



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 34 | 2023

Title	Translating Virginia Woolf's <i>To the Lighthouse</i> into Surrealist Art
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Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	34
Publication Date	October 2023

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Translating Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* into Surrealist Art

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*Virginia Woolf often crosses the boundaries between literature and painting in her writing, masterfully combining these two realms. However, her novels are only ever read within a post-Impressionist framework. In this essay, I aim to challenge this well-established notion by translating *To the Lighthouse* into the terms of surrealist art. Firstly, I compare automatic writing used by surrealists and Woolf's stream-of-consciousness technique and free indirect discourse, also reflecting on their significance in Lily Briscoe's painting. Then, I explore the concept of the surreal house and space in both surrealism and *To the Lighthouse*. Lastly, I develop the notion of Mrs Ramsay as a ghost and her influence on Lily's final piece of art. To justify my translation, I return to Freudian psychoanalysis, which was fundamental for surrealists and equally significant for Woolf, although in a less immediate way. It is essential to note that existing scholarship does not associate Woolf with surrealism at all, and, accordingly, I am not going to argue that Woolf considered herself a surrealist, nor that *To the Lighthouse* is representative of the movement. Instead, I plan to challenge the form of Woolf's novel, redirecting our transfixed gaze towards new possible dimensions of this well-known, extensively interpreted text, and assist in merging the realms of literature and painting.*

The complex figure of Virginia Woolf always seems to balance on the border between painting and literature. Whether through her substantial knowledge of and active participation in London's art scene or her personal associations with the Bloomsbury Group, including her sister Vanessa Bell and the art critic Roger Fry, or her novels, journals, and other writings, Woolf manages to combine different branches of art masterfully. Considering the time in which she lived, as well as her environment, many critics focus their scrutiny on the connection between Woolf's texts and post-Impressionism, where her novels create paintings of such character in the imagination of her readers. However, in this essay, I try to shift this perspective. What I aim to do is to transpose, transform, and perhaps even transgress the common notion of Woolf as a solely post-Impressionist writer and, instead, translate her novel *To the Lighthouse* in terms of surrealist art.

Striking yet perhaps accidental similarities between Woolf's novel and surrealism may arise from the fact that both key texts were written at a similar time. André Breton's *Manifesto*

of Surrealism was first published in 1924, and *To the Lighthouse* only three years later, in the wake and the memory of the Great War, amidst quickly forming and disbanding avant-garde movements. A more crucial reason for their resemblance may arise from the fact that both Woolf and Breton were familiar with psychoanalysis, which is a recurring theme in my argument. I treat it not as a leading theoretical framework, considering it is sometimes deformed and diverges from the original version used by surrealists, but rather as a means to truthfully convert literature into the language of painting. In this article, I examine some of their parallels and common elements, referring back to Sigmund Freud's theory and beginning with Breton and Woolf's personal associations with psychoanalysis. Subsequently, I compare automatic writing used by surrealists and Woolf's stream-of-consciousness technique and free indirect discourse, also reflecting on their significance in Lily Briscoe's painting. I then explore the concept of the surreal house and space in both surrealism and *To the Lighthouse*. Lastly, I develop the notion of Mrs Ramsay as a ghost and her influence on Lily's final piece of art.

In his manifesto, Breton admits being almost obsessed with Freud and "familiar [...] with his methods of examination" (Breton 22) whilst also broadly acknowledging Freud's revolutionary discoveries, which served previously ignored issues of the mental world. Although Freud himself, as I have already indicated, disapproved of the manner in which surrealists used psychoanalysis, claiming it to be distorted and accusing them of lacking necessary context (Vesely 34), the artistic movement remained heavily influenced by Freudian concepts, such as the meaning of dreams, the unconscious, and the return to childhood, all of which are addressed in the manifesto.

On the contrary, Woolf's attitude towards psychoanalysis is deeply ambivalent: while she denies reading Freud's texts before the 1930s, many of her biographers, including Bryony Randall and Jane Goldman, agree that "[d]uring the 1910s and 1920s Woolf was frequently exposed to 'reading psychoanalysis' through ventriloquism and quotation" (97). They name *To the Lighthouse* as Woolf's most psychoanalytical novel (101) while Gabrielle McIntire even claims that "[i]n Woolf's fiction we find Freud everywhere, and her texts are full of both direct and indirect references to his ideas" (161). Maria DiBattista adds that "[w]hile [Woolf] was certainly aware of psychoanalysis and reviewed the newest instances of Freudian fiction [...], she avoided radically assimilating its language to her own" (67), somehow concealing the immediate link between the two. Although I do not intend to read *To the Lighthouse* in the context of Woolf's biography, as many critics do, the connection between her, the novel, and psychoanalysis is undeniable.

The first such parallel is established by the creative processes and techniques used by surrealists and Woolf. In the very definition of surrealism, Breton identifies it as a “[p]sychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought” (26). Images created by such means are “opium images that man does not evoke [..]; rather they ‘come to him spontaneously, despotically’” (Breton 36). This procedure refers to one of the fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis and the unconscious, which occurs involuntarily, escaping introspection and awareness, creating dreams and, automatic thoughts. As Jane Alison clarifies, “pure psychic automatism [is] an attempt to unravel the mysteries of the unconscious” (20), or, at least, depict them in an artistic manner.

On the stylistic level, Woolf’s interest in the unconscious is less conspicuous but still present. The stream of consciousness and free indirect discourse used in *To the Lighthouse* only gives the impression of free-flowing mental processes, whether they are the characters’, the narrator’s, or the author’s, while not manifesting their essence. Basing his observations on this particular style of writing, John Mepham distinguishes between “unspoken verbal meanings and spoken ones with which they are in contradiction” but which “can be laid out next to each other on the line. However, stream of consciousness and interior monologue are not simply literary techniques; they are psychological strategies” (118). Such an extensive dichotomy, which permeates *To the Lighthouse* throughout, also suggests other divisions: the conscious and the unconscious, or, in terms of Woolf’s novel, the light and the dark, which I explore later in this essay.

To some extent, Woolf’s techniques metafictionally translate into Lily Briscoe’s artistic strategies. According to Sharon Wood Proudfit: “the artist is caught up in the rhythm of the aesthetic emotion, *a rhythm experienced almost unconsciously*, but expressed through the consciousness of the artist, a rhythm which *holds the artist completely in its grasp*” (29, emphasis mine). Although not identical, considering the emphasis on consciousness, this description nonetheless resembles surrealist automatism with the unconscious overpowering the artist. Similarly, Lily is overpowered: “[w]ith a curious physical sensation, as if she were urged forward and at the same time must hold herself back, she made her first quick decisive stroke. [...] A second time she did it – a third time” (Woolf 152). Soon, Lily finds a rhythm:

which was dictated to her [...], strong enough to bear her along with it on its current. Certainly she was losing consciousness of outer things. And as she lost consciousness

of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance, [...] *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 modelled it with greens and blues (Woolf 154, emphasis mine).

Despite this dynamic imagery, Lily's painting appears as a firm object in a whirlpool of the stream of consciousness and later darkness: "[i]n the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing [...] was struck into stability" (Woolf 156). Such an understanding encourages viewing the canvas as a "container object" (Alison 17) and, therefore, a space in itself, whose surface "could be seen as providing an entrance to the dimensions of psychic life", "as a doorway to 'the interiorised place' of the novel – somewhere language cannot reach" (Fang 17). Nini Fang's remark about the painting seems to aim back to Woolf's text, just as Woolf's writing is echoed by Lily's painting. The form of expression and its space must be changed to fully comprehend the beauty of Woolf's art and the language must be translated into image. However, to adequately examine this curious space, and its possible transformations, other spaces must be first addressed.

According to Freud, "dream imagination has one particular favourite way of representing the organism as a whole: namely as a house" (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 111). The concept was then adapted by surrealists who "thought of the house not as Freud's medical body, but as a metaphor for the imagination or the unconscious itself" (Alison 15). The surreal house became "a convulsive theatre of the domestic: both a real space and a metaphoric space, inhabited, if not by people, then by their ghosts" (Alison 14); "the mirror of the unconscious" (Alison 17); its structure developed into a "labyrinthine, symbolizing the structure of the unconscious world" (Vesely 35). Not only is the inside of the house essential for its image but also the surroundings and the tension existing between the furnished inside and the outside, Delibor Vesely continues, are crucial for the full recognition of the potential meanings signified by such space.

Analogous space, with the psychoanalytical unconscious and the dichotomy of the inside and the outside, is thus portrayed in *To the Lighthouse*. The novel is based in and around the house, even when, reiterating Alison, there are no inhabitants apart from ghosts: such a structure "around spaces [is] to give readers a clear sense of how such spaces affected the female characters in her novel". Moreover, "Woolf often uses space as a form of imaginative mapping as a way for her characters to navigate the roles that they move within, but also to

highlight a character's experience of space and place as an index for their identities" (Rutledge 76-7), and although Thais Rutledge suggests a deeply feminist reading, her concepts are equally useful for other approaches. The space of the darkened room where Mrs Ramsay sits alone is indeed a scene of her "[l]osing personality", becoming "the thing she looked at", and finding "freedom, [...] peace, [...] most welcome of all, a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability" (Woolf 59-60). The transformation is complete when Mrs Ramsay becomes the house and, therefore, the unconscious, and this foreshadows her future in her domestic space as a ghost.

The transition between the house and the garden is made possible through the window. As Mrs Ramsay says, "they must keep the windows open and the doors shut" (Woolf 13); these are not the bodies but the minds that wander. The importance of the window, already expressed by the title of the novel's first part, is emphasised by Michael R. Schrimper: "it allows Woolf to move from consciousness to consciousness [...]. With Mrs. Ramsay perched, sitting for a picture being painted by Lily, with James in her lap, the window allows Woolf to glide inside the mind of whoever falls within sight of its pane" (33). Stylistically, it is achieved through free indirect discourse and stream of consciousness, which allow for such movements across physical distances. The window poses as an element that develops and underscores the surreal undertone of the novel, and not only in terms of stylistic technique.

Accordingly, it is also the window that marks, to some extent, the distinction between darkness and light. While Mrs Ramsay knits in the dark, "a wedge-shaped core of darkness" within her mirroring the night and somehow guiding her rest, she "looked out to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke" (Woolf 59). The potential meanings of this contrast are equivocal, fluid, and often contradictory, as mentioned above by Mephram, with Mrs Ramsay's identity-less "core of darkness" and simultaneous "praising the light" (Woolf 59-60). The essence, however, seems to be in accordance with the ideas of the surrealist house: "Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by" (Woolf 59). Just like in the unconscious, and just like on Lily's surrealist canvas, it is "the artist who explores these depths from which a freer sense of self may rise" (Foley 125). Curiously, noticing the lighthouse's strokes, especially 'her stroke', Mrs Ramsay seems to be painting in the dark space with the window as her canvas, making herself an ambiguous object once again: is she the house, or is she the artist?

Jack Stewart points out another use of the window: “[it] becomes an opaque reflector, shutting out darkness” (84). Once again, it distinguishes the outside, where “things waved and vanished, waterily”, and the inside, where “all the candles were lit up, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candlelight, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table, *for the night was now shut off by panes of glass*” (Woolf 92, emphasis mine). Light, which was just entering from the outside through the window, now occupies the inside, and darkness is exiled from the dining room. Social convention replaces the meditations over Mrs Ramsay’s deeper and “freer sense of self”, while the window keeps its surreal character as a border between the conscious and the unconscious.

Lisbeth Larsson explains the scene by suggesting that “[i]n *To the Lighthouse* the days are long and the nights short. Or, to invoke its title: when the lighthouse’s light can be seen, life is present, long and distinct; when the light is doused, life is extinguished and disappears” (142). Subsequently, when the novel’s second part begins, “a downpouring of immense darkness began. Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness” (Woolf 121). This turn of events is not only predicted by Mrs Ramsay – ‘It will end, It will end, she said’ (Woolf 60) – but also by the surrealists: ‘[I]ike the unconscious, [the surreal house] is especially prone to fragmentation and possible meltdown’ (Alison 17) and ‘was painstakingly built, but it was destined to collapse, to be blasted apart’ (Alison 33). Both the St Ives house and Mrs Ramsay, which Larsson also connects, are predestined to be destroyed.

A comparable process may be observed in Salvador Dalí’s *La Reine Salomé*, chosen by Alison to illustrate the theatre of the domestic (99). Next to Breton, Dalí serves here as a leading surrealist artist whose works shaped the movement. His hallucinatory painting *La Reine Salomé* represents a room, cut in half diagonally, with its lower part darker than the upper one, reflecting the main dichotomy in Woolf’s novel. In the centre, there is a window or a picture frame, creating a tiny exit outside, or at least giving its appearance. On two sides of the canvas, two bizarre figures are placed: one resembles a woman with naked breasts, evoking the Kleinian breast of Mrs Ramsay, developed by Fang, and the other is a face or a mask, which can be associated with darkness beneath the surface, mentioned above. Despite different art forms, many similarities between *La Reine Salomé* and *To the Lighthouse*, which connect these two works like Dalí’s spikes connect opposite sides of the painting, indicate their common roots in psychoanalysis. Together with the house, the Ramsay family breaks apart, with its members’ deaths in parenthesis “to show how small and insignificant human beings are in the immense mechanisms of society and warfare” (Larsson 142).

The disintegration of the house, as Spivak notices, is signified by Mrs Ramsay's shawl: "one fold of the shawl loosened and swung to and fro" (Woolf 125). Similar objects, "[c]uriously animated furniture and unsettling ghosts occupy the house" (Alison 98), while plants and animals overtake it; "the outside world and class enter the spaces of the house" (Rutledge 79). Therefore, it is not abandoned, as Rutledge continues, because "its empty rooms are filled with life" (80): the non-human witnesses of the passing of time. This transition is especially striking after considering the beginning of the novel, or even the beginning of 'Time Passes', where the house is "the dwelling-place of reason and of light as the sign of reason are firmly implied" (Spivak 48): "Mr Carmichael, who liked to lie awake a little reading Virgil, kept his candle burning rather longer than the rest" (Woolf 121). In the beginning, there is life even in darkness, as proved by Mrs Ramsey. However, now, the house is rendered almost dead and devoid of people and reason. It is in this framework that the supernatural appears, where "certain airs, detached from the body of the wind [...] crept round corners and ventured indoors" (Woolf 122).

The house is undoubtedly uncanny, which Freud characterises as "something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it" ("The Uncanny"). Such a contradictory experience, in turn, shows what is hidden: it "reveal[s] concealed, alternative versions of self, relationships and family [...]. The repressed, destabilising element leaks or bursts out as a ghost [...] in often the most familiar and comfortable surroundings such as the home" (Wisker 13-4). Alison adds that "in some languages the uncanny can only be translated as 'the haunted house' that gives rise to the appearance of ghosts" (22), already mentioned in terms of the surreal house. Mrs Ramsay, whose presence is 'old-established' throughout 'The Window', does not simply die in 'Time Passes'; she becomes something Gina Wisker calls "a continuation of the human" (5), bursting as a ghost and (re)shaping relationships in the family. Her "lingering presence" is often comparable to a traditional image of a ghost: "[g]host, air, nothingness [...]. Suddenly, the empty drawing-room steps, the frill of the chair inside, [...] the whole wave and whisper of the garden became like curves and arabesques flourishing round a centre of complete nothingness" (Woolf 172); "([a] noise drew [Lily's] attention to the drawing-room window – the squeak of a hinge. The light breeze was toying with the window)" (Woolf 187).

Like surrealists and Freud, Wisker notices the association between the house and the dead: "[t]he St Ives holiday home of the Ramsays [...] resonate[s] with the continued presence of people who have died and gone" (9). In general, she continues, "Woolf's ghosts are

imprinted on houses” (11), also evoking the figure of Septimus in *Mrs Dalloway*. The ghosts are present, amongst others, in objects such as Mrs Ramsay’s shawl or her clothes, stroked and fingered by Mrs McNab, whose very motions seem to revive Mrs Ramsay: “[t]here was the old grey cloak she wore gardening. [...] She could see her, as she came up the drive with the washing [...], she could see her with one of the children by her in that grey cloak” (Woolf 131).

Time in *To the Lighthouse* is uniquely created, as McIntire observes: the first part of the novel is “the aperture to the future”; the second “works as a pure present”; and the last is “the pure, realized, and realizable, future” (174). The novel’s structure mirrors the content, as Spivak claims ‘Time Passes’ is a copula, a passage between two moments in time, closely connected with copulation. Accordingly, “[t]he differentiation of night and day, if almost obliterated (itself a possible copulation – night is day is night is day)” (Spivak 52). Woolf echoes this: “the winds and waves disported themselves like the amorphous bulks of leviathans whose brows are pierced by no light of reason, [...] in the darkness or the daylight (for night and day, month and year ran shapelessly together)” (130). Not only does the central dichotomy of the novel become blurry, but the element of leviathans strengthens the supernatural and the unconscious, and this makes the distinction between the inside and the outside, the human, and the non-human, unclear.

Similarly to Mrs McNab, Lily also has visions of Mrs Ramsay in the same cloak: “Oh Mrs Ramsay! She called out silently, to that essence which sat by the boat, that abstract one made of her, that woman in grey, as if to abuse her for having gone, and then having gone, come back again” (Woolf 172). Lily’s calls repeat every few pages, marking Mrs Ramsay’s lingering presence or, at least, her perceptible absence. These are not hallucinations or “some trick of the painter’s eye” (Woolf 174), but rather a form of communication or exchange. When finding shape in the chaos, Lily states that she “owned this revelation to [Mrs Ramsay]” (Woolf 156), making not only the canvas but also the figure of Mrs Ramsay a permanent and stable element in her life, and a shape in itself: “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!’” (Woolf 173).

The haunting of the central character in *To the Lighthouse* is not limited to the physical sphere: it suggests “a proactive haunting by the artist of their subject” (Foley 128). In this interpretation, Matt Foley uses the metaphor of a bee from the first part of the novel: “[o]nly like a bee, drawn by some sweetness or sharpness in the air intangible to touch or taste, *one*

haunted the dome-shaped hive, ranged the wastes of the air over the countries of the world alone, and then *haunted the hives with their murmurs and their stirrings*; the hives, which were people” (Woolf 48-9, emphasis mine). This shape resembles Mrs Ramsay: “as she sat in the wicker arm-chair in the drawing-room window she wore, to Lily's eyes, an august shape; the shape of a dome” (Woolf 49). The haunting persistence of the bee “connotes the honey-like lure of the phantom of character. For Lily, it takes becoming ghostly to at least explore the unrepresentable phantom” (Foley 128). In other words, Lily must fulfil her desire to “make her[self] and Mrs Ramsay one” (Woolf 48) to reach, metaphorically, Mrs Ramsay’s ghost.

Lily eventually does just that by finishing her painting, which, similarly to the creative processes explored above, evokes surrealism. Suzanne Bellamy, the only critic who connects this art movement with Lily’s struggles, points out “an almost surreal texture that coexists with Lily Briscoe’s efforts to hold the canvas frame around a calm composition of Mrs. Ramsay and her son in the window” (137). It is the painting’s subject, a ghost, that becomes central and permeates the whole third part of the novel; the subject that, in the final moment of the novel, is a “surrealist explosion of the purple triangle and a transformed window scene” (Bellamy 144). Starting in ‘The Window’, the image represents Mrs Ramsay and James: “[N]o one could tell it for a human shape” (Woolf 49). Instead, the picture is reduced to a mother and a child, and then once again is “reduced to a shadow without irreverence” (Woolf 50). Such a loss of identity, even humanity, mirrors Mrs Ramsay’s core of darkness and its freeing qualities. Bellamy agrees with this interpretation, calling the purple triangle and the core of darkness repetitions. Moreover, “[t]he shape [of a triangle] is also associated with Lily sitting on the floor, with her head on Mrs. Ramsay’s knee, the ensemble forming the shape of a dome” (Bellamy 142), as also underscored by Foley.

The idea of repetition is mentioned by Lily herself, who claims that “the vision must be perpetually remade” (Woolf 175). Justifying Bellamy’s reading, “Lily was not inventing; she was only trying to smooth out something she had been given years ago folded up; something she had seen. For in the rough and tumble of daily life [...] one had constantly a sense of repetition” (Woolf 191). In a similar sense, Lily’s painting is a repetition of her last vision of Mrs Ramsay:

whoever it was stayed still inside; had settled by some stroke of luck so as to throw an odd-shaped triangular shadow over the step. It altered the composition of the picture a little. [...] "Mrs Ramsay! Mrs Ramsay!" she cried. [...] Mrs Ramsay – it was part of

her perfect goodness – sat there quite simply, in the chair, [...] cast her shadow on the step. There she sat. (Woolf 193-4)

Just like in their previous encounters, Mrs Ramsay communicates with Lily. The message remains unspoken, following Mepham's reading, yet it is understood. Because of this vision, Lily can finish the painting, standing on "the edge of the lawn" (Woolf 194), and not inside, with the house being Mrs Ramsay, but within the boundaries of its influence. The painting process seems automatic to some extent: Lily is surprised when "[s]he looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred" (Woolf 200). This description doubles the whole structure of the novel: it escapes clear divisions and mixes the light with the dark, and the unconscious with the conscious.

The parallels between surrealism and *To the Lighthouse* are too numerous to explore comprehensively in this essay. I have omitted many psychoanalytic concepts, such as dreams or the return to childhood, in favour of more, in my opinion, vital issues: the unconscious, the uncanny, supernatural, and surreal space. All these aspects appear in the works of surrealists and Virginia Woolf, and in the process of suggesting a 'translation' between them, and between two very different art mediums, differences emerge as significant as similarities. I want to emphasise that Woolf is not a surrealist, nor should she necessarily be perceived as such. Nevertheless, my analysis of the affinities between her work and surrealism might, perhaps, redirect our transfixed gaze towards new possible dimensions of this otherwise well-known and extensively interpreted text, and assist in merging the realms of literature and painting.

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