



# Artistic Creation as a Mystical Transmutation in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

Salah Bouregbi

## ► To cite this version:

Salah Bouregbi. Artistic Creation as a Mystical Transmutation in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. *Annals of Philosophy, Social & Human Disciplines (APSHD)*, 2017, 1 (1), pp.5-21. <hal-04083063>

**HAL Id: hal-04083063**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04083063v1>**

Submitted on 26 Apr 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 - Attribution - International License

# Artistic Creation as a Mystical Transmutation in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

Salah BOUREGBI

Department of English, Badji Mokhtar University,

Annaba, Algeria

salihbourg@yahoo.fr

## Abstract

*This paper deals with the mystical experiences in Virginia Woolf's artistic creation. Woolf denies any form of modernism that cannot transcend reality. There are moments, where reality is never what it is but a vision — a perspective — whose meaning is beyond the graspable. Reality, thus, becomes un-reality — a halo, and the artist becomes a contemplator — a devotee to such visionary manifestation. Virginia Woolf does not make an exception to this rule. She is par excellence a mystic. The artistic design of her novels, mainly, *To the Lighthouse*, is of transcendental dimension. Both, Mrs Ramsay's and Lily Briscoe's perceptions of life are beyond the palpable: their selves merge within a process of sublimation comparable to that of mysticism. In other words, art (mainly fiction) becomes a process of change from the factual to the transmutable.*

**Keywords:** *Mysticism, Transmutation, Sensibility, transcendence, art and vision .*

## Introduction

The act of writing is an act of metamorphosis: an act of becoming another person. It is an on-going manifestation of the authorial authority through written form. But this activity is not always linguistic. It goes beyond words. There are moments, where reality is never what it is but a vision — a perspective — whose meaning is beyond the graspable, transcending to a world of never-never time and never-never space. Reality, thus, becomes un-reality — a halo, and the artist becomes a contemplator — a mystic. He becomes a devotee to such visionary manifestation. Virginia Woolf does not make an exception to this rule. She is par excellence a mystic. The artistic design of her novels, mainly, *To the Lighthouse*, is of a transcendental dimension.

Woolf leans more to mystical experiences in her artistic creation. She denies any form of modernism that cannot transcend reality and step beyond the earthly

world in order to express the spiritual intensity of characters. “Literary modernism,” Drobot maintains, “is known as a movement away from the conventions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century realism and toward an aesthetic of self-conscious interiority.”<sup>1</sup> This interiority is an inner-eye, which is personal, silent but very contemplative.

Contemplation is a flicker of subliminal response to life, which makes the contemplator and the contemplated one thing — a Unity. This unity is a kind of transmutation, which cannot be possible without the immanent power of the artist’s inward vision — the inward eye. Words, which live in mind more than in dictionaries, are not an end in themselves, but a means of transmutation that enables the artist to unite the inner voices of/in the self. The body, itself, is equally a means, not an end: instincts and physical drives do not liberate the self; they chain it to the physical world and its envies, and prevent it to reach its essence and embrace oneness in Eternity.

### *Mysticism and Perceptual Vision of Woolf’s Artistic Creation*

Mysticism is understood by Richard King as “a process of sublimation, which carries the correspondences of the self with the universe up to higher levels than those on which our normal consciousness works.”<sup>2</sup> That is, man does not experience time as such, but as a sensation, motion, and change. “Time loses its meaning,” admits the philosopher Tseng Jui-hua. “The past and the present merge together. The recreated universe then is an insubstantial oneness, its myriads of atoms disseminating like nebula but all connected together to form a unified whole. As for the speaker’s sense of euphoria, it is in fact a mystic’s ideal of mind.”<sup>3</sup> In the same vein, Fan Grace, in his article, “Beyond Reason: The Certitude of the Mystics from Al-Hallaj to David R. Hawkins,” maintains that: “Mystics throughout history have discussed the timeless state of ego dissolution, when all sees of a personal self dissolves into that which is Universal and Eternal.”<sup>4</sup> The critic Ann Banfield notes the importance of sensation in conceiving reality and differentiates between what science formulates as reality — a reality of matter and substance — to the sensations, which remain its evidence. He writes:

---

<sup>1</sup> Irina-Ana Drobot, “«Moments of Beings» in Virginia Woolf and Graham Swift,” *US-China Foreign Language* 10, 8 (2012), 1454.

<sup>2</sup> Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonialism Theory, Indian and Mystic East* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Jui-Hua Tseng, “Walter Pater; the Stenphens and Virginia Woolf’s Mysticism,” *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 30, 1 (2004), 204.

<sup>4</sup> Fan Grace, “Beyond Reason: The Certitude of the Mystics from Al-Hallaj to David R. Hawkins,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 1, 3 (2011), 147.

*Out of sight and beyond earshot lie then, perhaps, sights and sounds unseen and unheard [...] Precisely, because [the] universe is a plurality of occupied and unoccupied perspectives, the objects which fill it are always unresolved by someone. Separated from their owners in time and space, lost objects do not necessarily cease thereby to exist.*<sup>5</sup>

Past experiences might themselves continue to exist somewhere inaccessible, but observable for us: there is no way to re-enter or re-observe them, except in mind. This state of mind is what the critic Evelyn Underhill calls the “apex” or “the spark of the soul,”<sup>6</sup> which marks the last stage of contemplation. “As humans,” Rom Landau points out, “we can see only fragments of the whole. Moreover, we seldom penetrate beyond their surface.”<sup>7</sup> But as mystics, we can get unity with the object we perceive.

This self-realization, as conceived beyond the earthly world, involves both the awareness of the self, as it currently exists, and its potential extension to selflessness. “For us the key of self-realization, to discover what the self can be is selflessness: we become our self only as we can get our self.”<sup>8</sup> This selflessness is a characteristic mystic concept associated with the enlightened state. H. Fingarett points out:

*It [selflessness] does not mean the absence of a self in the psychoanalytic sense of that term, nor does it refer to the absence of the ego or of the self-representation, or to the loss of ability to distinguish “inner” and “outer” as in hallucination or estrangement... “Selflessness”, being a term in a “subjective” language, expresses the lack of conscious awareness of self.*<sup>9</sup>

Such absence, or alienation from the real world, means that the individual is estranged from his real self, which “becomes a stranger, a feared and disturbed stranger.”<sup>10</sup> Man’s self, thus, is bound up with his conscious effort directed at his attempt to “get away” from the “Karma” of impressions, thoughts, emotions, and desires. “Such a desire for pleasure,” according to the mystic philosopher Sadhu Santideva, “can be fulfilled only if one can find a final place in a state that is

---

<sup>5</sup> Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 134.

<sup>6</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: Meridian, 1974), 366.

<sup>7</sup> Rom Landau, *The Philosophy of Ibn Arabi* (1959) (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 32.

<sup>8</sup> Warren G. Bennis and Edgar H. Schein, “Some Interpersonal Aspects of Self-Communication,” in *Interpersonal Dynamics: Essays on Human Interaction* (1964) (Homewood and Illinois: The Dorsey Press, 1969), 222.

<sup>9</sup> H. Fingarett, “The Ego and Mystic Selflessness,” in *Identity and Anxiety*, ed. Stein Vidich et al. (Glencoe Ill: Free Press, 1960), 580-81.

<sup>10</sup> W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Los Angeles: Jeremy, 1960), 724.

entirely free from pain and opposition of every description and is one of supreme bliss.”<sup>11</sup> This is mystically called the charm after annihilation of the body: death of the body, or in a Sufi term: *fana* (فناء). “They (Sufi) agree that in *fana* consciousness of the phenomenal world is lost; that *fana* leads to gradual unification with God; and that it involves a giving up of all personal desires, and resignation to the will of God.”<sup>12</sup>

In *Moments of Being*, Woolf describes a state of inebriation recalled from her past: “It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be there; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive.”<sup>13</sup> The core of Woolf’s mystic philosophy is clearly demonstrated in the following passage from *Moments of Being*:

*From this I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool lies a pattern; that we — I mean all human beings — are connected with this one; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of this work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the things themselves. And I see this when I have a shock.*<sup>14</sup>

Given Woolf’s description of her union with the whole world in a single pattern, where distinctions vanish, it will be argued here that what Woolf calls “a philosophy” or “a constant idea of mine” is, in fact, essentially mystical. The oblivion of “ideas, feelings or insights may be closely tied to their «unspeakability»; a key doctrine of mysticism is of course that neither the Infinite nor our sense of inebriation in it is expressible in words.”<sup>15</sup>

The root of mystical experience — loss of self, merging with a greater unity, apprehension of numinousness, timelessness, transcendence, and intensified meaning — is recognizable in many of Woolf’s novels and essays. Woolf terms her mystical experiences “moments of being.” Such moments constitute true “reality” for her, a belief which she knows to be “irrational”, but does not attempt to resolve it: “It is irrational, it will not stand argument — that we are sealed vessels afloat upon what is convenient to call reality; at some moments, without

---

<sup>11</sup> Sadhu Santideva, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Mysticism*, vol. I (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1999), 7.

<sup>12</sup> Landau, *The Philosophy of Ibn Arabi*, 51.

<sup>13</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Beings: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings* (1976), ed. Jeanne Schulkind (London and New York: The Hogarth Press and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 65.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, 72.

<sup>15</sup> Tseng, “Walter Pater,” 206.

reason, without an effort, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality.”<sup>16</sup> These moments are characteristics of Woolf’s writing. Drobot points out that: “The first characteristics of a mystical which are noticeable in Woolf are a noetic quality and passivity. The noetic quality allows characters to access moments of vision, during which they experience various revelations.”<sup>17</sup>

As early as 1917, Woolf recorded having told to Clive Bell: “Every word has an aura. Poetry combines the different auras in a sequence.”<sup>18</sup> Life is “not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged,” she wrote; “Life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness until its end.”<sup>19</sup> When her intellect was scattered at social events, she felt herself “beginning to glitter and englobing people with a champagne mist. And then it fades away.”<sup>20</sup> Human beings “show the light through. But what is the light?” she asked in her diary in March 1929.<sup>21</sup>

As C. W. Leadbreaker explained in his 1927 book *The Charkas* (transcendence), each charka’s vibratory level corresponds not only to a colour but to a tonal sound and to a set of vowels or consonants from the ancient Sanskrit alphabet. This correspondence sets up the possibility of translating tonal sound and colour and language into each other, providing a “rational explanation for the occurrence of synesthetic perception.”<sup>22</sup> From the Theosophists, too, such experiences constitute expanded ways of knowing, and take place under altered states of consciousness such as meditation, trance, or sleep, rather than on the physical plane. It is the out-of-body travel. Jui-Hua Tseng states that:

*Not only do all these sensual images interweave into larger “states of mind”, but the distinction between subject and object is blurred as well. Time loses its meaning. The past and the present merge together. The recreated universe then is an insubstantial oneness, its myriads of atoms disseminating like nebula but all connected together to form a unified whole.*<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 142.

<sup>17</sup> Drobot, “«Moments of Beings» in Virginia Woolf,” 1470.

<sup>18</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf (1915-1919)*, vol. I, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (Harmondsworth and Middlesex: Penguin, 1980), 80.

<sup>19</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays* (1966) vol. II, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967), 189.

<sup>20</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. III, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978), 48.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, 218.

<sup>22</sup> C. W. Leadbreaker, *The Charkas* (London: Routledge, 1927), 18.

<sup>23</sup> Tseng, “Walter Pater,” 204.

But later in 1926, Woolf began to entertain the idea of writing a work about a heroine whose consciousness was somehow not bounded by time:

*Yet I am now and then haunted by some semi mystic very profound life of a woman, which shall all be told on one occasion; and time shall be utterly obliterated; future shall somehow blossom out of the past. One incident — say the fall of a flower — might contain it. My theory being that the event practically does not exist — and time either.*<sup>24</sup>

According to Hinduism/theosophy, the “aggregate of individual karma” — those right and wrong actions carried out in an individual’s past lives — “becomes that of the nation to which those individuals belong, and further... the sum of National Karma is that of the world.”<sup>25</sup> A very spiritually advanced individual may “redeem” the aggregative negative karma of a nation or even the world:

*It is reserved for heroic souls to find out the cause of this unequal pressure of retributive Karma, and by a supreme effort to readjust the balance of power, and save the people from a moral engulfment a thousand times more disastrous and more permanently evil than the like physical catastrophe, in which you seem to see the only possible outlet for this accumulated misery.*<sup>26</sup>

Whether or not, all these allusions to Indian mystical practices are deliberate on Woolf’s part. Her diaries and notes definitely reflect the shift in her attitude toward mysticism, which took place between 1927 and 1931. In a 1919 letter to Janet Case, she writes: “And then there’s the whole question, which interested me, again too much for the books sake, I daresay, of the things one doesn’t say; what affect does that have? And how far do our feelings take their colour from the drive underground.”<sup>27</sup>

Part of Woolf’s own “mystical feelings” is associated with her bouts of mental illness: “I believe these illnesses are in my case — how shall I express it? — Partly mystical.”<sup>28</sup> Contemporary research into manic depression claims that Woolf’s particular mental disability is the cause of her mystical experiences. Thomans Caramagno explains that the manic stage of the illness is associated with “torrents of ideas and words connected by complex webs of associations”, delusions, hallucinations, a heightened sense of the meaning of life, a sensation of

---

<sup>24</sup> Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. III, 118.

<sup>25</sup> Edwin G. Blavasky, *The Key to Theosophy*, 1889, Abr. Joy Mills (Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophical, 1972), 122.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, 124.

<sup>27</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf (1912-1922)*, vol. II (1976) eds. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (New York and London: A Harvest/HBL Book, 196, 1978), 400.

<sup>28</sup> Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. III, 287.

being able to “read one’s environment, even auras and halos around things.”<sup>29</sup> In the same vein, M. Barrett maintains that:

*Psychoanalytically, Woolf’s “moments of being” could be related to what Jung defined as the penetration of unconscious contents into the consciousness. Characters begin to daydream when they seem to lose contact with objective reality, and they seem to create their own world by means of perception. Unconscious contents play a significant part in shaping another dimension of reality.*<sup>30</sup>

Woolf’s encounter and challenge with the Bloomsbury Group and its aesthetics and her mystic inclinations enable her to pave the way for a sensibility of art, which has distinctive qualities and senses of the world. Living in an era where the conventionalism of artistic form is being replaced by new canons and values, Woolf sublimates worldly morality and beauty in a manner to that of Platonic metaphysical contemplation. Liberated from the external forms of words and language, she relies more on her “inner light” (inwardness) expressing it through prismatic colours, and pours forth, as a mystic does, “an abundance of archetypal images in plain language to a point where metaphor has transcended its normal function, and instead of merely indicating a point of resemblances between two differentiable entities, it has totally merged them.”<sup>31</sup>

Woolf establishes a certain knowledge of the world. Her soul is opened up to the spirits and the “inner light”, but it is only through the act of writing, a form of contemplation proceeding through the powers of recollection and imagination deep in her soul, that she is able to penetrate to the core of life’s wholeness. “It is only by putting it into words that I make it a whole,” she said in *Moments of Beings*.<sup>32</sup> Writing, in other words, becomes a mystical transmutation for the writer — an actualisation of her sensibility.

It was only in moments of writing — mystically speaking moments of being — that Woolf could liberate herself from all particular doctrines, intellectual limitations and psychological problems. For her, as Martin Corner points out, mysticism “is the renunciation of inappropriate expectations toward the nonhuman world; but it was also a condition of that purified perception which would reveal

---

<sup>29</sup> Thomas C. Caramagno, *The Flight of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 40-2.

<sup>30</sup> M. Barrett, *Imagination in Theory — Essays on Writing and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 190.

<sup>31</sup> Jane Marcus, *Art and Anger* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1988), 29.

<sup>32</sup> Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 72.



the world as ordinary and yet miraculous, as nonhuman in its otherness and yet beyond everything worth our attention.”<sup>33</sup>

Woolf combines the formal aesthetics of the Bloomsbury Group and mystical influences together. She maintains, thus, the equilibrium between what might be called intelligence and soul. Above all, she is a writer who keeps seeking the truth from within, and the representation of her truth comes only through art. Her knowledge or vision of the One (oneness) could only be reached through her highly poetic prose. It is precisely here that this “One”, as prismatic colours of light, disintegrates into a multiplicity of inner voices and sense of impressions.

*Aesthetics of Impersonality and Mystical Dimensions in “To the Lighthouse”*

For Woolf, art does transcend life. And life is significant only in its functioning as part of the whole: that is art. Life, therefore, is not inherently valuable in itself. It derives its very significance from the fact that it is a constituent of art, the whole. In *To the Lighthouse*, both art and life are fused together to produce wholeness. Both Lily and Mrs Ramsay attempt to use their respective arts to “compose from [...] fragments a perfect whole or read in the littered pieces the clear words of the truth.”<sup>34</sup> Two selves experience a transmutation: they merge or blend their selves with the outer world. Ali HadiMulla Al-Adilee states that: “Mrs Ramsay is a rational mystic who works at reunion opposites and bringing together illogical fragments into an active unity. A Similar creative power is also included by Lily Briscoe, her spiritual heir. Lily is a rational Mystic, in addition to being a creative artist; she shares Mrs Ramsay’s mystical energy toward unity.”<sup>35</sup>

The ground of Woolf’s writing is the experiencing of the physical body in a spatiotemporal, kinetic field. The experience of “I”, as a body in space in relation to other bodies (objects), is fundamental to Woolf’s thinking on selfhood, self-representation and art. “Lily’s painting,” J. Hillis Miller admits “is presented as rhythmical movement which seems to be sustained by an impersonal transcendent rhythm which is beyond her and in which she nevertheless participates.”<sup>36</sup> So, Lily’s art of painting and performance, in harmonizing between the artistic act and

---

<sup>33</sup> Martin Corner, “Mysticism and Aestheticism in *To the Lighthouse*,” in *Identity and Anxiety*, ed. Stein Vidich, et al. (Glencoe Ill: Free Press, 1960), 243.

<sup>34</sup> Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 1964 (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1970), 144.

<sup>35</sup> Ali Hadimulla Adilee, “Contemporary Reviews of Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*,” *International Journal of Education and Research* 3, 9 (2015), 362.

<sup>36</sup> J. Hillis Miller, “Mr Carmichael and Lily Briscoe: The Rhythm of Creativity in *To the Lighthouse*,” in *Tropes, Parables, Performances: Essays on Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 153.

the rhythms of the body movement, and the physical world, is a translation of the body onto the canvas. In its mystical sense, it is the turning for the charm and transcendence. What is communicated with striking clarity, through Lily's performing experience, is the sense of bodily movement that constitutes the act of painting: the pauses, the strokes and how that bodily movement creates the rhythm constitute the act:

*With a curious physical sensation, as if she were urged forward and at the same time must hold herself back, she made her first decisive stroke. The brush descended. It flickered brown over the white canvas; it left a running mark. A second time she did it-a third time. And so pausing and flickering, she attained a dancing rhythmical movement, as if the pauses were one part of the rhythm and the stroke another, and all were related; and so, lightly and swiftly pausing, striking, she scored her canvas with brown running nervous lines which had no sooner settled there than they enclosed (she felt it looming out at her) a space...*<sup>37</sup>

The lasting values in life and art are not, then, in the shifting details on the surface of things, but, rather, in the formal and permanent pattern that both life and art must try to remain forever. What Mrs Ramsay attempted, during her days of action, is the final truth. Death does not destroy it. And Lily at last realizes that, what the artist sees and what he feels about what he sees becomes a work of art. The seer and the seen are one. That is, when the inner form has been translated to the canvas and when the significance of the vision is communicated, not in the language of surface representation, but in the language of the design, the artist reaches unity and order. "In the state of ecstasy," Grace points out, "the soul vibrates with intense longing to unite with the One, the Beloved. The undercurrent of dualism (Lover and Beloved) melts in the moment of union or enlightenment, at which point there is no longer an individual «seeker» or «devotee». One has become Love itself."<sup>38</sup> This state of oneness, according to John Climacus, is the soul transcendence to Divinity. He writes: "The summit of the soul's ascent is, paradoxically, the «Divine abyss» where God «delights in his own Being» as the "soul forgets its own being" and allows the death of ego-self as the source of one's existence, uniting «with His nameless; unchartered, wayless Being.»"<sup>39</sup> Art is the apex of essence. "Art of whatever kind," Daniel Ferrer states, "must reach a point where the paternal language fails — but in painting, things are more clear, more simple, for this silence is not covered by the rustling of words."<sup>40</sup> In other words,

---

<sup>37</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 148-49.

<sup>38</sup> Grace, "Beyond Reason," 152.

<sup>39</sup> John Climacus, *Ladder to Divine Ascent* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 152.

<sup>40</sup> Daniel Ferrer, "To the Lighthouse," in *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism*, ed. Maud Ellmann (London and New York: 1994), 153.

painting has the advantage of being outside the field of language, outside the system of words alphabetically ordered by the patriarchal authority.

Woolf transforms any sensory contact with the object into artistic image. Physical images are parts of her artistic design, through which she represents her mind and her reality. That is, she encloses her inner world in the visual world that surrounds her. Thus, anything can become a part of her consciousness as well as a part of her novel's world. In her article, "«These Emotions of the Body»: Intercorporeal Narrative in *To the Lighthouse*," Laura Doyle admits that:

*The work of art, like the land that stokes, must "take its place among the things it touches." The narrator / painter must discover herself as both inhabitant (sic) of objects and inhabitants — beside those objects — of an intercorporeal world. Such a positioning gives the artist a three-dimensional open space [...] From within that space, the artist can carve a thing that exerts its own pressure in the hierarchy — inward world of intercorporeal objects.<sup>41</sup>*

The lighthouse is a central symbol in *To the Lighthouse*, and what it means depends on who is looking at it. Its relation to Mrs Ramsay is of crucial importance, for Mrs Ramsay has the power to see the transfiguration of time by eternity. Although she sits in her room and undergoes the mystical experience of becoming the thing she looks at, the lighthouse, she nevertheless recognizes that its meaning is paradoxical: it is "so much her, yet so little her."<sup>42</sup> It stands firm and unchanging amid the seas of time, yet in a sense has no reality apart from the sea. Its beam revolves in a pulsing rhythm akin to that of the time process, and so, as she watches it, she calls it "the pitiless, the remorseless."<sup>43</sup> At the same time, however, it gives her a sense of stability, be separated from change, and therefore represents a vital synthesis of time and eternity: "In the midst of chaos, there was shape; this external passing and flowing.... was stuck into stability."<sup>44</sup>

The relationship between Mr Ramsay's world of rationally apprehended fact and Mrs Ramsay's world of intuitively apprehended vision is figured symbolically by the central image of the lighthouse itself: Mr. Ramsay bears a clear figurative resemblance to the lighthouse tower; Mrs Ramsay sees him "as a stake driven into the bed of a channel upon which the gulls perch and the waves beat...marking the channel out there in the floods alone."<sup>45</sup> But such a stake possesses no light of its own; the light of the lighthouse is associated, rather, with Mrs Ramsay: "Often she

---

<sup>41</sup> Laura Doyle, "«These Emotions of the Body»: Intercorporeal Narrative in *To the Lighthouse*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 40, 1 (1994), 57-8.

<sup>42</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 103.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, 103.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, 151.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, 69.

found herself sitting and looking... until she became the thing she looked at — that light.”<sup>46</sup> Mrs. Ramsay prefers to get sensation through the contemplation of the lighthouse rather than the lighthouse itself. Remote from the lighthouse, she reacts with joy and fascination to the stroke of its beams of light.

Being flexible in symbols, the lighthouse may also be considered as a symbol of awareness and personal awakening. “A person that projects his sentiments,” Pierre Daco admits, “is, thus, like a lamp which throws its light on someone, who believes that the other emits some luminous rays, but in reality, he only reflects them.”<sup>47</sup> Jung considers this state as the progression of the ego forward into the future. It is the process of sublimation, which denotes how the mind can transform and integrate instinctual energy into more reasonable, nobler or spiritual efforts. Jung also states that the psyche has an instinct of transcendence, which can synthesize the personality into a balanced, integrated being. The individual both achieves wholeness and realizes a more complete self-actualisation.<sup>48</sup>

Mrs. Ramsay is aware that the lighthouse stands still, pitiless, remorseless, but gives light for those who want it: “All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrank, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness.”<sup>49</sup> The beam of light it reflects coaxes Mrs. Ramsay to respond to it. That is, the lighthouse is exposed to the truth of darkness — alone — like Mrs. Ramsay herself, who is exposed to the truth of her own life and equally in isolation and alone. “For the reader as for Mrs. Ramsay,” Joan Bennett comments, “lighthouse beam symbolizes the rhythm of joy and sorrow in human life and the alternating radiance and darkness of even the most intimate relationships.”<sup>50</sup>

Mrs. Ramsay identifies herself with the lighthouse. “She is magically related to the world in other ways: she has the power to become the thing she sees.”<sup>51</sup> The established magic that identifies Mrs. Ramsay with the lighthouse is well

---

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, 96.

<sup>47</sup> Pierre Daco, *Triumphes de la psychanalyse: Du traitement psychologique à l'équilibre de la personnalité* (1965) (Verviers: Editions Marabout, 1978), 203.

<sup>48</sup> Jung, qtd in Edward H. Stauch, *A Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (Jericho and New York: Exposition-University Book, 1974), 53.

<sup>49</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 60.

<sup>50</sup> Joan Bennet, *Virginia Woolf: Her Art as a Novelist* (1964) (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 103.

<sup>51</sup> J. O. Love, *Worlds in Consciousness: Mythopoetic Thought in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1970), 164.

expressed in Mrs. Ramsay's admiration of the light the house reflects. She exclaims:

*"Oh, how beautiful!" For the great plateful of blue water was before her; the hoary Lighthouse, distant, austere, in the midst; and on the right, as far as the eye could see, fading and falling, in soft low pleats, the green sand dunes with the wild flowing grasses on them, which always seemed to be running away into some moon country, uninhabited of men.*<sup>52</sup>

Looking at the lighthouse this way, Mrs Ramsay becomes a seeker, a devotee, who wants to be the object she looks at. Light forms the essence of the senses. Mrs Ramsay is in a state of transcendence and body annihilation. Rom Landau considers this act as an ascent means to reach Divinity. He writes: "Everything that enables us to apprehend life — in fact our very awareness of living — is this Light. Since God is the root of everything that is, He is Light par excellence."<sup>53</sup> W. Chittick extends further maintaining that "The objection of vision, which is Real, is light, while that through which the perceiver perceives Him is light. Hence, light becomes included within light. It is as if it returns to the root from which it became manifest."<sup>54</sup>

Both Mrs. Ramsay and the Lighthouse form a unity — oneness. Both have the power to stave off the unhappy situations and the chaos associated with Mr. Ramsay. In part One, when Mrs. Ramsay was alive, the light of the tower was dominant. But when she died, in part Two, disorder predominates: there is chaos and decay.

*It [The lighthouse] still caresses her, but also has power over her. [...] She feels a strange division between the mind as investigator and the mind as the object of investigation, and she is aware how her previous perfect union with her surrounding has changed them ; and, initially, the change is disturbing.*<sup>55</sup>

Mrs. Ramsay responds more acutely to the lighthouse beams. She accords and even shapes her innermost sense of identity through the beams of light it emits. Such response is a kind of transmutation, a way to become a self without body. Landau states that:

*In the mystics case Divine essence is revealed directly to the "heart" in an immediate vision. The mystic's heart sees (or reflects) all the Divine perspectives which,*

---

<sup>52</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 23.

<sup>53</sup> Landau, *The Philosophy of Ibn Arabi*, 37.

<sup>54</sup> W. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany, New York: Sunny, 1989), 215.

<sup>55</sup> T. E. Apter, *Virginia Woolf: A Study of her Novels* (London: The Mcmillan Press Ltd, 1979), 87.

*otherwise, are scattered in endless multiplicity throughout the universe. In fact, only the mystic heart can perceive Reality itself which is beyond thought.*<sup>56</sup>

Mrs Ramsay dies. Death is the most powerful assault. It sweeps her away, but it cannot destroy the lighthouse; and by the time she dies, the lighthouse has become the symbol of Mrs Ramsay. Mrs Ramsay equals eternity. From the window, she looks out on life, irradiating and transforming the human landscape. Her gaze reaches out to meet and mirror the lighthouse beam.

Being a source of regeneration and power, L.A. Polesky associates the lighthouse to God. He writes: "Woolf suggests the connection between the self and God, the Lighthouse stands firm and steadfast upon its rock base in the midst of the ever-flowing-dark sea. The sea archetypally symbolizes the unconscious, while the Biblical symbol of the rock usually refers to God or spiritual power."<sup>57</sup> Such revitalization, that the three strokes give to the spirit, is paralleled to the within power that the self regenerates as a response to the beams of light of the lighthouse. According to Polesky, the lighthouse "represents God within the self."<sup>58</sup> The third stroke emitted by the lighthouse is very significant. Mrs. Ramsay identifies herself with it, and makes her different from her husband. If Mr. Ramsay regenerates, symbolically, his power from the power of the lighthouse and its beams of light, Mrs. Ramsay sees her "self" through it. In other words, the lighthouse stimulates Mrs. Ramsay. It makes her introspect. She, unlike her husband, has the capacity to see what lies behind the darkness. She can see the core of her "self" and the depth of her identity. Her identification with the third stroke of the lighthouse makes her illuminate the core of darkness and, symbolically, the self within such core:

*[T]here she looked out to meet that stroke of Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, that last of the three, which was her stroke, for watching them in this mood always at this hour one could not help attaching oneself to one thing especially of the things we saw ; and this thing, the long steady stroke, was her stroke. [...] It will end, it will end, she said. It will come, it will come, when suddenly she added, We are in the hands of the Lord.*<sup>59</sup>

Mrs. Ramsay re-enters her life with a new understanding about identity and mainly her "self." "All of her concern over people marrying is actually the ego's disguise for her self's deep-seated concern: the marriage of Mrs. Ramsay to God.

---

<sup>56</sup> Landau, *The Philosophy of Ibn Arabi*, 37.

<sup>57</sup> Louise A. Poleskey, *The Elusive Self: Psyche and Spirit in Virginia Woolf's Novels* (Toronto and London: University of delamare's Press, 1981), 129.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, 129.

<sup>59</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 96-7.

She realizes this when she, having awakened into consciousness, returns her gaze to the light.”<sup>60</sup> Such self that holds light — the light of the third stroke — is associated with the Biblical image of a bride, who filled her spirit and self with the light of God. “The goal of *fana* is the attainment of true knowledge by the passing away of everything phenomenal, that is, everything other than God. This, however, must not be interpreted as becoming God. Rather it is God’s recognizing Himself through, and with the medium of man.”<sup>61</sup> Or in the words of Hallaj: “Oneness with the Beloved.”<sup>62</sup> Or in Marguerite Porete formulation: “I am absorbed in Him.”<sup>63</sup>

This third stroke, which has a great effect in Mrs. Ramsay’s self, could be associated with the Divine Light of the Holy Spirit. The absorption of this light revitalizes Mrs. Ramsay’s soul: “She looked upon over her knitting and met the third stroke and it seemed to her like her own eyes meeting her own eyes, searching as she alone could search into the mind and her heart, purifying out of existence that lie, any life.”<sup>64</sup> The ceaselessness of contemplating makes the contemplator and the contemplated One: “A lover’s absorption in the beloved.”<sup>65</sup> It is a full realization of oneness. This state of looking is a mystical experience according to Hallaj. Landau expresses Hallaj’s ideas as follows:

*Everyone who perceives must have some relationship to the light, by which he is made able to perceive, and everything which is perceived has a relationship with God, Who is Light, that is, all which perceives and all which is perceived.*<sup>66</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Undoubtedly, Woolf writes through a sensibility, which values the watchable and makes it an image or symbol of something that exists only when fusion appears between the seer and the seen, the contemplator and the contemplated. This mode of experience is very similar to that of mysticism. Forgetfulness of the body is the only avenue for such a process of transcendence. Like the mystic, Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe become the thing they look at: the lighthouse. Images, Woolf uses in *To the Lighthouse*, are internal responses, which reveal and reflect the inmost spirit of characters. Strangely, her characters project their emotions into

---

<sup>60</sup> Poleskey, *The Elusive Self*, 137.

<sup>61</sup> Landau, *The Philosophy of Ibn Arabi*, 54.

<sup>62</sup> Hallaj, qtd B. Lewis, *Music of a Distant Drum* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 148.

<sup>63</sup> Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. E. Babinsky (New York: Paulist, 1993), 156.

<sup>64</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 97.

<sup>65</sup> Landau, *The Philosophy of Ibn Arabi*, 51.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, 79.

external objects and appreciate looking at these emotions in these objects. That is, there is a process of transmutation allowing souls to extend from the body to the objects they look at or they recreate.

### **Bibliography:**

1. Adilee, Ali HadiMulla. "Contemporary Reviews of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*." *International Journal of Education and Research* 3, 9 (2015): 359-368.
2. Apter, T. E. *Virginia Woolf: A Study of her Novels*. London: The Mcmillan Press Ltd, 1979.
3. Banfield, Ann. *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
4. Barrett, M. *Imagination in Theory — Essays on Writing and Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999.
5. Bennet, Joan. *Virginia Woolf: Her Art as a Novelist*. 1964. Cambridge and New York : Cambridge University Press, 1979.
6. Bennis, Warren G. and Edgar H. Schein. "Some Interpersonal Aspects of Self-Communication." In *Interpersonal Dynamics: Essays on Human Interaction*. 1964, 207-226. Homewood and Illinois: The Dorsey Press, 1969.
7. Blavasky, Edwin G. *The Key to Theosophy*. 1889. Abr. Joy Mills. Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophical, 1972.
8. Caramagno, Thomas C. *The Flight of the Mind*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975.
9. Chittick, W. *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*. Albany and New York: Sunny, 1989.
10. Climacus, John. *Ladder to Divine Ascent*. New York: Paulist Press, 1982.
11. Corner, Martin. "Mysticism and Aestheticism in *To the Lighthouse*." In *Identity and Anxiety*, edited by Stein Vidich, and White, 421-435. Glencoe Ill: Free Press, 1960.
12. Drobot, Irina-Ana. "«Moments of Beings» in Virginia Woolf and Graham Swift." *US-China Foreign Language* 10, 8 (2012): 1452-1474.
13. Daco, Pierre. *Triumphes de la psychanalyse: Du traitement psychologique à l'équilibre de la personnalité*. 1965. Verviers: Editions Marabout, 1978.
14. Grace, Fan. "Beyond Reason: The Certitude of the Mystics from Al-Hallaj to David R. Hawkins." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 1, 3 (2011): 147-157.
15. Doyle, Laura. "«These Emotions of the Body»: Intercorporeal Narrative in *To the Lighthouse*." *Twentieth Century Literature* 40, 1 (1994): 57-58.



16. Ferrer, Daniel. "To the Lighthouse." In *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism*, edited by Maud Ellmann, 143-169. London, New York: 1994.
17. Fingarett H. "The Ego and Mystic Selflessness." In *Identity and Anxiety*, edited by Stein Vidich, and White , 580-591. Glencoe Ill: Free Press, 1960.
18. King, Richard. *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonialism Theory, Indian and Mystic East*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.
19. Landau, Rom. *The Philosophy of Ibn Arabi*. 1959. London and New York: Routledge, 2008.
20. Leadbreaker, C. W. *The Charkas*. London: Routledge, 1927.
21. Lewis, B. *Music of a Distant Drum*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
22. Love, J. O. *Worlds in Consciousness: Mythopoetic Thought in the Novels of Virginia Woolf*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1970.
23. Porete, Marguerite. *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. Trans. E. Babinsky. New York: Paulist, 1993.
24. Miller, J. Hillis. "Mr Carmichael and Lily Briscoe: The Rhythm of Creativity in *To the Lighthouse*." In *Tropes, Parables, Performances: Essays on Twentieth-Century Literatur*, 151-170. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.
25. Poleskey, Louise A. *The Elusive Self: Psyche and Spirit in Virginia Woolf's Novels*. Toronto and London: University of Delamare's Press, 1981.
26. Santideva, Sadhu. *Encyclopaedia of Indian Mysticism*. Vol. I. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1999.
27. Stace, W. T. *Mysticism and Philosophy*. Los Angles: Jeremy, 1960.
28. Stauch, Edward H. *A Philosophy of Literary Criticism*. Jericho, and New York: Exposition-University Book, 1974.
29. Tseng, Jui-Hua. "Walter Pater; the Stenphens and Virginia Woolf's Mysticism." *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 30, 1 (2004): 203-226.
30. Underhill, Evelyn. *Mysticism*. New York: Meridian, 1974.
31. Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. 1964. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1970.
32. Woolf, Virginia. *Moments of Beings: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*. 1976. Edited by Jeanne Schulkind. London, New York: The Hogarth Press, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985.
33. Woolf, Virginia. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf (1915-1919)*. Vol. I. Edited by Anne Olivier Bell. Harmondsworth, and Middlesex: Penguin, 1980.
34. Woolf, Virginia. *Collected Essays*. 1966. Vol. II. Edited by Leonard Woolf. London: Chatto&Windus, 1967.

35. Woolf, Virginia. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*. Vol. III, edited by Nigel Nicolson. London: The Hogarth Press, 1978.
36. Woolf, Virginia. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf (1912-1922)*. Vol II, edited by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann. New York and London: A Harvest/HBL Book, 196, 1978.