

**The Painter in the Novel, the Novelist in the Painting:
To the Lighthouse and Vanessa Bell's Portraits of Virginia Woolf**

ANNALISA FEDERICI, UNIVERSITY OF PERUGIA

Abstract:

This essay explores the implicit connection between Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), a novel featuring the figure of a painter as one of its protagonists, and the Post-Impressionist portraits of Woolf painted by her sister Vanessa Bell between 1911 and 1912. I will posit that this relation is based on a series of analogous aesthetic principles that manifest the closeness of the professional and private relationship between the sister artists. Moreover, I propose a reading of *To the Lighthouse* that, although taking into account the influence of Roger Fry's Post-Impressionist dichotomy between 'vision and design', especially highlights Woolf's metanarrative commentary on her own aesthetic principles, as variously discussed in both her private and her public texts. I also suggest that the artworks in question are distinct and at the same time closely connected manifestations of Woolfian ideals, that often conceive of crossing the boundaries between literature and painting. On the one hand, the presence of the painter Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* allows Woolf to explore manifold aesthetic and psychological issues that represent serious concerns for herself as a writer, and can be seen as an opportunity to consider the fundamental aspects of her own artistic vision; on the other hand, the presence of a novelist (Woolf herself) in some of Vanessa Bell's paintings may be interpreted as a prefiguration of her sister's mature aesthetic principles, which are surprisingly reflected – along with the tenets of Post-Impressionism that fascinated them both – in her own painterly technique.

In a diary entry written while composing the central section of *To the Lighthouse*, by her own definition 'the most difficult abstract piece of writing' she had ever attempted, Virginia Woolf states: 'I have to give an empty house, no people's characters, the passage of time, all eyeless and featureless with nothing to cling to.'¹ The adjectives 'eyeless' and 'featureless'

¹ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols (London: Penguin, 1977-84), III (1982), p. 76. Further references are given after quotations in the text, with the abbreviation *D III*.

that she uses to refer to her book seem to be particularly significant not only in terms of Woolf's own aesthetics, but especially in the light of the Post-Impressionist portraits of her painted by her sister Vanessa Bell between 1911 and 1912; these are all the more striking mainly because of the lack of facial features, most notably the eyes.² The subterranean link between such different works of art – the novel featuring as one of its main characters the figure of a painter, Lily Briscoe, and the paintings portraying the novelist Virginia Woolf – gives us an insight into the common aesthetic principles subtending Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Vanessa Bell's portraits of her sister. Most of the commentators on the novel have observed the parallel between Lily's progress with her canvas and the development of the narrative, and have recognized the influence of Roger Fry's formalist Post-Impressionist aesthetics on the creation and structure of both Lily's painting and the novel itself.³ I propose a reading of *To the Lighthouse* that, though acknowledging the role of Fry's advocated balance between 'vision and design', primarily highlights Woolf's metanarrative commentary on her own aesthetic principles that she more or less overtly discusses in both private (diaries, letters, memoirs) and public (novels, short stories, critical essays) texts. In particular, I will argue that these works of art are two different and at the same time closely connected expressions of Woolfian aesthetics, which often deliberately trespass boundaries between literature and painting, or, in Woolf's own words, explore 'the sunny margin where the arts flirt and joke and pay each other compliments'.⁴ On the one hand, the presence of a painter in the novel *To the Lighthouse* allows Woolf to examine numerous aesthetic and psychological issues that carry some urgency for herself as a writer, and can be seen as an opportunity to discuss the fundamental aspects of her own artistic conception. On the other hand, the presence of a novelist (Woolf herself) in some of Vanessa Bell's paintings may be interpreted as a prefiguration of her sister's mature aesthetic principles, which are surprisingly reflected – together with the tenets of Post-Impressionism that fascinated both of them – in her own painterly technique. In other words, in the specific case of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell the *sister arts* can be also considered as the *sisters' arts* (to refer to Gillespie's authoritative study): two different means of expressing the same underlying aesthetic principles as well as the closeness of

² Woolf also defined *The Waves* as an 'abstract mystical eyeless book' (ibid., p. 203), and one of its characters, Rhoda, describes herself as having no face.

³ Among many studies devoted to the subject see, for example, Thomas G. Matro, 'Only Relations: Vision and Achievement in *To the Lighthouse*', *PMLA*, 99 (1984), 212-24; Jane Goldman, 'Virginia Woolf and Post-Impressionism: French Art, English Theory, and Feminist Practice', *Miscelánea*, 20 (1999), 173-91; Jack Stewart, 'A "Need of Distance and Blue": Space, Color, and Creativity in *To the Lighthouse*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 46 (2000), 439-55; Randi Koppen, 'Embodied Form: Art and Life in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*', *New Literary History*, 32 (2001), 375-89.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, 'Walter Sickert', in *Collected Essays*, ed. by Leonard Woolf, 4 vols (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966-67), II (1966), p. 243.

their professional and private relationship.⁵ My reading is not intended as a definitive one, but rather aims to provide some insights to widen the scope of other biographical interpretations; in doing so, I will focus on what I consider a fundamental aspect of Woolf's writing, that is the metanarrativity and self-reflexivity of the literary text.

Between 1911 and 1912, Vanessa Bell painted four portraits of Virginia Woolf, all of which show experimentation with Post-Impressionist principles in relation to portraiture, and a questioning of the need for likeness or verisimilarity of representation. Like other contemporary artists, Bell considerably changed her manner of painting after the famous exhibit 'Manet and the Post-Impressionists', held at the Grafton Galleries in 1910 and followed by a second Post-Impressionist exhibition in 1912-13. One of these portraits, *Virginia Woolf*, shows the novelist in the intimacy of a domestic pose, with facial features barely suggested: wearing a greenish sweater, she is leaning back on an orange armchair boldly outlined in black, holding a piece of needlework in her hands.⁶ Another portrait from 1912, *Virginia Woolf in a Deckchair*, shows Vanessa's typical dark outlining combined with the same reclining position of the subject, and with a blank featureless face characteristic of several paintings from this period.⁷ Finally, similar traits can be found in a third portrait of Woolf, again sitting on an armchair (figure 1).

⁵ Diane F. Gillespie, *The Sisters' Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1988). On the loving but at times jealous rivalry of the sister artists see also Frances Spalding, *Vanessa Bell* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983); Gillespie, "O to be a painter!": Virginia Woolf as an Art Critic', *Studies in the Humanities*, 10 (1983), 28-38; Jane Dunn, *A Very Close Conspiracy: Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990); Goldman, *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post-Impressionism, and the Politics of the Visual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Gillespie, 'Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, and Painting', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts*, ed. by Maggie Humm (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 121-39.

⁶ Vanessa Bell, *Virginia Woolf* (1912), oil on canvas, London, National Portrait Gallery, <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mwo8084/Virginia-Woolf?LinkID=mp04923&search=sas&sText=woolf&role=sit&rNo=6> [accessed 17 June 2014].

⁷ Bell, *Virginia Woolf in a Deckchair* (1912), oil on canvas, private collection.

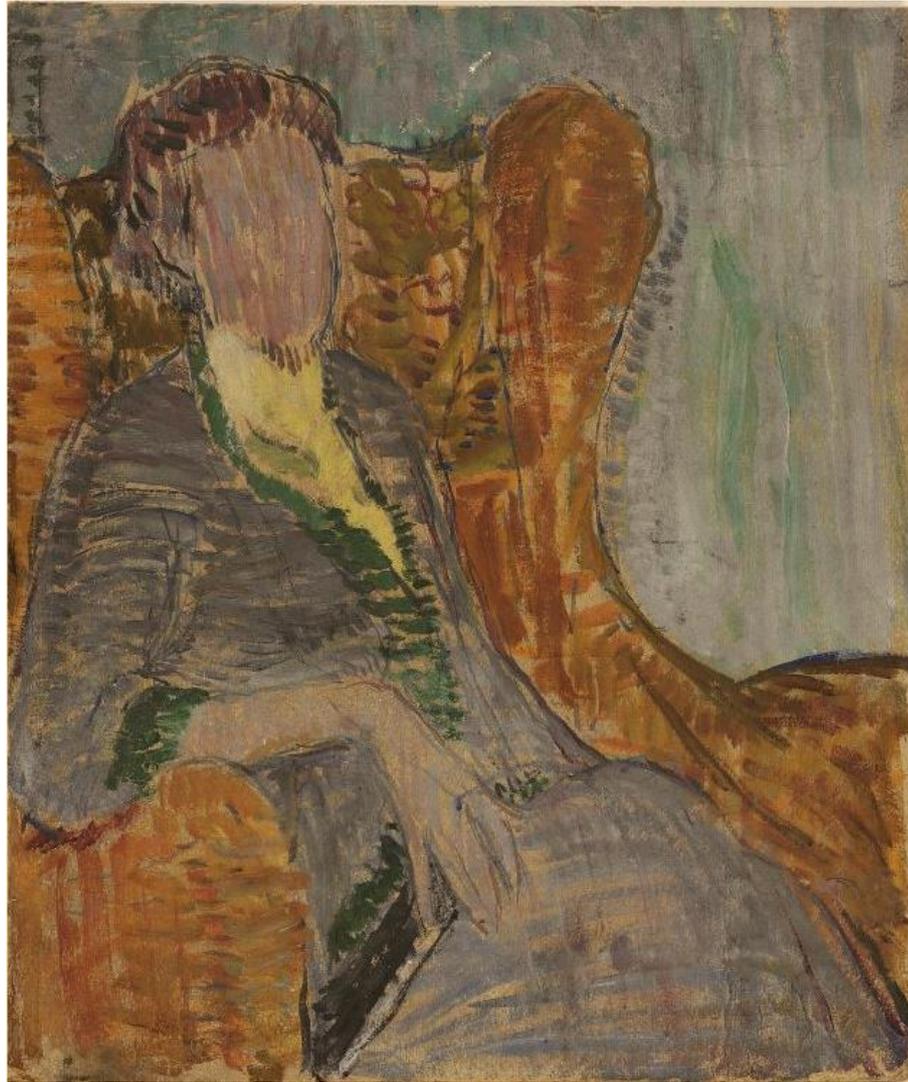


Figure 1: Vanessa Bell, *Virginia Woolf* (ca. 1912)

oil on paperboard, 14 ½ x 12 in., 36.83 x 30.48 cm

Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts. Gift of Ann Safford Mandel.

Copyright: Estate of Vanessa Bell.

In *To the Lighthouse* Lily Briscoe ‘made no attempt at likeness’, showing that a mother with child (Mrs Ramsay and her son James) ‘might be reduced [...] to a purple shadow without irreverence’.⁸ Similarly, Bell challenged the representational tradition of portrait painting by subordinating details to larger visual patterns in order to enhance the structure or architectural framework of the picture, thus echoing Fry’s aesthetic principles and his attempt to reconcile ‘vision and design’.⁹ As Frances Spalding notes about these portraits,

⁸ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 1st edition The Hogarth Press, 1927 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 45. Further references are given after quotations in the text, with the abbreviation *TL*.

⁹ Cf. Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1937).

It is evident here, for instance, that Bell is not concerned with creating an illusion and makes no attempt to disguise the brush strokes, which in many places remain separated from each other, thereby insisting on their reality as paint. In the face, these parallel brush strokes, as they fall down over the face, seem to create a veil, which obscures rather than defines the facial features.¹⁰

With these portraits we are offered not the fixity of precise traits, but the vagueness of a blank, empty, abstract space which is suggestive of the deepest recesses of Woolf's soul and her inner life. This is also reminiscent of Mrs Ramsay's 'wedge-shaped core of darkness', or of her yearnings 'to be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated' (*TL*, p. 52).

As for Woolf herself, in a famous passage from the essay 'Walter Sickert' she states that 'though they must part in the end, painting and writing have much to tell each other: they have much in common', because 'the novelist after all wants to make us see' (p. 241). Furthermore, some of the private exchanges with her sister, in which they set the common ground of their arts, are particularly illuminating in this regard. When moved to compliment each other on their work, Bell and Woolf often suggest the possibility of crossing over into one another's realm. For instance, in a letter dated 5 March 1927, the novelist writes to the painter:

The point about you is that you are now mistress of the phrase. All your pictures are built up of flying phrases. [...] I daresay your problem will now be to buttress up this lyricism with solidity. [...] I think we are now at the same point: both mistresses of our medium as never before: both therefore confronted with entirely new problems of structure. [...] I should like you to paint a large, large picture; where everything would be brought perfectly firmly together, yet all half flying off the canvas in rapture.¹¹

As this excerpt clearly demonstrates, not only are the instruments of writing and painting conceived as interchangeable, but in discussing her sister's achievement Woolf inevitably addresses one of the basic issues of her own art, that is how to reach that delicate balance between the fleetingness of sensations and the solidity of form, between evanescence and structural unity. 'I want, partly as a writer, to found my impressions on something firmer' (*D III*, p. 63), Woolf annotates while composing the novel. Moreover, the fact that she later writes 'I try to make visible this scene which will soon be gone forever [...] and try perhaps to solidify some of these floating sequences that go through my mind' shows that she never

¹⁰ Spalding, 'Vanessa Bell's Portrait of Virginia Woolf at Smith College', in *Woolf in the Real World*, ed. by Karen V. Kukil (Clemson: Clemson University Digital Press, 2005), pp. 130-31 (p. 130).

¹¹ *A Change of Perspective: The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, 6 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1975-1980), III (1977), pp. 340-41.

abandoned, as is typical of her dualist aesthetics, the attempt to make permanent what is essentially transitory, that is, to confer solidity to the artwork.¹² All of this bears a striking resemblance to a passage from *To the Lighthouse* in which Lily Briscoe envisages for her painting a way to obtain a taut, harmonic tension of surface and structure, ephemerality and endurance:

Beautiful and bright it should be on the surface, feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into another like the colours on a butterfly's wing; but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron. It was to be a thing you could ruffle with your breath; and a thing you could not dislodge with a team of horses (*TL*, p. 141).

It is particularly instructive, therefore, that even in the language she uses to explore the possible relationships between different forms of artistic expression Woolf establishes an analogy with her own way of conceiving the art of writing, that she often sees as founded on a series of binary oppositions (mind vs. world, subjectivity vs. objectivity, unity vs. fragmentation). Critics have variously discussed the presence of dualisms and contrasts in her literary conception, as well as her fascination with liminal spaces; Cheryl Mares, for instance, maintains that 'territorial terms – "boundaries", "margins", "borders", "raids", "transgressions", "outsiders" – are scattered throughout Woolf's comments on relationships between literature and painting', suggesting that she tended to consider them as blurring and mutually fertilizing.¹³

An extreme tension between life and art lies at the heart of Woolf's writing, which seeks, to quote a revealing extract from *To the Lighthouse*, 'that razor edge of balance between two opposite forces' (p. 158), between the sensory world of experience and the formal world of structural relations, by which aesthetics is linked to metaphysics and to spiritual experience. Her main concern as a novelist, mirrored in Lily's painting, is to capture the multiplicity and complexity of human existence, to convey the true essence of reality – 'the thing itself before it has been made anything' (*ibid.*) – but also to seek the unifying solidity of a pattern beyond shifting appearances; in other words, she always tries to fuse or reconcile the opposite elements which make up her essentially dichotomic vision. In her diary, for instance, she muses:

Now is life very solid, or very shifting? I am haunted by the two contradictions. This has gone on forever: will last forever; goes down to the bottom of the world – this moment I stand on. Also it is

¹² *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, IV (1983), p. 94.

¹³ Cheryl J. Mares, 'Reading Proust: Woolf and the Painter's Perspective', in *The Multiple Muses of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Diane F. Gillespie (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), pp. 58-89 (p. 61).

transitory, flying, diaphanous. I shall pass like a cloud on the waves. Perhaps it may be that though we change; one flying after another, so quick so quick, yet we are somehow successive, and continuous – we human beings; and show the light through (*D III*, p. 218).

Elsewhere, again, she notes:

I attain a different kind of beauty, achieve a symmetry by means of infinite discords, showing all the traces of the mind's passage through the world; achieve in the end, some kind of whole made of shivering fragments; to me this seems the natural process; the flight of the mind.¹⁴

Significantly enough for the merging of the writerly and the pictorial, in Woolf's private texts the output of the compositional process is generally conceived as an 'image' or 'scene', which is an equivalent of a state of mind or an act of apprehension of reality.¹⁵ Furthermore, the author frequently adopts the metaphor of crystallization for the process by which something enduring is made out of momentary impressions. In *To the Lighthouse*, for instance, both Lily and Mrs Ramsay struggle to 'crystallize and transfix the moment' (p. 7), in order to reveal 'a coherence in things, a stability; something [which] is immune from change, and shines out [...] in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby' (p. 85). This has many significant echoes in Woolf's aesthetic principles, as well as in the cultural milieu surrounding her. On the one hand, as Banfield has shown,

The same injunction to relate the immediacy of existence to the permanence of being underlies Fry's theory of Post-Impressionism, meant not to replace but to complete Impressionism. [...] Fry sees as Post-Impressionism's achievement the giving of such formal design to life without destroying it. It joins the ephemeralness of sense-data to the timelessness of universals; it gives in retrospect a necessity to the contingent moment.¹⁶

On the other hand, the scene (something visual and spatial) as crystallization of the moment (a temporal entity), described in terms pertaining to the field of luminance and preciousness, recurs in many passages in which Woolf reflects on her own creative process. We could compare the aesthetics of *To the Lighthouse* to Woolf's contemporary 'visual' non-fiction, such as the essay 'The Cinema' for instance; here the evocative power of the

¹⁴ Quoted in Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, 2 vols (London: Grafton Books, 1987), I, p. 138.

¹⁵ See, for example, the following extracts from her diary: "one sees a fin passing far out. What image can I reach to convey what I mean? Really there is none I think" (*D III*, p. 113); "I can make up situations, but I cannot make up plots. That is: if I pass the lame girl, I can without knowing I do it, instantly make up a scene [...]. This is the germ of such fictitious gift as I have" (*ibid.*, p. 160); "how many little stories come into my head! [...] One might write a book of short significant separate scenes" (*ibid.*, p. 157).

¹⁶ Ann Banfield, 'Time Passes: Virginia Woolf, Post-Impressionism, and Cambridge Time', *Poetics Today*, 24 (2003), 471-516 (pp. 495-96).

image (in this case the motion picture) is closely related to the functioning of psychological processes and our ability to construct mental representations, as in everyday life 'some momentary assembly of colour, sound, movement, suggests that there is a scene waiting a new art to be transfixed'.¹⁷ The autobiographical essay 'A Sketch of the Past', though written towards the end of her life, can be considered, because of its private and confessional tone, one of the most authentic expressions of Woolf's aesthetics and among the closest (conceptually, not chronologically) to the issues discussed in the novel. Moreover, it is also a text in which Woolf tries to go back to and reflect on the origins of her sensibility or the source of her creative vein, and on those ideas about life and art that, by the time she composed *To the Lighthouse*, had stayed with her for a long time (since her childhood). As she notes in 'A Sketch of the Past', scene-making is not only her 'natural way of marking the past', but also the origin of her writing impulse, in which, admittedly, she has always had to 'find a scene'.¹⁸ The moment, a unit of experienced time rooted in the present of the world of existence, is conceived as 'the centre and meeting-place of an extraordinary number of perceptions which have not yet been expressed'.¹⁹ It is, moreover, 'largely composed of visual and of sense impressions', or 'a knot of consciousness; a nucleus'.²⁰ It is also a still capturing of life in arrested movement, like one of the moments of vision in which Mrs Ramsay or Lily Briscoe hang suspended; something temporary that, once fixed in the atemporal world of being, partakes of eternity. Therefore, Woolf's aim is 'to saturate every atom', 'to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes' (*D III*, p. 209). Within the single, definite moment all is still and suspended and pregnant with meaning. For the same reason, it is regarded as extremely valuable, as a 'spark', a 'diamond', or a 'nugget of pure gold'.²¹

Both these quotations and her autobiographical writings show that Virginia Woolf conceives of literary creation as the transcription of a visionary moment of inestimable value, as an illumination which originates in the dark recesses of the mind and is then released by means of words. All of this is echoed in some of the most intense moments of revelation depicted in *To the Lighthouse*, as in the following scene focusing on Lily Briscoe:

'Like a work of art', she repeated, looking from her canvas to the drawing-room steps and back again. She must rest for a moment. And, resting, looking from one to the other vaguely, the old question which traversed the sky of the soul perpetually, the vast, the general question which was apt to particularize itself at such moments as these, when she released faculties that had been on the strain,

¹⁷ Woolf, 'The Cinema', in *Collected Essays*, II, p. 272.

¹⁸ Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', in *Moments of Being*, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind (London: Grafton Books, 1989), p. 156.

¹⁹ Woolf, 'The Narrow Bridge of Art', in *Collected Essays*, II, p. 229.

²⁰ Woolf, 'The Moment: Summer's Night', *ibid.*, pp. 293-94.

²¹ See, respectively, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, II (1981), p. 169; *ibid.*, p. 199; *D III*, p. 141.

stood over her, paused over her, darkened over her. What is the meaning of life? [...] The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. [...] Mrs Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent) – this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this external passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was stuck into stability (*TL*, p. 133).²²

The suspension, stillness, and silence of a visionary moment, which is transitory but also eternal, recur as a familiar trope in Woolf's fictional as well as non-fictional writings. The same could be said of her way of envisaging the secret correspondences and the hidden meaning of life in a sudden, intense illumination, that is both a spiritual and a physical experience. The discovery is an abrupt exposure to the real, an eruption of the contingent in the incessant passing and flowing of life, a manifestation of the transcendent into the immanent, as she theorizes in 'A Sketch of the Past':

And so I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. [...] From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this [...].²³

While experiencing a moment of being, all the senses are highly receptive and the mind is able to establish a fortuitous connection between the profusion of sensations deriving from the external world and the flow of consciousness. In this 'rapture', the secret meaning of life, or a coherence in things, is finally disclosed and becomes the origin of the writing impulse. It seems evident that Woolf's manner of responding to experience and her conception of the compositional process are inextricably interwoven, as both rest upon the idea that 'behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern', which becomes real, concrete, perfectly accomplished in itself only through an act of verbal transcription.

These passages show that Woolf's aesthetics can be conceived as a synthesis obtained by reconciling the opposing elements of her double vision, as a unity deriving from the

²² There is an extraordinary resemblance between Lily's experience in the novel and Woolf's when she notes down in her diary: 'odd how the creative power at once brings the whole universe to order. I can see the day whole, proportioned – even after a long flutter of the brain such as I've had this morning [–] it must be a physical, moral, mental necessity' (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, IV, p. 232).

²³ Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', p. 81. Analogously, in *To the Lighthouse* Lily seeks a moment of revelation in the ordinariness of everyday life: 'one wanted, she thought, dipping her brush deliberately, to be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that's a chair, that's a table, and yet at the same time, It's a miracle, it's an ecstasy' (*TL*, p. 164).

fusion of the many dichotomies standing at the basis of her art. As Sheehan rightly maintains,

Her writing articulates not one but two interpretations of experience, as both flux and fragmentation. Life consists of flowing streams of sensation, yet it is also centred in the singular, heterogeneous moment. These two renderings – of vertiginous, wavelike fluidity and atomised, isolated particularity – are [...] covariant properties of experience.²⁴

It is only after reaching such a profound awareness that Woolf, together with Lily Briscoe, can finally declare: ‘I have had my vision’ (*TL*, p. 170).

²⁴ Paul Sheehan, ‘Woolf’s Luminance: Time out of Mind’, in *Modernism, Narrative, and Humanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 121-49 (p. 128).