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Postmodernist Rereadings of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

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Dottoranda

Dott. Elisabetta Varalda

Tutor

Prof. Iolanda Plescia

Contents

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Introduction

"books continue each other in spite of our habit of judging them separately"

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929)

This thesis grew out of the pleasure I have always derived from reading Virginia Woolf as well as from my fascination with the postmodernist novels that rewrite the imaginary lives of historical canonical authors and engage in a dialogue with their texts. They have extended the tradition of life writing and through the practice of rewriting have facilitated access to rather difficult canonical texts. Far from considering these literary practices as a negative recycling, I view both biofictions and rewritings as an original way of re-appropriating the precursors' lives and texts and of reinforcing the canonical status of previous authors.

I read intensively about the fictional uses of historical authors' lives and the practice of rewriting their well-known texts, and, of all the current theoretical positions on the relationship between rewriting and postmodernism, which will be the primary focus of chapter one, the one I find most compelling is that developed by Gérard Genette. He considers every text as a 'palimpsest', and, redefining the entire field of narrative poetics, invites us not to consider a text in its singularity, but rather to study the relationships that link a text to other texts. I am also in debt to Franssen and Hoenselaars who suggest considering earlier authors' lives as texts, which contemporary authors can appropriate and make comparisons with as with previous literary texts.

The neologism that best defines the fictional rewriting of the lives of canonical authors is biofiction,[1] which I see as a hybrid genre at the crossroads of biography, historical biography and fiction that undoubtedly has its roots in the practice of life writing, but that has developed as a separate and distinct aesthetic practice.

This process of original literary "recycling" has also focused on Virginia Woolf's life and fiction that in recent years have become a major source of inspiration for contemporary writers who, drawn to their famous predecessor, have reworked her themes in a variety of different ways, thus making a significant contribution to the practice of reading the past in relation to the present, and bringing her closer to writers and readers alike. Virginia Woolf herself engaged with the question of life writing, extended its range and explored the relationship between auto/biography and fiction, a tradition that Postmodernism has further developed.

Although she was afraid of exposing herself in her fiction and was scared of being considered sentimental, in *To the Lighthouse* Virginia Woolf openly drew inspiration from her own life experience, her memories and feelings, and transformed biographical facts into fiction, so much so that it is certainly a novel about her family, her childhood and her struggles to become an artist. And it is this novel, Woolf's most autobiographical text, which I will investigate in this thesis. My choice was guided by the awareness that life writing has been reconfigured from a postmodernist perspective, and, since Woolf's life and work are continuously being rewritten, I want to examine whether *To the Lighthouse*, a personal real life history rewritten as fiction, could be read as an antecedent of contemporary biofictions.

Even though Virginia Woolf believed in the modernist idea of aesthetic impersonality, which seems to require a rejection of biography, her novel shows that in

[1] For a review of the terms used to define fiction that draws on the lives of canonical authors, see chapter one.

practice, the autobiographical is a pivotal theme. *To the Lighthouse* uses auto/biography, but extends its limits and turns it into something between biography and fiction. Woolf borrows elements and events from her own life and "recycles" them to offer her own vision of the world, so much so that *To the Lighthouse* can be read both as pure fiction and as fictional autobiography. The years in which Virginia Woolf was writing *To the Lighthouse* saw an upsurge of interest in the fictional possibilities offered by life writing and she was certainly familiar with her close Bloomsbury friend, the biographer and critic Lytton Strachey, who was aware of the need to go beyond objective biographical representation in favour of a more subjective analysis, which made it possible to transform biography and make it interact with fiction.

In this thesis I argue that in *To the Lighthouse,* Virginia Woolf extended the limits of the *roman à clef* to create something at the crossroads between life writing and fiction and that the effects of her experiments in life writing and of her blurring the rigid borders between fact and fiction are central to those postmodernist novels which deal with the complex relationship between life and fiction. My aim is not to argue that Virginia Woolf was a proto-postmodernist, nor is it to state that *To the Lighthouse* can be defined as a work of biofiction, which is a prime postmodernist practice. In her novel, in fact, Virginia Woolf does not use her parents' or siblings' real names, which is the defining feature of this genre. Yet, undeniably, in *To the Lighthouse* she openly transformed biographical facts into fiction as will be shown in chapter two where I will engage in a detailed reading of her novel compared with her diaries, letters, memoirs and the many biographies about her.

Woolf's novel is definitely a work of fiction, but I argue that being so full of life (*bio*) and personal history, it allows us to draw a connection between her form of life writing and contemporary biofiction. This study comes out of a sense that scholars have mainly focused their attention on the influence of Woolf's novels *Mrs Dalloway,* and *Orlando: A Biography*

on postmodernist biofictions and on contemporary rewritings, as the many critical publications testify, while I wish to illuminate how *To the Lighthouse*, by exploring life for the purpose of fiction, has had such a great influence on contemporary fiction and has informed our analysis of postmodernist literary practice. In order to demonstrate this position in chapters three and four respectively, I will take into account the novels of two contemporary writers, Maggie Gee's *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* and Susan Sellers's *Vanessa and Virginia*, which can be read not only as a postmodernist re-appropriation of Woolf's life, but also as a close dialogue with *To the Lighthouse* and a testimony to the powerful grip that Virginia Woolf's novel exerts over later writers.

Both novels are based on biographical truth, but at the same time interspersed with imaginary details, which show their authors' inventiveness. They represent two different ways of refashioning the original novel; in personal communications, Maggie Gee has openly admitted explicit and implicit references to *To the Lighthouse*,[2] while Susan Sellers has stated that she did not envisage her novel as a rewriting of *To the Lighthouse*, but she can see how that case can be made.[3] Even though their novels draw heavily on Virginia Woolf's life and work, both Maggie Gee and Susan Sellers reshape their narratives into something that the two contemporary authors can claim as their own. Through these two imaginary versions of Woolf's life, which also incorporate her novel *To the Lighthouse,* we are reminded of how relevant her work is to contemporary culture and the degree to which her novel inspires imitation and invites dialogue. It is interesting that two women are willing to rewrite the life and work of a canonical woman author with great respect and love. It shows that contemporary women writers are no longer afraid of Virginia Woolf and do not consider her as an unreachable heroine; on the contrary they are interested in revising and reclaiming texts

[2] Gee, personal communication with the author of this thesis, 26 March, 2018 (Appendix, 137-140).
[3] Sellers, personal communication with the author of this thesis, 27 July, 2018 (Appendix, 140-143).

written by her, and want to engage with her stylistic innovations and to share with her the experience of using biography creatively.

Both novels depend on minute factual research on Woolf's life, but also on Gee's and Sellers's imaginative and creative ability, and their novels result in a combination of biographical, historical and scholarly research. As Virginia Woolf becomes a character in their novels, poetic licence allows them to give the reader a different image of her from the one given in standard biographies. Gee and Sellers, in fact, are free from the limitations of traditional life writing. In addition, the reader is given access to Woolf's complex inner life. The Virginia portrayed by Susan Sellers is seen through the eyes of her sister Vanessa Bell, while Maggie Gee ironically makes Virginia resurrect in the Berg Collection in the New York Public Library and successfully makes Woolf a believable character. They both recreate a life, not only by borrowing facts, details, and events from the author's real life, as Virginia Woolf did in *To the Lighthouse*, but also from her fictional world.

Apart from being novelists, Maggie Gee is also a Professor of Creative Writing and Susan Sellers is a Professor of English Literature, Editor of the *Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf* and Co-General Editor of the Cambridge University Press edition of the writings of Virginia Woolf. Yet even though they know Virginia Woolf's life and work inside out, they both break free from conventional biography and fuse real with new and invented events. The two novels, the objects of this thesis, have the merit of making Virginia Woolf and her literary style more accessible to a wider reading public. Maggie Gee and Susan Sellers intertextually select fragments or themes from *To the Lighthouse* and integrate them into their work, so much so that Woolf's novel is constantly being rewritten to adapt to new readers and reading practices. These biofictions "manipulate" the truth, showing that, according to our contemporary view, absolutely objective historical truth does not exist. Gee's *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* and Sellers's *Vanessa and Virginia* absorb Virginia's life, stand

as acts of explicit homage, which the two writers openly assert in interviews, and stimulate further interest in Woolf's work and her contributions to literature. Virginia Woolf's frequent "resurrection" as a character in contemporary literary space demonstrates popular culture's reaction to the theories of the death of the author, who is still seen as dependent on the lived experience of the writer.

Finally a comment on my sources. As an overseas visiting scholar, I spent several months at Reading University in the Campus Library, then in London at the Senate House Library, at The London Library and at UCL Library avidly reading everything I could find on Virginia Woolf and *To the Lighthouse*, as the bibliography of this dissertation will clarify. *To the Lighthouse* is one of the most widely read and critically analysed of Woolf's novels and has been examined in relation to every phase of literary criticism. The summary below cannot set out all the critical perspectives, but can represent a comprehensive account. I examined different approaches, from those that read this novel primarily as an example of the modernist literary movement, such as Eric Auerbach's[4] "The Brown Stocking", or those that see it from a feminist perspective, which defined the course of Woolf's studies in the 1980s, such as Jane Lilienfeld's[5] "Where the Spear Plants Grew: The Ramsays' Marriage in *To the Lighthouse*", and Rachel Bowlby's[6] *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf.* More recently, in her introduction to *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf? Feminist Readings of Woolf", Toril Moi[7] laments the negative

[4] Auerbach, Erich: "The Brown Stocking" in *Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature* by Erich Auerbach, (trans by Willard R. Trask). 525-553. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974.

[5] Jane Lilienfeld: "Where the Spear Plants Grew: The Ramsays' Marriage in *To the Lighthouse*". *In New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf* edited by Jane Marcus, 148-169. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981.

[6] Bowlby, Rachel. *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998.

[7] Toril Moi starts with what she calls Elaine Showalter's rejection of Woolf. Showalter mainly focuses on Woolf's *A Room of One's Own,* which she does not consider a feminist essay. According to her, Woolf's androgyny is a way of transcending feminist conflicts and respects Bloomsbury's view of the separation of art

responses to this great feminist writer from Anglo-American feminist critics. In her *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject*, Makiko Minow-Pinkney[8] draws on psychoanalytic theories, while Gayatry C. Spivak[9] follows post-structuralist theory and offers a deconstructionist reading of *To the Lighthouse*. Mitchell Leaska[10] and Hermione Lee[11] offer a formal study of *To the Lighthouse*. Maria Di Battista's[12] "*To the Lighthouse*: Virginia Woolf's Winter's Tale" reads the novel from a psychological perspective. Patricia Waugh[13] suggests overcoming a narrow formalist reading of Woolf and analyses the historical differences between postmodernism and feminism, while Pamela Caughie[14] discusses how to read modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf from the perspective of postmodernism. Dealing with *To the Lighthouse,* she states that a postmodernist reading of it requires us to stop thinking in terms of form and content and she also suggests adopting a functional approach to narrative, which moves away from simply reading Woolf's writings through her life and what

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and politics because Woolf does not offer her personal experience. Toril Moi rejects the idea that a text should reflect the writer's direct experience and argues for an alternative way of reading Woolf's work and for a detailed analysis of the narrative strategies of her texts. Focusing on *To the Lighthouse,* she sees Lily as the subject that deconstructs the fixed gender identities represented by Mr and Mrs Ramsay and tries not to conform to the female sexual identity which the patriarchal society expects from her. Moi points out that Woolf does not fear fixed gender identities, rather she rejects them. Toril Moi suggests reading Woolf's deconstruction of sexual identity must be read as feminist (Moi 2002).

[8] Minow-Pinkney, Makiko: *Virginia Woolf & the Problem of the Subject.* Brighton, U.K.: The Harvester Press, 1987.

[9] Spivak, Gayatry C.: "Unmaking and Making in *To the Lighthouse*" (1980). In *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, by Gayatry C. Spivak, 30-45. New York: Methuen, 1987.

[10] Leaska, Mitchell: *Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse: A Study in Critical Method.* London: The Hogarth Press, 1970.

[11] Lee, Hermione: *The Novels of Virginia Woolf.* London: Methuen, 1977.

[12] Di Battista, Maria: "*To the Lighthouse*: Virginia Woolf's Winter's Tale". In *Virginia Woolf's Major Novels: The Fables of Anon* by Maria Di Battista, 64-110. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.

[13] Waugh, Patricia: "From Modernist Textuality to Feminist Sexuality; or Why I'm no longer A-Freud of Virginia Woolf". In *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* by Patricia Waugh, 88-125. London: Routledge, 1989.

[14] Caughie, Pamela L.: "Postmodern and Poststructuralist Approaches to Virginia Woolf". In *Palgrave Advances in Virginia Woolf's Studies*, edited by Anna Snaith, 143-168. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
Caughie, Pamela L.: *Virginia Woolf & Postmodernism: Literature in Quest & Question of Itself*. Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1991.

she says about her works in her diaries and letters, but also focuses on how her works actually function.

My thesis certainly shows my indebtedness to all the scholars I consulted and to their groundbreaking studies. Yet, I felt that to embrace only one of the many approaches would be limiting and would not offer an exhaustive perspective. Thus, following the postmodernist disbelief in the possibility of a universal truth, the choice of my sources was guided by the opportunity they offer to explore how the modernist novel *To the Lighthouse*, with its themes and stylistic innovations, has been reconfigured within postmodernism, primarily through the critical practice of rewriting. I was interested in highlighting the palimpsestic nature of life writing through Woolf's life story, and intrigued by the ways in which contemporary texts are in a dialogue with *To the Lighthouse* and bear traces of intertextuality. Therefore, I am especially indebted to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse,* to her essays on biography, to her diaries, letters, memoirs and to the many biographies included in the bibliography, which show different perspectives testifying to the impossibility of an ultimately objective reality.

Chapter One: Postmodernism in Literature: Rewriting and Life Writing

There is no real consensus as to when postmodernism really began, nor as to who coined the term that came into the philosophical lexicon in 1979 after the publication of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*[1]. It developed in the late twentieth century, so the cultural innovations of the 1960s were the formative background of many postmodernist intellectuals. Since the 1980s, postmodernism has been the focus of a cultural debate that aims at defining a phenomenon full of contradictions and which questions epistemic certainties; thus it is difficult to outline it without violating its own basic premise of a lack of absolute truth. It is usually defined in terms of scepticism and a suspicion of reason, and it is often associated with the idea of pastiche and recycling. It challenges the notion of universal certainties and univocal meaning.

Postmodernism has been linked to the new forms of economic production of late capitalism and to the awareness that a new culture is closely connected to the creation of a new social system (Jameson 1992), or has been seen as replacing the modernist epistemological focus with an ontological one (McHale 2003). As Jameson has pointed out, the creation of this neologism arises from our media society's need for a new lexicon and is linked to the contemporary need to rewrite "all the familiar things in new terms" and to remodel the canon. (Jameson 1992, xiv). It is an age of paradoxes and contradictions which postmodernists refuse to resolve, and so postmodernism has been alternatively read as being

[1] Lyotard, Jean- François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi trans.). Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984 [1979].

either nostalgic or revolutionary, celebrated or attacked by both political fields. (Hutcheon 1988).

The terrorist attack on September 11th, 2001 has been seen by some commentators[2] as marking the end of postmodernism, under the assumption that, since postmodernism challenges universal truth and sees all distinctions as provisional, it could make it impossible to justify our condemnation of terrorism. This perspective, however, considered postmodernism as a philosophy of life which could not give answers about the terrorist attack, rather than considering this phenomenon as a new mode of analysis, which in refusing polarizations, rejected the 'you are either with us or against us' logic (Caughie 2007).

The term was first applied to architecture, and this new aesthetic was undoubtedly given a voice at the 1980 Venice Architecture Exhibition. The exhibition's title, 'The Presence of the Past', clearly shows how postmodernist architects have ironically combined different styles from the past to create buildings that challenge the aesthetics of modernism from within, which is not rejected, but, on the contrary, integrated. The term is now associated with all the fields of art, film, painting, music and many others but, for the purpose of this dissertation, the focus of this chapter is on the study of what characterizes this current cultural phenomenon in fiction (the novel genre) and, more specifically, I have limited this study to the aesthetic practices of rewriting and life writing.

The concept of postmodernism is not univocal, and in literary studies it has therefore been alternatively defined in terms of continuity with its modernist predecessor or as being a break from it. Undoubtedly, modernists and postmodernists rely on some common features such as the rejection of realistic conventions, of the omniscient third person narrator, of traditional chronological structures and linear plot sequences. They both explore subjectivism

[2] Among others, see Edward Rothstein and his article "Attacks on U.S. Challenge the Perspectives of Postmodern True Believers" in *The New York Times*, 22 September, 2001 quoted by Pamela Caughie (Caughie 2007).

and fragmentation, but while modernists aim at solving such issues, postmodernists question and play with them. Postmodernists echo and play with established forms and genres from the past, often associated with modernism, and they appropriate some of the innovations of modernism, such as the multiplication of points of view, which was a common practice among modernist writers, but without its unprecedented and radical character. Pamela Caughie has correctly pointed out that "when we contrast postmodernism with modernism, [...] we are not comparing two things but rather different ways of conceiving writing and reading" (Caughie 2007, 19).

In his essay "The Literature of Replenishment" (1979), John Barth tries to define what postmodernism is and whether postmodernists "share any aesthetic principles or practice" (Barth 1979, 196). He starts by reviewing the conventions of modernist fiction, and even though he admits that the term postmodernism suggests both an extension of and a reaction against it, he argues that the postmodernist aesthetic cannot only be read in this perspective. He believes that postmodernist fiction should be read as the synthesis or transcension of both nineteen-century middle-class realism and the modernist mode of writing (ibid., 203) so his "ideal postmodernist author neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth-century modernist parents or his nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents"[3] (ibid., 203).

Postmodernists have critically redefined their relationship with the past, without idealizing it or referring to it with nostalgia, and they have used metafiction to reflect on it in a mutual confrontation with the present. Postmodernism challenges the separation of fiction and history, which both "appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality" (Hutcheon 1988, 105). The past is seen as being

[3] John Barth offers two examples of this postmodern synthesis: Italo Calvino's *Cosmicomics* (1965) and Gabriel Garcia Màrquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) (Barth, "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction" 1984).

accessible only through its texts. The textual dimension is a pivotal postmodern category, so much so that 'text' has replaced the old word 'work' just as 'critique' and 'discourse' have respectively replaced 'criticism' and 'style'. As Pamela Caughie has pointed out, this shift from work to text produces a new definition of writing itself, "from a mode of communication to a signified system" (Caughie 2007, 8).

Individual works are not isolated creations, they are inserted within a network defined by the term intertextuality, coined by Julia Kristeva who sees the text not as an isolated element but as a space where "several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another" (Kristeva 1980, 36). Texts are not simply a copy of previous texts; instead they use them for different purposes, and they transform them. (Kristeva herself substitutes the term intertextuality with transposition). In short, texts do not have univocal meanings, rather they are linked to wider social and historical pre-existing meanings. In postmodernist fiction, the traditional concept of character has been replaced by the term subject, which is the product of discourse and whose 'unstable' position is dependent upon the context in which the subject operates. According to Kristeva, the rise of modernism coincides with the rise of self-consciously intertextual art. Modernists, in fact, reject the single subject as well as the omniscient intrusive narrator, substituting it with an invisible, unobtrusive one. They use free indirect discourse or hide their subjectivity behind a first-person interior monologue, and they relocate the point of view inside the characters' mind, producing a shift from singular to plural notions of self and meaning. If some modernists, including Eliot, formulated a poetics of impersonality where art is not dependent on the author who produces it, "to divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim" (Eliot 1920, 53), postmodernists have taken modernist paradigms of authorship to the extreme.

This change of perspective justifies Barthes' theory of the 'Death of the Author', an influential reflection on the question of authorship. He follows and takes to the extreme the path of the Russian Formalists, who had already reduced the role of the author in order to build a science of literature and language and to analyse the nature of the text in itself. In a short essay written in 1967, Barthes claims that the author is no longer to be seen as the origin of meaning, nor can he be considered as the subject of a work. There is no single meaning born from the 'Author-God', and thus the focus shifts from the author, who can only produce within the language system, to the text which is seen as "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes "The Death of the Author" 1977, 146). Barthes makes a distinction between the text, which is a methodological field whose meaning depends on language, and the work, which is an object. The reader is given a major role because "the reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (ibid., 148). It is the reader who creates their own intertextual links and plays a crucial role in the production of meaning.

In the essay "What is an author?" (1969), which has its roots in the same change of consciousness, Michel Foucault also questions the notion of the author as individual creator, which he considers a mystification, and argues for a reversal of this tradition. He starts by analysing the relationship between author and text and argues that in a text the actual author ought not to be confused with the fictional narrator. The author, who is not to be seen as an actual individual, "must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing" (Foucault 1979, 143). He sees the text as "a space in which the writing subject constantly disappears" (ibid., 141), he underlines that the author's disappearance "is subject to a series of transcendental barriers" (ibid., 145), and he believes it important to locate the space left empty

by the author's death. He discards the notion of the author as an entity, but he sees the author as a function of discourse, a function that varies from period to period and from one social order to another. Foucault suggests reversing the traditional idea of the author as a genial creator, "the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works, he is a certain functional principle by which in our culture, one limits, excludes and chooses" (ibid., 159). Foucault's theory of the author-function incorporates the death of the author, but is not reducible to just that. If the author is absent, he is not newly absent; he has been absent in different ways throughout history. Barthes' and Foucault's essays have been the starting point of heated debates over the question of authorship, but both have the merit of focusing on the reader's role in the production of a text.

In the 1960s, while postmodernists were proclaiming the death of the author, women writers were trying to construct their subjectivity and a collective sense of identity (Waugh 1989). Feminist critics have linked the concept of author with patriarchy so, on the one hand they have reinforced Barthes' need for the death of the author, and on the other hand they feel the need to recuperate the author so that they themselves can gain a voice and construct their identities.

More recently, the function of the author has been reconsidered and restored. Aleid Fokkema has pointed out that "what is at stake now in postmodernism is not the 'death' of the author but how the discursive author can be reconciled with a personal author in clear terms that salvage, if not enrich, thinking on the subject" (Fokkema 1999). Linda Hutcheon also considers the discursive authority to still be alive even though the author as the only origin of meaning may be dead. In the *Death and Return of the Author,* Sean Burke argues that since Barthes' *S/Z* (1970), a reading of Balzac's novella *Sarrasine,* the question of authorship has been reopened, so much so that he defines *S/Z* as "the text of the death and return of the author", and suggests changing the slogan 'The Death of the Author' to the more appropriate

'The Death of the Realist Author' (Burke 1998, 44). Burke has had the merit of reconsidering the author debate, he has exposed the contradictions in the previous theories of authorial death and has helped to reposition the role of the author, demonstrating from a philosophical point of view that the concept of the author is far from having disappeared.

Life writing

Since the 1980s,[4] postmodernists have managed to intertextually reconstruct authorship by taking canonical authors back into the fictional world, often in the act of producing their famous texts, and with the practice of rewriting their works. It is obvious that there is a relationship between 'the death of the author' and the many rewritings of a great author's life or work. Postmodernists, in fact, are interested in history but aim at rethinking history in the light of the present, which is often expressed in an ironic or parodic dialogue with the past. As Linda Hutcheon points out "[p]arody is a perfect postmodern form, in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodied" (Hutcheon 1988, 11).

In a continuous blurring of fact and fiction, postmodernists break the rigid distinction between different literary genres, such as biography and fiction, they mix mass or popular and high forms of art through pastiche, and defeat the conventional ideas of originality and authorship. Every text can only be understood in relation to other texts. Since postmodernism approves of contradictions, paradoxically, as Paul Franssen and Tom Hoenselaars have pointed out in their introduction to *The author as Character: Representing historical writers in Western Literature,* "the very postmodernism that proclaimed the death of the author and

[4] In "The Rise and Legitimization of the American Biographical Novel", Michael Lackey considers that the year 1999 represents a turning point for the recognition of the biographical novel. In that year, Cunningham's *The Hours* received the Pulitzer Prize. Lackey thinks that, since by 1999 many biographical fictions had been published, it was impossible for the Pulitzer jury to ignore them and concludes that by 1999, the biographical novel was officially recognized. Moreover, the committee openly accepted postmodernism (Lackey 2016, 24-25).

the demise of character delights in resurrecting historical authors as characters" (Franssen 1999, 11). By challenging all the boundaries, postmodernists can ironically borrow different styles from the past, and they can even replace "the documented facts of the author-character's life with fictional speculation" (ibid., 19). Even a poetics of postmodernism cannot offer definitive answers, but only provisional ones (Hutcheon 1988), since postmodernists consider all conceptual systems of knowledge unreliable.

Although auto/biographical novels are not a recent phenomenon,[5] postmodernists have made the practice of borrowing from canonical writers more and more explicit, and, since the 1980s, through the literary form called biofiction,[6] they have relocated real-world authors as characters in their novels, making the interaction between biography and fiction a dominant mode. Postmodernists draw upon the traditions of life writing and historical fiction, but also extend them; they disrupt traditional distinctions in the domains of fact and fiction, history and imagination, past and present, so much so that biofictions have become a fascinating field of literary study, "one of the most dynamic and productive literary forms" (Savu 2009, 9) which has its own space in postmodernist practice.

As Michael Lackey has pointed out in *The American Biographical Novel,* postmodernism has given authors more creative liberty when representing historical figures

[5] For the variety of forms of the genre of the 'author as character', and examples from different periods, see Paul Franssen and Tom Hoenselaars. (Franssen 1999).
For a review of the 'complicated journey' towards a legitimization of the biographical novel, see Michael Lackey's *The American Biographical Novel* (Lackey 2016).

[6] Martin Middeke uses the term 'biofiction' to identify a strand of postmodernism writing which falls within Linda Hutcheon's category of historiographic metafiction (Middeke 1999).
Max Saunders uses the term 'biographiction' (Saunders 2012).
Monica Latham uses the term biofiction and considers it a subcategory of the genre of life writing (Latham, 2012).
Paul Franssen and Tom Hoenselaars use the term 'author as character'. They locate the phenomenon of the author as character at the crossroads between the historical novel, biography and the *Künstlerroman.* According to them, this phenomenon should by now be recognized as a literary genre, which differs from other historical fiction in that the modern author is engaged in a dialogue with a more or less illustrious predecessor (Franssen 1999).
Laura Savu defines 'author fictions' in the following terms: "authors and what they are, as well as were like; authors and the works they create; authors and the fiction about them". She considers it a subgenre of 'fiction biography' that appropriates and transform literary and non literary genres (Savu 2009).

(Lackey 2016, 10). According to him, biographical novelists "are different from historian and biographers in that they seek to create symbolic figures, while historians and biographers seek to represent factual 'reality'" (ibid., 13). As Max Saunders reminds us "[o]ur postmodern ways of thinking about biography is much more aware of, and open to, these elements of autobiography and fiction in all life writing. Such generic blurring is characteristic in another way, though. Life writing is fundamentally intertextual" (Saunders 2012, 5). Further extending the concept of intertextuality, Franssen and Hoenselaars suggest considering earlier authors' lives as texts which contemporary authors can appropriate and make comparisons with as with previous literary texts (Franssen 1999).

In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon insists "that the term postmodern in fiction be reserved to describe the more paradoxically and historically complex form that [she has] been calling 'historiographic metafiction'" (Hutcheon 1988, 40). She refers to those very popular novels which are self-reflexive but at the same time speak about historical events and people. According to her, history is not lost in postmodernist fiction, but it is newly problematized. Scholars have struggled to define this new aesthetic practice, which blends reality and fiction, in relation to the historical novel and to biography.[7] Biofiction can be seen as a strand of 'historiographic metafiction', but while the latter aims at representing historical crises, biofiction focuses on the story of an individual life (Saunders 2012). Historical references are back in the postmodern novel, but history is presented as if it were fiction, while fiction is written as if it were historical. It is a literary form whose key criterion is to name its protagonist after an actual historical figure, usually a cultural icon, whose inner and external life is creatively reconstructed, often on the basis of their written works (Franssen 1999). Thus biofiction is immediately recognizable by its use of the subject's real name. It

[7] For a brief survey of criticism on biofiction, see Michael Lackey 'Locating and Defining the Bio in Biofiction' (M. Lackey 2016).

represents a postmodernist revaluation of the concept of the character, which is taken back from real life.

But postmodernism subverts narrative conventions so, even though biofictions are based on biographic research, the aim of contemporary writers is not an objective reconstruction of the life of a famous person, but a subjective, partial one, so much so that the authors of biofictions feel free to change facts and to go beyond the limitations of factual biographies. As Michael Lackey has pointed out, "the biographical novelist appropriates the life story of a person from history and then converts that story into a metaphor" (Lackey 2018, 13). Facts, which have been presented in biographies and critical studies, are "manipulated", so that the reader does not understand what is true and what is false, yet he/she tacitly accepts it. Yet, as Martin Middeke has reminded us "readers and critics of biofictions will find themselves reminded of the distinction between fact and fiction every time they consult the factual biographies in order to trace fictional deviations from the factual accounts of the lives at issue" (Middeke 1999, 3). Biofictions renegotiate our relationship with the past, which is used to redefine the present, and biographical novelists "combine fact and fiction in order to create a literary symbol out of historical figure, a symbol that could expose and critique the culture," just as creative writers had done before (Lackey 2017, 5).

The postmodern reader has shown great interest in the lives of famous people as the many publications of biofictions show, so the decision to write about a famous literary figure speaks to contemporary tastes. "In biofiction, history and biography take their cue from the vision of the creative writer rather than from the reality of external world" (Lackey 2017, 9). Significantly, most authors of biofiction explicitly claim that they are not writing a biography, and they are adamant in insisting that their works are fiction, not biography. As Laura Savu has pointed out, the great number of biofictions (which she calls author fictions) make us "reflect on how previous models of authorship, along with aesthetic and historical aspects of

past texts, are continually being mediated, indeed revised, in light of recent critical thought on self, creativity, history, language and representation" (Savu 2009, 21), so while biographers have the task of representing the life of a historical subject as accurately as possible, the authors of biofiction use the novel's techniques to represent their creative vision of the life of the subject, through which they communicate their own vision of the world without following the biographer's rules of accurate representation (Lackey 2017). It is a dialogue that sheds light on the canonical author's life and work as well as on our own cultural tastes. As Laura Savu indicates "[t]he genre of the author-as-character emerges as an important component in the ongoing reconfiguration of the categories and canons of literature" (Savu 2009, 31).

In *The American Biographical Novel*, Michael Lackey underlines that contemporary authors have just started to exploit this new aesthetic form, while scholars will need time to clearly assess its value (Lackey 2016, 34) and in her interesting essay "'Serv[ing] under two masters': Virginia Woolf's Afterlives in Contemporary Biofictions", Monica Latham highlights the difficulties critics face when dealing with this "flourishing genre". They argue that these novels may reinforce stereotypes about a famous author of the past and moreover, that they only offer a simplified version of their novels (Latham 2012). Some academic critics denounce the lack of creativity and originality of contemporary authors who, on the other hand, feel stimulated by the many potentialities of this new discursive phenomenon.

In the essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" (1919), in which Eliot focuses on the relationship between a poet and the literary tradition that precedes him, he laments his contemporaries' insistence on praising a poet for those aspects of his work which are considered individual, while "we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality more vigorously" (Eliot 1920, 43). Eliot defends the role of tradition, but tradition, he argues, should not be inherited, it can only be obtained through a great effort;

tradition involves a historical sense which calls for an awareness of the fact that the past affects the present, as the present alters the past. As stated by Eliot, "[n]o artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone" (Eliot 1920, 44), so he must not be judged in isolation. Most importantly Eliot reminds us that the new artist must not be judged by the canons of dead critics.

Thus biofictions should not be valued as biographies, but as works of fiction, which are based on the lives of real people. It is a different way of telling the story of a life, in fictional form rather than in the factual way that a biography does. A novelist, in fact, has different aims and skills from those of a biographer and uses fictional techniques to narrate his story. In "How Should One Read a Book?" Virginia Woolf herself reminds us that "from different books we must ask different qualities" (Woolf 2008b, 64).

Reacting to David Lodge's view that the rise and growth of biofictions may indicate a loss of confidence in pure fiction, Lackey offers an alternative connected to the postmodernist lack of faith in the fact/fiction dichotomy, which makes the idea of pure fiction incoherent. Biofiction is "an aesthetic form that requires readers to use the inductive rather than the deductive imagination in order to understand the author's social, political, and cultural critique" (Lackey 2016, 29).

Rewriting

The impulse to fictionalize the lives of famous predecessors runs parallel to that of rewriting their well-known stories as a form of homage or as a critical revision (Savu 2009). Although rewriting is an old artistic phenomenon, it is a currently accepted praxis in our cultural tradition. As a literary practice, rewriting implies a dialogue between past and present novels, which is a typical postmodernist device. Since several contemporary writers have based their texts on pre-existing ones, the question of originality has been a focal issue. But in

spite of some strong criticism for their possible lack of originality,[8] their success with readers has aroused interest in those critics and academics who do not consider rewriting as a mere replication, but as an original way to reinterpret the past. The theories of influence consider every artistic production as being inscribed within a tradition; thus originality resides in the way characters, themes, topics are 'recycled' and updated. The question arising from the examination of this rewriting phenomenon is whether the more or less explicit borrowing from pre-existing texts could be read as a sign of the failure of imagination. Furthermore, it raises many ethical issues as to the limits to the right to borrow or 'steal' from a previous text. But as Roland Barthes has clearly stated in his essay "From Work to Text", while the author is considered the owner of his work, the text does not need a father, it is a network that can be broken, "it can be read without the guarantee of its father, the restitution of the inter-text paradoxically abolishing any legacy. It is not that the Author may not 'come back' in the Text, in his text, but he then does so as a 'guest'" (Barthes 1977, 161).

According to the French theorist Gérard Genette,[9] a text is a 'palimpsest', so he redefines the entire field of narrative poetics as one whose task is not to consider a text in its singularity, but rather to study the relationships that link a text to other texts. In his foreword to *Palimpsestes: Literature in the Second Degree*, Gerald Prince introduces Genette's view

[8] In *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1992), Fredric Jameson affirms that postmodernism "no longer produces monumental works of the modernist type but ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of pre-existent texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage: metabooks which cannibalize other books, metatexts which collate bits of other texts.-. such is the logic of postmodernism in general" (96); In "Simulacra and Simulations" Jean Baudrillard affirms that "it is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself" (167).

[9] In *Palimpsestes: Literature in the Second Degree* (1997), Genette coins the term transtextuality to define the theory that expands how to interpret texts beyond mere commentaries. He divides transtextuality into five categories: intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, hypertextuality and architextuality. Genette's category of intertextuality has a more limited dimension than Kristeva's. He then explores paratextuality in his *Paratexts:Threshold of Interpretation* (1997). Paratext refers to everything that accompanies a text such as prefaces, postfaces, dedications, which gives clues to the reader about the text even before its reception. But paratext also defines a test that is composed on one or more authoritative base texts. The whole paratext is made up of peritext plus epitext. The peritext includes elements within the text such as the title, the preface and the dedications. The epitext defines elements outside the text such as interviews and reviews.

that "any text is a hypertext, grafting itself onto a hypotext, an earlier text that it imitates and transforms; any writing is a rewriting; and literature is always in the second degree" (Genette 1982, ix). It is obvious then, that rewriting is not to be seen as an unoriginal reproduction, but as a creative process that reveals the infinite potentialities of a second-degree narrative. Gérard Genette uses the term transtextuality, as his own version of the previous theorists' word 'intertextuality'. He confines transtextuality to literature and divides it into five subcategories, which are not entirely separated from each other. The second subcategory, paratextuality, which relates to all the elements on the 'threshold' of a text, is the object of his seminal book *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1987). The paratext affects the readers' reception of a text and lets him/her discover the intertextual resonances within it. One of Genette's subcategories, hypertextuality, defines the relationship between two texts, a new text, the hypertext and an earlier text, the hypotext, which Moraru[10] calls the *rewrite* and the *rewritten* respectively (Moraru 2001, 18). As Moraru clearly states, recalling Barth, in his *Rewriting: Postmodern Narrative and Cultural Critique in the Age of Cloning,* rewriting is not a symptom of a cultural 'dead end', but conversely a new way to tell us who we are (Moraru 2001, 8).

Commenting on his famous essay "The Literature of Exhaustion", John Barth[11] laments that it has been frequently misread "as one more Death of the Novel", while he actually only claims that since literary forms 'have histories and historical contingencies' they are subject to 'used-upness'. Among other art forms, even the time of the novel may have

[10] In *Rewriting: Postmodern Narrative and Cultural Critique in the Age of Cloning,* (2001), Moraru focuses on rewritings in late twentieth-century America. He aims at defining what rewriting is and whether it is to be considered a literary genre. He reviews and distinguishes among different forms of rewriting (10-19) and concludes by defining it as an "*archigenre* or *hybrid practice*" (19).

[11] In 'The Literature of Exhaustion', John Barth discusses new 'intermedia' arts, some aspects of J.L. Borges and 'the literature of exhaustion'. He starts by focusing on the tendency of 'intermedia arts' to eliminate both the traditional audience and the traditional notion of the artist. Even though he likes rebelling against tradition, he laments the practice of contemporary writers of writing 'turn-of-the-century-type novels and praises writers such as Beckett and Borges.

exhausted the chances of producing novelty. He focuses on the concept of originality and identifies as an implicit theme of Borges' story 'Pierre Menard, Author of Quixote', "the difficulty, perhaps the unnecessity, of writing original works of literature" (Barth 1984, 69). Quoting Borges, Barth wants to underline that all writers are more or less faithful rewriters of 'pre-existing archetypes' (ibid., 73). In the abovementioned essay "The Literature of Replenishment" (1979), Barth clarifies that he does not consider fiction 'exhausted' but that previous literary conventions may be transcended and transformed to create new literary texts. Moreover, he reminds the 'misreaders' of his previous essay that "no single literary text can ever be exhausted, its meaning residing as it does in its transactions with individual readers over time, space, and language" (Barth 1979, 205).

In *Literary Symbiosis: The Reconfigured Text in Twentieth-Century Writing* (1993), David Cowart[12] focuses on the concepts of dependence and originality and convincingly demonstrates how recent trends in retelling have made the act of borrowing more explicit. Cowart explains that literary symbiosis is a contemporary phenomenon, which makes literary works attach themselves parasitically to their sources, thereby generating a mutual dependence and a host-guest relationship between the two texts. "Literary symbiosis is an important instrument of postmodernist aesthetics, a brilliantly effective strategy not only for transforming the monuments of literary history but also for 'making it new' in an age that, notwithstanding its pose of superiority, remains troubled by the myth of originality" (Cowart 1993, 3).

Cowart's theory of symbiosis follows and extends the path traced by Harold Bloom's Oedipal Complex theory of literary history. In *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Harold

[12] In *Literary Symbiosis,* Cowart focuses on contemporary rewritings of such texts as Hamlet, Robinson Crusoe, and Jane Eyre.

Bloom[13] employs Freudian metaphors to describe the relationship of a poet with his precursor, which is not mutual, but hostile and involves struggle and deliberate misreading. Even though his book offers a theory of poetry and Bloom only refers to strong poets who are able to fight against their strong precursors, his fascinating version of intertextual theory has been applied to all those writers who aim at challenging their predecessors' authority. These attempts at getting rid of the authority and influence of their predecessors after learning from them, and the new poets' fear of not being original in their own work, results in an anxiety, which Bloom calls anxiety of influence, an anxiety which only strong poets are able to overcome. Since Bloom's theory is intertextual, he focuses his attention on the concept of originality and claims that poetic influence, which he calls poetic misprision, does not make poets less original, but rather more original, which in any case, does not necessarily mean better (Bloom 1973, 7). Bloom suggests that strong poets make poetic history by misreading one another, so as to clear space for themselves. This process results in an immense anxiety of indebtedness (ibid., 5). The strong poet must 'swerve away' from his precursor and go beyond the tradition he inherits, so as to create a new poem and himself become an influence against that of his precursor. Bloom starts from T.S. Eliot's theory of influence, but while Eliot sets the work of the contemporary writer in the preceding tradition, in Bloom the new poet surpasses the work of the earlier one. Bloom's thesis is less fashionable today than it was in the past because of his exclusively male view of poetic creation, but his influence on the issue of rewriting is taken for granted.

[13] In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom identifies six revisionary ratios *Clinamen, Tessera, Kenosis, Daemonization, Askesis* and *Apophrades* in the strong poet's life-cycle, which are essential to understand how a poet challenges and rewrites his precursor's work.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic* (2000),[14] the feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, after acknowledging that their literary methodology is based on Bloom's theory, then attempted to read his patriarchal paradigm from a female perspective. They consider Bloom's model of literary history useful because it helps distinguish "the anxieties and achievements of female writers from those of male writers" (Gilbert 2000, 48). Since female poets have to deal almost entirely with a male tradition, from which they have traditionally been excluded, Gilbert and Gubar argue that female poets do experience the 'anxiety of influence', yet in a different way to their male counterparts, who not only represent patriarchal authority but also reduce women to stereotypes, thus limiting their subjectivities and identities (ibid., 48). A female artist feels a more radical fear, which they call an 'anxiety of authorship', which first makes her afraid of not being able to create, then makes her afraid of being unable to struggle against a male precursor and finally win. But just as Bloom's strong poet fights against his predecessor by passing through revisionary ratios, "so the female writer's battle for self-creation involves her in a revisionary process. Her battle, however is not against her (male) precursor's reading of the world but against his reading of *her*" (Gilbert 2000, 49). Thus she looks for a previous female model to help define her artistically and create a tradition, able to legitimize her.

According to Laura Savu, biofictions and rewritings show the contemporary desire "to overcome not so much the anxiety of influence, as our acute anxieties over postmodernism's lack of depth, cultural memory, and historical placement" (Savu 2009, 18). Yet contemporary writers, far from completely discarding the past tradition, incorporate it into their novels, making new fiction with old materials.

[14] In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susa Gubar extensively study the literature produced by women in the nineteenth century, when female authorship was no longer rare. The authors underline the common ground in women's struggle to break free from literary isolation.

Rewriting Virginia Woolf's life and fiction

This never-ending process of original literary "recycling" has also focused on Virginia Woolf's life and fiction that in recent years have become a major source of inspiration for contemporary writers, who have reworked her themes in a variety of different ways, thus making a significant contribution to the practice of reading the past in relation to the present, and to bringing her closer to writers and readers alike. As Hermione Lee reminds us, "[h]er life and work have been, since her death, variously and passionately idealised, vilified, fictionalised, and mythologised" (Lee 2005, 39). Woolf's life is incredibly appealing for biofiction and her works represent a vital impulse for contemporary literary fiction. Several contemporary biographical novels[15] are in debt to Virginia Woolf, both because of her

[15] Almost all the novels and some essays of Virginia Woolf have been sources of inspiration for contemporary writers. The list below is far from complete.
This dissertation focuses on Maggie Gee's *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* (2014) and Susan Sellers's *Vanessa and Virginia* (2008), which are read both as biofictions and as a dialogue with Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927).
Mrs Dalloway (1925) is the novel that in recent years has most inspired imitation and homage and much has been written about its various rewritings. Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* paved the way: it is not only a rewriting of Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, but also a biofiction, since Virginia Woolf is one of the characters in his novel.
In his "Rewriting Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*: Homage, Sexual Identity, and the Single-Day Novel by Cunningham, Lippincott, and Lanchester" (2004), James Schiff analyses three novels: Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998), Lippincott's *Mr Dalloway* (1999) and Lanchester's *Mr Phillis* (2000) and lists four reasons why Woolf's novel is so appealing for contemporary writers: the story takes place in the course of a single day, it is a city novel, it is about the ambiguity of sexual identity and desire and it is about how it feels to be alive.
In her *A Poetics of Postmodernism and Neomodernism: Rewriting Mrs Dalloway* (2015), Monica Latham first traces Virginia Woolf's own rewriting of her novel following a genetic methodology, then she analyses how a variety of contemporary rewritings and variations perpetuate *Mrs Dalloway*. She identifies the reasons for these many rewritings in the public's growing interest in Virginia Woolf, in a renewed interest in her work, mainly in *Mrs Dalloway*, and in the postmodern inclination to reappropriate past forms. Monica Latham distinguishes between postmodernists' and neomodernists' rewritings of *Mrs Dalloway*. The first are more explicitly in a dialogue with Woolf's work, while the second show a more subtle influence that aims at prolonging, reinvigorating and renewing the modernist tradition.
Mrs Dalloway provides the framework for "The Arrangements" (2016), a short story about the American election, in which the author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie compares Melania Trump to the protagonist of Woolf's novel.
Some other contemporary writers who have made their contribution to a renewed interest in Virginia Woolf are:
Jeanette Winterson, who considers herself a descendant of the modernists and has engaged both with Woolf's novels *Orlando* (1928) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and with her essays.
Pat Baker deals with the topic of madness which Virginia Woolf explored in *Mrs Dalloway*, and her *Toby's Room* (2012) is clearly indebted to Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922).
Ali Smith has acknowledged Woolf as her precursor and her *Hotel World* (2001) is influenced by *The Waves* (1931).
Priya Parmar explores Vanessa Bell's emotional life, her relationship to her sister Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury group in her *Vanessa and her sister* (2014).

fascinating life and tragic death, and her pioneering techniques for exploring the complex inner life of her characters. Her life, illness and death have been closely investigated and have become the focus of contemporary biofictions, while her novels have actively influenced a great number of postmodernist texts, which assimilate and rewrite hers.

Some novels, such as Maggie Gee's *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* (2012) and Susan Sellers' *Vanessa and Virginia* (2008), which are the objects of this dissertation, alternate between two different modes of engagement: they are, in fact, two immediately recognizable biofictions, but, at the same time, they are intertextually related to Virginia Woolf's work, in particular to the novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Both biofictions and rewritings encourage the more knowledgeable reader to establish a relationship between Woolf's real and fictional life and between the hypotext and the hypertext, but at the same time they are also enjoyable for those readers who can find a more accessible way to read Virginia Woolf. What Schiff has pointed out with reference to *Mrs Dalloway* can also be applied to all the retellings of Woolf's novels; they are "gaining cultural currency, becoming increasingly useful to contemporary readers and writers" (Shiff 2004, 365). The publication of Woolf's diaries, letters and memoirs has significantly increased[16] our interest in her life and work and has made it difficult to read her work independently from her life. As Claire Hanson has pointed out "aspects of Woolf's well documented life have by now attained the status of intertexts, which

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Norah Vincent's *Adeline: A Novel of Virginia Woolf* (2015) uses Virginia Stephen's first name and gives a portrait of Woolf and the Bloomsbury Group.
As Bethany Lane has pointed out, in *Mitz: the Marmoset of Bloomsbury* (1998), Sigrid Nunez explicitly engages with Woolf's *Flush* (1933) but also introduces Woolf as a fictional character (Layne 2014). Nunez relies on a variety of Woolf's texts among which her diaries and memoirs.

[16] Among the numerous biographies of Woolf, see Quentin Bell: *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (1972), which is mainly based on Leonard Woolf's notes.
Hermione Lee: *Virginia Woolf* (1999), which shows Woolf both as a woman and as a writer.
Emily Dalgarno: *Virginia Woolf and the Visible World* (2001) which draws on ideas from psychoanalytic theories.
Michael H. Whitworth: *Virginia Woolf* (2005), which shows how Virginia Woolf's work was influenced by contemporary writers, philosophers and scientists and how she has been reinterpreted in recent years.
Alexandra Harris: *Virginia Woolf* (2011) a lively portrait of Virginia Woolf.
Viviane Forrester: *Virginia Woolf: a Portrait* (2015) which offers a new light on Woolf's relationship with her husband Leonard and in general with her family.

interweave with her fiction and influence our interpretation of it. [...] In her production of diaries, letters and memoirs Woolf created a kind of interface between life and text, and herself questioned the barriers between them" (Hanson 1994, 1).

The interest in Virginia Woolf's biography and work, which, until the 1990s was mainly limited to academics and scholars, has become increasingly widespread. In *Virginia Woolf Icon* (1999), Brenda Silver, who has investigated Virginia Woolf's position in popular culture, considers the mid-1990s as the turning point in the upsurge of her cult, "since she was not only appearing alongside Shakespeare whenever a 'canonical' woman writer was needed, but her novels, already subject to versioning for scholars and general readers, were increasingly being adapted or versioned for the stage or screen" (Silver 1999, 211). Almost a century after their publication, her novels still influence many contemporary writers, whose impulses to fictionalize her life and to rewrite her novels are so successful with the readers that they have become the focus of critical interpretations and academic study. Not only was Woolf herself aware that "books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately" (*A Room of One's Own*, chap. 5), she also engaged and made experiments with different forms of life writing and explored the relationship between auto/biography and fiction.

Since her father, Leslie Stephen was the editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography,* Woolf was exposed early on to biographical writing, and realized that in her family, biography was a very respected literary form. Throughout her life she engaged with biography, she produced autobiographical writings, collected and published posthumously as *Moments of Being,* and she wrote a conventional biography, *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940), many biographical essays, reviews on biographies and auto/biographical novels such as *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) and *Flush: A Biography* (1933) which, with their combination of fact and fiction, may be seen as antecedents of biofiction. She

rejected the objective style of the Victorian biographies and in her essay "The New Biography" Woolf articulated her new vision. As Max Saunders points out, "in that essay, she was not only a major theorist of life writing as well as fiction, but also of their possible combinations of what we are terming auto/biografiction" (Saunders 2012, 440).

In addition, Virginia Woolf was a close friend of the biographer and critic Lytton Strachey, as they both belonged to the Bloomsbury Group, considered highly influential in the development of life writing. According to Todd Avery, it was Lytton Strachey who transformed the art of English life writing, by introducing irony into the more conventional Victorian tradition and an awareness of the relativity of factual biography. Todd Avery claims that Strachey's awareness of the need to abandon objective biographical representation in favour of a more subjective analysis made it possible to transform biography. "Strachey deftly steered biography in the direction of what we now call biofiction" (Avery 2017, 5). In 1927, Strachey was writing *Elizabeth and Essex: A Tragic History*, in which he expanded the possibilities of life writing by considering the biographer as a fictional artist (Avery 2017). According to Avery, he "deliberately approached Elizabeth in a biofictional spirit. [...] Strachey intentionally manipulated and invented historical facts in the service of an intensely personal vision" (Avery 2018, 16). Thus, "among the Bloomsburyans it was Strachey who, as historian, critic, and biographer, more fully theorized and more eagerly practiced a type of life writing that contains biofiction's DNA" (Avery 2018, 14).

In her influential essays "The New Biography" (1927) and "the Art of Biography" (1939), Woolf acknowledged the importance of Strachey's contribution to the change in the genre of biography. In "The New Biography", she recognized that in writing his biographies "he has ceased to be the chronicler; he has become an artist" (Woolf 2008, 97), a new approach that she claimed was well illustrated in Harold Nicolson's *Some People,* where he tried "to mix the truth of real life and the truth of fiction" (ibid., 99). Even though Virginia

Woolf granted that Nicolson had shown a possible new direction to follow, she claimed for herself the distinction between fact and fiction: “Let it be fact, one feels, or let it be fiction; the imagination will not serve under two masters” (ibid., 100). In “The Art of Biography”, Virginia Woolf restated the value of Lytton Strachey’s biographies *Eminent Victorians* (1918), *Queen Victoria* (1921) and *Elizabeth and Essex: A Tragic History* (1928) “to show both what biography can do and what biography cannot do” (Woolf 2008, 117), but again concluded that in spite of Strachey’s efforts to write “a book that was not only biography but also a work of art, [...] the combination proved unworkable; fact and fiction refused to mix” (ibid., 119). Yet “Strachey’s novelization of biography” (Saunders 2012, 456), was very stimulating for her, so much so that she conceived *To the Lighthouse* as a juxtaposition of truth and fiction.

Undeniably in her novel, Virginia Woolf openly drew inspiration from her own life experience, her memories and feelings and transformed biographical facts into fiction. Her novel is a work of fiction, but it is so full of life (*bio)* and personal history that it encourages us to read it as an antecedent of biofiction. It is not actually a biofiction, since Virginia Woolf does not use her parents’ or siblings’ real names, which is the defining feature of this literary practice, but borrowing Todd Avery’s words once again, it can be defined as “a type of life writing that contains biofiction’s DNA”. In this novel she anticipated not only the postmodernist belief that fact is fiction and that fiction is inseparable from fact, but also the practice of mixing them. As Max Saunders correctly speculates what Virginia Woolf meant when she stated that the mixing of fact and fiction is impossible, it was that this combination is unacceptable for biography but not for fiction. (Saunders 2012, 467).

Thus the following chapter investigates the biographical links between *To the Lighthouse* and Virginia Woolf’s memoirs, diaries, letters and comments in order to focus on

the relationship between the story of the Stephen family and the fictional representation of the Ramsay family.

Chapter Two: *To the Lighthouse*: biography or fiction?

This chapter investigates some biographical links between *To the Lighthouse* and Virginia Woolf's memoirs, diaries and letters to examine how real life, on which the novel is based, is intersected with fiction. This blurring of biography and fiction, which breaks the rigid distinction between two literary genres, allows us to read Woolf's novel as a precursor of postmodernist biofictions. As I have already pointed out in the Introduction, my aim is not to argue that Virginia Woolf was a proto-postmodernist, nor is it to state that *To the Lighthouse* can be defined as a work of biofiction, which is a prime postmodernist practice; this chapter aims to focus on how her personal experiences are fused together in her novel. I am aware that many scholars [1] have already investigated the relationship between *To the Lighthouse* and Virginia Woolf's life, to the extent that it is considered a critical commonplace to which I am indebted, as the bibliography of this thesis shows. Yet her life has undoubtedly been a source of inspiration for both Maggie Gee and Susan Sellers who have drawn solidly on events and family relationships in Woolf's life as presented in her novel. Just as Virginia Woolf reshaped her own life in her novel, transformed her own memories, mourned her losses, meditated about the meaning of life and death, focused on the passing of time and investigated the role of art, Maggie Gee and Susan Sellers reshape Woolf's life and adapt her topics in their novels, as the following chapters, dedicated to a close reading of the relationship between *To the Lighthouse* and *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* and *Vanessa and Virginia* will demonstrate. Following a biographical approach, I consider it essential to first give a brief account of the parallels between the historical and fictional elements in Woolf's novel in order to demonstrate how her own life is a sort of "hypotext" that remains highly visible in *To the*

[1] Among others, see John Batchelor (Batchelor 1995), Julia Briggs (Briggs 1995), Anne E. Fernald (Fernald 2005), (Gordon 1984), Katherine C. Hill-Miller (Hill-Miller 2001).

Lighthouse, which in turn informed Gee's and Sellers' works. I shall then focus on those elements and themes that Gee and Sellers borrow, absorb and update from Woolf. Like Woolf, the two contemporary writers depict facts that belong to meticulous biographical research and integrate them with fictitious details. Moreover, they also reproduce her voice, her thoughts, her memories and her emotions, thus making a significant contribution to carrying on Woolf's iconicity and literary tradition in the twenty-first century.

Undeniably, even though in her essay "The Art of Biography", Virginia Woolf affirmed that "fact and fiction refused to mix" (119), in *To the Lighthouse* she openly drew inspiration from her own life experience and transformed biographical facts into fiction. Even though Virginia Woolf did not name her protagonists after her parents or her siblings, as Michael Lackey has pointed out in his *The American Biographical Novel,* in the postmodern era Leslie Stephen is easily recognizable behind Mr Ramsay, (31) and we know that *To the Lighthouse* took inspiration from the lives of real people "empirically rooted and historically based" (Lackey 2016, 31).

Virginia Woolf believed in the modernist idea of aesthetic impersonality, which seems to require a rejection of biography (Saunders 2012, 12), so she tried to disguise her family by giving them different names and she pretended to create fictional characters, but her novel shows that in practice, the autobiographical is a pivotal theme. *To the Lighthouse* uses auto/biography, but extends its limits and turns it into something that falls between biography and fiction. She borrows elements and events from her own life and "recycles" them to the point that *To the Lighthouse* can be read both as pure fiction and as fictional autobiography.

Since her father was the editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, from a very early age Virginia Woolf was exposed to biography writing,[2] which was considered a distinguished literary form in her family group.[3] Furthermore, as Woolf's nephew Quentin Bell recollects in his Biography, when her father died the historian Frederick Maitland, who used to spend time with the Stephens at St Ives, asked her to make a contribution to the biography of Leslie Stephen which he was writing. He wanted her to describe Leslie's relationship with his children and her few pages were the first thing of hers that were printed.

In her diaries and letters Virginia Woolf gave clues to the connections between life and fiction but, since she wanted to feel free to use her creative imagination, she sometimes altered historical facts to shape them into her novel. Since she was writing fictional biography, she felt free to mix actual memories with events she had created for the purpose of fiction. Since fiction plays such an important role in *To the Lighthouse* , the novel cannot be considered an autobiography: but it is certainly a portrait in fiction of her family.[4] It is a form of fictional life writing that drew on her biographical material, and revealed it indirectly through her artistic techniques.[5]

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[2] In her *Aesthetic Autobiography: From life to Art in Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Anais Nin,* Suzanne Nalbantian focuses her attention on Virginia Woolf's interest in the relationship between art and life. In analysing Woolf's essays and her comments on fiction in her diaries and letters, Nalbantian argues that Woolf was probably unaware that "her life material was [...] being absorbed and dilated in her fiction. Moreover she reminds us that "Woolf was closely exposed to biography writing by the two dominant male figures of her life: her father and her husband" (Nalbantian 1994, 135).

[3] In "Virginia Woolf and 'The Proper Writing of Lives'", Julia Briggs focuses on Leslie Stephen's commitment to biography and Virginia Woolf's early interest in it and her attempts to extend its range and increase its flexibility. "Not only in the household in which she grew up, but in the wider family group, biography was accorded high status as a literary form, and much practised" (Briggs 1995, 245).

[4] In her *Virginia Woolf and the Poetry of Fiction,* Stella McNichol points out the blurring of autobiography and fiction in *To the Lighthouse* where "her family [Woolf's] and her past became altered as she shaped them into a work of fiction. *To the Lighthouse* is, in other words, an autobiographical novel, not autobiography" (McNichol 1990, 96). In *A Writer's Life*, Lyndall Gorgon defines *To the Lighthouse* as a portrait of Woolf's family and underlines that "since she [Woolf] was writing fictional biography, not biography proper, she could blend her memory of actual scenes with scenes she imagined" (Gordon 1984, 29).

[5] Julia Briggs considers both *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* forms of imaginary life writing that drew on biographical material (Briggs, "Virginia Woolf and 'The Proper Writing of Lives'" 1995, 262).

The birth and rapid progress of *To the Lighthouse*

Virginia Woolf started writing *To the Lighthouse* in August 1925 but she had been thinking about her story for some time:

> I'm now all on the strain with desire to stop journalism & get on to *To the Lighthouse*. This is going to be fairly short: to have father's character done complete in it; & mothers; & St Ives; & childhood; & all the usual things I try to put in-life, death, &c. But the centre is father's character, sitting in a boat, reciting We perished, each alone, while he crushes a dying mackerel (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf* 1980, Vol 3, 18-19, henceforth D).

In this novel she recreated events and people from her own life out of her memory or out of Leslie Stephen's *Mausoleum Book*, an autobiographical work into which her father poured his grief for his wife Julia Stephen's death as well as for the deaths of some family members. Both the *Mausoleum book* and *To the Lighthouse* focus on the abyss of desperation caused by the death of a mother, and certainly Woolf had Leslie's portrait of Julia in mind when she started her novel.[6] Following her father's path, in *To the Lighthouse* Woolf "continued the process of turning family memoirs into literature" (De Gay 2006, 98) and poured her nostalgia for her childhood, her ambivalent feelings for her father, her desperation for her mother's death, and her rivalry with her siblings, above all with her sister Vanessa. In different ways, both Maggie Gee's and Susan Sellers' novels echo and rework these themes taken from Woolf's own life as well as from her novel, which are absorbed but at the same time poured into two innovative narrative works. Gee and Sellers share the postmodernist interest in life writing, and their novels reveal the fictive nature of any narration of personal

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According to Suzanne Nalbantian, in *To the Lighthouse,* Virginia Woolf's reservations about the diary form motivated her to develop "a more veiled autobiography, which could reveal the intimate obsessions of her own life through indirect artistic means" (Nalbantian 1994, 135).

[6] In "*To the Lighthouse* and the Ghost of Leslie Stephen", Jane De Gay focuses on the relationship between Virginia Woolf and her father Leslie Stephen, and she considers *To the Lighthouse* important because in it "Woolf finally tackles Leslie Stephen's legacy directly, not only by bringing him to life in the character of Mr Ramsay but by exploring his writings in a series of allusions throughout the novel" (De Gay 2006, 97).

experience, following the path that Virginia Woolf, aware of the fluid boundaries of life writing, paved in *To the Lighthouse*.

To the Lighthouse is a novel made up of three parts of unequal length, which in her notes for writing, Virginia Woolf famously conceived as "two blocks joined by a corridor":[7] it is a structure, as we shall see, that Maggie Gee adopts in her own *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan*. Before she started writing it, Virginia Woolf had imagined her novel to be divided into three parts: "1. at the drawing room window; 2. seven years passed; 3. the voyage" (D., Vol 3, 36), which would then become "The Window", "Time Passes" and "The Lighthouse" in the version published in 1927. The action is mainly set at the Ramsays' holiday home on one of the Hebrides Islands whose description is evidently based on Talland House in St. Ives, Cornwall, where the Stephens spent many happy times before Julia's death.

To avoid being considered sentimental,[8] Virginia Woolf transposed the setting of her novel from St Ives, Cornwall, to the faraway setting of the Hebrides and also changed the time in her novel by postponing the events of her life by about ten years. In 1892, Leslie Stephen rented Talland House from the Great Western Railway Company as a holiday cottage for his family. St Ives and Talland house, where Virginia Woolf spent her summers until her mother's death, provided some of her earliest memories, as she herself wrote in "A Sketch of the Past". In St Ives, the sea seemed to be dominated by the Godrevy lighthouse, which is to be seen throughout *To the Lighthouse.*[9] Quentin Bell dedicates some pages of his aunt's

[7] For details on the origin of *To the Lighthouse* and of Virginia Woolf's notebooks, see *To the Lighthouse,* the Original Holograph Draft transcribed and edited by Susan Dick (Dick 1982).

[8] Among others, Hermione Lee underlines Woolf's concern about 'laying bare her soul'. "She was aware, all her writing life, of inner as well as outer censors. She was afraid of exposing herself autobiographically in her fiction or her essays. She disliked autobiography as confession and was extremely nervous of showing egotism" (Lee, "Am I afraid of Virginia Woolf?" 1998, 231).

[9] In her *From the Lighthouse to Monk's House*, Katherine Hill-Miller dedicates a chapter to St Ives and Talland House and points out how "St Ives, Godrevy lighthouse and Talland House, ¬ the home where Virginia spent her childhood summers, ¬ are central to Virginia Woolf's life and work," (Hill-Miller 2001, 12) and they shape the writer's earliest memories.

Biography to the description of the trip from London to St Ives that he defines as "the grand event of the year" (Vol I., 30), and his description of the family life at Talland House, which was informal, untidy, and full of guests, is mirrored in the first part of Woolf's novel. In her work, Susan Sellers successfully conveys Vanessa's nostalgia for the Stephens' happy childhood, which is closely related to their holidays in St. Ives.

> On holiday in St. Ives we do not keep to our rigid London schedules. Guests come and go according to the dictates of the trains and not the immutable pattern of meal and visiting times we live by at home. Even Father appears released from the relentless burden of work that oppresses him in London, finding time for walks, outings, games. We are given an unprecedented freedom to roam the garden and neighboring beach almost at will. The house is light and airy, the rooms opening out of each other like origami boxes (Sellers 2008, 13).

As is well-known, "The Window" takes place during a September afternoon and evening shortly before World War I breaks out. The window is the one at which Mrs Ramsay is sitting and knitting while her youngest son, six-year old James, is cutting out some pictures. They are the subject of a painting made by Lily Briscoe, one of the Ramsays' guests. Mr Ramsay, a philosopher, eleven years older than his wife, is outside on the terrace reciting a poem. As is well known, the main topic is whether or not a trip to the lighthouse will take place the following day. James is looking forward to going to the lighthouse but the weather is awful, so while Mrs Ramsay's opening remark "'Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow'" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 2006, 7, henceforth TL) fulfils James's expectations, his father dashes his hopes by telling him that the weather will not be good enough for this trip.[10] James being the Ramsays' youngest child, Mrs Ramsay's "cherished" one (TL, 25) "the most gifted, the most sensitive of her children" (TL, 49), is Adrian Stephen's most explicit textual representative. Since one of the greatest joys for the Stephens' children was sailing during their summer holidays, it is easily understandable how disappointed Virginia's youngest brother was when

[10] On James's Oedipal dream, see Maria Di Battista (Di Battista 1990, 69).

he was not allowed to go to the lighthouse on one of these excursions.[11] Moreover, in "A Sketch of the Past" Virginia Woolf remembers that Adrian was Julia Stephen's favourite; "she called him 'My Joy'" (83), further reinforcing the relationship between James and her youngest brother.

The pain of raising Mother from the dead

In "The Window", all the characters are introduced, although this section is not centred on Leslie Stephen as Virginia Woolf had first planned in her diary, but on her mother. The first section is dominated by Mrs Ramsay, who closely mirrors Woolf's mother Julia Jackson Stephen. Virginia Woolf was only thirteen when Julia Stephen died in 1895 but, as she makes clear in her memoirs, her presence obsessed her long after that until the age of forty-four, as she herself states.

> Until I was in the forties - I could settle the date by seeing when I wrote *To the Lighthouse* [...] - the presence of my mother obsessed me. I could hear her voice, see her, imagine what she would do or say as I went about my day's doings. She was one of the invisible presences who after all play so important a part in every life (SP, 80).

Woolf famously states about *To the Lighthouse*, "I wrote the book very quickly; and when it was written I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her" (SP, 81). Woolf's own admission that the novel was about her mother and her feelings for her, has prompted a number of biographical readings that look for similarities between Mrs Ramsey and Julia Stephen.[12] Such similarities were actually first pointed out by Virginia's sister Vanessa Bell, in words which are clearly echoed by Susan Sellers in her

[11] Quentin Bell quotes from Woolf's "Hyde Park Gate News" for 12 September 1892: "On Saturday morning Master Hilary Hunt and Master Basil Smith came up to Talland House and asked Master Thoby and Miss Virginia Stephen to accompany them to the light-house as Freeman the boatman said that there was the perfect tide and wind for going there. Master Adrian Stephen was much disappointed at not being allowed to go" (Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* 1996, 32).

[12] Among others, Katherine C. Hill-Miller points out that "Mr and Mrs Ramsay are loving, satirical, angry portraits of Julia and Leslie Stephen" (Hill-Miller 2001, 20).

Vanessa and Virginia (76). When Vanessa read *To the Lighthouse*, in fact, she identified Mrs Ramsay with Julia Stephen very clearly, and wrote to Virginia:

> It seemed to me in the first part of the book you have given a portrait of mother which is more like her to me than anything I could ever conceived possible. It is almost painful to have her so raised from the dead. You have made one feel the extraordinary beauty of her character, which must be the most difficult thing in the world to do. It was like meeting her again with oneself grown up on equal terms and it seems to me the most astonishing feat of creation to have been able to see her such a way.-You have given father too I think as clearly, but perhaps, I may be wrong, that isn't quite so difficult (Bell 1996, Vol. II, 128).

Since Virginia was only thirteen when her mother died, her memories of her might have been based on her father's[13] and other relatives' views of her, rather than on her own personal experience, as attested by another well-known quote: "the tragedy of her death was not that it made one now and then and very intensely, unhappy. It was that it made her unreal" (SP, 95). Julia Stephen was very beautiful, so beautiful that she became Burne-Jones's model for his *Annunciation,* just as Mrs Ramsay is the model for Lily Briscoe's painting. Woolf was proud of her mother's beauty, whose secret meaning she tried to discover while creating Mrs. Ramsay,[14] as the many allusions to her beauty in the novel show. Quentin Bell reports that Julia's mother used to say that every man who saw Julia fell in love with her (Vol.I, 17), and similarly, almost all the men in *To the Lighthouse* pay homage to Mrs Ramsay's beauty, even though both women seem to be unaware of their attractiveness.[15] Mrs Ramsay's beauty evokes different feelings throughout *To the Lighthouse* in every male

[13] Jane De Gay underlines the importance of Leslie Stephen's *Mausoleum Book* for *To the Lighthouse* which both "have an important common focus in the figure of the lost mother – Julia Stephen or Mrs Ramsay – and the void created by her death. While some similarities between the works can be explained simply by the fact that they use the same person for their model, it is evident that Stephen's portrait of Julia was in Woolf's mind as she wrote her novel" (De Gay 2006, 100).
Lyndell Gordon reminds us that "with Julia's death this panoply of love, which had enfolded the Stephen family, completely vanished. Relationships at once became artificial, strained. Leslie Stephen became melodramatic and unreal; the children retreated into distrustful silence" (Gordon 1984, 37).

[14] Anne E. Fernald points out that "Woolf took pride in her mother's beauty, attaching meaning to it, as her characters attach meaning to Mrs. Ramsay's beauty. Moreover, Woolf consciously sought to capture this meaningful beauty in depicting Mrs. Ramsay" (Fernald 2005, 8).

[15] On Julia's beauty, see Quentin Bell. *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, Vol. I, 18.

character, and deep feelings are nurtured in Mr Ramsay. Mr Carmichael seems to be the only one who is not attracted to her, despite the sympathy she has shown him: "every year, she felt the same thing; he did not trust her" (TL, 36). As Jane De Gay as pointed out, Mrs Ramsay, like Julia Stephen in the *Mausoleum Book*, is a mysterious character, and thus she may be sometimes valued more for her beauty than for her thoughts and feelings.[16]

Another biographical parallel may be found in Woolf's treatment of the mother figure's way of dealing with, and showing, emotion. Before marrying Leslie Stephen, Julia Jackson had married Herbert Duckworth with whom she had had three children, George, Stella and Gerald. Julia and Herbert were deeply in love with each other and when he died four years later "she was 'as unhappy as it is possible for a human being to be'" (SP, 89), as Julia herself used to say. Moreover, Stella told Virginia that Julia used to lie upon her husband's grave to mourn him. "As she was undemonstrative that seems a superlative expression of her grief" (SP, 90). Differently from Mr Ramsay who can never "conceal his feelings" (TL, 79), Mrs Ramsay is too undemonstrative, she cannot easily express her emotions, she cannot tell her husband that she loves him.

> He wanted something-wanted the thing she always found it so difficult to give him; wanted her to tell him that she loved him. And that, no, she could not do. He found talking so much easier than she did. He could say things she never could (TL, 99-100).

Virginia Woolf transposes Julia's sadness and remoteness to Mrs Ramsay who seems to hide something of her past. "Never did anyone look so sad" (TL, 26) the narrator says twice while observing Mrs Ramsay, and people wonder:

> What was there behind it- her beauty, her splendour? Had he blown his brains out, they asked, had he died the week before they were married-some other, earlier lover, of whom rumours reached one? Or was

[16] "Like Julia Stephen in the *Mausoleum Book*, Mrs Ramsay remains mysterious. As beautiful women, Mrs Ramsay and Julia Stephen are in danger of becoming objects which other people can contemplate and consume: their capacity to think or feel is ignored in favour of their capacity to give pleasure to the viewer" (De Gay 2006, 102).

> there nothing? Nothing but an incomparable beauty which she lived behind, and could do nothing to disturb? [...] She never spoke. She was always silent (TL, 26-27).

Even her husband "could not help noting, as he passed, the sternness at the heart of her beauty. It saddened him, and her remoteness pained him, and he felt, as he passed, that he could not protect her, and, when he reached the hedge, he was sad. [...]. She was aloof from him now in her beauty, in her sadness" (TL, 54-55). The secret of her melancholy cannot be shared so much so that Mr Ramsay expresses his dismay at seeing her look "so sad" (TL, 57).

Moreover, when her first husband died, Julia "flung aside her religion, and became [...] the most positive of disbelievers" (Woolf, "Reminiscences" 1985, 32). Mrs Ramsey shares this lack of belief: "we are in the hands of the Lord" she says, "but instantly she was annoyed with herself for saying that. Who had said it? Not she; she had been trapped into saying something she did not mean" (TL, 53). In her grief, Julia turned to charity work, she took care of the sick, whom she comforted and nursed, yet another feature which is common to Mrs. Ramsay. Julia often visited the poor and the sick in London and in St Ives, and Noel Annan, Leslie Stephen's biographer, remembers that Julia's abnegation in her charity work is testified in her single publication, *Notes for Sick Rooms,* which "combines an exquisite sensibility towards other people's sufferings with exceedingly practical advice on how to alleviate them" (Annan 1952, 100). When Virginia and Adrian went back to St Ives some years after their mother's death she was still remembered for her beauty and her charity. Mrs Ramsay is likewise aware of "the eternal problems: suffering; death; the poor. There was always a woman dying of cancer even here" (TL, 51). She pays visits in town to help "she went upstairs a moment to see a woman" (TL, 15), and she is just as sensitive as Julia Stephen as far as social problems are concerned.

> But more profoundly she ruminated the other problem, of rich and poor, and the things she saw with her own eyes, weekly, daily, here or in London, when she visited this widow, or that struggling wife in person with a bag on her arm, and a note-book and pencil with which she wrote down in columns

> carefully ruled for the purpose wages and spendings, employment and unemployment, in the hope that thus she would cease to be a private woman whose charity was half a sop to her own indignation, half a relief to her own curiosity, and become, what with her untrained mind she greatly admired, an investigator, elucidating the social problem (TL, 11).

Victorian Ideals of Womanhood

Both Julia and Mrs Ramsay believe in the values of the Victorian family, traditional values which the younger generations start questioning. "Her daughters [Mrs Ramsay's] Prue, Nancy, Rose could sport with infidel ideas which they had brewed for themselves of a life different from hers; in Paris perhaps; a wilder life; not always taking care of some man or other" (TL, 9), despite their mother's pressure to conform. The issue, as we know, is well expressed in Woolf's essay "Professions for Women", which she read to the Women's Service League in 1931.It is here that Woolf conjured up the figure, which would become a symbol, of "The Angel in the House":

> And while I was writing this review, I discovered that if I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, The Angel in the House. It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her. You who come of a younger and happier generation may not have heard of her— you may not know what I mean by the Angel in the House. I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family. She sacrificed herself daily (Woolf, "Professions for Women" 1974, 236).

This speech was written some years after publishing *To the Lighthouse,* but the novel anticipates this view and questions Victorian ideals of womanhood and, at the same time, it offers the different perspective of the younger generations. While Mrs Ramsay reverences her husband, Lily Briscoe refuses to marry and offers a different interpretation of Mrs Ramsay's admiration for men: "she pitied men always as if they lacked – something – women never, as if they had something" (TL, 70). In Sellers' *Vanessa and Virginia,* one of the vignettes is focused precisely on the way the "Angel in the House" influenced the two sisters' early lives.

> We learned to venerate the angel of virtue, whose selflessness was such that she had no requirements of her own (Sellers 2008, 15).

When Julia married Leslie Stephen, they had four children between them from their previous marriages and to this large family they added four more children, Vanessa, Thoby, Adeline Virginia and Adrian. The family was very demanding, as Quentin Bell describes: "a family of ten posed fearful problems for a very devoted mother. And there were so many other burdens upon her. Everyone who wanted help turned to her knowing that it would not be denied. [...] Julia became more and more obsessed by time. She was always in a hurry, ever more anxious to save time by doing things herself, even more anxious that others should be spared. And so she exhausted herself" (Bell 1996, Vol I, 38-39). Mrs Ramsay is equally dedicated to her husband and her children, who require all of her attention. Her skill in resolving everyone's conflicting needs often results in her forgetting her own. She has no time for herself, nor has she time to read even the books which have been dedicated to her, "but for her own part she would never for a single second regret her decision, evade difficulties, or slur over duties" (TL, 9).

Even though Leslie Stephen was agnostic, the language he uses to describe Julia in his *Mausoleum Book* is full of religious references; with Mrs Ramsay, on the other hand, Virginia Woolf tried to give a more realistic portrait of her mother to the extent that her nephew Quentin Bell considers Mrs Ramsay a more convincing portrait of Julia than Leslie's: "Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, although she is drawn only from a child's memories, seems to me more real and more convincing than Leslie's portrait [...]. Virginia's portrait of her mother is more human, more fallible, perhaps more likeable than that painted by Leslie" (Bell 1996, Vol I, 18). Woolf makes use of Lily Briscoe who in turn uses religious images to describe her "but into what sanctuary had one penetrated?" (TL, 43), words which parallel Virginia Woolf's memory of her mother in "A Sketch of the Past":

"certainly there she was, in the very centre of the great Cathedral space which was childhood; there she was from the very first. My first memory is on her lap. [...] She was the whole thing; Talland house was full of her" (SP, 81-83). As Anne Fernald[17] has pointed out, the apparent contradiction between the position of her mother at the heart of a cathedral, once in fiction, and later in memoir, and the education she was given by her agnostic Victorian parents, illustrates Woolf's desire to elevate her mother. Susan Sellers perfectly understands this vital desire to elevate Julia, as Vanessa's thoughts at the beginning of the novel make clear: "Mother. She enters the nursery like a Queen" (Sellers 2008, 2).

Mr and Mrs Ramsay: two different, but complementary 'notes'

Virginia Woolf also wished to investigate the relationship between her parents through Mr and Mrs Ramsay's bond, which mirrors that between Leslie and Julia Stephen, as Quentin Bell's words clearly show:

> Essentially the happiness of the Stephen home derived from the fact that the children knew their parents to be deeply and happily in love [...]. Despite her charities and her maternal commitments, Julia lived chiefly for her husband; everyone needed her but he needed her most. With his temperament and his necessities this was too great a task for even the most heroic of wives; his health and his happiness had to be secured; she had to listen to and to partake in his worries about money, about his work and his reputation, about the management of the household; he had to be fortified and protected from the world (Bell 1996, Vol I, 38).

Mr and Mrs Ramsay are "two different notes, one high, one low," "two notes sounding together" (TL, 34-35). Mrs Ramsay is the energy, "a column of spray","the spray of life" which fecundate "the fatal sterility of the male" (TL, 33), and this sensual image reveals a quality their marriage has, "one she need not name it that was essential; the thing she had with her husband" (TL, 51). The secret of this well-matched couple is paradoxically

[17] In her "*To the Lighthouse* in the Context of Virginia Woolf's Diaries and Letters", Anne E. Fernald states: "for a writer raised by celebrated Victorian agnostics, this placement of her mother at the heart of a cathedral once in fiction, later in memoir ¬ attests to the power of the sacred imagery of the mother and of Woolf's desire to elevate her mother" (Fernald 2005, 8).

disclosed by Lily Briscoe who has decided not to marry and who considers human relations between men and women "extremely insincere" (TL, 76):

> So that is marriage, Lily thought, a man and a woman looking at a girl throwing a ball. That is what Mrs. Ramsay tried to tell me the other night, she thought. For she was wearing a green shawl, and they were standing close together watching Prue and Jasper throwing catches. And suddenly the meaning which, for no reason at all, as perhaps they are stepping out of the Tube or ringing a doorbell, descends on people, making them symbolical, making them representative, came upon them, and made them in the dusk standing, looking, the symbols of marriage, husband and wife (TL, 60).

Mourning the Father

While Mrs Ramsay was modelled on Julia Stephen, Mr Ramsay is an obvious counterpart of Leslie Stephen: he is an intellectual, and considerably older than his wife.[18] There are also physical and personality characteristics that connect Leslie Stephen to Mr Ramsay. In a "Sketch of the Past", Leslie is described as very lean, with small blue eyes, and with a strong but at the same time limited, conventional mind; in *To the Lighthouse*, Mr Ramsay is "lean as a knife" (TL, 7), has "little blue eyes" (TL, 8) and "his narrowness, his blindness" (TL, 40) are highlighted by Lily Briscoe. Woolf's words help us understand how the composition of her novel was influenced by Leslie Stephen: "he too obsessed me for years. Until I wrote it out, I would find my lips moving; I would be arguing with him; raging against him; saying to myself all that I never said to him" (SP, 108). She had known Leslie longer and she loved and admired her father, but his death in 1904 was a sort of liberation: "his life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writings, no books" (D, Vol 3, 208). However, as Jane De Gay has detailed, the process of writing *To the Lighthouse* helped Woolf mourn her father, not only by embodying him in the

[18] Suzanne Nalbantian convincingly analyses the biographical references in *To the Lighthouse* and considers Mr Ramsay "an obvious match to Leslie Stephen, considerably older than his wife and engaged in intellectual matters" (Nalbantian 1994, 146).

character of Mr Ramsay, but also by enabling her to explore his writings, which are often alluded to in her novel.[19]

Sir Leslie Stephen was a Victorian man of letters. Before marrying Julia, he had been married to Minny Thackeray, the younger daughter of the Victorian novelist. When she suddenly died on his forty-third birthday, he was left with a daughter, Laura, who was mentally disturbed. Julia's husband was a difficult and demanding man who needed sympathy and reassurance, but, as Quentin Bell points out, he was also a wonderful father, who spent time with his children either entertaining them by drawing for them or by telling stories of his alpine expeditions, or reciting a poem and reading aloud, often from the novels of Sir Walter Scott (Vol I, 26-27). But his family also suffered from his extreme sensitivity. This ambiguity is shown in Mr Ramsay who is insensitive to others' feelings, has no respect for his children's sensitivity and needs the mediation of his wife to communicate with them.[20] Despite his difficult personality, Leslie Stephen believed in intellectual honesty. In 1854 he was awarded a Fellowship at Trinity Hall, Cambridge but the award required the holder to take Holy Orders, which Leslie Stephen did. However, in 1864, when he realized he had lost his faith he left both the job and the Holy Orders.[21] "To leave the security of Cambridge was a hazardous thing and he was, as he himself said, of a rather anxious temperament (this was an understatement); but he took the risk with an untroubled gaiety which in later life astonished him, and came to London without money or prospects" (Bell 1996, Vol I, 8).

[19] "The process of writing *To the Lighthouse* helped Woolf address this loss by enabling her to know her father (though not her mother) in a new way: as a writer." (De Gay 2006, 96) In this novel, Virginia Woolf "tackles Leslie Stephen's legacy directly, not only by bringing him to life in the character of Mr Ramsay but by exploring his writings in a series of allusions" (De Gay 2006, 97).

[20] Alex Zwerdling points out that Mr Ramsay "is barely on speaking terms with his children, has no respect for their feelings and seems to communicate with them mainly through the intermediary of his wife" (Zwerdling 1986, 183).

[21] See Annan 1952, 28.

Mr Ramsay, too, believes in intellectual honesty: "[w]hat 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 of his own children, who, sprung from his loins, should be aware from childhood that life is difficult" (TL, 8). So he destroys James's hopes of going to the lighthouse by telling him that the weather will not be fine the following day and causing the child great distress. "Had there been an axe handy, a poker, or any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it" (TL, 7). James shows little affection for his father, his hatred towards him stems from the primal fact that the father draws the mother's attention away and crushes the child's expectations. "His son hated him. He hated him for coming up to them, for stopping and looking down on them; he hated him for interrupting them" (TL, 33).[22] Similarly, Adrian Stephen, who was born when Leslie was over fifty years old, showed little affection for his father who often became the target of his jokes. Adrian "taught himself to imitate his father's voice and, safe in the knowledge of his father's deafness, would strike up before all the family at dinner in the hope of making his brothers and sisters giggle" (Annan 1952, 101).

The transcience of Fame

The durability of fame is another theme explored by Woolf in the novel: it is a constant thought both for Leslie Stephen, Mr Ramsay and herself. Mr Ramsay, "a splendid mind" (TL, 30), "a great mind" (TL, 59), different from all others, is constantly wondering whether his works are worthwhile and will be remembered. He imagines his intellectual effort as an alpabethical "journey". He wants to reach the letter R but realizes that he may not succeed:

[22] On James' s resentment towards his father, see Rachel Bowlby (Bowlby 1998, 59).

> He reached Q. Very few people in the whole of England ever reach Q [...]. But after Q? What comes next? After Q there are a number of letters the last of which is scarcely visible to mortal eyes, but glimmers red in the distance. Z is only reached once by one man in a generation. Still, if he could reach R it would be something (TL, 30-31).

He also often expresses his inner conviction that he is a failure: "in that flash of darkness he heard people saying he was a failure that R was beyond him. He would never reach R [...]. He would never reach R" (TL, 31)

As will be seen in detail in the following chapter, the durability of fame is a topic Maggie Gee develops at length in her novel, just as Virginia Woolf does in *To the Lighthouse* with her father and herself in mind. Leslie Stephen had doubts about the value and durability of his work. His daughter remembers that in his last years, "grown solitary and very deaf, he would sometimes call himself a failure as a writer" (Woolf, "Leslie Stephen" 2008, 115). Virginia Woolf shared a certain preoccupation with reputation[23] and was always enormously susceptible to criticism, to such an extent that after the publication of each of her novels, while waiting for the critical reviews, she suffered from great stress, fearing that her creations might not survive.

Leslie Stephen was a historian and a literary critic but he was mainly known as the editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography,* a daunting task which he accepted because of financial needs, although he himself would have liked to be remembered as a philosopher. "By 1860 he had read Mill and Comte, Kant and his English adapter Sir William Hamilton, Hobbes and Locke, Berkeley and Hume" (Annan 1952, 43). Leslie

[23] As Quentin Bell points out, Virginia Woolf "was always enormously sensitive to criticism" (Vol. I, 29).
In *The Domestic Politics of To the Lighthouse* (1986), Alex Zwerdling, while admitting that Woolf cared for her reputation, underlines that "she did not finally think of herself as a failure, because unlike her father she had both a firm sense of vocation and a profoundly original mind" (187).
In his Introduction to *Virginia Woolf: The Major Novels* (1995), John Batchelor makes a list of Woolf's recurrent psychological breakdowns and notices that she "suffered extreme stress following the publication of each of her major novels" (2).

Stephen admired Hume, who is also important in *To the Lighthouse.*[24] As Jane De Gay has pointed out, "the question of whether a table can be said to exist independently of a viewer is a popular example used by empiricists, such as Hume" (De Gay 2006, 109): this was precisely the object of Leslie Stephen's philosophical discussions. In *To the Lighthouse* Hume is introduced in relation to Mr Ramsay's philosophical ideas and his role in *To the Lighthouse* is definetely connected with his special meaning for Leslie Stephen. "In the process of transformation from Leslie Stephen to Mr Ramsay, Virginia Woolf notably raises the level of creativity and attainment at which the father figure is working, placing him in the rearward and yet within reach of major philosophers" (Beer 1993, 76). Virginia Woolf took up her father's question, which she uses to explain Mr Ramsay's philosophical studies when Lily asks Andrew about it.

> Whenever she 'thought of his work' she always saw clearly before her a large kitchen table. It was Andrew's doing. She asked him what his father's books were about. 'Subject and object and the nature of reality', Andrew had said. And when she said Heavens, she had no notion what that meant. "Think of a kitchen table then", he told her, 'when you're not there'. So she always saw, when she thought of Mr. Ramsay's work, a scrubbed kitchen table (TL, 22).

As Gillian Beer has pointed out, this is Virginia's act of homage towards her father: it is in fact also thanks to his daughter's novel, that his reputation survives.

Recollecting her father Leslie Stephen's eccentricities, Virginia Woolf also depicts Mr Ramsay's awkward habit of shouting out poetry to himself. This is particularly suggestive of Leslie Stephen, who, as Virginia Woolf remembers in a "Sketch of the Past", sometimes "strode along, often shaking his head emphatically as he recited poetry, and giving his stick a flourish" (SP, 113).

[24] For the relationship between the philosopher Hume and Leslie Stephen, see Gillian Beer's "Hume, Stephen, and Elegy in '*To the Lighthouse*'" (Beer 1993). Beer underlines the connection between Mr Ramsay and Hume. In "*To the Lighthouse* and the Ghost of Leslie Stephen, Jane De Gay also considers the relationship between Leslie Stephen and Hume. They both deal with the question of the existence of God; moreover, she underlines Woolf's ambivalence to Hume in *To the Lighthouse.*

> Suddenly a loud cry, as of a sleep-walker, half roused, something about. Stormed at with shot and shell sung out with the utmost intensity in her [Mrs Ramsay's] ear, made her turn apprehensively to see if any one heard him. Only Lily Briscoe, she was glad to find; [...] Indeed, he almost knocked her [Lily's] easel over, coming down upon her with his hands waving, shouting out 'Boldly we rode and well', but, mercifully, he turned sharp, and rode off, to die gloriously she supposed upon the heights of Balaclava. Never was anybody at once so ridiculous and so alarming (TL, 17-18),

Such eccentric behaviour, along with Leslie's fits of anger, followed the convention of the time "that men of genius were naturally uncontrolled. [...] It was part of this convention that after these outbursts, the man of genius became 'touchingly apologetic'; but he took it for granted that his wife or sister would accept his apology" (SP, 109-110). Mr Ramsay too sometimes shows a violent temper and when his wife tries to soothe James by telling him that the wind may change and it might be possible to go to the lighthouse the following day, "the extraordinary irrationality of her remark, the folly of women's minds enraged him [...]. He stamped his foot on the stone step. 'Damn you' he said" (TL, 29). However he then becomes apologetic and realizes that "indeed, the infernal truth was, he made things worse for her. He was irritable he was touchy. He had lost his temper over the Lighthouse. He looked into the hedge, into its intricacy, its darkness" (TL, 54). His wife is absolutely essential to him.

Sympathy and reassurance

Both Leslie Stephen and Mr Ramsay, in fact, are completely dependent on their wives for reassurance and sympathy, above all about their future reputation. Even when married to Minny Thackeray, Leslie believed that "love meant devotion: to adore and to be adored. [...] Stephen regarded his wife as a soothing creature who would dissipate worry, attend his needs and bend to his will" (Annan 1952, 63), an attitude he did not change when married to Julia Jackson. As Noel Annan clarifies, "he worshipped her with unalterable devotion. [...] He idealised her and longed to sacrifice himself for her which in

the day-to-day routine he was incapable of doing" (ibid., 75), but even though he worshipped Julia also as the embodiment of motherhood, he "treated her at home as someone who should be at his beck and call, support him in every emotional crisis, order the minutiae of his life and then submit to his criticism in those household matters of which she was mistress" (ibid., 99).

Mr Ramsay is also constantly demanding sympathy and reassurance from his wife, mainly about the quality of his work: "there he stood, demanding sympathy [...]. He wanted sympathy" (TL, 33). Thus, as Katerine Dalsimer has acutely observed, if Mr Ramsay's intellectual qualities are undoubtable and extended, his emotional horizon is much narrower and more limited (Dalsimer 2001). He is selfish, childish, and, despite eight children and his books, he is often associated with barrenness, and he has needs which only Mrs Ramsay is able to understand:

> It was sympathy he wanted, to be assured of his genius, first of all, and then to be taken within the circle of life, warmed and soothed, to have his senses restored to him, his barrenness made fertile, and all the rooms of the house made full of life— the drawing-room; behind the drawing-room the kitchen; above the kitchen the bedrooms; and beyond them the nurseries; they must be furnished, they must be filled with life. Charles Tansley thought him the greatest metaphysician of the time, she said. But he must have more than that. He must have sympathy. He must be assured that he too lived in the heart of life; was needed; not here only, but all over the world (TL, 33).

Mrs Ramsay silently persuades him to trust her but then she becomes physically and morally exhausted. She does not want people to consider him dependent on her, because "they must know that of the two he was infinitely the more important, and what she gave the world, in comparison with what he gave, negligible" (TL, 35).

Both Lily Briscoe and William Bankes wonder "why he needed always praise; why so brave a man in thought should be so timid in life; how strangely he was venerable and laughable at one and the same time" (TL, 39). But Mrs Ramsay knows how to fulfil her husband's constant need for love and sympathy, and she is able to keep the world of

possibilities open for him,[25] which is the reason for Mr Ramsay's devotion to her. Nevertheless, the sense of professional failure seems to be connected to marriage: "He [Mr Carmichael] should have been a great philosopher, said Mrs Ramsay, [...] but he had made an unfortunate marriage" (TL, 12). Even though Mr Ramsay's marriage is not unfortunate, "he was for the most part happy; he had his wife; he had his children;" (TL, 39), his large family is sometimes seen as an obstacle to his career, "he had not done the thing he might have done" (TL, 39), "he would have written better books if he had not married" (TL, 58). "Eight children! To feed eight children on philosophy!" (TL, 21) is Mr Bankes' thought, and Charles Tansley is sure that "of course Ramsay had dished himself by marrying a beautiful woman and having eight children" (TL, 74).

Cam: the story-teller

The house is indeed full of children who are mainly seen through their mother's eyes: "they were so critical, her children" (TL, 11), "they were gifted, her children, but all in quite different ways" (TL, 25), "all, she thought, were full of promise" (TL, 49). Being the second youngest in the family, Cam[26] has been considered as the literary counterpart of Virginia Woolf. In the first section Cam is first seen through Mr Bankes' eyes: "She was wild and

[25] In *The Three-Fold Nature of Reality in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (1965), Josephine O'Brien Schaefer analyses at length the different masculine and feminine views of the world. When planning the trip to the lighthouse Mrs Ramsay builds up the world of possibilities for her son James even though the weather will probably not be fine, and reacts to her husband's loss of temper by keeping the range of possibilities open for him. (O'Brien Schaefer 1965).

[26] In her essay "'Cam the Wicked': Woolf's portrait of the Artist as her Father's Daughter" Elizabeth Abel points out the autobiographical links between Virginia Woolf and Cam, whom she considers one of Woolf's two explicit counterparts in the novel with Lily. In addition, she investigates Cam's relationship with her father from a Freudian perspective. Cam shifts from a pre-Oedipal maternal influence to the Oedipal father. She considers Cam an enigma, indecipherable even to her mother (Abel 1993).
In the essay "Mothers and Daughters in Virginia Woolf's Victorian Novel", Margaret Homans analyses Cam's relationship with language, and her link with Mrs Ramsay. According to Homans, Cam's repetition of her mother's words at the end of the novel, places her in Mrs Ramsay's role. Homans puts forth the hypothesis that the name Cam may derive from Virgil's Camilla in the *Aeneid*. I suggest that the name Cam may derive from Camilla, the protagonist in Leonard Woolf's *The Wise Virgins*, (1914) a portrait of his wife Virginia.
Anne E. Fernald laments the fact that the relationship between Virginia Woolf and Cam has been less commented than Woolf's portrait of her parents and considers Cam's name as referring to the river that runs through Cambridge (Fernald 2005, 9).

fierce. She would not ‘give a flower to the gentleman’ as the nursemaid told her. No! no! no! she would not! She clenched her fist. She stamped” (TL, 21), so that he privately calls her “Cam the Wicked” (TL, 22). In her wildness she is very similar to Woolf who was something of a tomboy as a child: “Vanessa and I were both what was called tomboys; that is we played cricket, scrambled over rocks, climbed trees, were said not to care for clothes and so on” (SP, 68). Cam has a similar disposition: “she would not stop for Mr Bankes and Lily Briscoe; though Mr Bankes, who would have liked a daughter of his own, held out his hand; she would not stop for her father, whom she grazed also by an inch; nor for her mother” (TL, 46). She is always dashing past. “She was off like a bird, bullet, or arrow, impelled by what desire, shot by whom, at what directed, who could say?” (TL, 46). According to Elizabeth Abel, Cam is perhaps the only character whom Mrs Ramsay cannot understand, but she nevertheless stops when Mrs Ramsay calls her a second time: “the projectile dropped in mid-career, and Cam came lagging back, pulling a leaf by the way to her mother” (TL, 46). Cam belongs to the nursery, a memory of the nursery which Virginia shared with her brothers and sister: and which was a place where both love and conflict reigned. In that nursery Virginia Woolf remembers that Julia “came up at night to see if we were asleep, holding a candle shaded; this is a distinct memory, for like all children, I lay awake sometimes and longed for her to come. Then she told me to think of all the lovely things I could imagine. Rainbows and bells....” (SP, 82).

It is in the nursery that Mrs Ramsay

> went up to say good-night to them, [her children] and found them netted in their cots like birds among cherries and raspberries still making up stories about some little bit of rubbish — something they had heard, something they had picked up in the garden. They had all their little treasures… And so she went down and said to her husband, Why must they grow up and lose it all? Never will they be so happy again (TL, 50).

And it is this happiness that Virginia Woolf associates with her mother, with the wonderful summers at Talland House that she transposes into *To the Lighthouse*, where the Ramsays' children "were happier now than they would ever be again. A tenpenny tea set made Cam happy for days" (TL, 50). In the nursery at Hyde Park Gate Virginia was the family storyteller, a quality given to Cam too, and a theme that Susan Sellers evokes in *Vanessa and Virginia* when she highlights Virginia's "storytelling voice" (Sellers 2008, 9) and the spellbinding quality of her words, which somehow remind us of Cam's colourless singsong" (TL,47).

But the nursery is also a theatre for conflicts that it is Mrs Ramsay's task to resolve. When she is reading a story to James, she invites Cam either to come in or to go out, "knowing that Cam was attracted only by the word 'flounder' and that in a moment she would fidget and fight with James as usual" (TL, 48). Cam "loves the sounds of words for themselves, especially in so far as they garantee the mother's presence" (Homans 1997, 133), a presence for which Virginia Woolf longed all her life for Julia "was living on such an extended surface that she had not time, nor strength, to concentrate, except for a moment if one were ill or in some child's crisis, upon me or upon anyone unless it were Adrian" (SP, 83).

One of these childish crises occurs in *To the Lighthouse* when Mrs Ramsay finds Cam and James, who should be sleeping, fighting about a horrid boar's skull nailed up in their room: "Cam couldn't sleep with it in the room and James screamed if she [the nursemaid] touched it" (TL, 92). Sitting down on her bed, Mrs Ramsay invites Cam to sleep and "dream of lovely palaces" (TL, 92), but the little girl sees the skull's horns "(it had great horns said Cam)" (TL, 92) everywhere so Mrs Ramsay decides to use her shawl to cover the skull and

> then she came back to Cam and laid her head almost flat on the pillow beside Cam's and said how lovely it looked now; how the fairies would love it; it was like a bird's nest; it was like a beautiful mountain

> such as she had seen abroad, with valleys and flowers and bells ringing and birds singing and little goats and antelopes … (TL, 93)

until Cam lulled by her rhythmical words, which she repeats in her parrot-like way, falls asleep. Then Mrs Ramsay reassures James:

> Now, she whispered, crossing over to his bed, James must go to sleep too, for see, she said, the boar's skull was still there; they had not touched it; they had done just what he wanted; it was there quite unhurt. He made sure that the skull was still there under the shawl (TL, 93).

Virginia Woolf took inspiration from one of her early experiences which she recollected in her memoir and worked into her novel in a creative way. "In winter I would slip in before bed to take a look at the fire. I was very anxious to see that the fire was low, because it frightened me if it burnt after we went to bed. I dreaded that little flickering flame on the wall; but Adrian liked it; and to make a compromise, Nurse folded a towel over the fender; but I could not help opening my eyes, and there often was the flickering flame; and I looked and looked and could not sleep" (SP, 78). But Cam and James fall asleep, and later "one by one the lamps were all estinguished [...] a downpouring of immense darkness began" (TL, 103).

Death in *Time Passes*

These words open the second section of *To the Lighthouse* "Time Passes", whose beginning is the conclusion of the day portrayed in "The Window". In this short part, which covers ten years, the deaths of Mrs Ramsay, Prue and Andrew are briefly announced in brackets. Maggie Gee is especially indebted to this section of the novel, which she borrows and adapts to the twenty-first century in her novel, as will be illustrated in the following chapter. Woolf strove here to avoid sentimentality, to create a sort of simultaneity between

personal losses and the losses on a vaster scale caused by the First World War[27]: however, she may have also wanted to escape the melodramatic, histrionic attitude of her family after her mother's death when describing the devastation of these untimely personal losses. Prue and Andrew are the narrative counterparts of Stella Hills and Thoby Stephen. The reasons for Mrs Ramsay's death are not given: "[Mr Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but Mrs Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before he stretched his arms out. They remained empty]" (TL, 105).

Death had already broken the harmony of the first section: the Swiss girl's father is dying of cancer, the skull in the children's nursery is disturbing, and at the end of the dinner party Mrs Ramsay realizes that the dinner she has carefully planned is already the past: "it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past" (TL, 90). Lily Briscoe's thoughts offer a possible answer: "He [Mr Ramsay] is petty, selfish, vain, egoistical; he is spoilt; he is a tyrant; he wears Mrs Ramsay to death" (TL, 23). After Mrs Ramsay's death, Lily reinforces this idea: "Mrs Ramsay had given. Giving, giving, giving, she had died" (TL, 124). Julia had also exhausted herself. Even though the news of Mrs Ramsay's death is given in brackets, her death permeates *To the Lighthouse,*[28] just as Julia's death heavily affected Virginia Woolf's life. Death and personal losses are recurrent themes both in *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* and in *Vanessa and Virginia,* which also deal extensively with the importance of family ties. In Susan Sellers' novel, Julia's death is recounted in detail through Vanessa's sad memories; in Gee's novel, Virginia's visit to the Statue of Liberty prompts her unconscious desire to join her mother again. Quentin Bell

[27] For the influence of the Great War on *To the Lighthouse*, see James M. Haule (Haule 1991, 164-179) and Karen L. Levenback (Levenback 1999, 83-113).

[28] After analysing Woolf's use of the brackets, Laura Marcus focuses on the news of Mrs Ramsay's death and she underlines that despite the brief reference, the death of Mrs Ramsay pervades the rest of the novel (Marcus 1977).

remembers that Julia's death was a disaster and the cause of Virginia's first nervous breakdown, but "the chief mourner was Leslie" (Bell 1996, Vol I, 40), who abandoned himself to grief in a melodramatic way, which made him unable to comfort his children.

Prue Ramsay: an image of Stella

In his despair, Leslie Stephen relied on Stella as his support: "She accepted her position without question" even though he was not her father. "Her passion had been all for her mother: to save *her* trouble and pain, to preserve *her* health' sometimes boldly to steal a part of her mother's load, these had been Stella's cares" (Bell 1996, Vol I, 41). Woolf remembered that Stella lived in her mother's shade, that she adored her mother, but that Julia treated her severely because she considered her daughter part of herself. "But later as Stella grew older and developed her own beauty, her own singular charm and temperament, her mother ceased her harshness, if it were rightly called so, and showed only the true cause of it, a peculiar depth and intimacy of feeling [...]. Stella was always the beautiful attendant handmaid, feeding her mother's vivid flame, rejoicing in the service, and making it the central duty of her life" (Woolf, "Reminiscences" 1985, 42). When her mother was still alive, Stella had refused the proposal of one of her suitors, Jack Hill, against Julia's will. According to Lyndall Gordon,[29] although Stella had many suitors, she was so attached to her mother that she resisted marriage. After Julia's death, Jack, who was very persistent, proposed to Stella a second time, but she refused him again out of her sense of duty to Leslie and to her younger brothers and sisters. Jack however was later able to persuade Stella, a beautiful woman who in his opinion should not be entirely devoted to a man who was not her father, thus denying herself motherhood, to marry him in April 1897. In Susan Sellers' novel, Stella's vows are seen as a promise that "life can continue without Mother" (Sellers 2008, 24). However,

[29] In *A Writer's Life,* Lyndall Gordon describes the life of the Stephens in the 'twenty dark years', following Julia's death.

Stella's happiness did not last long, and after only a few months she died from peritonitis while pregnant. "Many years later Vanessa told her son, Julian, that Stella, who had refused to marry while Julia was alive, died because she could not live without her" (Gordon 1984, 47).

Virginia told Stella's story in *To the Lighthouse* in the character of Prue Ramsay. Prue is the daughter who mostly took after her mother. She is so beautiful that Mr Bankes privately calls her "Prue the Fair for Prue would have beauty" (TL, 22), and her mother realizes that "Prue was going to be far more beautiful than she was" (TL, 56), she "would be a beauty" (TL, 58). Prue seems to be the most reliable of all the children, and, even though she tries to escape, Mrs Ramsay easily brings her "back into the alliance of family life" (TL, 61).

Like Stella, Prue is deeply attached to her mother: "'That's my mother', thought Prue. Yes; Minta should look at her; Paul Rayley should look at her. That is the thing itself, she felt, as if there were only one person like that in the world; her mother" (TL, 94). Like Stella, Prue gets married "[Prue Ramsay, leaning on her father's arm, was given in marriage that May. What, people say, could have been more fitting? And, they added, how beautiful she looked!]" but soon after she dies of a complication of pregnancy: "[Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth, which was indeed a tragedy, people said. They said nobody deserved happiness more]" (TL, 108).

Andrew Ramsay: Thoby's literary counterpart

Andrew's death is also briefly announced in brackets. "[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully was instantaneous]" (TL, 109). Critics have often been reminded, in analyzing Andrew's fate, of the untimely death of Thoby, Virginia's favourite brother, who died of an

undiagnosed typhoid fever when he was twenty-six.[30] But Virginia Woolf wanted to give a broader view of how death and loss affect everyone, and Mrs McNab, the housekeeper, is given the task of linking personal and general losses: "many families had lost their dearest. So she was dead; and Mr Andrew killed; and Miss Prue dead too, they said with her first baby; but everyone had lost someone these years" (TL, 112).

Andrew the Just, the one with brains who is able to explain Mr Ramsay's work, the one Mr Ramsay wished "could be induced to work harder. He would lose every chance of a scholarship if he didn't" (TL, 56), dies unexpectedly in war like many other British young men. Thoby's death was a loss Virginia Woolf suffered from all her life. In her memoir, she tried to imagine his life had he lived longer. "Publicly, he would have been, had he been put on, a judge certainly. Mr Justice Stephen he would be today; with several books to his credit; [...]. By this time, aged sixty, he would have been a distinguished figure; but not prominent; for he was too melancholy, too independent, unconforming, to take any ready-made mould" (SP, 140). Aware of the effects of these untimely deaths on Virginia Woolf and of how she presented them in *To the Lighthouse*, Maggie Gee makes her Virginia re-live Thoby's death to offer her the opportunity of expressing her deep emotion and overcome it.

Journey as self-discovery

In the third section "The Lighthouse", which covers a few hours from breakfast to lunch time, Virginia Woolf continued her work intersecting biography and fiction. The remaining members of the Ramsay family and two of their former guests, Lily Briscoe and Augustus Carmichael, go back to the Ramsays' summer house after ten years. This is something the Stephens' children could not have done because immediately after Julia's death, Leslie gave up the lease of Talland House. It was only after Leslie's death that the four

[30] Among others, see John Batchelor (Batchelor 1995, 93).

Stephen children decided to return to St Ives and according to Quentin Bell, this symbolic trip represented for Virginia "a deliberate exercise of nostalgia" (104). It was a voyage back into the past that the characters of *To the Lighthouse* make in this third part in which the trip to the lighthouse, planned ten years before, finally takes place.

Since in the first section of the novel Mrs Ramsay has a privileged relationship with the lighthouse "pausing there she looked out to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke" (TL, 53) this trip can be read as a trip down a memory lane, but at the same time it is the beginning of a relationship of Cam and James with their father,[31] a trip which Virginia herself makes in Gee's novel by visiting the Statue of Liberty in New York.

Mr Ramsay is the dominant character in this third section: it is he who plans the trip to the lighthouse, taking with him Cam, seventeen, and James, sixteen, who is now unwilling to go. "There was this expedition – they were going to the lighthouse, Mr Ramsay, Cam, and James. They should have gone already – they had to catch the tide or something. And Cam was not ready and James was not ready and Nancy had forgotten to order the sandwiches and Mr Ramsay had lost his temper and banged out of the room" (TL, 121). Mr Ramsay has not changed, he is easily enraged and his demands for sympathy are constant. Since his wife has died he satisfies his need by forcing any woman "he did not care how, his need was so great, to give him what he wanted: sympathy" (TL, 125). Leslie Stephen was equally dependent on women. "He needed always some woman to act before; to sympathise with him, to console him" (SP, 145).

[31] In the first chapter 'Ghosts' of *Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse,* Suzanne Raitt traces the genesis of *To the Lighthouse* and its link with Virginia Woolf's real life experiences. She sees the novel as important in its obliteration of the maternal figure and the transformation of the paternal one. In particular, she considers the trip to the lighthouse as "the beginning of a reassessment of James and Cam's relationships with their father" (Raitt 1990, 35).

But differently from Stella, Vanessa refused to play the part: "her refusal to accept her role, part slave, part angel, exacerbated him" (SP, 146). Like Mrs Ramsay, who by giving, and giving "had left all this" (TL, 124), Julia was constantly worried about Leslie's health and put his welfare before her children's: in Woolf's words, "it was thus that she left us the legacy of his dependence, which after her death became so harsh an imposition" (SP, 133). In the third section of *To the Lighthouse*, Mr Ramsay insists on asking Lily for sympathy, which she is unable to give, "something she felt she could not give him" (TL, 124); in fact "she could not sustain this enormous weight of sorrow, support these heavy draperies of grief" (TL, 126). She tries "to escape his demand on her" (TL, 122), she is incredibly irritated because "that man, she thought, her anger rising in her, never gave: that man took" (TL, 124), but finally she decides that "she would give him what she could" (TL, 125).

> 'What beautiful boots!' she exclaimed. She was ashamed of herself. To praise his boots when he asked her to solace his soul; when he had shown her his bleeding hands, his lacerated heart, and asked her to pity them, then to say, cheerfully, 'Ah, but what beautiful boots you wear!' deserved, she knew, and she looked up expecting to get it, in one of his sudden roars of ill-temper, complete annihilation. Instead, Mr. Ramsay smiled (TL, 127).

Having been comforted by Lily's words, Mr Ramsay can now start his painful expedition to the lighthouse with his children sombrely following him. "They looked, she [Lily] thought, as if fate had devoted them to some stern enterprise, and they went to it, still young enough to be drawn acquiescent in their father's wake, obediently, but with a pallor in their eyes which made her feel that they suffered something beyond their years in silence" (TL, 128). Cam and James "vowed, in silence, as they walked, to stand by each other and carry out the great compact to resist tyranny to the death" (TL, 134).

Ambivalent relationships

After Stella's death, Vanessa and Virginia also conspired to resist Leslie's tyranny: "it was the tyrant father the exacting, the violent, the histrionic, the demonstrative, the self-

centred, the self pitying, the deaf, the appealing, the alternately loved and hated father that dominated me then", Virginia Woolf wrote in a "Sketch of the Past" (116). Just as for Virginia, hate alternates with love in Cam. On the one hand she resents Mr Ramsay forcing them to go to the lighthouse with him, on the other hand, when Macalister tells the story of a shipwreck during a storm at Christmas, she cannot help "feeling proud of him without knowing quite why, had he been there he would have launched the lifeboat, he would have reached the wreck, Cam thought. He was so brave, he was so adventurous, Cam thought. But she remembered. There was the compact; to resist tyranny to the death" (TL, 136).

In the third section, the ambivalence of the relationship between Cam and her father mirrors the relationship between Virginia and her father, which was made up of "rage alternated with love" (SP, 108). For this reason, Cam feels that it is intolerably hard for her to keep up the compact with her brother. As the boat starts sailing faster, Cam and James think that "they might land somewhere; and be free then" but Mr Ramsay begins to act the part of a desolate man, widowed, "walking up and down between the urns" a castaway who sighs and cries aloud "'We perished,' and then again, 'each alone'" (TL, 137). His usual demand for sympathy shocks Cam who nevertheless cannot avoid "murmuring to herself 'We perished, each alone', for her father's words broke and broke again in her mind" (TL, 137). Cam unconsciously identifies herself with her father, she is once again in her father's library where

> in a kind of trance she would take a book from the shelf and stand there, watching her father write, so equally, so neatly from one side of the page to another, with a little cough now and then, or something said briefly to the other old gentleman opposite. [...] And watching her father as he wrote in his study, she thought (now sitting in the boat) he was most lovable, he was most wise; he was not vain nor a tyrant. Indeed, if he saw she was there, reading a book, he would ask her, as gently as any one could, Was there nothing he could give her? (TL, 155).

Virginia Woolf must have remembered the time she used to spend in her father's library, where she could read whatever she wanted and Leslie was always ready to ask for her opinion and discuss what she had read. "Virginia was granted the freedom of her father's

library. There were certain books on his shelves, he managed shyly to convey, which were not, in his opinion, entirely suitable for young ladies [...]. But his daughter must decide for herself what she ought to read [...]. She must learn to read with discrimination, to make unaffected judgments, never admiring because the world admires or blaming at the orders of a critic" (Bell 1996, Vol.I, 51).

Throughout the third section of the novel Cam keeps swinging between love and hate towards her father, she tries to pass on to him, "unsuspected by James, a private token of the love she felt for him" (TL, 139), but she considers intolerable "that crass blindness and tyranny of his which had poisoned her childhood" (TL, 140).

Cam is also given the task of keeping her mother's memory alive just as Virginia Woolf did in her memoirs and in *To the Lighthouse*. Cam is no longer a tomboy, she has been changed by the deaths in her family, she is a reflective young woman who, sitting in the bow of the boat, looks back at the island which she has never seen from the sea before, and tries to understand and go beyond Mrs Ramsay's heritage. "She was thinking how all those paths and the lawn, thick and knotted with the lives they had lived there, were gone: were rubbed out; were past" (TL, 137). Cam takes up her mother's role as a fountain of joy, but at the same time she deviates from her mother's tradition and keeps her childhood love for adventure intact. "From her hand, ice cold, held deep in the sea, there spurted up a fountain of joy at the change, at the escape, at the adventure (that she should be alive, that she should be there)" (TL, 154). As she unconsciously repeated her father's words at the beginning of the voyage, at the end Cam repeats her mother's words which lulled her to sleep when she was a child. "It was a hanging garden; it was a valley, full of birds, and flowers, and antelopes... She was falling asleep" (TL, 166). Cam's memory of her mother's words recreates the visit of Mrs Ramsay to the nursery after the dinner party. "She had thought of that evening as something that would remain. In the boat her expectation is fulfilled" (O'Brien Schaefer 1965, 129).

James the ‘lawgiver’ silently expects Cam not to be able to resist their father’s tyranny, but while he initially identifies Cam with her mother, he then recognizes that she is different, “no, she won’t give way, he thought; she’s different, he thought” (TL, 139).

James remembers both his mother’s loss of attention for him when his father came and stood over them in ‘The Window’, and the permanent sense of abandonment due to her death. James cannot forgive his father’s despotism and he is ready to eradicate his tyranny just as he was ready to “kill” when he was a little child. “James kept dreading the moment when he [Mr Ramsay] would look up and speak sharply to him about something or other. [...]. And if he does, James thought, then I shall take a knife and strike him to the heart” (TL, 150). James is still angry with his father, whose words echo in his memory. “‘It will rain’ he remembered his father saying ‘You won’t be able to go to the lighthouse’” (TL, 152). But now James, who is steering the sailing boat and is approacing the lighthouse for the first time, realizes that “nothing was simply one thing” (TL, 152), the lighthouse is both the real object in front of him and his childhood dream.

> The Lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye that opened suddenly and softly in the evening. Now— James looked at the Lighthouse. He could see the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white; he could see windows in it; he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry. So that was the Lighthouse, was it? No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing. The other was the Lighthouse too (TL, 152).

“James's recognition that 'nothing was simply one thing' allows him to begin to see Mr Ramsay in all his human multiplicity, not just as the tyrannical father he wants to strike to the heart with a knife, but also as a charming old man who sits reading as they sail; not just as a figure to be battled and resisted, but also as a man with whom James has much in common” (Hill-Miller 2001, 28). In so doing he joins Cam who from the very beginning has realized that their father was not only ‘a sarcastic brute’. Both Cam and James are ready to see their father from a different perspective. Cam can feel safe sitting next to her father, as she realizes

that the island is very distant and that "the sea was more important now than the shore" (TL, 156), she once again "murmured, dreamily, half asleep, how we perished, each alone" (TL, 156). James allows himself to accept his father's praise, praise that Mr Ramsay had never granted him before.

> 'Well done!' James had steered them like a born sailor. There! Cam thought, addressing herself silently to James. You've got it at last. For she knew that this was what James had been wanting, and she knew that now he had got it he was so pleased that he would not look at her or at his father or at any one. There he sat with his hand on the tiller sitting bolt upright, looking rather sulky and frowning slightly. He was so pleased that he was not going to let anybody take away a grain of his pleasure. His father had praised him. They must think that he was perfectly indifferent. But you've got it now, Cam thought (TL,168).

Cam and James are now willing to give their father the sympathy he needs. "What do you want? they both wanted to ask. They both wanted to say, Ask us anything and we will give it you. But he did not ask them anything. He sat and looked at the island and he might be thinking, We perished, each alone, or he might be thinking, I have reached it. I have found it, but he said nothing" (TL, 169). Perhaps Woolf regretted having been unable to offer Leslie sympathy; she and her siblings were too young to understand his sorrow, even though he was sometimes "simple and eager as a child; and exquisitely alive to all affection; exquisitely tender. We would have helped him then if we could, given him all we had, and felt it little beside his need – but the moment passed" (Woolf, "Reminiscences" 1985, 46).

An elegy

To the Lighthouse was made up "in a great, apparently involuntary rush" (TL, 81) and written very quickly. The composition of the novel helped Virginia Woolf analyse her feelings for her parents as she herself stated in a "Sketch of the Past": "I suppose I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest" (81). Virginia Woolf clearly stated that she wanted to address her losses in this novel, which she meant as an elegy.

"(But while I try to write, I am making up *To the Lighthouse* the sea is to be heard all through it. I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant 'novel'. A new by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?)" (D, Vol 3, 34). With her novel, Susan Sellers expresses a similar need to remember in this case it is Vanessa and Virginia to the extent that she considers her own work as an elegy to the sisters[32]. Although Woolf aimed at recovering her childhood memories and overcoming her obsessions regarding her parents' and her siblings' deaths, she never forgot that she was an artist and did not hesitate to alter the portraits in order to answer "her need to shape her characters according to her own vision" (Zwerdling 1986, 181). In so doing, she wrote a memorable novel into which she poured her autobiographical material and creatively transformed it. It is this creative tension between art and life that animates, I wish to argue in the chapters which follow, both Gee's and Sellers' novels: in borrowing from Woolf's life and work, they are able to trascend their model at the same time as well as shape narrative tecniques in accordance with the postmodernist culture that made their own work possible.

[32] Sellers, personal communication, July 27, 2018.

Chapter Three: 'Time Passes' in *To the Lighthouse* and in Maggie Gee's *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan*

Virginia Woolf in Manhattan is indebted to varying degrees to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse,* which can be seen as part of the paratext for Maggie Gee's novel. As mentioned in the Introduction, it is also in light of Genette's theory on the relationship, more or less obvious, of a text with other texts discussed at length in his seminal books, *Palimpsestes* (1982) and *Paratexts* (1987), that I use such terminology to consider *To the Lighthouse* as part of the 'paratext' for *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan.* In fact, Gee's novel not only stands as an act of homage, "a love letter" to Virginia Woolf, as Maggie Gee asserts in her Acknowledgements (Gee 2014, 475), but it also absorbs the themes and narrative techniques of *To the Lighthouse,* so much so that *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* can be read both as an immediately recognizable biofiction, and also as an echo of Woolf's novel. Maggie Gee herself has stated that her novel contains a great "range and variety of explicit and implicit references to *To the Lighthouse,* especially in 'Time Passes'" (personal communication, March 26, 2018) and the relationship between the hypotext and hypertext is easily recognizable, as the following pages dedicated to a close reading of Woolf's 'Time Passes' and Gee's novel will demonstrate. Many of the pivotal themes of Woolf's novel, such as the transience of fame, the theme of the journey as self-discovery, and the meaning of life are evoked by Maggie Gee, integrated into her novel and developed in a contemporary context.

Like *To the Lighthouse*, *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* has a three-part structure, with each part divided into chapters, but Maggie Gee added a very short fourth part, 'Interzone', as a sort of conclusion. Part One, 'London-New York' is mainly set in New York, Part Three, 'Virginia in Istanbul' is set in Turkey while Part Two, 'Time Passes: London-New York-

Istanbul' is the bridging section or the corridor, which openly refers to Virginia Woolf's "Time Passes" and makes the novel more dynamic. Gee actually thought that the initial division of her novel into two parts was too static, which is why she decided to add this second section, which is clearly an echo of the middle section of *To the Lighthouse* since the title itself is one of the many visible elements recycled from Woolf's source text. Moreover, Maggie Gee anchors her novel in the Woolfian context, following her predecessor's interest in her characters' inner thoughts and memories and by tunnelling deeper and deeper into Virginia's mind and her past.

Exploring the past

In "Time Passes", Virginia Woolf continued the process of exploring her past in order to exorcise the ghosts of her family and find some reconciliation with them. As Reina van der Wiel has suggested, "the difficulty and abstraction of 'Time Passes' also played a part in this process. This not only represented a challenge to her literary capacities, but also provided Woolf with a container for the traumatic emotions she wished to articulate" (Wiel 2014, 79).

From the beginning[1] Virginia Woolf had conceived her central section to record her "seven unhappy years" following the deaths of her mother, her sister Stella and her father (SP, 136), seven years which she then extended to ten years. On Saturday 17th April 1926, Virginia Woolf finished the first part of *To the Lighthouse* and the following day she started the second section. She was immediately aware of the difficulties in writing this lyrical part, but the challenge made her rush through it.

> I cannot make it out— here is the most difficult abstract piece of writing— I have to give an empty house, no people's characters, the passage of time, all eyeless & featureless with nothing to cling to: well, I rush at it, & at once scatter out two pages. Is it nonsense, is it brilliance? Why am I so flown with words, & apparently free to do exactly what I like? (D, Vol 3, 76).

[1] Virginia Woolf wrote in her Diary: "I conceive the book in 3 parts: 1. At the drawing room window; 2. seven years passed; 3. The voyage" (D, Vol. 3, 36).

Her diaries and letters shed some light on her creative process. “Time Passes” was written in twenty-two days and ‘The Initial Holograph Draft’ was forty manuscript pages long, later reduced to a twenty-six page typescript. A year before the publication of the novel, for the only time in her life, a different version of “Time Passes” was published in the periodical *Commerce* in a French translation ‘Le Temps passe’ done by Charles Mauron on behalf of Virginia Woolf. This version is different from the one incorporated into the English and American publications of the complete novel and it is not clear why she decided to have it published in advance in France.[2] A comparison of the Holograph draft and the French version of “Time Passes” with the one published in *To the Lighthouse* shows that some crucial elements, such as for example the bracketed pieces of information, were added later so as to fully integrate the second section in the novel and make it part of the mourning process that Virginia Woolf had decided to bring to a close. In the published version, the characters, which were added to the original version, fade out slowly in the first two chapters of the second section and return in the last two.

Personal and universal experience of death

As mentioned in the previous chapter, in this middle section Virginia Woolf incorporated her personal losses into a wider perspective, stemming from the experience of the First World War, which tragically affected her generation.[3] Due to her illness, Virginia Woolf was hardly aware of the first part of the War, but after her recovery her horror and opposition to it was evident; while “Time Passes” is clearly grounded in her personal

[2] As John Mephan has pointed out “it is not clear why Virginia Woolf published ‘Les Temps passe’ nor why she subtly altered its emphasis. It is possible that she felt safe having it published in French, where such mystical prose poems are a more familiar genre” (Mepham 1991, 111).

[3] Jillian Beer has underlined the connection between Virginia Woolf’s personal experience of death and the First World War. “Death was her special knowledge: her mother, her sister Stella, and her brother Thoby had all died prematurely. But death was also the special knowledge of her entire generation, through the obliterative experience of the First World War” (Beer 1993, 73).

traumatic losses, the deaths of Mrs Ramsay, Prue and Andrew become a symbol of every unexpected and untimely death.[4]

In this second section time speeds up; one night is extended to ten years which are then condensed into a few pages made up of ten chapters.[5] Yet the representation of the passage of time is more conventional here. External time replaces the interior time of the first part and the many subjective points of view disappear. The story is told by an impersonal narrative voice: as Suzanne Raitt has pointed out, in the second section, devoid of characters to indicate the passage of time, the narrative follows the rhythm of nature (Raitt 1990).[6]

Woolf chose to portray the effects of the passing of time not only on people but also on objects. The Ramsays' summer house, which was the centre of family life in the first section, is now desolate and empty: "the doors locked and the matresses rolled round" (TL, 105), but it retains hints of its former inhabitants who still linger in the house to the extent that it can be considered a haunted house[7], "full of unrelated passions" (TL, 123) as Lily Briscoe will later feel. Mrs Ramsay's, Prue's and Andrew's deaths are recorded in brackets and, as already seen in the previous chapter, they mirror the traumatic losses of Virginia Woolf's

[4] Reina van der Wiel has drawn the connection between Woolf's personal losses and the deaths of the characters in *To the Lighthouse.* She underlines that, "while clearly grounded in the traumatic losses of Julia Stephen, Stella and Thoby, the deaths of Mrs Ramsay, Prue and Andrew can simultaneously be read as symbolizing a more abstract notion of sudden, unexpected and premature death" (Wiel 2014, 85).

[5] "Devoting 190 pages to unraveling the personal interaction of a few hours and then juxtaposing that to the thirty-page treatment of the succeeding ten years makes us experience both the stillness and the flow which are central to Woolf's conception of time" (Rosenthal 1979, 118). Moreover, Michael Rosenthal points out the experimental quality of the lack of characters in "Time Passes": "technically, it was a daring experiment for 'Time Passes' had to be written without the anchor of any human point of view whatever" (Rosenthal 1979, 119).

[6] "In Part II the characters no longer carry the chronology. Instead the narrative follows the rhythm of the sun and of the seasons, and the two governing images of Part I, the sea and the lighthouse, remain dominant" (Raitt 1990, 91).

[7] "The most important thing about the empty house is not that it is a completely neutral place, but that it is a haunted house, one that is full of associations and memories and meaning. This section is, then, a poetic interlude about the passage of time and an empty house. It is also about life and death, and love and war" (McNichol 1990, 107).

mother Julia and her siblings Stella and Thoby. By including the deaths of the Ramsays' family members in square brackets, the conventional textual hierarchy in which parenthetical material is less important is effectively subverted.[8]

In the first section of *To the Lighthouse,* which represents the harmony and stability of the pre-war age, Virginia Woolf had already made it clear that human life is merely incidental. Mr Ramsay is aware that "the very stone one kicks with one's boot will outlast Shakespeare" (TL, 32) and Mrs Ramsay knows that "no happiness lasted" (TL, 54), but in "Time Passes" the destructive process of time is clearly shown and Virginia Woolf expanded elements from the previous section. Even the waves, which for the most part succeed in soothing Mrs Ramsay, "at other times suddenly and unexpectedly [...] had no such kindly meaning, but like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life, made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea, and warned her whose day had slipped past in one quick doing after another that it was all ephemeral as a rainbow" (TL, 17). Not only people are in the grip of time, but also objects and feelings: Mrs Ramsay's hair is grey, "her cheek sunk" (TL, 9), Mr Bankes feels "aged and saddened" (TL, 21), and even feelings die as the end of Mr Bankes' friendship with Mr Ramsay makes clear, with Mr Bankes' realization that "the pulp had gone out of their friendship" (TL, 21). Minta cries because she has lost her grandmother's brooch, and even the quotations from the tale "The Fisherman and his Wife" that Mrs Ramsay is reading to James the sea "smelt putrid" (TL, 48), "'and there were numbers of soldiers with kettle-drums and trumpets'" (TL, 49) are a clear anticipation of death. As for the house and its furniture, they are "fearfully shabby" as Mrs Ramsay considers and "things got shabbier and shabbier summer after summer. The mat

[8] "Rather than depicting these events in detail, however, as would have been inevitable with a more conventional narrative style, Woolf engages with the question of how to record the passing of time per se, putting the actual events in between square brackets. By thus reversing conventional textual hierarchy in which parenthetical material is less important than, and often auxiliary to, non-parenthetical material, she severely disrupts readerly expectation" (Wiel 2014, 90).

was fading; the wallpaper was flapping" (TL, 25). Even the green Cashmere shawl, which identifies Mrs Ramsay and symbolizes her maternal protection, "in two weeks [...] would be the colour of pea soup" (TL, 26). Thus, decay and death belong not only to the world of "Time Passes", but they are also anticipated in the apparently livelier world of the first section.

The descent into Hell

The first chapter of "Time Passes", which Virginia Woolf added to the published version of the novel, takes place after the Boeuf en Daube dinner party of the first section is over. Mr Bankes, Andrew, Prue, Lily and Mr Carmichael are getting ready for the night. Significantly, Andrew's and Prue's words anticipate the image of darkness which will be dominant in this second section and seem to fortell their untimely deaths: "'It's almost too dark to see' said Andrew, coming up from the beach. 'One can hardly tell which is the sea and which is the land,' said Prue" (TL, 103). While the Ramsays and their guests go to sleep, Mr Carmichael, "who liked to lie awake a little reading Virgil, kept his candle burning rather longer than the rest" (TL, 103). The choice of Virgil can not be accidental since, significantly, Virgil is Dante's guide in hell,[9] and the reference foregrounds the beginning of a true descent into hell: "So with the lamps all put out, the moon sunk, and a thin rain drumming on the roof a downpouring of immense darkness began" (TL, 103). Emphasis is given to the profusion of darkness which makes it impossible to distinguish anything: "there was scarcely anything left of body or mind by which one could say: 'This is he' or 'This is she'" (TL, 103). From now until the end of chapter eight, literal darkness, given in effective visual language, takes on

[9] Among others, Carolyn Hellbrun has underlined the reference to Dante's Hell. "That Mr Carmichael should be reading Virgil is significant: Dante chose Virgil for his guide in hell (Hellbrun 1975, 77).

different symbolic meanings and envelops the Ramsays' summer house which can be seen as a microcosm reflecting the more universal experience of the war.[10]

In darkness only "certain airs [...] crept round the corners and ventured indoors" (TL, 103): the durability of objects and people alike is profoundly questioned. These airs are personified, as they wonder whether "the flap of hanging wallpaper, [...] would it hang much longer" or if "the red and yellow roses on the wallpaper [...] would fade" (TL, 103-104), and above all they wonder if people, whether allies or enemies, will be able to endure. Indirect references to the war are also made: "sometimes a hand was raised as if to clutch something or ward off something, or somebody groaned, or somebody laughed aloud as if sharing a joke with nothingness" (TL, 103), which seem to describe a scene in the trenches. "Were they allies? Were they enemies?" (TL, 104) are questions that clearly reinforce the image given in the first chapter where the words "One by one the lamps were all extinguished" (TL, 103), are unquestionably an allusion to the Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Gray's words at the outbreak of the First World War[11]. When even Mr Carmichael falls asleep, the indifference of nature and the destructive power of time take over. The first square brackets are introduced: [Here Mr. Carmichael, who was reading Virgil, blew out his candle. It was past midnight] (TL, 104). The protagonist is now the Ramsays' empty house, and the cyclical indifferent passage of time where nights succeed nights, in continuous darkness, and one season follows another. The destructive effects of winter are also highlighted: "The nights are now full of wind and destruction" and "also the sea tosses itself and breaks itself" (TL, 105). No answers are given to explain the uncertainty of the future, and sorrow and destruction cannot be shared: "and should any sleeper fancying that he might find on the beach an answer to his doubts, a sharer

[10] "The highly visual language is effective in portraying wholesale destruction not on the battlefield, however, but in the individual household which could be perceived as a microcosm of the collective experience" (Nalbantian 1994, 149).

[11] "The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our life-time", quoted by David Bradshaw in his Introduction to *To the Lighthouse* (Woolf, To the Lighthouse 2006, xxv).

of his solitude, throw off his bedclothes and go down by himself to walk on the sand, no image with semblance of serving and divine promptitude comes readily to hand bringing the night to order and making the world reflect the compass of the soul" (TL, 105).

The fate of the house

This gloomy atmosphere anticipates another parenthetical sentence, added in the final version of the novel, which informs the reader quite abruptly of Mrs Ramsay's death. "[Mr. Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty]" (TL, 105).[12] Only the mystic and the visionary seem to have an answer to their existential questions, but the answer cannot be communicated. "Meanwhile the mystic, the visionary, walked the beach, stirred a puddle, looked at a stone, and asked themselves 'What am I?' 'What is this?' and suddenly an answer was vouchsafed them (what it was they could not say): so that they were warm in the frost and had comfort in the desert" (TL, 107). As Jean De Gay has discussed at length, Virginia Woolf seems to be engaging with this novel in a dialogue with her father, whose interest in the empiricist question about God's existence given that He cannot be seen, she also shared.[13]

Mrs Ramsay's death is closely connected to the fate of the house, which, left without people, is at the mercy of the destructive forces of time. The shawl, symbol of Mrs Ramsay's maternal care, "loosened and swung to and fro" (TL, 106). Only the clothes which once belonged to the Ramsays, "those alone kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated

[12] Among others, Randall Stevenson dwells on Woolf's use of brackets in "Time Passes": "This is one of the most disturbing moments in twentieth-century fiction, for reasons aesthetic as well as emotional. Finding an event of such emotional import apparently so marginalized, readers are bound to register painfully the implications of those square brackets ¬ the inconsequentiality of even the richest life. And what the brackets contain is disturbing in form as well as meaning." (Stevenson 1996, 174).

[13] "Woolf brings the divine figure to bear on the empiricist argument which greatly interested Leslie Stephen ¬ the question of whether God can be said to exist if He cannot be seen. [...] There is a strong correspondence between these figures [the mystic, the visionary] and the group of believers Stephen casts as his theological opponents in *An Agnostic's Apology*, whom he named Gnostics" (De Gay 2006, 112-113).

how once they were filled and animated; how once hands were busy with hooks and buttons; how once the looking-glass had held a face; had held a world hollowed out in which a figure turned, a hand flashed, the door opened, in came children rushing and tumbling; and went out again" (TL, 106).

Silence surrounds everything and nothing can break the indifference of nature. The War is alluded to again. Nothing in the house can resist "those stray airs, advance guards of great armies" (TL, 105), but "then again peace descended" (TL, 106). It is not a permanent peace; in fact, after Julia's death, other painful bereavements hit Virginia Woolf, just as after Mrs Ramsay's death other deaths will occur in her family. Thus, even though the coming of Spring "like a virgin fierce in her chastity" and Prue's marriage "[Prue Ramsay, leaning on her father's arm, was given in marriage that May. What, people said, could have been more fitting?]" (TL, 108), seems to imply that there is still hope for a happy future, and "that good triumphs, happiness prevails", almost immediately, a small shower of rain carries "a knowledge of the sorrows of mankind" and anticipates Prue's untimely death. Nature does not care about human sorrow, as another parenthetical piece of information points out: [Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth, which was indeed a tragedy, people said. They said nobody deserved happiness more] (TL, 108). Prue's fate is clearly a memory of Stella's life, as recorded by Virginia Woolf in "A Sketch of the Past":

> Stella's happiness, and the promise it held for her and for us of escape from that gloom; when once more unbelievably incredibly as if one had been violently cheated of some promise; more than that, brutally told not to be such a fool as to hope for things; I remember saying to myself after she died: 'But this is impossible; things aren't, can't be, like this' the blow, the second blow of death, struck on me; tremulous, filmy eyed as I was, with my wings still creased, sitting there on the edge of my broken chrysalis (SP, 124).

The Ramsays' summer house, invaded by flies and weeds, falls into slow decay, darkness penetrates it again, and "another fold of the shawl loosened", a portent of further tragedy to come. Anticipated by some more allusions to the Great War, "ominous sounds like

the measured blows of hammers" and "the thud of something falling", the news of Andrew's death is bleakly given. "[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous]" (TL, 109), leaving "a purplish stain upon the bland surfaces of the sea as if something had boiled and bled, invisibly, beneath" (TL, 109). This personal and universal tragedy defeats every hope:

> that dream, then, of sharing, completing, finding in solitude on the beach an answer, was but a reflection in a mirror, and the mirror itself was but the surface glassiness which forms in quiescence when the nobler powers sleep beneath? Impatient, despairing yet loth to go (for beauty offers her lures, has her consolations), to pace the beach was impossible; contemplation was unendurable; the mirror was broken (TL, 110).

Nature seems to take part in this universal chaos, "the winds and the waves disported themselves like the amorphous bulk of the leviathans whose brows are pierced by no light of reason" the trees and the flowers are "eyeless, and thus terrible" (TL, 110) and wrap the house, which, without people, seems to regress into the natural world itself.[14]

Yet, paradoxically, war affects art positively: "[Mr. Carmichael brought out a volume of poems that spring, which had an unexpected success. The war, people said, had revived their interest in poetry]" (TL, 110). Through Mr Carmichael's success, Virginia Woolf reasserts the value of art as a defence against the horrors of the conflict; yet, on the other hand, she underlines that his poetry "was extremely impersonal; it said something about death; it said very little about love" (TL, 159). Carmichael's poems are a means for re-establishing a human order, which is also reflected in the restoration of the house made by an old, vulnerable charwoman, Mrs McNab; "the old woman in the kitchen with very red cheeks,

[14] In his "Time as protagonist in *To the Lighthouse*" Paul Sheehan underlines that "there is no 'now' in 'Time Passes', because other time scales have taken over" and considers natural time and cosmic time to represent "repetition and return, cycles of declension and regeneration". Then he sees the changes in the built environment "represented in microcosm by the Ramsays' summer house and time's ceaseless abrading of its surfaces and contents. What this ineluctably reveals, across the passage of years, is the process of entropy – decomposition and decay, as if the house, without its human occupants, has lost its purpose and begun to sink back into the natural environment" (Sheehan 2005, 53).

drinking soup out of a basin," who first appeared in "The Window", has an important role in the dehumanized world of "Time Passes".

Restoration of the house

Even though Mrs McNab is seventy years old, "bowed down [...] with weariness," (TL, 107), toothless, but, above all, witless and gossipy, it is she who will restore the abandoned house and save the memory of the family from oblivion. She is first introduced in chapter five, when peace seems possible again: "Mrs McNab, tearing the veil of silence with hands that had stood in the wash-tub, grinding it with boots that had crunched the shingle, came as directed to open all windows, and dust the bedrooms" (TL, 106). She is shown while doing her humble housework: "dusting, wiping, [...] bringing things out and putting them away again, [...] taking up mats, putting down china" (TL, 107). Yet it is she who is given the task of telling the story of the Ramsays and their home during the long years of darkness, and it is through her memories that Mrs Ramsay is resurrected just as Virginia Woolf's novel brought her family to life again.

The fate of the house and that of the Ramsays are closely connected. At first "some said that the house would be sold at Michaelmas" because "there it stood all these years without a soul in it" (TL, 111), just as Leslie Stephen sold the lease of Talland House after Julia's death. The decay of the objects, "the books and things were mouldy, [...] the carpet was ruined" (TL, 111), the clothes left there "had the moth in them" (TL, 111), is a mirror of the decay which had affected the family. Mrs Ramsay's death is evoked through the objects that once belonged to her: "Mrs. Ramsay's things. Poor lady! She would never want *them* again. She was dead, they said; years ago, in London" (TL, 111). Even though she has died, Mrs Ramsay is still a presence in the house just as Julia Stephen had been "one of the invisible presences who after all play so important a part in every life" (SP, 80).

It is Mrs McNab's memory which alternates images of Mrs Ramsay's past busy life with the destruction she is trying to mend. "She could see her, as she came up the drive with the washing, stooping over her flowers (the garden was a pitiful sight now, all run to riot, and rabbits scuttling at you out of the beds) she could see her with one of the children by her in that grey cloak". Her thoughts follow the pattern of incremental repetition by gradually adding pieces of information. Thus, we are reminded of Mrs Ramsay's death: "(She had died very sudden at the end, they said)" as well as those of the other family members. This personal loss is clearly connected to the historical tragedy of the War, which has so far mostly been alluded to, but is now explicitly mentioned: "the books and things were mouldy, for, what with the war and help being hard to get, the house had not been cleaned as she could have wished" (TL, 111).

The War is also partly responsible for the abandonment of the house: "once they had been coming, but had put off coming, what with the war, and travel being so difficult these days; they had never come all these years; just sent her money; but never wrote, never came" (TL, 111) and it made many things change.

> But dear, many things had changed since then (she shut the drawer); many families had lost their dearest. So she was dead; and Mr. Andrew killed; and Miss Prue dead too, they said, with her first baby; but everyone had lost someone these years. Prices had gone up shamefully, and didn't come down again neither (TL, 112).

The recurrent image of death, the skull in the nursery, makes Mrs McNab scared. "She didn't like to be up here at dusk alone" (TL, 112) to the extent that she leaves the house: "she banged the door. She turned the key in the lock, and left the house shut up, locked, alone" (TL, 112). Any restoration of the house seems to be impossible. "The house was left; the house was deserted. [...] She had locked the door; she had gone. It was beyond the strength of one woman, she said" (TL, 114). Woolf draws the reader's attention to one of the problems

caused by the war, namely the lack of domestic help, since women had to undertake jobs left vacant by the men who became soldiers.

Then, quite unexpectedly, the war is over and Mrs McNab is able to find someone who could help restore the house:

> there was a force working; something not highly conscious; something that leered, something that lurched; something not inspired to go about its work with dignified ritual or solemn chanting. Mrs. McNab groaned; Mrs. Bast creaked. They were old; they were stiff; their legs ached. They came with their brooms and pails at last; they got to work. All of a sudden, would Mrs. McNab see that the house was ready, one of the young ladies wrote: would she get this done; would she get that done; all in a hurry. They might be coming for the summer; had left everything to the last; expected to find things as they had left them (TL, 114).

Mrs Bast's son, George, cuts the grass and catches the rats, while the two ladies save some objects and, notably, the Waverly novels from oblivion.

As Virginia Woolf stated in her contribution to Maitland's biography of her father, Walter Scott was one of Leslie Stephen's favourite authors. She remembers that her father used to read the thirty-two volumes of the Waverley Novels to his children over and over again.[15] In "The Window", Scott's novels, "old Sir Walter's" as Mrs Ramsay calls him, are closely connected to the durability of fame: Tansley arrogantly states that "people don't read Scott any more" (TL, 95) and Mr Ramsay, "always uneasy about himself", starts thinking "that's what they'll say of me" (TL, 95). Thus, "by making Mrs McNab save Scott, Woolf implies that the reputation of Mr Ramsay, and Leslie Stephen whom he represents, might also survive to a future generation. It suggests, furthermore, that the power to perpetuate Leslie Stephen's memory now resides with Woolf" (De Gay 2006, 119).

[15] Maitland recollects Virginia Woolf's memory of her father: "it must have been very soon that we attacked the first of that long line of red backs -the thirty-two volumes of the Waverley Novels, which provided reading for many years of evenings, because when we had finished the last he was ready to begin the first over again. At the end of a volume my father always gravely asked our opinion as to its merits, and we were required to say which of the characters we liked best and why" (Maitland 1906, 474).

In “Time Passes”, the Ramsays’ memory resides with Mrs McNab, even though her recollections are sometimes wrong: “in a ring of light she saw the old gentleman, lean as a rake, wagging his head, as she came up with the washing, talking to himself, she supposed, on the lawn. He never noticed her. Some said he was dead; some said she was dead. Which was it? Mrs. Bast didn’t know for certain either. The young gentleman was dead. That she was sure. She had read his name in the papers” (TL, 114). It is Mrs McNab who regrets the harmony of the pre-war world. “Things were better then than now” (TL, 112), “they lived well in those days. They had everything they wanted” (TL, 115), a world that “they’d find [...] changed” (TL, 115), whose collapse had been anticipated by Alfred Tennyson’s poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade”.

At last the house is put in order, “after days of labour within, of cutting and digging without, dusters were flicked from the windows, the windows were shut to, keys were turned all over the house; the front door was banged; it was finished” (TL, 115). These words echo Lily’s words in the third part when she finally succeeds in completing her painting. The remaining members of the Ramsay family come back with Lily Briscoe and August Carmichael after the end of the war. This means that social peace has been restored: “then indeed peace had come” (TL, 116), and their return foretells the recovery of their inner peace, which allows them to commemorate the dead, and finally stop being haunted by them.[16]

By making Lily and Carmichael come by the same train, “[Lily Briscoe had her bag carried up to the house late one evening in September. Mr. Carmichael came by the same train]” (TL, 116), Virginia Woolf “prepares symbolically for the later synchrony of their imaginations” (Tremper, 1992, 168). Even though the house is full again, the protagonists of the last chapter of “Time Passes” are the two artists, who link this interlude to the last section

[16] “They return to the house on the island because ‘certain rites’ in honour of the dead have to be gone through” (McNichol 1990, 111).

of *To the Lighthouse.* "(Lily was tired out with travelling and slept almost at once; but Mr. Carmichael read a book by candlelight)" (TL, 116) as he used to do in the past. "And it all looked, Mr. Carmichael thought, shutting his book, falling asleep, much as it used to look years ago" (TL, 116). Yet the 'downpouring of immense darkness' is about to end:

> The sigh of all the seas breaking in measure round the isles soothed them; the night wrapped them; nothing broke their sleep, until, the birds beginning and the dawn weaving their thin voices in to its whiteness, a cart grinding, a dog somewhere barking, the sun lifted the curtains, broke the veil on their eyes, and Lily Briscoe stirring in her sleep clutched at her blankets as a faller clutches at the turf on the edge of a cliff. Her eyes opened wide. Here she was again, she thought, sitting bolt upright in bed. Awake (TL, 117).

Virginia Woolf in Manhattan

Interestingly, the last word 'Awake' ends the long night of "Time Passes" just as the word 'Awake' ends the second part of Maggie Gee's *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan*: "Here we are again, Angela thought, sitting bolt upright in her seat. Awake" (Gee 2014, 282). Gee's novel alternates details of Virginia Woolf's life experiences as documented in her writings or biographies of her, with her imagined experiences in a contemporary epoch. Maggie Gee borrows from Woolf's biography, diaries and letters and it is obvious that she knows her work inside out; however, she also imagines Woolf's thoughts and feelings in a twenty-first-century context in order to invent a new story. In a typically postmodernist way, Gee brings together past and present, historical facts and fiction and in so doing she appears to be following "the basic tenets of postmodern thought and attitude that every artistic production has features that can be traced to the past, and creation is but an endless process of echoing, repeating, quoting, incorporating, absorbing and recycling" (Latham, 2015, 2102).

The novel alternates between three narrative strands dealing with three characters: Virginia Woolf herself, Angela Lamb, a successful best-selling novelist and academic, going through a crisis in her marriage, and Gerda, Angela's thirteen-year-old daughter. The main

protagonists in the novel are Angela, Virginia and occasionally Gerda, but their voices, thoughts and memories are sometimes interrupted by a third person narrator.

When the novel starts (Part One London-New York), we hear "thunder as Angela flies to New York" (Gee 2014, 9), anticipating a storm, which could be connected to the "ominous sounds" heard in "Time Passes". The storm is particularly frightening for Angela Lamb who is afraid of flying, which introduces an autobiographical element since Maggie Gee has expressed a similar fear: "all the novels are a bit autobiographical" (Gee, personal communication, March 26, 2018), and this is certainly true for Woolf's own work as we have seen. But Angela's fears will not stop her, as she wants to read Woolf's manuscripts in the Berg Collection in the New York Public Library to prepare for an upcoming lecture in Istanbul at an international Woolf conference. Once in New York, Angela is disappointed to find out that the original manuscripts cannot be consulted: "I was excited. I couldn't wait to get my hands on her! Then the librarian explained. There's a rule that only applies to Woolf, because she is so valuable: no original manuscript material can be accessed. 'I'm afraid you have to read her on microfilm'. But it is hardly the same, is it? She hasn't breathed on that film, or used it, or touched it." (Gee 2014, 17). This scene again echoes Gee's experience in finding out that even scholars may only see microfilm versions of Woolf's work.

While Angela Lamb is trying to recover from her disappointment, reminding herself that "at least I was *near* those manuscripts. At least I sat two feet away from the heavy glass case where the walking stick she carried on that final day was lurking" (Gee 2014, 17), all of a sudden, Virginia Woolf materializes in the flesh. "Suddenly there's time again; & I'm in it" (Gee 2014, 13), thinks Virginia, but, paradoxically, as soon as she appears in the library, which is mostly famous for her books, the librarian promptly "closed in on her like a gaoler" (Gee 2014, 19). Virginia Woolf is brought back to life out of love as Angela had promised Virginia that she would take her back to Europe and to her life: "I'll take you home to Europe,

I silently promised, if I can get to you I'll slip you in my bag and take you back to Sussex, to Leonard, to Lewes..." (Gee 2014, 18). When Angela accidentally expresses her wish to bring Virginia Woolf back to life, she senses a presence behind her. Virginia's return from the dead is presented step by step; Woolf's disorientation at being dropped into contemporary New York, is well depicted and believable. "Did I hear 'Leonard'?" she asks (Gee 2014, 18). Leonard is Virginia's first memory as she realizes that "somehow I slipped a century. Stones in my pockets weighted me down I sank, bursting Then nothing" (Gee 2014, 13). Virginia's thoughts are given in short broken sentences, spread on the page as if she were writing in her notebooks; they are also written in different typefaces to mirror her different moods and feelings. Maggie Gee uses italics, capital letters, and in a deliberate echoing of Woolf's style, brackets and dashes are everywhere. She has stated that she loves dashes because they are lively and fast and her novel had to be light and airy (Gee, personal communication, March 26, 2018)[17].

Light and darkness alternate just as they do in "Time Passes": Gee's Virginia remembers that she "spent ...*seven, eight decades*...in the dark – a normal lifetime" (Gee, 13), and is surprised by her waking in the light after being "in the dark so long" (Gee, 20). When Virginia comes to life again, she is white and almost boneless: "it was like dipping my hand in water" (Gee 2014, 22) as Angela thinks when she touches her. It is a rebirth, and Virginia becomes stronger and younger as the novel goes on. During a fight, Angela realizes that even though she was stronger than Virginia, " yet something had changed since she first arrived when I had touched her hand and there was nothing there. Her body no longer felt liquid, boneless" (Gee 2014, 72). As previously stated, Maggie Gee borrows from Woolf's biographical events, but handling Virginia Woolf's suicide was very hard because Maggie Gee did not want to intrude upon such an intimate and difficult decision; nevertheless she

[17] I have had the opportunity to engage in conversation and email communication with Maggie Gee and consider her comments to be particularly enlightening with regard to her relationship to Woolf and her style.

alludes to it because she felt that Virginia would have had to remember it so as to be able to come to terms with it (Gee, personal communication, March 26, 2018). Even Angela Lamb realizes how difficult it is to speak about such a topic. “I couldn’t say ‘since you killed yourself’. That phrase is an impossibility. It can never be said between two human beings” (Gee 2014, 46). Yet Virginia Woolf has to face the consequences of her suicide both for her husband, whom she still loves, “my mongoose love, my beloved mate” (Gee 2014, 36) and for her beloved sister Vanessa. She thinks back to everything that happened that day in March 1941: “I loved my life but I had to go, once the Furies smell you you can only flee. I knew that day I could not outrun them, the sky was cloudless, they had me at bay – I wrote to Leonard & I wrote to Vanessa” (Gee 2014, 40) and fragments of her last letter to Leonard are given in italics as if they were hand written:

“*feel certain I am going mad again*

can’t go through another of those terrible times

begin to hear voices can’t concentrate

I am doing what seems the best thing to do

You have given me the greatest possible happiness I don’t think

two people could have been happier

could have been happier

this terrible disease I can’t fight any longer” (Gee 2014, 41-42).

But Gee’s Virginia is not the gloomy person she is commonly thought to have been, an idea of her personality strengthened by novels such as Cunningham’s *The Hours* (1999). In *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan*, Virginia’s character is not stereotyped. She is melancholy and moving when she looks back and remembers her past: “I remembered my crime” (Gee 2014,

45), but at the same time she is witty, lively, adventurous, full of *joie de vivre*, and both puzzled and delighted by her new twenty-first century life as witnessed by the sheer pleasure she takes in riding up and down in the hotel elevator.

In spite of her professional interest in Virginia Woolf's life and work, Angela soon finds her heroine demanding and troublesome as Virginia tries to cope with laptops, mobile phones, the Internet, plastic surgery, twenty-first century politics and religion, while the world she knew has gone forever. "Everyone she knew was dead", Angela thinks while she wonders "How could I possibly tell her?" (Gee 2014, 33). Angela and Virginia's relationship is also affected initially by their different class backgrounds. Angela resents Virginia's snobbish attitude, her lack of gratitude and being treated as if she were a servant: "*Bring* me another! [glass of milk] Did she think it was free? Unlike her, I did not inherit money. She spoke to me as if I were a servant" (Gee 2014, 33). On the other hand Woolf resents being called 'Virginia' by a person she hardly knows, in a clear act of resistance not only to contemporary familiarity but also to having become, in a sense, a cultural commodity: "She said my name, that first time, as if I belonged to her" (Gee 2014, 21). Throughout *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* Angela Lamb is ambivalent about Virginia, alternating between affection and admiration, impatience and antagonism:

> Virginia was one of the first celebs, with her background and her beauty. Let's face it, it wasn't just raw talent. It must have helped her, knowing everybody (which certainly could not be said of me).
>
> Privilege. It can make you hate them.
>
> This isn't really what I meant to say. Because yes, she was the daughter of Leslie Stephen, the most famous Victorian man of letters, yes, she was friends with EM Forster and Maynard Keynes and Lytton Strachey, yes, she had a small private income and looked like a clever, dreamy angel – but she wrote like an angel, as well. A pinioned angel, not the household kind.
>
> Delicate, witty, brutal. Woolf does it all, at the speed of light. Each time I read her, I admire her more. I try to be critical. But she's just good.

> And if she was privileged, I accept it. Because she did it for all of us. Showed she was cleverer than the men. Showed what we were capable of. I told Gerda, 'She's a genius.'
>
> All the same –she was privileged (Gee 2014, 50-51).

Quite understandably, Angela fears her precursor and struggles to affirm herself but, even though she has won prizes, which make her name quite well- known in the UK, Angela has to admit that "in New York my name means very little. Whereas Virginia Woolf was huge here in her lifetime" (Gee 2014, 15). Angela Lamb is a bestselling author who would like to be validated by her heroine, but Virginia Woolf never treats her as an equal. Angela effectively embodies the uneasiness that contemporary writers feel when they are measured against canonical, historical authors. Maggie Gee herself has admitted to her need to cope with what is known as the 'anxiety of influence': she has told me how she got stuck while writing her novel, came close to abandoning it, and swore she would never attempt anything of the sort again (Gee, personal communication, March 26, 2018). Her novel, though, is important precisely because it offers a perspective on issues relevant to contemporary writing: despite her admiration for Woolf's work, Angela cannot avoid comparing herself with Woolf constantly positioning her heroine's talent against her own double role as working mother and academic. Angela's thoughts show the degree of her professional rivalry: "I was a best-selling author, with two degrees she didn't have one, though they called her 'the cleverest woman in England' and I went to the gym and looked after myself. [...] I had a daughter. She did not" (Gee 2014, 95).

Fame is needed by both Virginia and Angela, so much so that *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* deals extensively with the durability of fame, a pivotal theme in *To the Lighthouse*. Both novels, in fact, explore the question of what continues to exist after death. Mr Ramsay, like Sir Leslie Stephen, constantly worries about the longevity of his work, a concern that reflects Virginia's own uneasiness about her literary legacy and affects her new

life in New York: “Will I leave any mark when I write? Will this new world read me?” (Gee, 13), she asks. She has no idea of her posthumous reputation, and is astonished to learn that she is still famous in the twenty-first century as the following questions show: “‘People still read me? You still read me?’”, “‘People still read me in the twenty-first century?’” (Gee, 60-61). Virginia is also unaware that her diaries have not been destroyed as she asked Leonard to do, neither does she know that they have been published.

Despite their differences and arguments, see for example Angela’s irreverent references to Virginia Woolf’s suicide “Virginia smelled. Of mud, and roots.” (Gee 2014, 28), which makes her wonder whether Virginia is still carrying a stone in her pockets “what’s in your pocket? *(Disappointed)* ‘Oh I suppose it’s just a *stone*’” (Gee 2014, 71), as well as Angela’s obsessive interest in money, which disappoints Virginia who considers her “a vulgar woman” (Gee 2014, 71) the two women team up in Manhattan, where Virginia Woolf had never been. “‘Of all places. I never went there! Never went to America. I never cared to, I loved Europe...’” (Gee 2014, 65). At the end of 1926, Virginia Woolf had considered an invitation from the *New York Herald Tribune* to visit New York, but she decided not to go.[18] As Hermione Lee reminds us, “although Woolf never crossed the Atlantic, she once wrote a surreal fascinated fantasy called ‘America Which I Have Never Seen’ and might well have made the journey, after the war, if she had lived” (Lee, *Virginia Woolf's Nose* 2005, 47). Maggie Gee makes Virginia Woolf’s fantasy come true and vividly describes Virginia and Angela’s adventures in New York, where they enjoy going to the zoo, shopping at Bloomingdale’s, eating hamburgers, and visiting the Statue of Liberty, which reminds Virginia of the image of Vanessa’s dust jacket for *To the Lighthouse*. “The model of the just female warrior. Tall, kindly, an amazon. The mother brave enough to hold up the light Vanessa’s dust jacket for *To the Lighthouse*” (Gee 2014, 205). The view of the Statue of

[18] “She was offered her expenses plus a fee in exchange for four articles. She took the offer seriously before turning it down.” (Mepham 1991, 116)

Liberty prompts one of Virginia's interior monologues in which she remembers her mother Julia and longs for her. "I felt I was with Mother, too. That she and all the suffering were here. That with Liberty, mothers could be tired children. That they could rest, and she would care. Julia's head leant upon my shoulder. [...] I was coming home..." (Gee 2014, 206). Virginia revisits old haunts just as the characters of *To the Lighthouse* do in the third part of the novel. But despite her exhaustion and weariness, Virginia is not ready to go home yet; she still has to live her new life.

While in New York, Angela is astonished to find a first edition of *To the Lighthouse* in Virginia Woolf's pockets and her wonder is convincingly expressed through her words:

> 'My God. *To the Lighthouse.* what a glorious copy.' I could hardly believe what I saw on the bed. [...] 'Virginia! It's a first edition.' There it was, Vanessa's lovely design, the grey swirls of the waves below, the few plain strokes to denote the lighthouse, the black dots swarming in different densities to show the light blazing up in a fan. All around it, the lighthouse wall. 'It's worth a fortune' (Gee 2014, 72-73).

From now on, the references to *To the Lighthouse* are more and more explicit and the "glorious copy" helps not only the beginning of Angela and Virginia's collusion, but also makes their relationship run more smoothly. It is Virginia who suggests "'Let us go out and make some money!'" (Gee 2014, 75), but it is Angela who manages to find the way to sell this rare book. "'Goldstein & Sons, Rare Book Dealers. Madison Avenue. Shall we walk?'" (Gee 2014, 85). It is in this intimidating shop that Angela finds another ancient "copy of *To the Lighthouse*, with the familiar Vanessa Bell book jacket. The lighthouse tower, the radiating beams, and Virginia's name in capitals" (Gee 2014, 94). This discovery discourages her at first because "if they had a copy, would they want another?" (Gee 2014, 94). Soon Angela finds out that any first edition of *To the Lighthouse* is worth a huge amount of money but that a personalized copy would be more valuable:

> if someone were to turn up with a book she had signed for a friend, rather than a signature done to order you know she pre-signed for her American publisher? That would be something very special. Signed copies were more unusual then. Especially if it were something meaningful. Best of all, a message to someone famous Lytton Strachey, for instance, are you familiar with him? Vita Sackville-West or, best of all, Leonard (Gee 2014, 97).

As we have seen, in *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan*, Maggie Gee combines real and imagined events. Angela and Virginia start looking for dip pens and ink to personalize their copy, only to find out that this kind of pen is out of date since nowadays everyone uses a computer. Paradoxically, at 'Shaverland', a shop in which Angela and Virginia manage to find old-fashioned pens at last, an old man accuses Virginia of not being able to handwrite:

> 'Your friend don't know how to use a pen.'
>
> 'I most certainly do!'
>
> 'Ya don't'
>
> 'She's actually a very well-known writer.'
>
> 'Yeah? What's your name?'
>
> She stared at him, then with deliberation enunciated 'Virginia Woolf.'
>
> 'Virginia Who? I ain't heard of you. You're not Jackie Collins. You're not Stephen King'" (Gee 2014, 109).

This exchange is only superficially funny, as it actually shows our contemporary cultural decline, which praises a commercially successful author like Stephen King[19] more than Virginia Woolf. Reproducing "the familiar writing" (Gee, p. 110) in the violet ink which the entire manuscript of *To the Lighthouse* was written takes hours of trial and error, but in the end Virginia manages to write a meaningful dedication:

[19] In "Dumbing down American readers", Harold Bloom laments the decision to give the National Book Foundation's annual award for "distinguished contribution" to Stephen King. He considers it "another low in the shocking process of dumbing down our cultural life. I've described King in the past as a writer of penny dreadfuls, but perhaps even that is too kind" (Bloom, 2003). He obviously complains about the postmodernist rejection of the distinction between "high" and "popular" culture.

For Leonard, always and only Leonard.

Your V." (Gee 2014, 110)

It is in Goldstein & Sons, Rare Book Dealers, that Virginia finally experiences happiness: "I felt half at home for the first time since I had woken in this new world" (Gee 2014, 121); and it is here that "almost at once I glimpsed my name. Suspended in a glass case on the wall, I saw the copy of *To the Lighthouse*, which Angela had told me they had. I felt a brief, intense uplift of pleasure to see how it sailed there like a pale ship, safely afloat in the twenty-first century" (Gee 2014, 123).

Maggie Gee must have had 'The Dreadnought Hoax'[20] and Virginia Woolf's impersonation of a fake delegate of the fake Emperor of Abyssinia in mind when she conceived the scene in which Virginia manages to sell her precious copy of *To the Lighthouse* with the ability of a "consummate actress!" "Her long white hands dived into the bag and pulled out her pristine *To the Lighthouse.* 'I see you already have a copy of this, so perhaps I should take it to another dealer?'" (Gee 2014, 128). And when the antiquarian at Goldstein's wants to know where the book comes from "'Do you mind me asking where you came by these?' the older man asked, clutching *To the Lighthouse* with a covetous hand" (Gee 2014, 128), Virginia replies "they've always been in my family" (Gee 2014, 128) so convincingly that people end up seeing a family resemblance between Virginia and the author. In the end the book is sold for a huge amount of money and Virginia can enjoy herself with Angela feeling "[f]or the first time [...] this writer who came from the future was pleased with me. Pleased with the real Virginia, not the dead Virginia she knew from writing" (Gee 2014, 134).

[20] The 'Dreadnought Hoax' was a joke conceived by Virginia Woolf's brother Adrian Stephen and his Cambridge friend Horace Cole to tease the Navy. Adrian asked Virginia to take part in the joke and she agreed. They pretended to escort the Emperor of Abyssinia. For a full report of the joke see Quentin Bell (Bell 1996, Vol I, 157-161).

While Angela and Virginia are in New York, Gerda is in a boarding school in the UK where she is bullied by the other pupils, partly because she is a bit overweight, but mainly because she is bookish. She manages to exchange emails intermittently with her mother who is totally unaware of her troubles at school. Maggie Gee created this character at a later stage of the writing process (Gee, personal communication, March 26, 2018). Her name comes from *The Snow Queen* by Hans Andersen, a tale considered to be very modern by Maggie Gee, which has had a strong influence on her. At first Gerda is annoyed with her mother for "pick[ing] up this weird old woman" (Gee 2014, 27), while Angela justifies her intermittent communication on the grounds that: "I am having to take care of Virginia Woolf. [...] She is really *very* famous." (Gee 2014, 50). Then Gerda Googles her and she is astonished to find out that Virginia is actually dead: "I hated the idea of Virginia Woolf" (Gee 2014, 51), Gerda says; she is jealous, but is also ready to believe in Virginia Woolf's resurrection: "You may wonder why I wasn't more surprised about Virginia Woolf coming back to life. It's because people come back to life all the time" (Gee 2014, 147). Quite understandably, she hopes her mother will manage to get rid of "this ancient freak" and will be able to start taking care of her again.

In a completely different way from Virginia Woolf, Gerda has to fight a battle with the Furies too, as like all teenagers she has to cope with her changing body, with her bullying schoolmates, with her parents' quarrels, and with her aspirations: "One day I'll be a writer too, and I don't want anybody to stop ME" (Gee 2014, 90). Gerda hates the cult of suicide "if you ask me, suicide is Pants" (Gee 2014, 153) and her favourite author is Kurt Vonnegut, "because he is funny. And great. He's dead like her [Virginia Woolf], but he didn't kill himself" (Gee 2014, 144). Despite that, she is ready to take sides against her mother, supporting Virginia's wish to "go to her own conference" (Gee 2014, 146).

Gerda decides to play truant from school and join her mother in New York and, like her Anderson namesake, starts an adventure of her own. She borrows *To the Lighthouse* from her mother's bookshelf to read on the plane "in order to find more reasons to hate her [Virginia Woolf]" (Gee 2014, 179). "*To the Lighthouse,* Gerda reads, with cynicism. Then she leans back and closes her eyes. She's on the plane, she's off to New York, she's got her mother's stupid book...[...] *To the Lighthouse*. Gerda unfastens her seat belt, looks at the book jacket and considers. As a title, it's a bit shit, which she had hoped and expected to find" (Gee 2014, 214-215). Then, she feels ashamed and decides to give the book a chance. "Within twenty minutes Gerda is gripped" (Gee 2014, 215) and so she is discovering Virginia Woolf's work on her own. That *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* is a novel about literature and more generally about reading and writing is also marked precisely by Gerda's interest in Woolf: her growing interest shows how biofictions can encourage people, who only dimly know about a canonical author, or in this case about *To the Lighthouse,* to approach the 'source' text. Postmodernist novels that rewrite the imaginary lives of canonical authors and engage in a dialogue with their texts have extended the tradition of life writing, and through the practice of rewriting have facilitated access to rather difficult canonical texts.

The second section 'Time Passes: London-New York-Istanbul' closely echoes "Time Passes" in Woolf's novel. The title itself is one of the many visible elements recycled from Woolf's source text; moreover, Gee inserts various sentences directly taken from *To the Lighthouse* into this part of her novel. The two novels are further linked by Angela's observations that: "the pace of change had doubled, quadrupled since she [Virginia] wrote about time in *To the Lighthouse*. In the novel's central section, 'Time Passes', the years crawl by in a gradual erosion of surfaces. In the far distance, the great war thunders. Entropy is slow as flowers. Whereas now time was just a kaleidoscope of earthquakes, everything collapsing

and starting again, names and technologies jumbling to rubble. [...] Could there be a twenty-first century 'Time Passes'?" (Gee 2014, 159-160).

Maggie Gee's novel answers this question. Her 'Time Passes' is set on a transatlantic plane, which contributes to the novel's broader representation of technology as representative of the spirit of the time in which we are currently living; Virginia Woolf has fun in the hotel lift, she uses the Internet to find out if she is still read, and she flies on a jet plane for the first time in her life. Angela eventually agrees to take Virginia to Istanbul so they set off for Turkey just as Gerda starts her journey to New York, more and more caught up in her reading of *To the Lighthouse*. The theme of the journey as self-discovery, which is pivotal in *To the Lighthouse,* is also central to this section of *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan*. It is in the third section of Woolf's novel that the trip to the lighthouse, planned ten years before, finally takes place and James realizes that 'nothing was simply one thing' (Woolf, 2006, p. 152). Moreover, both Cam and James begin to see their father not only as a tyrant, but also as an old man of a certain charm and reconcile with him.

Once on the plane to Istanbul both Angela and Virginia reflect upon their lives. Virginia continues to get to grips with the twenty-first century world, where prejudice appears to persist even though today people prefer not to use the words 'Jews' and 'Africans'. She is curious and considers the plane as a film setting in which she is happy to be. "'The plane is a film, and we are in it.'" (Gee 2014, 229); thus it is only after midnight that she falls asleep. "When she put out her light, it was gone midnight." (Gee 2014, 231).

On another plane, Gerda is reading the "Time Passes" section of *To the Lighthouse*.

> Here Mr Carmichael, who was reading Virgil, blew out his candle. It was past midnight.
>
> ... But what after all is one night? (Gee 2014, 231).

The following chapter opens with another verbatim quotation from "Time Passes" suggesting that Gerda is still reading and that the same night envelops both Angela and her daughter in spite of their flying in different directions.

> ...what after all is one night? A short space, especially when the darkness dims so soon, and so soon a bird Meanwhile
>
> sings, a cock crows, or a faint green quickens, like a turning leaf, in the hollow of the wave. Night, however, succeeds to night (Gee 2014, 232).

As soon as Virginia falls asleep, Angela starts thinking about her husband Edward, an explorer whose documentary *The Palace of Ice* was being shown on the plane that night. This film, which was shot to make people aware of global warming, stars both Edward and Gerda. Angela remembers that Gerda was only nine years old, "she was totally happy, alive with laughter" (Gee 2014, 233). She admires her father just as Cam admires Mr Ramsay whom she considers the "most lovable, [...] most wise" (TL, 155); Angela is aware that "Edward was Gerda's model. I think she wanted to be him, not me. That wasn't easy for me to see" (Gee 2014, 233). Angela has never been invited on their expeditions and she feels excluded. "I was happy for her [Gerda], I was happy for them, I was happy for Edward, but of course I felt lonely" (Gee 2014, 234).

But Gerda is now grown up.

> (Another Gerda, on her own trajectory over the ocean, under the stratosphere, went on reading *To the Lighthouse*, unknown to Angela, far away. Only two hours until she landed, only two hours to reach the lighthouse, no-one must interrupt her now) (Gee 2014, 235).

Angela's love for her is so strong that Gerda's leaving home for the boarding school is conveyed with the same words Virginia Woolf used to depict Mrs Ramsay's death.

> Angela, too, was perfectly calm, yet she woke in the night and stumbled down the dark landing to go to the bathroom, Gerda's light was showing, she walked in, unthinking, to switch the light off as her daughter slept, and stretched out her hand to feel the warmth of her cheek.

> But Gerda having left the day before, she reached further, and further, touched nothing and no-one. She clutched at the duvet: her arms remained empty (Gee 2014, 236).

Like in "Time Passes", the second section of *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* considers the effect of the passing of time on people. "How long, after all, is five weeks?" Angela asks contemplating the time it took to shoot *The Palace of Ice,* her husband's documentary. And about her daughter Angela observes that *"She'll be surprised how fast time passes. The young are different: they feel things less. I managed to find her an excellent school"* (Gee 2014, 238).

The First World War hovers in the background of Woolf's novel, yet fighting also belongs to the contemporary world, "'There is trouble in Iraq,' said Angela, and Afghanistan. And Syria. And Palestine. We are up to our necks in it'" (Gee 2014, 247). She sadly points out that peace is far from coming and Virginia wonders whether Angela has read *Three Guineas* and if her essay has had any influence.

"An eleven-hour flight could feel like a lifetime" and while approaching Istanbul, Virginia revisits her losses, a crucial theme in *To the Lighthouse*. First, she remembers her father's death.

> When my father died, it seemed impossible, the disappearance of the giant father, always behind me, sheltering, looming, for he loved my writing and believed in me. The keeper of the library, who opened it to me. I was desolate. Then the wound healed over. Second by second, minute by minute, day by day, loss became less. His shadow shrank. I saw beyond him. Could it have been the same for Leonard? (Gee 2014, 268).

Then she recollects her brother Thoby's death after her first visit to Constantinople, as Istanbul was then called.

> The unthinkable loss after the first visit. My elder brother, my conspirator. I envied Thoby, but I adored him of course. He came with us to Greece on the way to Turkey, we rode and walked through the blue aromatic mountains, naming the gods and their transformations; he read us Greek , we drank that rough wine and I had too much and got a headache, but we plotted futures of fantastic greatness as the moon

> rose and fell and the crickets sang and the white vines of stars slowly faded into morning. That night I knew we would always be happy. But I was the one who had the future. The gods demanded a sacrifice. [...] The doctors could do nothing to save him, those grave old mummers with their hopeless nostrums. The bravest, most beautiful of us was dead (Gee 2014, 271-272).

The memory of Virginia's second visit to Constantinople is also sad because it reminds her of Vanessa's miscarriage in Bursa:

> 1910. Over a century ago. The message came, and I had to go. Vanessa was miscarrying in Bursa, a boat trip away from Constantinople. It was me she asked for. Roger wrote to me. And then I showed them what I was made of. I travelled alone, I travelled hard, I refused to fear heat, or snakes, or strangers, I went by boat and bus and horseback and crossed Europe in less than four days. I found her lying in a darkened room. I became a man, off to save a woman I was brave Gerda in my childhood book, my beautiful gold-and-green *Hans Andersen's Fairy Stories* that my father bought for me when I was eleven, Gerda, my favourite, who saved little Kay, a brave girl who saved a boy Angela had named her daughter well (Gee 2014, 273-274).

At the end of the second section of *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan,* light and darkness alternate again, but even though "darkness threatens", light prevails in the end; Angela and Virginia land safely in Istanbul and an explicit reference to the last chapter of "Time Passes" reminds the reader of *To the Lighthouse*. Angela falls asleep and, like Lily Briscoe, she hears the sound of the waves. "Gently the waves would break (maybe Angela heard them in her sleep)" (Gee 2014, 282). The light is a flashforward of Angela's and Virginia's visions that mirror that of Lily Briscoe in the third part of Woolf's novel, a vision which enables her to complete her painting. The section ends with the already reminded description of Angela "sitting bolt upright in her seat. Awake" (Gee 2014, 282).

Here Maggie Gee openly displays the influence of 'Time Passes' and of Woolf's whole novel, echoing Woolf's themes and adapting them to contemporary life. Just as in *To the Lighthouse,* Virginia Woolf made it clear that human life is only incidental, in *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* this same topic is the subject of a conversation between Angela and Virginia.

> 'It's very strange the way time passes', says Virginia as they climb out of their taxi. 'And everything but us remains. We came by sea, before, in the very early morning, we came up on deck to see the dawn, and

> it burned on the golden domes and windows. My sister has gone. All of us have gone. But those airy domes are still standing, as if the past had waited for me' (Gee 2014, 289).

But Virginia refuses to feel sad, she wants to grasp this chance to live, and she loves Istanbul, which Maggie Gee considers more feminine, and more forgiving than New York, even though in Turkey the message of freedom, which will be discussed at Woolf's conference, is still very important (Gee, personal communication, March 26, 2018). In the novel, Virginia expresses Gee's point of view: "New York is a man, I thought to myself, cool, straight, confident. And Istanbul's a middle-aged woman. Watery. Supple. All tides and inlets" (Gee 2014, 353).

Virginia even buys a present for Angela, a charm against the evil eye saying that it "will protect you against demons and critics!'" (Gee 2014, 309) Very soon Angela will try to warn Virginia against the literary theories about 'The Death of the Author'. "'I know it will sound strange to you, but they [modern academics] won't believe what you say about your work' [...]. 'It's because some modern scholars think authors don't know anything about their work. [...] It's 'The Death of the Author'. It's well, it's French" (Gee 2014, 317). Maggie Gee herself has expressed irritation at these theories and blames critics for wanting to take the author's place. Conversely, she praises Woolf's criticism, which she considers to be lively and human (Gee, personal communication, March 26, 2018). Thus, by resuscitating Virginia Woolf, Maggie Gee openly reacts to these literary theories and shares the contemporary interest in Virginia Woolf's life and the postmodernist "delights in resurrecting historical authors as characters" (Franssen 1999, 11). *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* offers the resurrected Virginia the chance to be happy again.

Angela and Virginia make plans for their few days in Istanbul, which are conveyed through Virginia's words. "We would go to Pera: just across the bridge from the Old City, it would be there still.[...] We would visit the Harem, in Topkapi Palace. We would go to Aya

Sophia, of course. We would visit Scutari, for Florence Nightingale. And of course, on the third day, my conference, *The* conference, I corrected myself" (Gee 2014, 326). Just as in *To the Lighthouse,* colours, such as blue, gold, and green, are a significant feature in *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan*; like Virginia Woolf, Maggie Gee uses highly visual language to define the places in Turkey, while in Woolf's novel colours are mainly seen through Lily's eyes. The painter is often busy dipping into the blue paint, putting the green paint on her brush, or realizing that the jacmanna was bright violet against the white wall. Angela and Virginia enjoy the colours and atmosphere in Istanbul, and not only do the two women visit this city, and get caught up in a riot, but they also exchange confidences. When Angela is angry with her husband Edward because he has asked her for money to finish his expedition to the Arctic Circle, it is Virginia who prompts her to help him and a reference to *To the Lighthouse* helps her clarify the point. "The Press did make money. We [Leonard and Virginia Woolf] were a success. And after *To the Lighthouse*, I earned more than him. I think I preferred it actually. [...] 'I'd give anything for Leonard to telephone one morning. And I would give him whatever he asked for'" (Gee 2014, 339).

Later Virginia confides to Angela that "'I have been having ... feelings. Feelings I haven't had for some time. Some time before I died, that is. One hadn't felt desire in ages'" (Gee 2014, 381). She wonders whether she has become a different person and she regrets the "so many things I have never done" (Gee 2014, 383). And it is in Istanbul that Virginia even experiences a holiday romance. This encounter in the book is unexpected because it is a commonplace that Virginia Woof had problems with physical intimacy: however, in Gee's novel hers is a new life. Maggie Gee has expressed the idea that the abuse Woolf suffered in her childhood had such a strong impact on her that without it she might have been a different person (Gee, personal communication, March 26, 2018): with *Orlando* in mind she offers the new Virginia the chance to experience a bisexual relationship which is very interestingly and

retrospectively told from both Angela's and Virginia's points of view. When Angela tries to understand whether Virginia has read her paper, all she can see in Virginia's room is a Muslim girl who has taken her scarf off and a large black men's shoe on the floor, details which suggest that intimacy has taken place. But it is Virginia's thoughts that are illuminating: "what miracle made what happened, happen? Happen, happen, happiness. I will keep those hours till the end of my life this second life, my happy life" (Gee 2014, 427).

Meanwhile in New York, Gerda, who "has finished *To the Lighthouse*," (Gee 2014, 288) is looking for her mother, but finds out that she has left for Istanbul. She remembers that her "*Mum did tell me. Ages ago*. She was really thrilled they had invited her. Yes, it was an international conference IN TURKEY. How had she forgotten!" (Gee 2014, 301). At last she manages to find a way to get to Istanbul, but before that she wants to buy *A Room of One's Own*. "*To the Lighthouse*, rather more dog-eared and dusty than before, is back in her bag, but she wants another book. There is an eleven-hour flight in her future". In the bookshop she is surprised to find out that there is still a lot of interest in Virginia Woolf and Gerda's wish to get to know her hints at the idea that there may be something in Virginia Woolf's books for everyone, regardless of their age.

Just as at the end of *To the Lighthouse*, Cam, James and Mr Ramsay successfully complete their journey, Lily finishes her painting, and James is praised by his father, something he had been hoping for, at the end of *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* Angela gains the validation of her work by Virginia that she has been courting since they first met. In a taxi on their way to the conference, Virginia agrees to read Angela's paper and, quite unexpectedly, "'Angela' she said, looking up suddenly. 'Thank you. You defended me. But really how heavy-footed critics can be'" (Gee 2014, 420). At last Angela has the chance to declare her love for Virginia.

> I was going to deliver my gift to her. I had long loved her. I would defend her. None of the rest of it mattered, finally. I had never been able to say what I wanted; never told her why I loved her work; never quite had the in-depth discussion that I had always longed to have. What would remain of us was love (Gee 2014, 446).

Yet, at the conference Angela realizes that her well-written paper full of quotations is not what young people want from her because "[t]hey had not given up" (Gee 2014, 448) the hope that in Woolf's pages they might all find something that directly reflects their voices and their lives. Angela manages to find the right words only when she dares to improvise her talk. The Academics are puzzled, but the young people are enthusiastic when she invites them "to see Woolf more widely. She is a great writer because she is neither Clarissa Dalloway nor Mrs Ramsay. The fact is, she can be anybody. She has Keats's 'negative capability' in her, others can find their lost voices. That means, my voice, your voice'" (Gee 2014, 450).

Maggie Gee calls for a different way of reading Woolf which, following the postmodernist disbelief in a universal truth, questions univocal interpretations. Placing her message of freedom significantly in Turkey, where it can resound with particular poignancy Gee has Gerda starting to read from *A Room of One's Own*, the passage referring to Shakespeare's sister, leaving everyone open-mouthed. After that, Virginia steals the show at the conference and reaffirms her double role of writer and critic. The conference is a triumph and the young people's great interest in Virginia Woolf's biography and work, which, until the 1990s was mainly limited to academics and scholars, shows how her standing has continued to increase. In *Virginia Woolf Icon* (1999), Brenda Silver, who has investigated Virginia Woolf's position in popular culture, considers the mid-1990s as the turning point in the upsurge of her cult (Silver 1999). Almost a century after their publication, her novels still influence many contemporary writers, whose impulses to fictionalize her life and to rewrite her novels are successful with readers and academics alike. The charm against the evil eye,

which Angela finds in her pocket, makes the reader realize that Virginia really has lived again.

Virginia Woolf in Manhattan is intimately connected to Woolf's work but it is also an autonomous literary production. As already pointed out, Maggie Gee's novel engages in a dialogue with and offers a reflection on Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*; through her retelling, Gee perpetuates Woolf's novel in the twenty-first century, and prolongs and updates its pivotal themes. She borrows extensively from *To the Lighthouse*, quoting some sentences verbatim, and by imagining Virginia's inner life, she is able to fill in the gaps left open by traditional biography, merging fictional and biographical motifs. Moreover, through Angela's and Gerda's characters, Gee offers a multi-faceted perspective of her protagonist and takes in two more points of view; Angela representing the position of female writers today, Gerda embodying Woolf's common reader. Maggie Gee has created a successful network of connections between her novel and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Like Lily Briscoe, she has had her vision.

Chapter Four: Lily Briscoe and Susan Seller's *Vanessa and Virginia*

Sellers' novel *Vanessa and Virginia* is not an immediately recognizable rewriting of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*; however, echoes between the hypotext and the hypertext are identifiable at close inspection. This chapter examines the way in which Susan Sellers reworks some Woolfian pivotal themes, but at the same time, offers an original novel. Susan Sellers' novel displays her informed criticism, but she subtly mixes fact and fiction, biography and fiction as the novelist Virginia Woolf did in *To the Lighthouse*. Moreover, she engages in creative dialogue with Bloomsbury theories of art, which remind us of Lily Briscoe and her painting, as will be shown in this chapter. As Susan Sellers writes in her acknowledgements, her novel is informed by four biographies, Frances Spalding's *Vanessa Bell*, Angelica Garnett's *Deceived with Kindness: A Bloomsbury Childhood*, Jane Dunn's *Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell: A Very Close Conspiracy*, and Hermione Lee's *Virginia Woolf*, but she is adamant in insisting that her book is a work of fiction. Furthermore, as she stated in an interview with Bethany Layne, she looked at several of Vanessa Bell's paintings and spent time with artist friends in preparation for writing her novel. She wanted to understand how a blank canvas slowly becomes a picture, brush after brush (Layne, "Postmodernism and the Biographical Novel" 2018). It is clear that a more knowledgeable reader will understand the many references to Bell's art or Woolf's work, but the novel is also enjoyable for readers who know very little about Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf. Susan Sellers acknowledges that a novelist's approach derives from considerable research, just as that of the biographer's does, but she adapts E.M. Forster's adage: a biography tells, a novel shows, to explain the difference between biography and biographical fiction. Sellers mixes real details of the two

sisters' lives with imagined events effectively and the result is a moving memoir of both of them.

The aim of this chapter is to follow the dialogue between *Vanessa and Virginia* and *To the Lighthouse*, to identify similarities and analyse points of departure. Sellers' novel displays many motifs taken from Woolf's life, which are also mirrored in *To the Lighthouse*, such as the importance of family ties, the meaning of motherhood and sisterhood, and sorrow for family tragedies and untimely losses. But Susan Sellers also explores the meaning of artistic creation, especially for women.

The author crucially focuses on the character of Vanessa Bell from whose point of view the story is told. Thus Sellers borrows elements from the painter's biography as well as from Woolf's. Incidents and characters from the Stephen sisters' lives, as also represented in *To the Lighthouse*, are retold in *Vanessa and Virginia*. Moreover, the novel also reverberates Woolfian topics such as the fear of artistic failure and the survival of an artistic creation. Not only does Susan Sellers borrow themes from Woolf's novel, she also follows her precursor's interest in the characters' inner lives and revives and perpetuates Woolf's innovative techniques such as explorations in subjectivity, fragmentation and impressionism in her prose. Sellers puts the reader in contact with Vanessa's random thoughts, which reveal her emotional life, oscillating between love and anger, sorrow and happiness, as well as her memories, which Vanessa's words "I turn the kaleidoscope of memory" make clear (Sellers, Vanessa and Virginia 2008, 44, henceforth V&V).

In *Vanessa and Virginia*, time continuously shifts between past and present while Vanessa reflects on her life and tries to find meaning in her relationship with her sister. Sellers' novel does not follow a strict chronological order, even though it starts with the sisters' childhood and ends after Virginia's death, but instead explores Vanessa's mind, and in

so doing she carries on Woolf's legacy. Sellers, in fact, follows Woolf in not being interested in external events, but rather in depicting the inner experiences of her characters[1]. Vanessa's painful family background and the impact of Virginia's suicide are mentioned from the very first pages. Vanessa still feels her sister's lingering closeness, just as the characters of *To the Lighthouse* feel Mrs Ramsay's presence after her death. Like Woolf, Sellers uses visual prose and pays great attention to pictorial details, to which Vanessa, being a painter, refers to depict her inner life:

> The frame of a window, blue paint blistering in the Mediterranean sun. I am arrested, dazzled by colour, the cascading scarlet of a pot of hibiscus, the glaring whitewash of a wall. It is as if the colors, first separately, then collectively, strike a series of notes that sets up a resonating chord in me. I am impelled to paint it. I am forced to convey the impact of the red against the blue, the white against the red. Perhaps this compulsion is a flaw. When I paint, I think only of what is before me (V&V, 137).

These words clearly echo Lily Briscoe's thoughts and her efforts to portrait Mrs Ramsay and her son James:

> The jacmanna was bright violet; the wall staring white. She would not have considered it honest to tamper with the bright violet and the staring white [...],Then beneath the colour there was the shape. She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked: it was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed (TL, 19).

Just as Woolf puts emphasis on light, darkness and colours in *To the Lighthouse*, which echo the characters' inner distress, Sellers uses the language of the senses, with its nuances and different tones, to vividly render Vanessa's thoughts and explore them.

> I climb the stairs and wish that the thin sliver of moon I can see hanging outside the landing window would pick me up and spirit me away. I go into my room and lie on my bed. I bury my head in the pillow, letting the coolness of the cotton seep into my brow. Images flicker on the closed screen of my eyelids (V&V, 114).

[1] In her interview with Bethany Layne, Sellers says:" My task is to get inside my characters' heads, try to render their voices" (Layne, Postmodernism and the Biographical Novel 2018, 213).

Virginia Woolf was firmly aware that "painting and writing have much to tell each other: they have much in common" and that "all great writers are great colourists", (Woolf, "Walter Sickert: A Conversation" 1950), pointing out the important role that visual arts play in verbal arts. She wrote many essays on visual arts,[2] whose importance is emphasised through the character of Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse.*

Lily Briscoe: part Vanessa Bell, part Virginia Woolf

Since I consider the character of the painter Lily Briscoe crucial in the background of *Vanessa and Virginia,* this part of the chapter focuses on her, as her efforts to portray Mrs Ramsay while she is reading to her child James become a metaphor of Woolf's own efforts in writing *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf wrote herself into the character of Lily Briscoe, an outsider with no biological links to the Ramsays, who desperately wishes to be part of their family. The painting becomes Lily's way to try and understand the Ramsays, of whom she is able to discern the flaws, and her relationship with them, just as Woolf tried to capture her parents' essence in writing her novel. Differently from Cam, the literary counterpart of the young Virginia Woolf, Lily offers an adult perspective. At the end of the novel, she is forty-three years old, the same age as Virginia Woolf when she started *To the Lighthouse.* Lily "is in many ways Woolf's portrait of herself, struggling in middle age to grasp her parents' legacy" (Hill-Miller 2001, 20). Thus, Cam and Lily represent Woolf's attempt to understand her parents from both a child's and an adult's point of view respectively. Even though Lily Briscoe is not depicted as bearing any particular likeness with Virginia Woolf, either physically or temperamentally, most critics read her as an artistic surrogate for the novelist; she is also childless and is given a virginal name like Virginia. Yet, since Lily is a painter, I

[2] Among others, "Walter Sickert: A Conversation." In *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays*, by Virginia Woolf (Woolf, Walter Sickert: A Conversation (1950) 2016).

read her not only as Virginia Woolf's counterpart, but also as a parallel of her sister Vanessa Bell,[3] which helps us to understand Sellers' wish to scrutinize the two sisters' strong relationship. Lily is the name of a flower like Rose, the child who, being the most artistic of the Ramsays' children, the one who chooses jewels for her mother and colourfully arranges the bowl of fruit for the dinner party, can be seen as a literary stand-in for the young Vanessa Bell.

Vanessa and Virginia had a very close relationship, they greatly influenced each other and Virginia's feelings for Vanessa were often a source of inspiration for her. In Lily's character, Virginia Woolf helps the reader visualize the complicity that the two sisters shared together. "God! How you'll laugh at the painting bits in the Lighthouse!" Virginia wrote to her (Bell 1996 Vol. II, 127)**.** Even though they have often been seen from an opposed dual perspective, they formed a personal and artistic sisterhood that even their sibling rivalry[4] could not break. Very early on they decided that they would make a profession of art and, to avoid jealousy, they quickly decided to dedicate themselves to two different "sisters' arts",[5] Virginia to the verbal, Vanessa to the visual; yet each experimented not only with her own,

[3] In the essay "Unmaking and Making in *To the Lighthouse*", which represents an attempt to read the book through two allegories, grammatical and sexual, and as autobiography Gayatri Spivak considers Cam and Lily both representatives of Virginia Woolf, but Lily being a painter, is also Virginia's sister Vanessa Bell (Spivak 1987, 39).
Hermione Lee considers Lily Briscoe's struggle with her art as much Vanessa's as Virginia Woolf's (Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* 1977).
Anne Fernald points out that Lily has no single biographical analogue, but she is part Vanessa Bell, part Vita Sackville-West and part Virginia Woolf herself (Fernald 2005, 14).
Jane Lilienfeld considers Lily Briscoe as an artistic surrogate of the author, (Lilienfeld, "Where the Spear Plants Grew: the Ramsays' Marriage in *To the Lighthouse*" 1981, 165).
Michel Leaska considers the painter as a silhouette of Virginia Woolf, the novelist (Leaska, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf: From Beginning to End* 1977, 139).

[4] Quentin Bell, reporting Virginia's unusual way of writing at a desk so high that she had to stand, suggests that the main reason for that had to be found in the fact that Vanessa, like being a painter, stood to have a better perspective of her picture (Bell 1996, Vol. I, 73).

[5] I borrow the expression from *The Sisters' Arts*, written by Diane Filby Gillespie. In her book, she shifts her attention from Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell's personal relationship to the professional one. She points out that the visual and verbal arts are not just siblings, they are female siblings. Diane Filby Gillespie claims that her changing from 'the sister arts' into 'the sisters' arts' has political, metaphorical and aesthetic implications (Gillespie 1988, 4).

but also with the other's art, and they set their sights on the same goal. Virginia Woolf's novels and Vanessa Bell's paintings were in constant dialogue, thus, even though they were dedicated to different artistic fields, they often discussed and exchanged ideas on art and measured their achievements against each other.[6] Certainly, Virginia felt herself to be dependent on Vanessa's praise, as she considered her a remarkable painter.

In addition, they were friends of Roger Fry, an artist and art critic, who had a strong influence on both sisters and whose comments on her writing Virginia Woolf took into serious consideration: "I am immensely glad that you like *To the Lighthouse* [...], you have I think kept me on the right path, so far as writing goes, more than anyone" (Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf* 1977, 385). In her biography of Roger Fry, Virginia Woolf laments that "he never found time to work out his theory of the influence of Post-Impressionism upon literature" (Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography* 2016). The relationship with her sister and with Roger Fry made Virginia Woolf explore the interaction between visual and literary mediums, and art is so central in *To the Lighthouse*[7] that throughout the novel we witness Lily's painting process in its complex development.[8] As mentioned, Virginia Woolf wrote several essays on visual arts, and she also wrote prefaces to the catalogues of Vanessa Bell's paintings in 1930 and in 1934; being part of the Bloomsbury group, she was well aware of what modern painters were doing. On the other hand, Vanessa Bell illustrated and designed the dust-jackets

[6] "Virginia Woolf made many condescending remarks about the visual arts as part of her competition with her sister. She also liked to equate her professional and financial successes with Vanessa Bell's domestic ones. When Vanessa succeeded as a painter, however, Virginia had two reactions. On the one hand, she did not think it fair that Vanessa should have professional achievements in addition to children; on the other, identifying with her sister as closely as she did, Virginia felt more certain of her own artistic gifts" (Gillespie 1988, 10).

[7] In "Art in *To the Lighthouse*", Ruby Cohn defines Woolf's novel as a work of art about art likewise *Hamlet* and *Don Quixote* (Cohn, Art in *To the Lighthouse* 1975).

[8] "Not only is a canvas painted throughout the entire novel, constituting an embedded parallel visual text, and has an artist as the principal witness to all major scenes, but the textures of the novel are deeply visual" (Bellamy 2005, 136).

for her sister's works: the two sisters were artistically linked in Frances Spalding's words "their ambition was an important bond between them" (Spalding 2016, 32).

When in her essay 'Character in Fiction' (1924), Virginia Woolf famously wrote that "on or about December 1910 human character changed" (Woolf, 38), she was not explicitly talking about painting, but she certainly had in mind the opening in November of the First Post-Impressionist Exhibition in London, whose title was 'Manet and the Post-Impressionists'. The abstract experimental paintings of Cézanne, Picasso, Van Gogh among others shocked the public, who were used to a more photographic representation of reality. In her biography of Roger Fry, Virginia Woolf reports that the paintings were considered outrageous. Roger Fry had been asked to organize this exhibition at the Grafton Gallery in the autumn, which he considered a great opportunity for putting young English artists in contact with the works of Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso. As Virginia Woolf pointed out, Roger's aim was "to explain and to expound the meaning of the new movement, to help the young English painters to leave the little backwater of provincial art and to take their place in the main stream" (Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography*, Chap. 7). He was deeply criticized by the establishment, but the young English artists were enthusiastic, so much so that they considered the first Post-Impressionist Exhibition as a revelation, which would affect their work profoundly. Roger Fry's aesthetics, with their emphasis on the concept of analogy[9] in art, also deeply affected those novelists, among whom Virginia Woolf, who were fighting against a traditional method of representation.[10] Virginia Woolf's connection with post-impressionists is made clear by what she wrote in her memoir: "if one could give a sense of

[9] In *Vision and Design*, Roger Fry defines the Post-impressionists' aims as follows: "they do not seek to imitate form, but to create form, not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life" (Fry 2017, 252).

[10] With Woolf's statement about the year 1910 in mind, Suzanne Nalbantian underlines that "her statement regarding the basic change in human character with its link to changes in artistic form was suggesting that the modern novelist thereafter was to have the complicated task of depicting life in a more complex manner than that of mimesis and representation" (Nalbantian 1994, 137).

my mother's personality one would have to be an artist. It would be as difficult to do that, as it should be done, as to paint a Cézanne" (SP, 85).

Fry's idea that there was no break but rather a continuity from Watts to Picasso's works influenced Vanessa Bell, who had met G.F. Watts in 1903 when she was a student of painting at the Royal Academy. Yet, even though Vanessa was impressed by Watt's reputation and thoughts, she very soon distanced herself from his style.[11] As Diane Filby Gillespie has pointed out, like her sister Virginia, Vanessa was influenced by some of Fry's theories, but at the same time, even before she met him, she had started to build her autonomous ideas about art.

The challenge of being women artists

The relationship between the two sisters, which is the focus of Sellers' novel, is analysed here to illuminate the character of Lily Briscoe. As Diane Filby Gillespie points out, both sisters experienced the difficulties of being women artists and rejected the traditional role imposed upon them. "Like Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, [they] struggled to assert their own views and needs in the face of traditional domestic pressures and artistic theories and did so with sufficient vigor to be productive professionals" (Gillespie 1988, 11). Lily's struggle as an artist mirrors Virginia Woolf's and the problems that Lily faces are analogous to the doubts Virginia Woolf had when shaping her novel. "It was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed. It was in that moment's flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child" (TL, 19). As Pamela Caughie has pointed out, through Lily Briscoe, Virginia Woolf tells the story

[11] In the biography of Vanessa Bell, Frances Spalding gives an account of this meeting. She points out that this eminent Victorian painter must have represented the repressive past to Vanessa, from which, after her father's death, she was determined to escape (Spalding 2016).

of her own creative process and the tripartite structure of *To the Lighthouse*, which discards the conventional view of linear time, mirrors the progression of Lily's painting, from her initial attempt to paint Mrs Ramsay, to the completion of the painting after a break of ten years.[12]

Both Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell were aware of the change of sensibility in art and the break with previous tradition in Modernism,[13] which extends over the first part of the twentieth century and whose heyday is to be found in "the years immediately preceding and the years immediately following the First World War" (Bradbury 1991, 36). The two sisters actively committed to experimenting with new forms of art. Vanessa Bell rejected traditional representation in her paintings, and her featureless faces, among which her sister's, break with the tradition of painting portraits conforming to appearance. In her essay "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1924), Virginia Woolf contrasts two generations of writers, the Edwardians and the Georgians, in order to define the contemporary need to transcend realism, which had been associated with the novel, and the necessity to explore new forms to depict characters in the modern world. In "Character in Fiction", she further explores ways to express characters and wonders what reality may be. Lamenting the Edwardians' lack of interest in Mrs Brown,[14] who embodies the character in itself, she calls for different tools and encourages the Georgians first to throw away the inadequate tools of the past and then, urging an alliance between readers and writers, urges them "never to desert Mrs Brown" (54).

[12] "The structure of Woolf's novel is the progression of Lily's painting: its inception in Lily's desire to paint Mrs. Ramsay (part 1); its dissolution following the death of Mrs. Ramsay (part 2); its renewal ten years later when Lily returns to the Ramsays' summer home (part 3); and its completion as the exhausted artist lays down her brush, declaring in the last line of the novel: 'I have had my vision.'" (Caughie, *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* 1991, 33).

[13] Malcom Bradbury and James McFarlane have tried to define Modernism: "the term has been used to cover a wide variety of movements subversive of the realist or the romantic impulse and disposed towards abstraction" (Bradbury 1991, 23).

[14] "You should insist that she is an old lady of unlimited capacity and infinite variety; capable of appearing in any place; wearing any dress; saying anything and doing heaven knows what. But the things she says and the things she does and her eyes and her nose and her speech and her silence have an overwhelming fascination, for she is, of course, the spirit we live by, life itself" (Woolf, "Character in Fiction" 2008, 54).

In her essay "Modern Fiction" (1919),[15] Virginia Woolf had already made it clear that she wanted to free the novel from its previous constraints and to situate it within the realm of consciousness. First, she calls for a new way of considering life and encourages us to "examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions —trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel" (Modern Fiction 2008, 9), then she wishes that the writer could break free from conventions:

> if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end (ibid., 9).

She redefined the novel and consequently plots, characters, and time, but the pre-war period also saw rich achievements in painting as the Post-impressionist exhibition showed. Virginia Woolf often acknowledged the importance that visual impressions had on her creative process, especially as many of her friends were connected with Post-impressionism. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf uses the painter Mr. Paunceforte's style, with his attention to realistic details, as an artistic antithesis to Lily's. "Since Mr. Paunceforte had been there, three years before, all the pictures were like that [Mrs Ramsay said], green and grey, with lemon-coloured sailing-boats, and pink women on the beach" (TL, 14); later it is Lily who laments that it was fashionable "since Mr. Paunceforte's visit, to see everything pale, elegant, semitransparent" (TL, 19). Virginia Woolf incorporated Fry's aesthetics in her novel, and so Lily is a Post-impressionist like Woolf and her sister Vanessa, who tries to paint Mrs Ramsay

[15] In "Modern Fiction", Virginia Woolf tries to define what modern fiction should be. She starts by criticizing H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy, whom she calls materialists, because even though they are good craft men, they are not interested in the spirit, but in the body. She suggests that the modern writer breaks from the constraints which force him to create plots, comedies or tragedies and attempts to represent what interests him and presumably lies in what she calls "the dark places of psychology". She praises other authors, among whom James Joyce, whom she considers spiritual, for their innovations. (Woolf, "Modern Fiction" 2008).

in an abstract way, with colourful, geometrical shapes. "Taking out a penknife, Mr. Bankes tapped the canvas with the bone handle. What did she [Lily] wish to indicate by the triangular purple shape, "just there?" he asked. It was Mrs. Ramsay reading to James, she said. She knew his objection —that no one could tell it for a human shape. But she had made no attempt at likeness, she said" (TL, 43). Her abstract painting can be seen as analogous to *To the Lighthouse,* since both reject the aesthetic of verisimilitude and adopt Fry's concept of analogy.[16]

In a diary entry written on the 3rd September 1926, when Virginia Woolf had nearly completed her novel, she mentions Lily for the first time: "I am doing Lily on the lawn; but whether its her last lap, I don't know" (D, Vol. 3, 106). It is on the edge of the lawn, painting, that Lily is first introduced through Mrs Ramsay's thoughts, which reveal a special link between them: "the sight of the girl standing on the edge of the lawn painting reminded her; she was supposed to be keeping her head as much in the same position as possible for Lily's picture. Lily's picture! Mrs. Ramsay smiled. With her little Chinese eyes and her puckered-up face she would never marry; one could not take her painting very seriously; but she was an independent little creature, Mrs. Ramsay liked her for it, and so remembering her promise, she bent her head" (TL, 17-18). Little information is given about Lily Briscoe, she is thirty-three years old, we do not know anything about her mother, her father and her home are only hinted at and her Chinese eyes convey her exotic position in the Ramsays' family. Like all the other characters in *To the Lighthouse,* Lily loves Mrs Ramsay and the world she managed to create as her thoughts make clear: "what could one say to her? 'I'm in love with you?' No, that was not true. 'I'm in love with this all', waving her hand at the hedge, at the house, at the children? It was absurd, it was impossible. One could not say what one meant" (TL, 19). Later

[16] According to Michael Rosenthal, "Lily's non-representational canvas suggests a metaphoric version of Woolf's non realistic fiction" (Rosenthal 1979, 113).

again she considers that "she was in love with them all, in love with this world" (TL, 22), but it is a conflicting love, confused as it is with rebellion and a desire for freedom.

Lily Briscoe and Mrs Ramsay

Lily's feelings for Mrs Ramsay mirror the complexity of Virginia Woolf's own feelings for her mother Julia; love, in fact, does not prevent Virginia and Lily from contesting Julia and Mrs Ramsay's anachronistic views of life. Significantly, in "The Window" Virginia Woolf makes it clear that Mrs Ramsay and Lily embody two different ways of conceiving art and life. While Mrs Ramsay still believes in the possibility of achieving harmony in life and society by marrying, and she thinks "that Lily's charm was her Chinese eyes, aslant in her white, puckered little face, but it would take a clever man to see it" (TL, 24), Lily resists this model and realizes that she likes being alone and that she wishes to dedicate herself to her art: "she liked to be alone; she liked to be herself; she was not made for that; and so have to meet a serious stare from eyes of unparalleled depth, and confront Mrs. Ramsay's simple certainty (and she was childlike now) that her dear Lily, her little Brisk, was a fool" (TL, 43).

Even though both Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf were married, their husbands never limited their professional careers but understood their need to paint and write. Yet, when Vanessa had her first child Julian, although she was extremely happy, the baby took up much of her time, which made it difficult for her to paint; thus Lily represents the attempt of both sisters to react against the myth of the "Angel of the House" and although she is often discouraged by Mrs Ramsay, who considers painting just a hobby, and by Charles Tansley's whispers in her ear that "'women can't paint, women can't write ...'" (TL; 42), she resists social pressures to get married and plunges into her aesthetic world. Throughout the first section of *To the Lighthouse,* Virginia Woolf shows Lily's ambivalence towards Mrs Ramsay, on the one hand she adores her and longs for intimacy with her, on the other hand she realizes

that there is something frightening in Mrs. Ramsay who tries to manipulate destinies which she fails to understand to the extent that she is seen as leading "her victims, Lily felt, to the altar" (TL, 83).

In spite of that, Lily feels insignificant in comparison to Mrs Ramsay's life. In "The Window" Lily is always shown while she is busy with her painting, she wipes her brushes, she scrapes her palette, she considers shapes, shadows, lights, and colours, which she sees "burning on a framework of steel" (TL,42) and she wonders how to relate masses. When she tries to elucidate her abstract painting to Mr Bankes, the scientist who is used to representational art,[17] namely the portrait of Mrs Ramsay reading to James represented by a purple triangle,[18] Lily expresses herself in terms of formal relations, which mirror Virginia Woolf's own theoretical views on literature to the extent that *To the Lighthouse* can be considered a self-reflexive novel. The painter discusses problems and looks for solutions just as the writer does in creating her novel.

> She [Lily] could not show him what she wished to make of it, could not see it even herself, without a brush in her hand. She took up once more her old painting position with the dim eyes and the absent-minded manner, subduing all her impressions as a woman to something much more general; becoming once more under the power of that vision which she had seen clearly once and must now grope for among hedges and houses and mothers and children —her picture. It was a question, she remembered, how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left. She might do it by bringing the line of the branch across so; or break the vacancy in the foreground by an object (James perhaps) so. But the danger was that by doing that the unity of the whole might be broken" (TL, 45-46).

Lily's painting is one of the many tributes to Mrs Ramsay's beauty, the celebration of her female energy, so great that "a mother and child might be reduced to a shadow without irreverence" (TL, 45), and it is also Woolf's homage to Vanessa Bell's abstract paintings. During the *Boeuf en Daube* dinner party, which can be considered as Mrs Ramsay's own

[17] According to Jane Goldman, "Lily's explanation serves as the novel's implicit aesthetic manifesto" (J. Goldman 2006).

[18] For the different possible meanings of the triangle shape see Linden Peach. (Peach 2000).

work of art, because she tries to create social harmony and to make the moment of love permanent, Lily's ambivalent attitude to Mrs Ramsay is made clear. On the one hand she responds to Mrs Ramsay's silent appeal to be nice to Mr Tansley, even though he belittles her with his words "women can't write, women can't paint", but, on the other hand, she questions this social code and is aware that she needs a different kind of life. Not only does she focus on proportions, and try to find a way "to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left" (TL, 46) as her thoughts indicate: "Yes, I shall put the tree further in the middle; then I shall avoid that awkward space. That's what I shall do. That's what has been puzzling me. She took up the salt cellar and put it down again on a flower in the pattern in the table-cloth, so as to remind herself to move the tree" (TL, 70), but she also realizes that she need not to marry. "For at any rate, she said to herself, catching sight of the salt cellar on the pattern, she need not marry, thank Heaven: she need not undergo that degradation. She was saved from that dilution. She would move the tree rather more to the middle" (TL, 83).

Lily's refusal to marry and her independent spirit are further developed in the third section of *To the Lighthouse*, which mirrors the new unconventional world that the Stephens created in Bloomsbury after Leslie's death. In a letter written on 29th June 1906 to Violet Dickinson, a family friend who had helped her recover after her father's death, Virginia Woolf herself exclaimed "And now we are free women!". It is Lily who underlines the failure of Mrs Ramsay's belief: "It has all gone against your wishes. They're happy like that; I'm happy like this. Life has changed completely" (TL, 143). In "Old Bloomsbury" a memoir of the years from 1904 to 1914, Virginia Woolf describes the Bloomsbury members' unorthodox views on family life, friendship and women's work. She remembers that they could talk about everything and do everything to the extent that even the old views of marriage were completely changed: "I should be sorry to tell you how old I was before I saw that there is nothing shocking in a man's having a mistress, or in a woman's being one. Perhaps the

fidelity of our parents was not the only or inevitably the highest form of married life. Perhaps indeed that fidelity was not so strict as one had supposed" (Woolf, "Old Bloomsbury" 1985, 196). Some years later in *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf depicts Paul and Minta Rayley's marriage in about the same way. In the third section, in fact, they are still married, but, unfaithful to each other, they are now just "excellent friends", a situation which mirrors Vanessa and Clive Bell's marriage where "if gradually love for each other evaporated, it distilled into a lasting affection" (Spalding 2016, 77).

Lily Briscoe and Mr Ramsay

While in "The Window", Virginia Woolf mainly develops Lily's relationship with Mrs Ramsay, whose essence she tries to capture in her canvas, in "The Lighthouse" she also focuses on her connection to Mr Ramsay. As the diary entry of 5th September 1926 shows, a few days after her first words on Lily, Virginia Woolf was still thinking about Lily's role in the novel and about her relationship with Mr Ramsay. "The problem is how to bring Lily & Mr R[amsay] together & make a combination of interest at the end. I am feathering about with various ideas. The last chapter which I begin tomorrow is In the Boat: I had meant to end with R. climbing on the rock. If so, what becomes [of] Lily & her picture? Should there be a final page about her & Carmichael looking at the picture & summing up R.'s character? In that case I lose the intensity of the moment. If this intervenes, between R. & the lighthouse, there's too much chop & change, I think. Could I do it in a parenthesis? so that one had the sense of reading the two things at the same time? I shall solve it somehow, I suppose" (D, Vol. 3, 106).

In the third section of the novel, the role of Lily becomes more prominent and her relationship with Mr Ramsay is further developed. This had never been easy and it certainly mirrors the one between Vanessa and her father Leslie Stephen, whose melodramatic

performances after Stella's death she refused to indulge. In the first part of *To the Lighthouse*, Lily resents Mr Ramsay's aggressive behaviour and his constant dependence on praise. While she was painting, Mr Ramsay "almost knocked her easel over, coming down upon her with his hands waving, shouting out 'Boldly we rode and well', but, mercifully, he turned sharp, and rode off, to die gloriously she supposed upon the heights of Balaclava. Never was anybody at once so ridiculous and so alarming. But so long as he kept like that, waving, shouting, she was safe; he would not stand still and look at her picture. And that was what Lily Briscoe could not have endured" (TL, 18). In the third part, differently from Mrs Ramsay who was always able to meet others' needs, she is unable to offer him the sympathy he is demanding. Lily is also unable to express her sorrow after Mrs Ramsay's death; she asks herself "what did she feel, come back after all these years and Mrs. Ramsay dead?" and her answer "Nothing, nothing —nothing that she could express at all" (TL, 121) reminds us of Virginia Woolf's own reaction after her mother's death as disclosed in her memoir: "I said to myself as I have often done at moments of crisis since, 'I feel nothing whatever'" (SP, 92).

Lily Briscoe: the artist

Even though Lily Briscoe expresses Woolf's continuous ambivalence towards her parents, in the third section of the novel Woolf mainly asserts her role as an artist. Thus, art becomes a major topic and Lily tries to solve her previous aesthetic problems. She still wonders how to fill two empty spaces and to bring masses together and she remembers that "when she had sat there last ten years ago there had been a little sprig or leaf pattern on the table-cloth, which she had looked at in a moment of revelation. There had been a problem about a foreground of a picture. Move the tree to the middle, she had said. She had never finished that picture. It had been knocking about in her mind all these years. She would paint that picture now" (TL, 122). But once again the presence of Mr Ramsay, walking in a rage up and down the terrace, is an

obstacle to her painting. “But with Mr. Ramsay bearing down on her, she could do nothing. Every time he approached — he was walking up and down the terrace — ruin approached, chaos approached. She could not paint. She stooped, she turned; she took up this rag; she squeezed that tube. But all she did was to ward him off a moment. He made it impossible for her to do anything” (TL, 123). She can only start painting when Mr Ramsay, Cam and James leave for the lighthouse, just as Vanessa and Virginia could start working only after their father’s death. Both Mr Ramsay’s literal sailing to the lighthouse and Lily’s inner voyage towards the completion of her painting represent a complex process in the search for the meaning of life. While at first Lily realizes that she has taken the wrong brush and that she put her easel in the wrong place, she is then ready to organize her combination of colours and lines.

> With 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. 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 so flickering, she attained a dancing rhythmical movement, as if the pauses were one part of the rhythm and the strokes 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 (TL, 130).

In *Vision and Design*, Fry discussed the qualities of line at length, which he identifies in rhythm, in the significance and as a gesture (Fry 2017, 175) which, significantly, Virginia Woolf remembers when considering Lily’s picture. She further associates Lily’s creative dedication with her own dedication to writing to the extent that Lily’s painting may be read as an elegy for Mrs Ramsay just as *To the Lighthouse,* in Virginia Woolf’s own words, was meant to be an elegy for her parents. In the third section of the novel, Lily, who could not finish her painting when Mrs Ramsay was alive, after ten years of great losses, takes up her brush again and struggles to depict the woman, whose essence is difficult to fix. Though dead, Mrs Ramsay still influences her life, and Lily, using her memory, goes on “tunnelling her way

into her picture, into the past" (TL, 142). Yet she realizes that "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" (TL, 161). As Margaret Homans has pointed out, "the shapes on Lily's canvas do not represent Mrs Ramsay in any conventional sense, but they do represent the shapes of light and shadow made by Mrs Ramsay's body" (Homans 1997, 136). Lily's memory of Mrs Ramsay is the source of inspiration that helps her to complete the picture, and her nostalgia makes her understand not only Mr Ramsay, but also herself. Lily realizes that everything Mrs Ramsay believed in has gone the wrong way:

> Mrs. Ramsay has faded and gone, she thought. We can over-ride her wishes, improve away her limited, old-fashioned ideas. She recedes further and further from us. Mockingly she seemed to see her there at the end of the corridor of years saying, of all incongruous things, 'Marry, marry!' (sitting very upright early in the morning with the birds beginning to cheep in the garden outside). And one would have to say to her, It has all gone against your wishes. They're happy like that; I'm happy like this. Life has changed completely (TL, 143).

Thus it is Lily who can offer a new perspective on womanhood, which is now seen as compatible with art, just as Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell did after their father's death. In investigating the meaning of life, as Mrs Ramsay had done in the first section, Lily realizes that

> the great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other; herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs. Ramsay saying "Life stand still here"; 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 (TL, 133).

Lily the painter can now accept the validity of her life as an unmarried woman and an artist without feeling inadequate, and realizes that "love had a thousand shapes" (TL, 157). She is

ready to accept both the Ramsays without feeling trapped by them,[19] and she sees them as individuals, so much so that she becomes aware of Mrs Ramsay's invisible side, of her complexity, whose meaning she lovingly tries to penetrate when she asks herself "what did the hedge mean to her, what did the garden mean to her, what did it mean to her when a wave broke?" (TL, 161), and at the same time she can endure Mr Ramsay's demand for sympathy, which earlier she was unable to give him. She can now silently communicate with Mr Carmichael the inscrutable poet, who is the only one with whom she can share her emotional and artistic process. "Suddenly, the empty drawing-room steps, the frill of the chair inside, the puppy tumbling on the terrace, the whole wave and whisper of the garden became like curves and arabesques flourishing round a centre of complete emptiness. 'What does it mean? How do you explain it all?' she wanted to say, turning to Mr. Carmichael again" (TL, 147), questions that echo those of the beach walkers' in "Time Passes". Lily is aware that "nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint" (Tl, 147); yet, although she is not a confident artist and is afraid that her picture will be hung in the attics or hidden under a sofa, she now struggles more effectively to create a harmonious relationship. While painting, she misses Mrs Ramsay terribly to the extent that she wonders if she could make her return by shouting her name. "'Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!' she cried, feeling the old horror come back —to want and want and not to have. Could she inflict that still? And then, quietly, as if she refrained, that too became part of ordinary experience, was on a level with the chair, with the table. Mrs. Ramsay— it was part of her perfect goodness to Lily— sat there quite simply, in the chair, flicked her needles to and fro, knitted her reddish-brown stocking, cast her shadow on the step. There she sat" (TL, 165).

[19] "Accepting both the Ramsays as flawed but monumental human beings, no longer trapped into seeing them as all-encompassing archetypes, Lily Briscoe realises that her imaginings about their lives have ceased to imprison hers" (Lilienfeld 1981, 165).

Mrs Ramsay's reappearance had been anticipated by Lily's vision through the window of "some light stuff behind it," which creates "an odd-shaped triangular shadow over the step" (TL, 164), a reminder of the triangular shape on her first canvas. Not only does Lily resurrect the absent mother and make her live in the present, but significantly Mrs Ramsay also rewards Lily for her efforts and helps the painter solve her compositional problems while, at the same time, enables Woolf to meet her own real mother on equal terms.[20] Moreover, the position of her easel at the edge of the lawn offers a double perspective: on the one hand she sees the house and can reshape the figure of Mrs Ramsay out of her memory,[21] while on the other hand she is given a view of the sea and can follow Mr Ramsay's voyage to the lighthouse: "there was a brown spot in the middle of the bay. It was a boat. Yes, she realised that after a second. But whose boat? Mr. Ramsay's boat, she replied. Mr. Ramsay; the man who had marched past her, with his hand raised, aloof, at the head of a procession, in his beautiful boots, asking her for sympathy, which she had refused. The boat was now half way across the bay" (TL, 149).

Lily's completion of the painting

Art offers her the possibility of synthesizing these experiences and finding a shape "in the midst of chaos". The progress in her painting mirrors her progress in understanding Mrs and Mr Ramsay's visions of life; Lily is "trying to smooth out something she had been given

[20] As Thomas A. Vogler has pointed out "the problem of re-creating and discovering her mother is worked through twice in the novel, but in different ways. In Part I she is alive and present, and the author is trying as an artist to shape her memories of her into a novel. Lily is painting or thinking of painting Mrs Ramsay throughout Part I, and not succeeding. In Part III, Lily is painting Mrs Ramsay from memory (like Virginia Woolf in Part I) and succeeding not on canvas, but in her mind, where the real interactions between memory and art occur. [...]. In some ways then, Lily in Part III parallels Virginia Woolf writing Part I, and comments on the nature of writing that part" (Vogler 1970, 12).

[21] According to Pamela Caughie "Lily's memories are not private but shared in that they activate the reader's memories. For example, when Lily hears a voice saying 'women can't paint, women can't write,' we have identified that voice long before Lily dips into her memory far enough to pull out the name Charles Tansley. This is a common strategy of Woolf's works on the artist figure. [...] This reworking of earlier scenes implicates the reader in the narrative process, merging our memories with the artist's" (Caughie, *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* 1991, 34-35).

years ago folded up; something she had seen" (TL, 162). This memory helps her get a new perspective on love and through it create something that will remain forever. Mrs Ramsay can live on just as Julia Stephen can live on in *To the Lighthouse*.

As Lyndall Gordon has pointed out "Virginia's healthiest response to her mother's death was creative: the completion of Lily's portrait. Virginia Woolf saw biography as a portrait, not a compendium of facts. Her subject had to be composed like a work of art. Memories and facts were essential but, in the end, were only a guide to questions. Memory gave her the beam but only imagination could direct it" (Gordon 1984, 38). Through her experience of love, Lily can also share Mr Ramsay's burden of sorrow with him. In the third section of the novel both Cam and Lily, the two counterparts of Virginia Woolf, reconcile with Mr Ramsay and try to resolve their feelings of loss.

The account of Lily completing her painting parallels the story of the trip to the lighthouse. Woolf shows two different perspectives: Cam, looking at the island from the boat cannot see their house and realizes "how all those paths and the lawn, thick and knotted with the lives they had lived there, were gone: were rubbed out; were past; were unreal, and now this was real; the boat and the sail with its patch" (137), while Lily looking across the bay, thinks that "distance had an extraordinary power; they had been swallowed up in it, she felt, they were gone for ever, they had become part of the nature of things" (TL, 154). Distance[22] is a pivotal theme in the third section of *To the Lighthouse* and punctuates both Mr Ramsay's voyage and Lily's creative struggle, whose possible solution depends on her ability to distance herself from Mrs Ramsay. Lily sees the lighthouse "at an immense distance", Cam cannot see her house after "the little distance" they have sailed. Lily the artist feels "some instinctive need of distance and blue", until she realizes that "so much depends, [...] upon

[22] Katherine Hill-Miller considers *To the Lighthouse* "a book about gaining distance, and a perspective on one's past". (Hill-Miller 2001, 20).

distance: whether people are near us or far from us; for her feeling for Mr. Ramsay changed as he sailed further and further across the bay"(TL, 156).

Significantly, it is only when Mr Ramsay completes his journey to the lighthouse that distance gives Lily a new perspective that enables her to exercise her sympathy genuinely and complete her painting. At the same time, Virginia Woolf, obsessed by the haunting legacy of both parents, concluded *To the Lighthouse* and laid them to rest. Painting and novel are completed simultaneously and their fulfilments show Virginia Woolf's identification with Lily and through her with her sister Vanessa, because as old Mr Carmichael would say "all changes, but not words not paint" (TL, 147). Thus, significantly, while Mr Carmichael, "looking like an old pagan God, shaggy, with weeds in his hair and the trident (it was only a French novel) in his hand" (TL, 169), is crowning the moment, Lily draws a line and completes her painting: "with a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision" (TL, 170).[23] While most critics identify this line with the lighthouse, I prefer to stick to Virginia Woolf's own words. In a letter to Roger Fry, after finishing *To the Lighthouse*, she reaffirmed her formalist view about the novel. "I meant nothing by The Lighthouse. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together" (Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf* 1977, Vol. 3, 385).

[23] As Alex Zwerdling has carefully pointed out "the very sentence 'I have had my vision" has a ring of authority that would have been beyond her ten years earlier. Before she had abandoned her painting,; now she completes it. Before she had played the role of the succoring female at Mrs Ramsay's direction; now she more or less successfully resists Mr Ramsay's pressure for sympathy and simply goes on with her work" (Zwerdling 1986, 199).

Vanessa and Virginia

Writing about her novel *Vanessa and Virginia*, Susan Sellers compares her own feeling on finishing her story to the line Lily Briscoe draws down the centre of her painting.[24] As the title indicates, her book focuses on and fictionalizes Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf's close, but also difficult, relationship, made up of strong affection but also of intense jealousy[25]. Sellers' novel, based on meticulous research, is certainly a work of fiction, a biofiction, but also shows a subtle link with *To the Lighthouse.* Sellers's novel is written in epistolary form and presented as a love letter, an elegy from Vanessa to Virginia; in doing so, the author subverts the usual perspective by showing the painter while she is writing. From the beginning, Vanessa makes it clear that writing belongs to her sister:

> You were the one with words. You were the one who knew how to take an event and describe it so that its essence was revealed. I do not have your talents. If you were here you would know how to tell this tale (V&V, 14).

Throughout the novel, Vanessa constantly compares her talents with her sister's and is aware of their rivalry, which they resolved by taking up different arts.

> We placated each other by exaggerating our differences, renouncing all claim to the other's field. I, always less skilful with words than you, relinquished them to you entirely. I took painting for myself (V&V, 36).

[24] "Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* culminates with one of the characters, a painter Lily Briscoe, finishing a picture by drawing a single line down its center. It is a powerful climax because Lily (whom many critics believe is based on Vanessa) has been struggling with this painting for years. Though she senses no one will ever look at her work, or that if they do they will not understand it, she experiences a moment of epiphany as she realizes she has succeeded in portraying her vision. My own feelings on finishing Vanessa and Virginia are similar. It is a story about two remarkable women it is not the only story, and it is certainly not entirely true. My hope in publishing it is that it will prompt readers to return to the extraordinary wealth of writing and painting by the historical sisters, and perhaps offer fresh insights into their troubled, passionate relationship" (Sellers, "About *Vanessa and Virginia*" from the Two Ravens Press UK website (2008) 2017, 84).

[25] In her interview with Bethany Layne, speaking about Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf, Susan Sellers says: "What fired me to write was their exceptionally close bond as siblings - their loyalty and support for each other, as well as their rivalries and occasional desire to free themselves from the other's orbit" (Layne, Postmodernism and the Biographical Novel 2018, 208).

Yet, even though each sister dedicated herself to her specific art, they were both aware of the other's artistic efforts. Susan Sellers's novel aims at expressing the point of view of a painter in words, a technique which Virginia Woolf successfully employed in the character of Lily Briscoe.

As already pointed out in this chapter, Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell were in constant artistic dialogue; thus, even though they dedicated themselves to different fields, they often discussed and exchanged ideas on art. In *Vanessa and Virginia*, Susan Sellers shows how Virginia absorbs and reworks principles borrowed from painting, to the extent that when Vanessa underlines that "for all your affected disdain, it is my art that is showing you the way" (V&V, 48), Virginia acknowledges the important role that painting has in her new method of writing: "there is no doubt painting is leading the way. Fiction has forgotten its purpose" (V&V, 74). Sellers' biofiction merges not only the portraits of the two sisters as Virginia Woolf did in Lily Briscoe, but also their arts. We see Virginia through Vanessa's eyes, just as in *To the Lighthouse*, Lily offers a pictorial perspective of the Ramsays. Vanessa tells the story as a painter might, using an imaginative, pictorial style and the process of painting itself becomes a way to investigate her relationship with Virginia.[26]

As in *To the Lighthouse*, the novel centres around such themes as family ties, losses, and the effort that artistic creation requires, especially from women. Moreover, the connection between art and life, which is a pivotal theme in Woolf's novel, is further underlined here. Everywhere there are fragments of paintings, scenes from novels or from Woolf's memoirs.

[26] Susan Sellers' words make her research and aim clear "We may not have access to many of Vanessa's words, but what we do have are her paintings. I realized that if I wanted to get to know Vanessa as a character; I would have to do so from this perspective. Consequently, I bought or borrowed every book I could that contained reproductions of her art. I visited the house she settled in at Charleston, almost every wall of which is decorated. For an entire year; as I worked on the first draft of what became the novel, the walls of my study were covered with Vanessa's images. Given the close relationship that existed between the two sisters I wanted my writing to echo Virginia's interior, poetic, lyrical style – but I did not want to produce a pastiche, and whatever I did had to be with a painter's voice. Since I am not a visual artist myself, I visited friends who are and watched them work" (Sellers, "About *Vanessa and Virginia*" from the Two Ravens Press UK website (2008) 2017, 82).

As the title indicates, *Vanessa and Virginia* offers an intimate insight into the relationship between the two sisters. Their emotional territory is explored: we see the loyalty and support the two sisters gave to each other, but also their wish to break free from the other's influence. The novel is a portrait of sibling rivalry and closeness, love and jealousy. Vanessa Bell becomes the central subject here, and the novel follows her while she is thinking back to their history of sisterly complicity. As in *To the Lighthouse*, memory plays an important role here, since Vanessa revisits the story of her past and her memory moves across the years.

As already pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, Sellers adopts Woolf's pioneering technique of exploring the inner life of her characters, moreover she focuses on everyday events, which are apparently banal, but meaningful for the protagonists' consciousness. Present tense scenes in the first and second person convey memories, and Vanessa is, in fact, trying to come to terms with her sister's haunting presence, her writing gaining a cathartic power, just as Virginia Woolf wrote *To the Lighthouse* to exorcise the ghosts of her past.

The novel is written in short vignettes, each chapter broken up into small sections. The early chapters describe the sisters' childhood, their relationship with their brother Thoby and their longing to escape their suffocating life: "we were like fledgling birds watching for the clues that would enable us to fly" (V&V, 16). One of Vanessa's first memories is Virginia's "snake green eyes" when she tries to "lure [Thoby] away" (V&V, 1). Sellers shows how essential Vanessa was to Virginia's precarious balance even in their adolescence, and how Virginia was always looking for her sister's maternal role which was able to soothe and help her, "a poor, orphaned goat, bleating most piteously for her dolphin mother" (V&V, 11). The family relationships are vividly drawn and pages are dedicated to the summer holidays in St Ives, so memorable for the whole family that they became a source of inspiration for *To the*

Lighthouse. Vanessa remembers the great freedom the children were given and above all she remembers her liberty "to draw and paint all day" (V&V, 13), which reminds us of Lily Briscoe, always busy with her painting. Vanessa's thoughts witness the everlasting memory of St Ives for her: "a sudden memory of our childhood holidays in St Ives flashed through my mind" (V&V, 82).

Sellers' novel gives a voice to the painter Vanessa, and her work is described in detail, just as *To the Lighthouse*, mainly in the third section, gives voice to the painter Lily and to her efforts to find balance and colours. In *Vanessa and Virginia*, the younger, more famous sister is in the background, but her distant presence affects the story, similarly to Mrs Ramsay, who, although dead, helps Lily to complete her painting and Mr Ramsay, Cam and James to reach the lighthouse and a new understanding of one another. Vanessa remembers the trip that the Stephens made to Cornwall after their father's death, their wish to go to the Godrevy lighthouse, which is postponed because as Virginia says, quoting verbatim from *To the Lighthouse* "'There'll be no going to the lighthouse tomorrow. It's forecast rain" (V&V, 39).

Sellers' book points out how the two artist sisters dedicated their lives to artistic experimentation and innovation, after the shock of the Post-impressionist exhibition, and it emphasizes Vanessa's search for balance and colour, as well as Virginia's successful overcoming of conventional fiction to achieve a change of perspective, which Vanessa sees in *To the Lighthouse.*

> With *To the Lighthouse* it was different. There, for the first time, I felt the full force of your genius. In the intricate balance between composition and vision, in the exquisite execution of each phrase, I knew, despite myself, that you were a consummate artist and that nothing I could do would ever compete. Once again, you had told our story, yet this time you had done so in a way that bridged the gap between biography and art. You had painted Mother and Father with a surety that took my breath away. It was as if, by homing in on certain traits, you could give them to your reader with a directness that made them archetypal as well as vivid, instructive as well as real. You had freed them from the snares of memory and used them to reflect on the deeper issues of human life. You had done all this in prose of such limpidity,

> such poignancy, that I to could only marvel at your gift. You had done more. Through the boldness of your framework, extending and then collapsing time so as to show its impact rather than its passage, you had opened up new possibilities for your art. I began to see equivalent hurdles and prospects in my own work. For once, what you had accomplished was so momentous it advanced us both (V&V, 76).

These words show the nature of the sisters' working relationship, which alternates between admiration and rivalry. Since the point of view in *Vanessa and Virginia* is that of a painter, Susan Sellers often shows Vanessa in the act of painting. As in *To the Lighthouse* great importance is given to colours and form; Vanessa is interested in "the impact of colours" (V&V, 44), and she paints "a series of rectangles" (V&V, 43) using bright colours, and her position in front of her canvas mirrors Lily's. "I am fascinated by the way the two reds shun and call to each other. Sometimes, when I stand back from my canvas, I can see nothing else" (V&V, 44). Vanessa plays with colours, she mixes them and most importantly she decides "to ignore verisimilitude" (V&V, 47). She even uses colours to soothe and console herself. Sellers' description of one of Vanessa's paintings, a portrait of a mother and child, shows her struggle with space and distance, a pivotal theme in *To the Lighthouse.* "There is a black line running diagonally across it, dividing the almost monotone blue of the upper part from the murky whiteness of the central space. [...] At the front, in the left hand corner, set against the barren whiteness, is a yellow-brown triangle, a rock perhaps" (V&V, 20). This painting openly refers to the one Lily is painting in "the Window" representing Mrs Ramsay and her son James.

Throughout the novel Vanessa's paintings play a major role, and even though they do not aim at giving a realistic portrait, it is clear that they are rooted in the same personal experiences from which Virginia took inspiration. Like Lily Briscoe, Vanessa points out that "art is not life, after all" (V&V, 77); she also fights with perspectives and the line she draws parallels both Lily's and Virginia Woolf's interest in form. The dialogue between the two sisters, which Susan Sellers builds up, illuminates the artists' struggle to complete both the

painting at the end of *To the Lighthouse* and the novel itself. Virginia tries to investigate the meaning of one of Vanessa's tiles just as William Bankes wonders about Lily's abstract painting.

> 'So if you weren't thinking about a particular seascape, what did you intend this mark to be here?' You draw your finger along a straight black line down the center of the tile. 'I had assumed it was a lighthouse.' I look at the line. I remember painting it, sensing that the swirls of blue required an anchoring point. 'I'm not sure I meant anything in particular by it, though of course I've no objection to you seeing it as a lighthouse.' I pick up the pot and pour two cups of tea. You continue to examine the tile. 'But if it isn't a lighthouse —or indeed anything specific –why is it there?' (V&V, 106).

One of Vanessa's recurring dreams is evidently inspired by Lily's subject for her painting: "I have a recurring dream. In it I am sitting by a window, looking out over a garden. I am wearing Mother's green shawl and there is a boy by my side. He is cutting shapes from a magazine, frowning as he concentrates on his task" (V&V, 126).

Throughout the novel, the reader witnesses Vanessa's vain struggle to paint her mother's face and shares her admission that in *To the Lighthouse* Virginia succeeded where she failed. "You succeeded where I failed. You were not embroiled as I was. The portrait of Mother you drew in your novel was so convincing that I heard her voice, saw the perpendicular of her back, as I read" (V&V, 134).

Even though painting is the main topic, Sellers' book deals with other themes, which were pivotal in Woof's novel. For example, Vanessa underlines how dangerous "the angel of virtue" is for a woman's ambitions, and she remembers her mother's "insistence that marriage is the goal of woman's life" (V&V, 51), a mirror of Mrs Ramsay's own insistence that "they all must marry" (TL, 43). Julia Stephen's tragic death, caused by what Vanessa considers to be her father's unrelenting needs, is also dealt with. Vanessa's thoughts parallel Lily's in *To the Lighthouse.* Vanessa remembers "Father wearing Mother out with his perpetual demands. You caught him perfectly in your novel, when you described his famished beak draining her

energy dry" (V&V, 19) and her memory echoes Lily's idea that Mrs Ramsay "giving, giving, giving, [...] had died— and had left all this" (TL, 124). Yet her mother is also a comforting presence for her children, as Sellers makes clear by drawing a further comparison between Julia and Mrs Ramsay: "I remember Mother's tales of the creatures that lived in the old sheep's skull Thoby found washed up on the beach at St Ives. To calm your fears Mother wound her green shawl round its horns, and as she tucked you into bed said how it was like a mountain, with valleys and flowers and goats running about" (V&V, 87).

The untimely family deaths, which break the harmony of the first section of *To the Lighthouse* are also in the background of *Vanessa and Virginia*, where Thoby, Stella and Julia are often the protagonists of Vanessa's thoughts. Differently from Woolf's novel, *Vanessa and Virginia* also deals with Woolf's own death. At the end of the first chapter, in fact, Sellers reconstructs the most dramatic episode associated with Woolf's life, her suicide. Vanessa tries to figure out what went on inside her sister's head: "You walk along the bank searching for stones to fill your pockets. [...] Did you remember me, Leonard, the children, as you left your stick on the bank and strode out into the swirling water, or were your thoughts bent on escaping what you could no longer bear to endure?" (V&V, 17). The account of this suicide is given from different perspectives and made up step by step. Since Susan Sellers plays with truth she borrows from Woolf's real attempt to kill herself a few days before her death, and projects it onto Vanessa, imagining her own attempt to drown herself: "I step into the water and feel the icy cold seep into my shoes" (V&V, 147), which reinforces the empathy between the sisters. Death by water is a recurrent topic in *Vanessa and Virginia*; after her miscarriage, in fact, Vanessa considers this option: "Only water can obliterate what I have done. Only drowning will thwart the monsters I might still create" (V&V, 70), and Virginia's suicide is anticipated by a nightmare Vanessa has: "we are underwater. [...] Your features are distorted by the water, but I can read your fear. [...] I am terrified that if I let you go you will drown"

(V&V, 78). Yet it is Virginia who dies first. Once again Vanessa identifies with her sister to the extent that she lives her death in her own flesh and body: "I see you standing on the river bank, casting about for stones to fill your pockets. I feel the paralysing cold as you wade in, the weight of your wet clothes as you force yourself forward. The water is in my mouth, my lungs, as the river drags us under. This time I cannot escape" (V&V, 177).

As Susan Sellers herself claims,[27] her book is not only an elegy from Vanessa to Virginia, but also her own elegy for the two sisters. Thus the end of the novel, when Vanessa collects her pages and dedicates them to her sister Virginia, may be read as Sellers own dedication to them:

> There, it is done. I tie the pile of pages together and go into the hall to put on my jacket and boots. I walk to the river and kneel down on the bank. I untie my parcel and dip the first sheet in the water. The words blur. I wait until the paper is soaked so that it will not be blown away by the wind, then let it go. The current snatches it from my fingers and rushes it downstream. I take the next page from the pile. When the last one has been released I make my dedication. This story is for you (V&V, 181).

Susan Sellers' novel displays her informed criticism, but she subtly mixes fact and fiction, biography and fiction as the novelist Virginia Woolf did in *To the Lighthouse*. She considers the recent proliferation of biographical fiction exciting and the novel as the best form for exploring life; fiction, in fact, can give us access to the mind more easily than any other form of art. She makes a distinction between history and biography, which inform us about people and their period, and fiction that makes us actually live it. (Layne, "Postmodernism and the Biographical Novel" 2018).[28]

[27] Sellers, personal communication, July 27, 2018.

[28] In answering Layne's question about the opportunities that the biographical novel offers, in contrast to traditional history or biography Sellers says: "While history or biography aims to present as many facts as possible (including different theories and viewpoints), this is not the main objective of a historical or biographical novel.[...] I would say that whereas history and biography teach us about a period and people, fiction takes us there. It aims to place us in the moment - so we experience what it is like to be alive at that time or to be that person, without the advantage and constraint of hindsight but as events happen and choices are made (Layne, Postmodernism and the Biographical Novel 2018, 210).

Susan Sellers did not suffer from the so-called "anxiety of influence" but she claims that in writing her novel, she wanted to do justice to Virginia Woolf rather than rivalling or surpassing her. Bloom's model has always struck her as somewhat patriarchal and she would like to think that there are alternative scenarios. After all, as Virginia Woolf says in *A Room of One's Own,* 'we think back through our mothers if we are women'. She believes that all contemporary novelists particularly women are indebted to Virginia Woolf, whether they are aware of it or not, and she considers every writer as one of her heirs. (Sellers, personal communication, July 27, 2018).

Susan Sellers, a Professor of English Literature, Editor of the *Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf* and Co-General Editor of the Cambridge University Press edition of the writings of Virginia Woolf, has created a powerful novel clearly based upon accurate research on Woolf's and Bell's lives and works. As she herself has stated "there are plenty of references to Woolf's fiction in *Vanessa and Virginia*" (Layne 2018, 211), references which this thesis has demonstrated. Yet even though she respects the well-known biographical events in the sisters' lives with some fidelity, she writes a work of fiction, which allows her some freedom to invent. Sellers herself gives an account of her writing process: "[d]uring the process of drafting *Vanessa and Virginia*, there came a point where I consciously had to let go my research, in order to allow my characters to come alive on the page" (Sellers 2017, 83). Sellers successfully renders Virginia's and Vanessa's voices, and in so doing allows the reader either to simply enjoy the novel, or eventually to "investigate" the truth of Woolf's and Bell's lives.

Conclusion

The starting point of this thesis was my awareness that Virginia Woolf, together with her interesting life and work, is a constant protagonist in postmodernist biofictions, to the extent that nowadays she has become a cultural commodity. My aim was not so much to investigate the reason why contemporary writers are drawn to Virginia Woolf, because undoubtedly her life, which the many biographies have highlighted, arouses great reverence and devotion; but rather, I wanted to find out whether I could trace elements in her own fiction that could explain Woolf's relevance to contemporary postmodernist biofictions.

Following this path, I focused on only one canonical text, *To the Lighthouse*, because it is the most intimately revealing of her works; in it, in fact, Virginia Woolf turns to autobiographical material, and refines her constant subject, that is to say the continual interchange between life and fiction. Even though Virginia Woolf was afraid of exposing herself in her fiction, the publication of her diaries, letters and memoirs has made it inevitable that parallels would be drawn between her life, as documented in her personal writings, and her novels. *To the Lighthouse*, in which she openly drew inspiration from her own life experience and transformed biographical facts into fiction, has inspired epigones who have successfully reproduced her pivotal themes and have made a contribution to shaping Woolf's iconicity.

As I said in the Introduction, I believe that in this novel Virginia Woolf extended the limits of the *roman à clef* to create something in which life writing and fiction are combined. Thus, I worked to demonstrate how the effects of her experiments in life writing as well as of

her blurring the rigid borders between fact and fiction have clearly inspired those postmodernists, whose aim is to deal with the complex relationship between life and fiction.

The starting point of this thesis was the awareness that *To the Lighthouse* is heavily suffused with Woolf's life and that in this book her autobiographical material is transformed to create a work of fiction. Even though Virginia Woolf believed in the modernist idea of aesthetic impersonality, which seems to require a rejection of biography, she was closely exposed to biography and a close analysis of her novel shows that the autobiographical is actually a pivotal theme. *To the Lighthouse*, in fact, presents auto/biography, but extends its limits and turns it into something between biography and fiction.

In the second chapter of this thesis I investigated the elements and events that Virginia Woolf borrowed from her own life and the way she "recycled" them in *To the Lighthouse*. Therefore, since her novel can be read both as pure fiction and as fictional autobiography, I considered it as an antecedent of contemporary biofictions. I have never argued that *To the Lighthouse* is a work of biofiction, which is a prime postmodernist practice. In her novel, in fact, Virginia Woolf does not use her parents' or siblings' real names, which is the defining feature of this genre. Yet *To the Lighthouse* is so full of life and personal history, that I felt free to make a connection between her form of life writing and contemporary biofiction, which is undoubtedly a form of life writing. I aimed at illuminating how exactly *To the Lighthouse,* by exploring life for the purpose of fiction, has had a great influence on contemporary authors, who have appropriated and adapted her key themes, such as the transience of fame, the theme of the journey as self-discovery, the meaning of life, the sorrow for untimely losses and the struggle to become an artist.

Hence, I focused on issues in Woolf's novel, which were absorbed, more or less obviously, by the biofictions taken into consideration. Woolf's novel, as I discussed at length

in chapters three and four, was an echo chamber for two contemporary novels, Maggie Gee's *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* (2014) and Susan Sellers' *Vanessa and Virginia* (2008), which not only re-appropriate and adapt Virginia Woolf's life, but also insert many more or less obvious allusions to *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Both novels explicitly stand as an act of homage to Virginia Woolf, and they are imbued with the modernist tradition. They absorb themes and narrative techniques from *To the Lighthouse,* to the extent that they can be read as immediately recognizable biofictions, but also as echoes of Woolf's novel.

Gee and Sellers engage in a dialogue with *To the Lighthouse*, but they also reshape it into an autonomous narrative rooted in their times. Through their retellings, both Maggie Gee and Susan Sellers perpetuate Woolf's novel in the twenty-first century, and prolong and update its core themes. Their novels are based on minute research, and not only demonstrate that the two writers know Woolf's work inside out, but also reveal their creative ability to fill in the spaces that the traditional biographies left out. In her novel, Maggie Gee audaciously resurrects Virginia Woolf and imagines how her life would be in twenty-first century New York. She borrows extensively from *To the Lighthouse,* quoting some sentences verbatim and using Woolf's structural, stylistic and thematic devices, but goes further and imagines Virginia's thoughts and feelings.

Susan Sellers sees Virginia through her sister Vanessa's eyes and investigates the relationship between the two sisters. She mainly focuses on the sisters' artistic struggles in their respective art forms, which I considered as a mirror of Lily Briscoe's own artistic struggle to finish her painting. Moreover, since I read Lily Briscoe as the literary counterpart of both Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf, Sellers' novel gave me the opportunity to justify this perspective. Even though the influence of *To the Lighthouse* is less obvious here, memory also plays an important role in *Vanessa and Virginia.* Susan Sellers worked hard to avoid

straight pastiche, but she inevitably relied on Woolf's investigation of the character's inner life, which is one of the essential features in *To the Lighthouse.*

These contemporary novels, both written by women, make these retellings particularly interesting because they show that women are willing to borrow from the work of Virginia Woolf, to do justice to Virginia Woolf rather than trying to rival or surpass her. Thus, they are ready to "think back through our mothers if we are women" as Woolf stated in *A Room of One's Own*.

This thesis has demonstrated that postmodernist works are not unoriginal copies of the source-text; on the contrary they show that creation is a fruitful process of echoing the past and reinforcing the literary status of Woolf's work. My aim was to state that the themes and aesthetic features of *To the Lighthouse,* incorporated in an original way in the two postmodernist novels, are a source of inspiration for those writers, who are keen to engage with life writing and to create a blend of biography and fiction.

In conclusion, since I am a high school teacher always fighting to help my students love Virginia Woolf, I think that the postmodernists' practice of borrowing and recycling from the past has a positive cultural implication, since they have the merit of facilitating access to *To the Lighthouse* and addressing a larger number of young readers. The two postmodernist novels examined here, can be enjoyed both by readers who do not have extensive knowledge of Woolf's life and her work, and also by more competent readers who can better appreciate the refashioning of the original text and the many allusions to *To the Lighthouse.*

Appendix: Conversations with the authors

These are the original transcripts of the conversations with Maggie Gee and Susan Sellers, who have given permission to include them in this thesis.

Conversation with Maggie Gee

March 26, 2018

Q: Like *To the Lighthouse*, your novel has a three-part structure. In one of your interviews you said that you introduced a bridging section in your novel, modelling it on 'Time Passes'. What are the similarities between Woolf's second section and yours?

Gee: My novel is set on a plane because it is a modern book. Virginia Woolf never flew and she was never in New York. Technology is a recurrent theme in the novel. Virginia loves the lift, she has fun in the hotel lift, she uses the Internet to find out if she is still read, and she flies on a jet plane for the first time in her life. At the beginning, my novel was divided into two parts, with two main characters, but I felt it was too static. So echoing Woolf, I am doing what she did. I created a three-part structure, which is more dynamic.

Q: In the second part of your novel, there are intertextual passages taken directly from Woolf's *To the Lighthouse.* Would you define these parts of your novel simply as homage?

Gee: The whole novel is homage.

Q: Gerda, Angela's daughter, is reading *To the Lighthouse* while flying to New York, reinforcing the idea that 'Time Passes: London-New York-Istanbul' is closely building an overarching relationship with Woolf's novel. Why did you choose *To the Lighthouse* as the most obvious reference to Virginia Woolf's work?

Gee: Gerda came in a lot later. Her name is taken from Hans Anderson's *Snow Queen,* a writer I consider very modern. Gerda is a teenager and a heroic female character like Anderson's character. She is quite funny. She ends up reading *To the Lighthouse,* meaning to hate it because she is jealous of her mother's interest in Virginia Woolf.

Q: The Statue of Liberty is seen by Virginia Woolf as the lighthouse on Vanessa's dust jacket of her novel and its seeing it prompts her interior monologue in which she remembers her mother Julia. Can we see a link between Julia and the Statue of Liberty as a mirror of the relationship between Mrs Ramsay and the lighthouse?

Gee: Virginia longs for her Mom, who died young and was always very busy.

Q: You borrow from Woolf's biographies, diaries, letters and it is clear that you know her work inside out. Did you have to cope with the so-called Anxiety of Influence?

Gee: I will never do it again. I got stuck and then I had to have faith to finish my novel.

Q: Your novel faces the topic of the durability of fame, a pivotal theme in *To the Lighthouse.* Mr Ramsay (and before him Woolf's father Leslie Stephen) is always worrying about the longevity of his work. Did you have *To the Lighthouse* in mind when in your novel you considered Woolf's uneasiness about her literary legacy?

Gee: I took her diaries into consideration.

Q: From a stylistic point of view, could you please tell me why you sometimes use italics, capital letters, dashes, brackets? Is it a deliberate echoing of Woolf's style?

Gee: I wanted to pay homage to form. I love form, I love dashes, which I consider lively and fast. They give books an airy quality and my novel had to be light and airy.

Q: You use the word ambivalence about Virginia and Angela Lamb is definitely ambivalent about her, alternating between affection and impatience. Are you referring to the problems contemporary authors have when they measure up to such an important writer of the past?

Gee: Angela wants to be validated by Virginia, but she never treats her as an equal.

Q: Angela Lamb is a best-selling novelist. By choosing her as coprotagonist of your novel, did you try to articulate the nature of contemporary writing?

Gee: I think that deference does not help us to write, but all modern women in Europe and U.S.A. write back to Virginia Woolf.

Q: By resuscitating Virginia Woolf at the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, are you referring to the literary theories about 'The Death of the Author'?

Gee: I consider these theories irritating criticism. Critics want to take our place. Conversely, Woolf's criticism is lively, is human. She does not want to kill the author.

Q: Do you think that *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* may encourage people who only dimly know Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* to read it? Can your novel propel Virginia Woolf further into popular culture?

Gee: I hope so. I wanted to invent a new story, even though most references to Woolf's real life are based on her writings or on the biographies. There is only one invention about the past. Her thoughts and her feelings are my imaginings. But this is my Woolf, I wanted to give her a new life.

Q: What are the implications of this renewed interest in the biography of Virginia Woolf?

Gee: It has never gone away since Bell's biography.

Q: In ‘How Should One Read a Book?’, which Virginia Woolf wrote when she was working on *To the Lighthouse,* she invites readers to compare texts from different historical moments. Can your novel be considered a literary affiliation of Woolf’s work in general and *To the Lighthouse* more specifically?

Gee: Let me say you are the first person who has noticed the range and variety of explicit and implicit references to *To the Lighthouse,* especially in ‘Time Passes’. *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando* are the presiding Woolfian spirits of the book.

Conversation with Susan Sellers

July 27, 2019

Q: In ‘How Should One Read a Book?’, which Virginia Woolf wrote when she was working on *To the Lighthouse,* she invites readers to compare texts from different historical times. Can your novel be considered a descendant of Woolf’s work in general and of *To the Lighthouse* more specifically?

Sellers: ‘Perhaps not so much a descendant as part-homage, part new creation.’

Q: You acknowledge that your novel is indebted to some of Virginia Woolf’s biographies. It is obvious that you know her work inside out, but *Vanessa and Virginia* is a work of fiction so you also inserted imaginary details to represent Woolf. Did you have to cope with the so-called ‘Anxiety of Influence’?

Sellers ‘I felt a degree of ‘anxiety’ – though this came more as I considered publishing rather than in the act of creation and was connected to wanting to do justice to Virginia Woolf rather than rivalling or surpassing her. Bloom’s model has always struck me as somewhat patriarchal and I’d like to think there are alternative scenarios. After all, as Virginia Woolf

says in *A Room of One's Own,* we think back in an enabling sense through our mothers if we are women.'

Q: Even though Virginia Woolf claimed that fact and fiction cannot mix, in *To the Lighthouse* she inserted members of her family and created their rich interior lives. Did you have her novel in mind when in *Vanessa and Virginia* you subtly mixed fact and fiction to build up Vanessa's interior life? Why is it now acceptable to blend fact and fiction?

Sellers 'There have never been clear lines between fact and fiction – we only have to turn back to Shakespeare to see that. In Woolf's case the lines were constantly crossing. There are striking strands of fiction in Woolf's essays which she uses in diverse ways. Sometimes the fictional element is there to carry the reader along with her – as in 'Flying Over London'. Sometimes it's deployed as a structuring device to give cohesion to the whole as in 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure'. Sometimes it's used to fill in the gaps – often with a political point as in *A Room of One's Own*. There's fact in Woolf's fiction – her parents haunt *To the Lighthouse* as you say, while her brother Thoby appears in both *Jacob's Room* and *The Waves*. Her friend and lover Vita Sackville-West is openly acknowledged in *Orlando.* But even in novels like *Mrs Dalloway* she drew on real-life counterparts. She visited Gerald Brenan for a number of weeks, whose experience of WWI parallels that of Septimus Warren Smith at a particularly formative stage in her writing of *Mrs Dalloway.* And there's plenty of evidence to indicate not only that Clarissa Dalloway herself was based on the society hostess Kitty Maxse, but that Clarissa (who is presented somewhat satirically when she initially appears in Virginia Woolf's first published novel *The Voyage Out*) and her story are altered by what happens to Kitty Maxse.'

Q: Why did you decide to write a story from Vanessa's point of view? Can your novel be considered as a love letter from Vanessa to Virginia but also as your love letter to Virginia Woolf?

Sellers: 'I did think of it as an elegy from Vanessa to Virginia. And I like that idea of the novel perhaps being my own elegy to both sisters.'

Q: You craft your novel in short vignettes, each section framing a particular moment in time, beginning with memories of the sisters' childhood. For example, the memories of their holidays in St Ives; is there any connection with *To the Lighthouse* where memory plays such an important role?

Sellers: 'Definitely. And of that resonant notion in *Orlando* of memory being like a seamstress sewing together the scraps and fragments that remain into some kind of pattern.'

Q: What can you as a novelist communicate about Vanessa and Virginia that a biographer cannot?

Sellers: 'There are commonalities of course between the two approaches (both derive from considerable research and both aim to interest readers in the lives of their subjects), but there are differences too. Perhaps one of the most important might be most succinctly expressed by adapting E.M. Forster's adage: a biography tells, a novel shows. So for instance, a biographer might describe the harrowing effect Julia Stephen's death had on her two daughters, but a novelist might dramatise that scene in such a way that the reader is there.'

Q: Your style has deep similarities with Woolf's, in the use of lyricism, in the use of abstract images and in your investigation of inner life. Did you have Woolf's works in mind?

Sellers: ‘Inevitably. I worked hard to avoid straight pastiche, but I was certainly mindful of both the extraordinary precision and mesmerising rhythms of Woolf’s prose, as well as her rich palette of language.’

Q: This novel has a painterly quality, and attention is given to shapes, colours and lines. Did you have Lily Briscoe in mind when you shaped Vanessa’s character?

Sellers: ‘Perhaps more the way Lily Briscoe is described painting than in straight character terms. Though of course Virginia Woolf was drawing on her sister when she was writing Lily Briscoe.’

Q: In your novel there are references to *To the Lighthouse*: ‘I remember Father, wearing Mother out with his perpetual demands. You caught him perfectly in your novel’, and intertextual passages taken directly from it: ‘There’ll be no going to the lighthouse tomorrow’. How would you define these parts of your novel?

Sellers: ‘Perhaps as an echo chamber? One of the most inspiring things for me about both Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell is the way they each became pioneers of their chosen art form, constantly experimenting and creating even during very difficult times in their lives.

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