aen.* VI:684-713).

Unlike Aeneas’ visit, Anchises’ stay in Hades is beyond recall. Having crossed this “threshold”, established in Hades between the world of the living and the world of the dead since long, Anchises proves to be beyond reach of all physical contact with his living son:

And there he tried three times
To throw his arms around his father’s neck,
Three times the shade untouched slipped through his hands,
Weightless as wind and fugitive as dream. (*Aen.* VI:684-713)

To arrive safely at this and all other places Aeneas relies on Neptune, the ruler of seas and director of winds. There is a conspicuous example of Neptune’s powerful intervention in a passage describing when Aeneas’ ships are in danger of being entirely “undone by the wild gale”, raised by Neptune’s sister Juno as she tries to prevent Aeneas from reaching Italy. Emphasizing that he is the sovereign sea-god, Neptune commands “Eastwind and South” to go away. Neptune then “quiets” the storm-beaten

waves, and this gives Aeneas the opportunity to continue his journey (*Aen.* I:97-181).

Similarly, the journey to the lighthouse relies on the direction of winds. This is already made clear when the novel opens, when Mrs Ramsay assures that there will be a journey to the lighthouse “if it’s fine to-morrow” (*TL* 11). James’s recognition of Mrs Ramsay’s words shows that weather conditions are crucial for the realization of the journey.⁹ For this reason, the combined poet and sea-god Augustus Carmichael, alias “Neptune”, has a vital role in the narrative (151; cf. 236, 319).

The proximity to the sea constitutes the basis for the frequent creation of analogies between ships and people, for instance in connection with descriptions of Mrs Ramsay.¹⁰ At the dinner in the summer-house, Lily reveals the importance assigned to Mrs Ramsay, seeing her as a ship that must not “sink” (131-132).

The existential dimension inherent in the analogy drawn between ships and people is evident in the section about the realization of the journey to the lighthouse. Mr Ramsay, Cam, and James are reminded by the fisherman Macalister that three men were “clinging to the mast in a great storm” (253). Mr Ramsay, who leads an expedition made “in memory of dead people” (255), questions Macalister further about the “eleven ships that had been driven into the bay in a storm”, whereof “[t]hree had sunk” (254-255). Close to the lighthouse, James recalls Macalister’s story. Looking at the lighthouse on its rock, he thinks to himself: “We are all driving before a gale—we must sink” (312). Still closer to the lighthouse, they are sailing faster, as people “making for safety in a great storm after a shipwreck” (314). Pointing to the sea, Macalister’s boy suddenly declares: “That was where she sunk” (315). Macalister’s reply to this observation is, that this was also where three men died: “Three men were

⁹ For instance, a wind “due west” would spoil the arrival of Mr Ramsay, Cam and James to the lighthouse island (cf. 14). On the other hand, Cam and James know that they will be exposed to winds that might destroy them all: “He [Mr Ramsay] was leading them on a great expedition where, for all, she [Cam] knew, they would be drowned” (312). Accordingly, James thinks to himself: “We are driving before a gale—we must sink” (312).

¹⁰ Not surprisingly, Hermione Lee emphasizes in her *Novels of Virginia Woolf* (1977) the circumstance that it is the sea that “dominates the actual and imaginative lives of the characters” in *To the Lighthouse* (127).

drowned where we are now”. He is quite certain of this since “[h]e had seen them clinging to the mast himself” (315). This is, then, as close as Mr Ramsay, Cam, James (and Lily) are able to experience the absence of dead people—of seeing, inwardly, the place where people “were drowned”. Taken together, the above remarks give the impression of being based on the precise observation by an eye-witness, made with his or her sincere intention to bring to the listener the full knowledge of a grievous fact.

In the *Aeneid* there are similar descriptions of “great storms”, in a context that stresses their existential dimension. On one occasion Aeneas and his crew encounter “a howling gust / From due north [that] took the sail aback and lifted /Wavetops to heaven”. In the strong wind, “[m]en hung on crests” and “[t]he Southwind caught three ships and whirled them down / On reefs, hidden midsea”. In a figurative language which can be said to be recalled by the previously related ship/man analogy in *To the Lighthouse*, some of these ships are “undone by the wild gale” as “their seams / Parted and let the enemy pour in” (*Aen.* I:97-127).

There are powerful winds also in the dark, abandoned summer-house in “Time Passes”. Toying with the torn wall-paper, these winds ask, “would it hang much longer, when would it fall?” (*TL* 196). They let then “one fold” of Mrs Ramsay’s shawl on the skull “loosen”, only to disclose the place it was meant to hide: the hideous death’s head left on the nursery wall. At this moment of approaching fulfilment that re-creates, on a secular level, the instant in “The Place of the Skull” (Golgotha) when the “curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” and the “rocks split” (Matt. 27:33, 51 NIV), the winds in the abandoned house increase and a rock “rend[s] itself from the mountain” (*TL* 202).

The gods that reign over the sea are central to the narrative in *To the Lighthouse* and the *Aeneid*. This is why Augustus Carmichael has a vital role in *To the Lighthouse*, recalling that of the Roman sea-god Neptune in the *Aeneid*. Augustus

Carmichael has, like Neptune, the power to determine whether a journey may reach its goal. While Aeneas is assisted by Neptune to calm the sea that he must traverse to reach his future destiny in Italy, Lily turns to the poet Augustus to calm the anguish raised by painful memories and thoughts. When the expedition finally arrives at the lighthouse, it is Augustus Carmichael, who—with the look of the “old pagan God” Neptune—makes the ultimate confirmation that this is the moment of drawing the “finishing line” of the story, and, at the same time, of Lily’s painting (319-320).

In the first section of *To the Lighthouse*—“The Window”—Lily plans to make a portrait of Mrs Ramsay, in accordance with Knox-Shaw’s definition of the first of the elegist’s “three functions”: to “offer a life of the departed” (701). According to the principle of the triangle and triangular relationships that condition the character of Lily, who is also the narrative focalizer in *To the Lighthouse*, Lily studies Mrs Ramsay as the object of her forthcoming work of art, together with the scientist William Bankes.

The purple triangle is planted at the heart of the narrative by appearing here for the first time on Lily’s canvas. The triangle is the figure of creation that reduces Lily’s elegiac motif, Mrs Ramsay, to a manageable object. The pictorial reduction of her motif as shown by the triangle serves as a model in Lily’s attempt to simplify the complex nature of Mrs Ramsay—to envision her “essence”. At the same time, the scientific dimension provided by the triangle helps Lily to distance herself from emotions that might be an obstacle as she attempts to distinguish the essential characteristics of Mrs Ramsay. It is in this connection that the triangular composition in the painting of a Renaissance Madonna with Child merges with Lily’s perception of Mrs Ramsay, reading to her son James in the summer-house’s entrance.¹¹ To realize the implication of the icon portrait in *To the Lighthouse* we might think of its version

¹¹ The photo with “Julia Stephen at the window”, included in de Gay’s article, shows that the front window of the summer-house where Virginia Woolf spent the summers in the years of her adolescence was a French window and, as de Gay puts it, “the threshold between indoors and outdoors” (20).

of Michelangelo's 'Madonna' as a temporally all-inclusive object in its imagined contact with eternal divinity. As a sign of ephemeral "world-time", Mrs Ramsay's green shawl is "tossed over the edge of the frame" (51), thereby getting in touch with the lighthouse's imagined "all-time". This means that everything occurring in "world-time"—i.e. on an "ordinary" level of experience—also happens in "all-time". This is a circumstance similar to the position chosen by Lily as she paints, i.e. on the edge of the lawn which "was the world". This lawn is the pastoral scene for Mr and Mrs Ramsay, their eight children and guests—noticed there by Lily, who stands painting her picture at the edge of the lawn.

Mrs Ramsay is presented as the problem of being an at once artistic and existential vacancy. Lily's painting turns, therefore, into a force field in which is created a piece of innovative art. In this field Mrs Ramsay is a pivot, the iconic object which, once called back by Lily will continue to exist on an imaginary threshold between life and death. Specific stages in her lamentation appear as codifying colours on her canvas. The mission of this work is fulfilled at the end of the novel and coincides with the mission of bringing the elegy to the last stage of mourning—i.e., when the icon 'Mrs Ramsay' returns, finally, to the realm of the dead.

Colours are vital expressions of iconicity in *To the Lighthouse*, recalling, in their use as conceptual tools, the role that colours had in Byzantine sacred art as distinguishers of important persons and events. They work as conceptual codes or pivots that, together with the genre of elegy, organize the theme of mourning according to the structure expressed by Lily's purple triangle. Colours that denote absence, death, fruitfulness, etc., are balanced against each other to converge in the timelessness occasioned by Mrs Ramsay's death, which is the content of the top angle or apex in a triangle of concepts, towards which aspects of "opposite forces" are directed for the sole purpose of rendering a picture of Mrs Ramsay that will show the "essence" of her

nature. This triangular organization of colours persists until the reconciliation of opposite forces is achieved by Lily's painting. The triangle with concepts thus built on Lily's mental image of Mrs Ramsay vanishes once the process of mourning is completed.

According to the art historian Liz James, the Byzantine black is an "absolute", 'allowing no other colours to interfere', and white embraces all colours. Light—often defined as "whiteness"—is the "divine mediator" of all colours (101, 106).¹² We might here recall the nature of the novel's lighthouse: striped in black and white, it lances strokes of white light that reach the lawn which "was the world" (i.e. of ordinary life), where Lily's canvas is (298).

In *To the Lighthouse*, darkness is a sign of absence and death, but also of scientific detachment from one's subject. When Lily wakes up after a night of sleep in the revisited summer-house, she finds herself able to rethink her project. She treats the difficult and distant memories that the awareness of Mrs Ramsay's death conjures up from her mind as something that can be managed only by transforming them into iconic, "steadfast things"—pictorial reductions that must be "tried" on the easel left in the house ten years ago (cf. 197).

As in an alchemical process, the colour purple in *To the Lighthouse* signifies the most elevated stage in a process of emancipation or redemption. The most prominent example is the "triangular purple shape" that Lily initially paints as a geometrical simplification of her motif.

The lighthouse's white light appears on the same conceptual level as the purple triangle. It is the source of all the colours in Lily's painting. In Byzantine art white is the prerequisite of all other colours as it symbolizes the light of God. To

¹² Liz James's study, *Light and Colour in Byzantine Art* (1996), focuses on "colour words in Byzantium" and for that purpose thoroughly reviews the classical inheritance in Byzantine art. James investigates how Byzantine writers, from the influence and approximations of classical philosophy, used colour words to define spiritual matters. Byzantine art was also discussed by Roger Fry in relation to Cézanne and Gauguin.

Aristotle, light is the medium that “modifies” colours (James 59). Colour is not visible without the whiteness of light (James 59), and Plotinus went so far as to suggest that colour is a *form* of light: “the eye has the form of light and directs its gaze at the light and at colours, which are lights” (James 70).

I consider the white colour in *To the Lighthouse* as both the all-colour and non-colour that in itself symbolizes the a priori condition of Lily’s blank canvas—the whiteness in the divine light that makes the visualization of her now absent motif—Mrs Ramsay—possible. More precisely, each colour included by the white light denotes a specific aspect of Lily’s painting as it also participates in the process of reconciliation provided by the genre of elegy that this painting expresses.

Converging symbolically with the light-house’s third and final stroke of light in its series of three strokes as “some wave of white [goes] over the window pane”, Mrs Ramsay reappears at this moment, first as some white “light stuff”, then—“on a level of ordinary experience”—in the shape that Lily remembers: sitting “quite simply, in the chair, flick[ing] her needles to and fro” (310).

The skull of the wild boar in the nursery belongs to the same conceptual field. The skull in an uncovered state—i.e., a white skull—equals the subject of the second stage of elegy in *To the Lighthouse*: Lily’s confrontation with the fact that Mrs Ramsay is dead. The symbolic context of this skull alludes to the winter-death/spring-new-life dualism present in the Roman seasonal imagery. The slaying of the wild boar of Death and Winter, was, according to epitomes based on seasons and animals in Roman mythology, an illustration of how Spring made way for renewed life, hence a parallel with the elegiac concern of conquering death to ascertain, even fortify, a continuation of life. “Time Passes” can be studied as an example of that seasonal

thinking.¹³ As a grotesque given, the wild boar's skull is, in this first stage of elegy in "The Window" a symbol, still hidden and unacknowledged by being covered by a sign of life: the green shawl that Mrs Ramsay used to drape around her shoulders. Consequently, this skull haunts the room with the shadow of its "horns" (151).¹⁴ Before accepting death as a fact, the view of this skull can be endured only if it is covered by this sign of feigned existence.

This does not, however, exhaust the complex subject of *To the Lighthouse*, which is also, as the art-work created under the lighthouse's pulsating light, an unceasing discussion about life in interplay with literature and art.

In the black night that predominates in the central section of the novel, folds of the shawl with which Mrs Ramsay once covered the "horrid" wild boar's skull that was nailed to the wall in the summer-house nursery are gradually "loosened" (cf. 202, 206) to confront Lily with the awareness of the absolute, unwavering fact that Mrs Ramsay is dead.

In "Time Passes", black indicates, moreover, one's inability to see things clearly in a dark house, which confuses boundaries and invites the elegist's transcendence of the physical world. It is not only the contour of one chair that cannot be distinguished from that of another, but also the otherwise clear boundaries that normally separate the world of the living from that of the dead. In the dark house, the present in the elegist's consciousness is narrowed into becoming no more than a liminal strand between the past and the future.

The abandoned house reflects, then, an ontological state that anticipates Lily's revelation of the "true" Mrs Ramsay. Untouched by premature knowledge,

¹³ The myth of Persephone (Proserpina in Roman mythology) is characteristic of this life/death dualism in the Roman seasonal imagery. With its variety of interrelated bonds between life-giving and destructive elements, the myth functions as a complex symbol of creation.

¹⁴ Cf. the two gates in the underworld—the one of horn was the gate through which "true" spirits could pass to the world of the living, and according to Frank Fletcher's interpretation, a symbol of perception (101).

Lily's canvas rests here in a state as innocently childish and peaceful as "the thing itself before it has been made anything" (179, 297). This is the "tried picture on the easel" (197) that awaits the return of the artist who once marked its centre with a purple triangle. Applying William Bankes's "wise child's eyes" on her motif, Lily prepares herself for her encounter with the "true" Mrs Ramsay.

Finally, Lily, sees through William Bankes's "wise child's"—i.e. detached and "scientific"—eyes (271-272). Like a "thing itself before it has been made anything" (297), the "essential thing" (79), Mrs Ramsay sits there, "peaceful and silent, with downcast eyes"; "young" and "astonishingly beautiful" (273). At this concluding stage of elegy, Lily is able to see her unconditionally, as if seeing her for the first time. It is only then that the woman in grey "puts out her hand" and "wings" Lily's heart for the last time (275). This vision returns in the end, transformed into what William Bankes, with his scientific eyes, saw already from this triangle's first appearance: "Mother and child then—objects of universal veneration [. . .] might be reduced [. . .] to a purple shadow without irreverence" (52). In the place of the "woman in grey", an "odd-shaped triangular shadow" is cast over the liminal drawing-room step from the whiteness behind the window, Mrs Ramsay in her shroud.

Physically, shadows are projections preventing the progress of light rays. A fusion of this fact with the above event in *To the Lighthouse* leads to the consideration of this transformation of Mrs Ramsay into a "woman in grey" as the visual description of a halted influence from the lighthouse's creative white light over Lily's work on her painting. It is only after this instance that Lily is capable of drawing the finishing line across the hitherto vacant centre of her canvas, as if synchronizing the last stroke of light falling across the sea to the summer-house side with the arrival of the boat at the "other" side.

The appearance of the "woman in grey" that precedes the grey shadow on the

door-step of the initially purple triangle is, I think, the ultimate objectification of the correlation of elegy and painting conditioned by the triangle, the novel's overall narrative figure of creation. Here one needs to reconsider the symbolic meaning of grey by first recognizing the drawing-room step as the objectified *limen* between differing worlds; between life and death, past and present, experienced and unexperienced things.

This is the end of elegy's last phase, where the function of the triangle is, like that of a physical mould, nullified, and the last, liminal stroke of paint may at last break the hitherto empty centre of the canvas.

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