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'We long sometimes to escape from the incessant, the remorseless analysis of falling into love and falling out of love, of what Tom feels for Judith and Judith does or does not altogether feel for Tom' (Woolf, 'The Narrow Bridge of Art'). What desires empower Woolf's novels if they do not depend upon the motivations of the romance plot?

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Commonly regarded as one of the twentieth century's leading social commentators, feminists, and novelists, Virginia Woolf nevertheless vehemently avoided labelling either herself or her craft. What separated her, both from many of the artists around her and from the enormous body of literary work back through the nineteenth century and beyond, was her identification that form, rather than subject matter, was the area in which meaning had been suffocated for so long. For her, the old structures of literature were necessarily intertwined with the old structures of existence: if you wanted to change one, you had also to change the other. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis states, '...the revelation that "story" was really a product of dominant ideology and interests, and that non-dominant views could nonetheless be told in oppositional narrative, helped to structure Woolf's career'.[1] It is DuPlessis's identification of 'oppositional narrative', the shape and form of Woolf's fiction, which holds the key to understanding its desires.

In the same year that *To the Lighthouse* appeared, Woolf addressed what she saw as the 'failure of poetry to serve us as it has served so many generations of our fathers'[2] in the essay, 'The Narrow Bridge of Art'. 'In the modern mind', she argued, 'beauty is accompanied not by its shadow, but by its opposite'[3]: where Keats was once able to appreciate a nightingale's song as a single experience, the 'modern man' exists in a state of freedom and curiosity that has caused his own experiences to homogenise, rendering him unable to separate out each emotion so that they may 'enter the mind whole'.[4] This argument implies both a literary and a sociological desire in Woolf, to repel 'the incessant, the remorseless' insistence of nineteenth and early twentieth-century analysis on conventional ideals embodied in the likes of the romance plot, and in so doing, reclaim the ability to express oneself fully in art and reverse the lost power in 'accepting anything simply for what it is'.[5] It is exactly this desire to express and experience emotion in its uncircumscribed entirety that empowers Woolf's novels from that time, and, I will argue, it is important not to lose sight of this, whatever other social or political expression lies behind her work.

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[1] Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 57.
[2] Virginia Woolf, 'The Narrow Bridge of Art', in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey (Malden: MA, 2005), p. 904.
[3] Ibid., p. 906.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

To demonstrate the truth of this assertion, I intend to use an argument put forward by the American scholar, Rachel Blau DuPlessis as an example of a very useful, yet constrained analysis of what Woolf was doing with her writing and what desires lay behind it. For DuPlessis, when Woolf criticised plots, especially the love interest plot, she was doing so with a view to criticise the 'cultural and narrative forces that produced women' which 'necessarily [led] to a critical transformation of [her] narrative structures'.[6] She argues this partly on the weight of a quote from Woolf's 1929 essay, 'Women and Fiction', which states,

> It is probable [...] that both in life and in art, the values of a woman are not the values of a man. Thus, when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values – to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important.[7]

It is when DuPlessis attempts to bend these words in a critique of Woolf's fiction that certain tensions become apparent in her argument. In the instance of *To the Lighthouse*, she begins fairly astutely by recognising its ability to fashion 'a story that displaces the heterosexual love plot in favour of the parent-child tie, a bisexual oscillation between mother and father'.[8] Unlike the romance novel, where a rhythmic back-and-forth between a male and a female protagonist culminates in marriage, or the nineteenth-century bildungsroman which tended to build to the same climax, *To the Lighthouse* distances its reader from such concerns by permanently altering its point of view. The opening line, 'Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow'[9], belongs to Mrs Ramsay, but it also foreshadows the novel's ending in the word 'yes', the last of which belongs to Lily Briscoe: 'Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision'.[10] The narrative begins, therefore, with the promise of cyclical change and regeneration; we may not be aware of it at first, but the structure is nevertheless in place. If the opening page asserts that this is a story that will focus on the dynamic of parenthood, it does so because the first three characters that it introduces conform to a tri-partite familial structure, but its construction through free-indirect discourse shatters the illusion almost as quickly as it creates it; the rhythm of the narrative is such that a reader is left permanently re-adjusting their focus in largely equal measures between characters, including those outside of the family bond:

> What he said was true. It was always true. He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact; never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being; least of all his own children, who, sprung from his loins, should be aware from childhood that life is difficult [...] one that needs, above all, courage, truth, and the power to endure.[11]

In the section quoted above, Woolf presents the narrative in a state of flux, both perceptually and rhythmically. Declarative statements such as 'What he said was true' could be seen as belonging to either James, Mrs Ramsay or an impersonal narrator, but the duty-bound modality of statements such as '*should* be aware' implies the vanity of their subject, Mr Ramsay. The 'oscillation' that DuPlessis mentions does not, therefore, belong solely to a single set of parents, but rather, to as many character's perspectives as the narrative includes

[6] DuPlessis, p. 56.
[7] Virginia Woolf, 'Women and Fiction', quoted in DuPlessis, p. 56
[8] DuPlessis, p. 60.
[9] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2000), p. 7.
[10] Ibid., p. 226.
[11] Ibid., p. 8.

along the way. This is not to question DuPlessis's identification that maternity, parenthood and female experience will take critical roles in the tale that is about to be told, but simply that one needs to tread cautiously before attributing precedence to any specific area or entity that is explored. Hermione Lee expresses this by stating that '...as always, Woolf burie[s] the polemical substance of the book below what interested her more: intense emotions, the creation of character and atmosphere, the rhythms of perception'.[12] Woolf expressed these sentiments in a letter of 1926 where she stated that, 'Style is a very simple matter; it is all rhythm. Once you get that, you can't use the wrong words'.[13] It was such 'rhythms' that helped structure the shape of the novel and encase its desires.

DuPlessis addresses this rhythmic intertwining of perspective by arguing that '...this couple are put in the context of many other networks, communities, and ties, involving [...] "geniality, sisterhood, motherhood, brotherhood"'[14], but quickly links these 'networks' back to what she sees as Woolf's overall aim of 'trying to make fiction talk about women and their concerns'[15], while failing to address the pressing desires that Woolf explores which are not exclusive to any particular sex, but to humanity in its entirety: 'The loop in the Lily plot (a painting untouched for ten years is begun again and finished) expresses the peculiarities of the female quest, with its loop back through the family and the psychic stage of preoedipal attachment'.[16] To take DuPlessis's argument in full that this represents the 'female quest' is to focus exclusively on the fact that Lily Briscoe is a woman and to essentially ignore the rather important detail that, like Woolf, she is an artist attempting to capture a picture of humanity in a meaningful way. Not only does it constrict a reading of the text and the desires that it seeks to communicate, but it also necessarily alters its meaning by creating the illusion that it is predominantly about 'this' and less about 'that'. Turning to what Lily expresses concerning her process of creation, we see that she is occupied most pressingly in the truth, rather than the gender of what she portrays:

> One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with, she reflected. Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with, she thought. [...] One wanted most some secret sense, some fine air, with which to steal through keyholes and surround her where she sat knitting, talking, sitting silent in the window alone; which took itself and treasured up like the air which held the smoke of the steamer, her thoughts, her imaginations, her desires.[17]

Here, Lily's reflections offer much insight into Woolf's own artistic process: like Virginia, she feels not only limited by the angle imposed by her vision, but also by the inability to express exactly what it is that she seeks in the first place, likening it vaguely to 'some secret sense, some fine air'. Like Woolf, she is also acutely aware that each individual essence of Mrs Ramsay (who she is painting) is necessarily intertwined with so many other aspects of life; '...the smoke of the steamer, her thoughts, her imaginations, her desires'. Where it may once have been possible to communicate each one in their separate, pure forms, Lily's awareness of such impossibilities echoes Virginia's: '...they blend but do not mix. The two emotions, so incongruously coupled, bite and kick each other in unison'.[18] What this reveals

[12] Hermione Lee, 'Introduction' to Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2000), p. xxvi.
[13] Letter to Vita Sackville-West, 16 March 1926, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf Volume III*, ed., Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (London: Hogarth Press, 1975-80), p. 247.
[14] Blau DuPlessis, p. 60.
[15] Ibid., p. 56.
[16] Ibid., p. 61.
[17] Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 214.
[18] Woolf, 'The Narrow Bridge of Art', p. 906.

for both artists is the troubling paradox of experience versus communicability: having desires is one thing; describing them, quite another. Indeed, the predominant desire here seems to be simply to communicate at all, before it is possible to describe what it is that one wants to communicate. Even in recognising that rhythm offered her a platform to do this, Woolf complained that this was in many ways just as elusive as those certain 'right words': '...here am I sitting after half the morning, crammed with ideas [...] and can't dislodge them, for lack of the right rhythm'.[19] Difficulties aside, the point is that neither artist stops trying; *To the Lighthouse* works continuously with new modes of seeing; new angles, rhythms and shapes. If Mr Ramsay is described in one light at the beginning of the novel, 'incapable of untruth', he actively becomes it at the end: 'he looked as if he had become physically what was always at the back of both of their minds – that loneliness that was for both of them the truth about things'.[20] What becomes apparent is a sense that somewhere in the rhythm of the narrative, details of a character's gender, physical appearance and opinions become less important than how they are constructed. The active desires driving the text (parenthood, female experience, death) are therefore bound constantly to the overarching desire to separate out each experience so that they may be grasped whole by the reader.

We have seen then, how Woolf works rhythmically with her narrative to attempt a truthful depiction of human experience, and also, how Rachel Blau DuPlessis offers an insightful, but incomplete demonstration of the desires that lay behind it. Stepping beyond the limitations of the DuPlessis analysis, the psychoanalyst and literary critic, Julia Kristeva offers many useful insights into the mindset of a writer that can be applied very effectively to Woolf's novels. Kristeva is interested in what she terms the 'heteronomy' (i.e. the condition of being subject to the rule of another being or power) of our psyche, and how 'In speaking, in traversing the universe of signs, we arrive at emotions, at sensations, at drives, at affects', which amount to 'something unnameable, which becomes, none the less, the source of our investigations'.[21] In her 1931 novel, *The Waves*, Woolf seemed preoccupied with many of these same concerns: Kate Flint describes her as having made an 'implicit denial, through her method of writing the novel, that the perceiving mind – the mind of the writer – operates in any consistent way'[22] and these psychological inconsistencies necessarily hold huge implications for the manner in which the desires of Woolf as writer become apparent. Written as a series of interconnected monologues between friends, the novel traces the inconsistent patterning of life, the shape of which Woolf likened to an omnipresent tidal sea: 'the same molecules, in a constant process of rearrangement, directed, like the waves, by forces beyond themselves, 'bound by the power of some inner compulsion''.[23] The shape of *The Waves* begins, therefore, to step beyond its role as an 'oppositional narrative', desiring only to challenge literary and political convention, and begins, through the interconnection of certain divergent elements to address the heteronomy of human psyche. It is significant, also, that Woolf chooses another artist figure, Bernard, in which to divulge the desire to step beyond the limitations that language would impose upon her: 'I begin to long for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement'.[24] Like Lily Briscoe, Bernard's narrative constitutes a proposal by Woolf for the necessity of introspection; a desire to reformulate 'these divisions between self and other'[25], thereby separating out those same emotions or experiences that have so incongruously mixed

[19] Woolf, *Letters Volume III*, p. 247.
[20] Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 219.
[21] Quoted from an audience dialogue with Julia Kristeva, transcribed in *Parallax: Julia Kristeva 1966-96: Aesthetics, Politics, Ethics*, ed. by Griselda Pollock, Issue 8 July-September 1998, pp. 5-16.
[22] Kate Flint, 'Introduction' to Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2000), p. xxv.
[23] Ibid., p. xxvi.
[24] Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2000), p. 183.
[25] Flint, p. xxv.

in the 'modern mind' that she talks of in 'The Narrow Bridge of Art'. He shares also with Woolf the same notion that 'the rhythm is the main thing in writing'[26], and longs to 'indulge in the impossible desires to embrace the whole world in the arms of understanding'[27] – 'impossible', because of the unending tragedy that our minds, as Kristeva suggests, are not ruled exclusively by ourselves, but shared out with the world in which we exist.

It did not, indeed, escape Woolf's knowledge that what she desired was, in the end, unreachable. Even with her innovative approach to form, she was necessarily constrained both by the struggle to find the rhythms that would dislodge the words, and finally by the words themselves to communicate the full extent of her meaning. In her characters, however, she found that she was not alone; in the closing lines of Bernard's final monologue he becomes aware of 'a new desire':

> ...something rising beneath me like the proud horse whose rider first spurs and then pulls him back. What enemy do we now perceive advancing against us, you whom I ride now, as we stand pawing this stretch of pavement? It is death.[28]

Bernard experiences in this moment a state which reinvigorates his call in life, and is almost as quickly reminded of its futility in the face of death. In re-approaching DuPlessis's claims of oppositional narrative, we may, therefore, conclude that the 'limitations' of which she speaks and Woolf's desire to step beyond them are certainly present, but, knowing as she did the pressing concerns of time, and of the limitations imposed by her tools (i.e. language), Woolf most actively desired more than to adhere to any one polemic and much more to begin the process of creating a platform in which to make these separate emotions, experiences and opinions heard in their complete, unmediated entireties. It was through the restructuring of narrative and the revival of poetic language that she felt this could be glimpsed, if never fully achieved.

It is, nevertheless, difficult to conclude with any certainty whether the desires illuminated in the structure of Woolf's narratives necessarily 'mean' with any consistency, since part of the very process that drove her lay in either battling against or working with the heteronomy of the creative mind. Like Bernard, Woolf was determined to describe the desires that she felt; for life, for love, for 'inarticulate words', but as life would have it, she would mainly have to settle for describing what it was to be interrupted before ever having the chance. In Lily Briscoe we see the figure of the artist trying to do two things at once: 'understand her own feelings, and create a structure that worked [...] ('So much depends, she thought, upon distance')'[29], but even in the completion of her painting, Lily has already 'had [her] vision'[30], grasping it momentarily before it disappears and continues to elude anyone else that she might care to share it with. Whilst there can be no doubt that Woolf has escaped the imposed desire for structure and contrived ending present in the romance plot, what she leaves us with is the paradox of illustrating new desires; of female empowerment, of artistic quest, of truthfully describing human experience, whilst simultaneously highlighting the futility of desiring at all without the proper means of acting upon it. Whilst humans remain essentially personal beings, the very same desire for 'impersonal relationship' remains with us as we continue to long 'for ideas, for dreams, for imaginations' and 'for poetry'.[31]

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[26] Woolf, *The Waves*, p. 58.
[27] Ibid., p. 85.
[28] Ibid., p. 228.
[29] Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 478.
[30] Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 226.
[31] Woolf, 'The Narrow Bridge of Art', p. 907.

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