

## The wandering thread: on the rationality of the novel

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1. **I** am aware that my title is a bit too ambitious. To-day I will only present the broad lines of a work in progress on the question of fiction and propose in that framework a few remarks about the response given by two novels of Virginia Woolf to the issue of the rationality of fiction, such as it has been raised by some modern authors, such as Flaubert, Proust, Conrad and a few others. When I use the word “response” I am not only thinking of the theoretical statements made by those writers about literature, fiction, the novel, etc. I am thinking of the patterns of rationality which are at work in the construction of their novels and allow them to describe such and such things as events and to piece them together into a whole. Accordingly I shall start with an episode in one of Virginia Woolf’s best known novels, *To the Lighthouse*. I borrow it from the sixth chapter of the second part (“Time passes”).

The Spring without a leaf to toss, bare and bright like a virgin fierce in her chastity, scornful in her purity, was laid out on fields wide-eyed and watchful and entirely careless of what was done or thought by the beholders.

[Prue Ramsay, leaning on her father’s arm, was given in marriage. What, people said, could have been more fitting? And, they added, how beautiful she looked!]

As summer neared, as the evenings lengthened, there came to the wakeful, the hopeful, walking the beach, stirring the pool, imaginations of the strangest kind — of flesh turned to atoms which drove before the wind, of stars flashing in their hearts, of cliff, sea, cloud, and sky brought purposely together to assemble outwardly the scattered parts of the vision within. In those mirrors, the minds of men, in those pools of uneasy water, in which clouds for ever turn and shadows form, dreams persisted, and it was impossible to resist the strange intimation which every gull, flower, tree, man and woman, and the white earth itself seemed to declare (but if questioned at once to withdraw) that good triumphs, happiness prevails, order rules; or to resist the extraordinary stimulus to range hither and thither in search of some absolute good, some crystal of intensity, remote from the known pleasures and familiar virtues, something alien to the processes of domestic life, single, hard, bright, like a diamond in the sand, which

would render the possessor secure. Moreover, softened and acquiescent, the spring with her bees humming and gnats dancing threw her cloak about her, veiled her eyes, averted her head, and among passing shadows and flights of small rain seemed to have taken upon her a knowledge of the sorrows of mankind.

[Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth, which was indeed a tragedy, people said. They said nobody deserved happiness more.]<sup>1</sup>

2. The construction of those four paragraphs exactly reflects the structure of the whole section. They clearly oppose two temporalities — two ways in which Time passes — and, along with them, two ways of “telling stories”. There is a temporality which is constructed around the relationship between time and nature — we can call it a lyrical temporality. And there is a temporality constructed around the events that mark the great phases of human life and the essential relationships between human beings: birth, marriage, fatherhood, motherhood, death. The text gives us the right name for this temporality: it is the time of tragedy: a time of great promises and of the collapse of those promises. The heterogeneity of the two temporalities is underlined by a typographic device: the time of tragedy is separated from the other by square brackets.
3. Square brackets are not usual in narration. They normally belong to the writing of comments, footnotes or other forms of explanation. They are still more surprising in forms of narration based on the use of indirect speech in which no voice of the author is allowed to take a distance from the narrative continuum. Here they are clearly put as a mark of disjunction. The disjunction is necessary to break the normal relation between the two temporalities. The parallel between the ages of human life and the seasons of the year has been for centuries a poetical commonplace. This parallel has to be broken in order to counterpose the time of birth, marriage and death to the time of Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter, or the tragic time to the lyrical time. Now we must not be mistaken about the opposition. The point is not that men’s life is only a short parenthesis in the infinite repetition of years and seasons. It is not a question of quantity. It is a question of quality. The very content of the “parentheses” is different from the content of the continuum that they cut from time to time. Nothing could be more striking than the opposition laid by the first sentences: on the one hand, a chaste virgin with her eyes wide open but entirely careless of the acts and thoughts of the beholders; on the other one, the quasi-photographic record of a wedding, with all the beholders looking at the beautiful bride. But again it is not a question of opposing indifferent Nature to human beholders. In the next paragraph it appears that late Spring evenings on the beach, with the clouds reflected in the pools, has another kind of beauty to offer to the “wakeful and hopeful”, a kind of beauty which is not linked to the events of human life, yet is “human” too, since it is the external reflection of their interior vision. Before asking who are those

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1 V. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 143-144.

“wakeful and hopeful” who are counterposed to the beholders of ceremonies of promised human happiness, it is worth examining what they see in the pools on the beach: “flesh turned to atoms which drove before the wind, stars flashing in their hearts, cliff, sea, cloud, and sky brought together”. That transformation of flesh into atoms and that assemblage of cliff, cloud and sky immediately evoke the famous essay on “Modern fiction”: the “incessant shower of innumerable atoms”<sup>2</sup> that falls on the mind at every moment and makes life, truly understood, “a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end”<sup>3</sup>. Our passage looks like an illustration of the essay in which Virginia Woolf asks the novelist to convey the unknown and uncircumscribed spirit of life by freeing himself from the slavery of the plot, comedy, tragedy, love interest or any “catastrophe in the accepted style”<sup>4</sup>. The unfortunate marriage, childbirth and death of Prue Ramsay might sum up the destiny of the character in the old tyrannical plot. It is not incidental that it happens in a section when Time, the time of seasons and years, nights and days, sunsets and sunrises or rising and ebbing tides is the only true character. Nor is it incidental that this section about the action of time is put as a break in a novel whose plot, if it exists at all, is a plot of tyranny and rebellion: there is the open tyranny of the father who makes the expedition to the lighthouse a mere matter of prohibition or constraint ; and there is the soft tyranny of the housewife who is obsessed with the idea of marrying all the women around her.

4. To fight against tyranny, this means to choose the fall of the atoms against the tyranny of the plot. The author of “Modern Fiction” equates this choice with a stance taken in a philosophical fight: spiritualism — or the life of the soul — against materialism. The opposition is not that clear, at first sight. What characterizes the materialism of the old-fashioned novelists? It is, she says, the fact “that they write of unimportant things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring”<sup>5</sup>. Materialism thus is the choice of the trivial and the transitory. But what is the essence of spiritualism, the spiritual truth of life? The answer comes a few lines further: “a myriad impressions — trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel”<sup>6</sup>. Trivial against trivial, evanescent against transitory, where is exactly the difference? Marriage after all is usually held to be something less transitory and a little more attuned to the “life of the soul” than the reflection of the sky in pools, the digging of holes in the sand, the sound of a car in a London street, the letters of a brand drawn by a plane in the sky or other events of the same kind that fill the pages of Virginia Woolf’s novels. It turns out thus that the choice between spiritualism and materialism does not deal with the intrinsic quality of the things that are

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2 V. Woolf, « Modern Fiction », 150.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*, 148.

6 *Ibid.*, 150.

described or the events that are told. It deals with the mode of their linkage. Now the spiritual mode of linkage is given two aspects that may seem contradictory: on the one hand, it is a matter of recording the atoms “as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall”. On the other hand, it is a matter of making the “luminous halo “or the “semi-transparent envelope” in which life, as a whole, is enveloped, shine. Of course, it can be said than the relation of the shower to the luminous halo is no more contradictory than the relation of the soul to the pools and holes on the beach. The task of the “modern” novelist is to change at the same time the nature of the singular events and the nature of the link between them. But, to understand this, it is necessary to restage the old debate within which this twofold task takes on its significance.

5. The debate about the nature of fiction reaches back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Poetry, Aristotle said, is not a matter of rhythm; it is a matter of fiction. Fiction is an arrangement of actions, linked by necessity or verisimilitude. To that extent, poetry is more philosophical than history since the latter deals with the καθ’εκάστον, the succession of the things as they happen in their particularity, while poetry deals with the καθολον, the concatenation of the events as they “could have arrived”, according to the causal links of necessity or verisimilitude. We can sum up the opposition: either the empirical succession of individual facts or the construction of a causal arrangement of events. This setting up of the issue has a double implication: the first one is a poetical one: the exemplary form of poetry is the drama with his acting people giving flesh to the causal connection. Conversely one form of fiction will be left outside poetry or on its fringes: the novel which is the form of fiction where events succeed one another without any necessity. The second implication is political. The opposition of two forms of connection between events is an opposition between two forms of life. There is a form of life that fits the conditions of the καθολον: it is the form of life of the individuals who conceive of great projects and set out to achieve them, a form of life allowing for a dramatic scenario of shift from happiness to misfortune and from ignorance to knowledge. Conversely there is a form of life confined in the universe of the αθ’εκάστον: it is the form of life of those who live in the mere time of birth, reproduction and death, which also is the time of the everyday. It is not incidental that the champion of “modern fiction” equates the logic of the plot with the constraint of tyranny. Aristotle had already made the story of Oedipus the tyrant the paradigm of the fictional plot.
6. In spite of Nietzsche, Modern fiction begins with the burial of tragedy. Among the many events that can serve as landmarks in the history of modern fiction there is the new version made by Goethe of *Iphigenia in Tauris*, the tragedy of the end of the tragedy, ending with the assent given by Thoas to let the ship of Agamemnon’s children go and with his last word: *Lebewohl*. In the name of life, modern fiction bids farewell to tragic action. It bids farewell to the destinies of the princes, to the perfection of the network of causes and effects creating “verisimilitude” and to the

demonstration of the separation between two forms of life. Life does not know of such a separation. Life too is a temporality of expectations and disappointments, of success and failure. But those expectations and those outcomes are woven for everybody in one and the same time of birth and death, of youth and old age, which is also the same time of days succeeding other days, of chains of perceptions and affections through which individuals try to cut out their own identity and to interact with one another. This common fabric of life is now best expressed by two genres which were formerly on the fringes of art. One is lyrical poetry that lays claim to be the proper language of life, the one able, as Wordsworth stated it in a well-known manifesto, to take up the particularity of modest “incidents and situations of common life” and to trace in them “the primary laws of our nature”<sup>7</sup>. Poetry thus replaces the conventions of causal connection by the experimental investigation in a specific state — a state of “excitement” — of those laws of the association of thoughts in the human mind which are, according to David Hume, the truth underlying the uncertainties of causality and the fabric of everybody’s experience.

7. This is a first way of reframing the relationship between the καθολου and the καθ’εκάστον: the καθολου is proved to be present, enveloped in the particularity of the καθ’εκάστον. Now there is another genre: the novel, the genre which was not a genre and told events “as they fall” without piecing them strongly together by the links of necessity or verisimilitude. The collapse of the old poetic hierarchy seemed to put things upside down and to give it the supremacy which formerly belonged to the tragic poem. The misfortunes of the princes were no more paramount in the art of fiction. But when the princes — or the tyrants — are dethroned, new characters pop up: characters representative of the declining classes, the new masters of society or the heretofore invisible inhabitants of the lower classes. New types of plots come to the fore, for instance those showing the rise of plebeians conquering high positions in society. And a new world appears to be a store of innumerable plots: society itself which is now the stage of a multiplicity of expectations, interactions, misfortunes, tragedies or comedies, but also the visible manifestation of a new network of laws, more coercive than the caprices of the kings or of the gods with which the old playwrights had to compose their plots of necessity and verisimilitude. The novel seemed to be the genre in which the science of plot makers can exactly coincide with the manifestation of the truth of social laws. This is still around 1940 the belief that sustains the big project of Erich Auerbach.

8. But the shortcut leading from *Red and Black* to *To the Lighthouse* through *Germinie Lacerteux* in Auerbach’s book witnesses that things did not happen that way. From the very moment when Julien Sorel discovered in his prison that the true enjoyment of life consisted in doing nothing, it appeared that the big plot making the plans of individual characters coincide with the revelation of the laws of society was thwarted by a devastat-

7 W. Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, 156.

ing force of inertia. The most striking example of this counter-movement was given by Balzac when he invented the plot of those thirteen intriguers knowing all the secrets and pulling all the strings of the social machine. Those intriguers end up failing in all their endeavours. The end of the first episode of the trilogy shows us their chief, the terrible Ferragus turned into a semi-fossil, an inert observer of a game of bowls, leaning against a tree near the cochonnet and looking at the other bowls flying through the air or rolling along the ground “with the same attention that a dog gives to his master’s gestures”<sup>8</sup>. The preface of the book had already given the reason for all the failures of the omnipotent Thirteen: “since they could do everything in society, they did not care for being something within it”<sup>9</sup>. What makes the reason strange is that it does not ascribe the failure to any drawback, mistake or misfortune in the development of the action. It ascribes it to action itself, to the mere opposition of doing to being. The cause for this is not only that the nihilist denunciation of the vanity of will and action raised at the same moment — and at the same speed — as the great narrative of the transformation of society by science and by rational wilful action. The cause is that “life” appeared to be more present, more deeply expressed in the silent and inexpressive look of an old destitute man on a game of bowls than in any combination of events provoked by the interplay of competing social interests. It already appeared that life is “not like this”. This is the revelation that the young Flaubert put in the mouth of the devil in the *Temptation of Saint Anthony*. There are no such things as individual wills, feelings and actions using material objects as their tools; there is only the “life of the soul”, which means a perpetual movement randomly assembling an infinity of atoms that get intertwined, part with one another and get interlaced again in a perpetual vibration. The life of the soul is an impersonal life, which does not know of the distinction between subjects and objects, human beings and inanimate things, voluntary actions and passive perceptions. That life which erases all the frontiers can be felt in the humblest manifestations of the life of the senses, says the devil: “Often, apropos of nothing, a drop of water, a shell, a hair, you stopped dead, your eye starring, your heart open. The object you contemplated seemed to encroach on you, the closer you lent towards it, and ties were established; you hugged each other by means of subtle, innumerable grips”<sup>10</sup>.

9. This is what life looks like. But is it what a novel looks like? Can a novel be made of subtle airs, droplets of waves, reflects in pools, shells picked up on a beach, etc? Flaubert agreed that there was a flaw in his work: it was a lyrical work, made of fine pearls, but the thread of the necklace was missing. But what thread? If a novel cannot be made of those perceptions and affections which are the real form of manifestation of life, how can a novel be true? What type of thread can at the same time be true to life and construct a concatenation of events that deserves the name of

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8 H. de Balzac, *Ferragus*, 205.

9 *Ibid.*, 73.

10 G. Flaubert, *La Tentation de saint Antoine*, 444-445.

fiction? The problem is not, as it might seem, to reconcile the singularity of the καθ'εκάστων with the necessity of making the fiction a whole. The problem is to reconcile two types of whole: the luminous halo of life and the organic link of the fiction with a beginning, a development and an end, which also means a story of wills, acts, successes and failures. Flaubert soon understood the problem and proposed a solution that became canonical for “modern fiction”: there is no solution at the level of the whole. The solution has to come from the καθ'εκάστων: not only at its level, but through it. The thread must be a bridge: as it links a sentence with another sentence and a narrative event, tiny as it may be, with another one, it must also bridge the gap between the logic of the impersonal connections of life and the logic of action, which is a logic of personalization and of causal relation between individual wills and acts. It is not enough that the indirect speech allows the narrative of the writer and the sensations of the character to melt into a unique impersonal tissue of micro-perceptions. The logic of succession and the logic of action must slide imperceptibly on each other: a seducer uses all the stereotypes to persuade a woman of his love and he tries to take her hand. She smells a perfume of vanilla and citron and leans back in her chair the better to breathe it in; as she makes this movement, she perceives the long trail of dust dragged by a stagecoach; memories of old desires are raised, like grains of sand; they get mixed with the sweetness of the perfume, and finally she leaves her hand in the hand of the seducer: this is how a continuum of sensations is turned into a cause and makes for the success of the causal chain constructed by the seducer: the “effect” — love story — is the conjunction of two independent series: a series of personal actions guided by a will adjusting appropriate means to its ends and a series of interlaced sensations of smells of vanilla, wind blows, trails of dust and memories of past sensations.

10. Such is the solution found by Flaubert. But there can be no such love story, no such compromise between two ways of producing an event in Virginia Woolf. The episode of the “engagement” of Paul and Minta in *To the Lighthouse* gives us full evidence of this. There can be no intertwining of two forms of causality to produce the expected effect. The will that wants it, the soft domestic tyrant Mrs Ramsay, is not on the beach. She is doing what she has to do at that hour of the day, according to the logic of domestic life: watching the preparation of the diner. She has sent in her place her daughter, Nancy. But Nancy has no intention to take part in the production of the effect. She leaves the couple “look after themselves” and does what the sand, the hour of the day and the state of the tide command when one is a character in a Virginia Woolf’s novel: look at the infinite life present in the smallest pool, concentrate one’s look so as to turn it into an ocean, make it a universe of darkness or light by stretching or removing the screen of her hand between the sun and the pool, and then stay immobile, hypnotized by the intensity of feelings reducing her life and the lives of all the people in the world to nothingness, until the rising tide forces her to go backward and to discover a spectacle totally disconnected

from her contemplation, a spectacle that no sensory thread of events has produced: the young couple in each other's arms. There is no bridge allowing the life of the soul to produce an effect within the chain of purposeful actions. The two series remain apart from each other. The love story has no place in the luminous halo of life; it can be an event only in the mind of Mrs Ramsay who is not on the beach. And it will die with her death in square brackets.

11. Must we conclude that there can be only one temporality possible for the novel: that which equates the life of the soul with the course of the days and the timetable of a housewife? This might seem to be the temporality proposed by *Mrs Dalloway*: the καθολου woven by the mere progression of the καθ'εκαστον. The first sentence makes us know that Clarissa, unlike Mrs Ramsay, will perform herself the acts implementing her will: she will "buy the flowers herself"<sup>11</sup>. From this point on a continuum of sensory events is woven that leads to the last sentence affirming the immediate causal link between her identity, her sensory presence and the effect produced by that presence ("It is Clarissa, he said. For there she was")<sup>12</sup>. The continuity of the novel however cannot be given by the succession of the hours. The mere equality of moments following other moments ends up confirming the tyrannical social rule expressed by the "philosophy of Whitaker": "Everybody follows somebody"<sup>13</sup>. The true continuum is a continuum of contemporaneousness. That's why the sensorium of her presence must not only be widened by the layers of memory, it must also be extended to other persons without Clarissa exerting any power on them. There are those who are part of her past and come back into the present like Peter Walsh; there are the anonymous passers-by who share with her a minute of the impersonal life of the soul as they hear the same noise made by a car in the street or see the same smoke letters drawn by a plane in the sky and who are given in passing a name that Clarissa ignores: Mrs Bletchey who reads the smoke words as "Kreemo", Mrs Coates who reads "Glaxo" or Mr. Bowley who thinks it's toffee. The continuity of the sensorium woven from the first sentence she utters to her final presence must not be broken. As the thread traced by the plane has been cut on the morning when Clarissa has closed the door of her home while the plane circled above Saint Paul and the unemployed truth seeker with his leather bag stuffed of pamphlets that nobody read, Clarissa's daughter must decide to make a detour and go to the Strand instead of coming back home directly in order that the reflection of the sun on her omnibus flash into the room of Septimus and weave a thread between her mother's house and Septimus' apartment.
12. But there is somebody that the continuity in time and space cannot absorb, even though the ambulance taking away his body crosses at the right moment the walk of Peter in his way to Clarissa's party, namely Sep-

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11 V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 3.

12 *Ibid.*, 213.

13 V. Woolf, « The Mark on the Wall », 88.



timus himself. The thread will go on, but what allows it to go on is his suicide. Septimus is the character that must be sacrificed for the story to go on, as was the case for Emma Bovary or Albertine: to go on or rather to succeed, because the problem is not to add a new development and a tragic episode to the plot. It is to secure the right relation between several plots. Flaubert killed Emma so that his artistic plot — the dance of atoms — wins over her sentimental plot — the love story; Proust killed Albertine so that the narrator discovers the illusion of turning the patch of colour on the beach, which should be an object for art, into an object of love. To kill Septimus is a way of both including and suppressing in the story the power that threatens to disrupt the story. Septimus is not only the double of the character who gives her name to the story and was initially destined to commit suicide herself, he is also the double of the writer who lends some of her visions of madness to him. The question is still the same as it was in Flaubert: the success of “modern fiction” rests on its capacity to construct a form of succession that fits the demands of a plot while making the “life of the soul”, the life of the impersonal or the Infinite that denies the artificiality of all plots appear. In order to make it appear or resound, one has to do two contradictory things: on the one hand, one has to dissolve the fragmented temporality of causes and effects, ends and means, thoughts and actions within the continuity of micro-sensory events succeeding one another just as an hour succeeds another hour; on the other hand, one has to create differences of intensity within this continuum. Flaubert implemented a principle of double causality, allowing some random networks of sensory events to create the break in the kingdom of the plot. Proust implemented a principle of double truth, one progressing through the illusions and disillusion of the love story produced by the wrong interpretation of a patch of colour on a beach; the other consisting, on the contrary, in the direct impression of the truth of the sensory event — as a spiritual event — in the mind of the narrator. Virginia Woolf refuses both ways of marrying continuity with discontinuity. Nevertheless there must be a jump from a regime of events to another. In *To the Lighthouse* Lily Briscoe tries to make do with the idea that there is no great revelation, only “little daily miracles”. But Virginia Woolf is not one of those “catholic humanist novelists”, mocked by Sartre, who turn any humble life into a perpetual miracle. The agenda of Clarissa Dalloway cannot coincide with a garland of “little daily miracles” of that kind. It cannot fulfil the promise made to the “wakeful and the hopeful” stirring the pools on late Spring evenings, the promise of “some crystal of intensity, remote from the known pleasures and familiar virtues, something alien to the process of domestic life, single, hard, bright like a diamond in the sand”<sup>14</sup>. A difference of intensity must be produced, a glimpse into one of these mirrors making it impossible to resist the strange intimation made by every gull, flower, tree, man or woman “that good triumphs, happiness prevails, order rules”.

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14 V. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 144.

13. This is when Septimus comes in. Septimus is the one who can make the difference in the temporal continuum, the one who has cut the rope of “domestic life” since the leaves quivering in the rush of air, the sun dazzling them with soft gold, the sparrows rising and falling in jagged fountains, the swallows flinging themselves round and round, the chime tinkling on grass-stalls, or the gold glow produced by the reflect of light on an omnibus, all those harmonies taken together have revealed to him, in their language of signs, the new religion: Beauty is everywhere, and love with it, not the love of love stories and familiar virtues but universal love identical to universal life. Trees are alive, there is no crime, no death, nothing but universal love. Septimus makes the difference. He opposes the pure miracle of the presence of the One, submerging the life of the Self, to the little miracles sprinkled over the timetable of Clarissa. But that pure miracle has a name: it is called madness. Taken at face value, the promise found in the pools (imagination of flesh turned to atoms driving before the wind, of stars flashing in the hearts, of cliff, sea, cloud, and sky brought purposely together to assemble outwardly the scattered parts of the vision within) can only be fulfilled by madness. But, at this point, the liberation is turned into a new form of tyranny: the impersonal “life of the soul” that should be freed from the tyranny of the plot and the self, becomes itself a plot: pools and clouds, leaves and birds, smoke in the air or reflects of light are deprived of their impersonality, turned into signs announcing the new religion to the Chosen one. This is a godsend for the tyrants — the doctors who regulate the right relationships between the self and the one, and who are also the champions of ancient fiction and classical art: Dr Holmes, who plays the part of Human Nature; Sir William Bradshaw, the champion of Proportion — the goddess of classical beauty whose sister is the tyrant Conversion, who “feasts on the will of the weakly”<sup>15</sup>.
14. With the chase of “human nature” and “divine proportion” against the seer, tragedy is back in the heart of the novel. Septimus, the bad double of the healthy Clarissa, must die. But, on the other hand, Septimus, the martyr of the “life of the soul” must be there to oppose his unconditional faith to the idolatry of the pagan worshipper of the little miracles of the everyday. Or rather the tragedy of Septimus must put a radical split in the heart of the story to prevent the “luminous halo” to identify with the mere continuum of those miracles. This is Virginia Woolf’s response to the problem of the compromise between the demands of the plot and the constraints of Truth. It is a dialectical one. There is no imperceptible shift from the shower of atoms to the causal connections of the plot. Instead there is a split between two chains of events: the lyrical continuum of small events leading from Clarissa’s morning to Clarissa’s night; and the tragic confrontation of the great lyricism of Septimus with the plots of human nature. There is no pure beauty, no pure lyricism. Lyricism has to be split in two by tragedy, and it is that split which becomes perceptible when the stream of perceptions of the main characters is interrupted by the random

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15 V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 109.

encounter with the mystery that pops up behind any window. Not pure and simple beauty, Peter Walsh must admit: impure and fragmentary beauty, emerging now and again, as one sees through open or uncurtained windows “parties sitting over tables, young people slowly circling, conversations between men and women, maids idly looking out (a strange comment theirs, when work was done), stockings drying on top ledges, a parrot, a few plants. Absorbing, mysterious, of infinite richness, this life”<sup>16</sup>. The life of the “One” that is the matter of modern fiction has not its proper expression. This is what was already suspected by the narrator of the “unwritten novel”, reading on the inexpressive face of a woman in a train a whole drama of guilt and solitude that is brutally denied at the arrival of the train when the poor lonely creature appears to be a happy mother. This is what is more radically witnessed by the tragedy of Septimus. The life of the One is made of separated stories: moments taken from the continuum of an individual life, extended to the layers of the past and the chance meetings of the present; discontinuities provided by the enigma of the life enclosed in a silhouette in the street or a group behind a window; tragedy of the self crushed in the direct confrontation between the life of the One and the guardians of normal individual and social life.

15. The dialectics opposing the vision of the wakeful on the beach to the wedding and death in square brackets of poor Prue Ramsay witnesses another form of the same dialectics. The division of the book into three parts is significant in this respect, as it separates two temporalities. The impersonal time of the second section is put between two moments — an evening and a morning — in a family story. In the intermediary section, the time of the One becomes autonomous. In the first part it was felt, time and again, by the characters. Mrs Ramsay seemed to hear the voice of Flaubert’s devil when she concentrated so intensely on her knitting that she became the thing she was looking at and the inanimate things in turn appeared to express her better than she can do herself. Lily Briscoe felt the voice of oneness when she leant on Mrs Ramsay’s knees and dreamed she became one with her, and James too when the story of the fisherman was over and the lighthouse displayed its impersonal ray of gold. But it is not allowed to individual characters to be absorbed in the peace of impersonal life and express it as a whole. They are doomed to stay behind the window, where they play either the part of the character or that of the spectator, either the part of the model or that of the painter. But no face-to-face vision will ever replace the dim and partial vision through a glass. In the second section, the life of the One reigns alone. This means that there is no chosen One, elected to decipher the secret of universal beauty and universal love. The part of Septimus, the mad man, has been split too. Beauty or rather “loveliness” reigns in the empty house, “solitary like a pool at evening far distant, seen from a train window”<sup>17</sup>, untroubled by poor Mrs MacNab who is not mad — only witless — and whose face in the looking-glass only reflects the stupidity of a life reduced to getting up, working

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>17</sup> V. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 141.

the whole day and going to bed again. As for the anonymous “wakeful and hopeful” on the beach, they only see universal harmony reflected in the mirrors provided by the pools. The moment of solitary reign of Impersonal life is necessary to allow a shift from the exteriority of the window to the interiority of the circle of light.

16. But the third section of the book offers us no face-to-face vision. Instead it stages a new separation. On the one side, there is Lily, the artist who has resisted the tyrannical rule of marriage and domestic life embodied by Mrs Ramsay but tries to transcribe on her canvas the life of the One felt when leaning on her knees or looking at the group made by James and her near the window. Lily is given the task of the artist: the task of grasping the thing itself, the “very jar on the nerves”<sup>18</sup> prior to any identification and to fasten it on a fabric “clamped together with bolts of iron” while the colours melt into another “like the colours on a butterfly’s wing”<sup>19</sup>. The problem is not only that which amazes William Banks — making the couple of a mother and her son a mere purple shadow. On the contrary, the abstraction of the purple shadow allows the painter to escape the madness that threatens those who want to express directly the jar on the nerves as a message in the language of words. It gives her the possibility of reconciling two forms of manifestation of the impersonal: the overwhelming strength of the wave that draws one “out of gossip, out of living, out of community with people”<sup>20</sup> naked into the presence of Truth, and the quietness of the housewife, able to say to life “Stand still here”<sup>21</sup> as she writes sitting on the beach, makes a hole in the sand and creates friendship around her thanks to her art of bringing together “this and that and then this”<sup>22</sup>.

17. This is a division of roles again. Nobody will ever know what was written on the pages written by Mrs Ramsay on the beach. Since the life of the One has no proper language, the task of the vision reconciling its opposite manifestations is left to the painter. But nobody will ever see the canvas. Its existence will remain for us a mere combination of narrative sentences. The passage from the exteriority of the window to the presence of light itself will remain a tension between the fictional painting and the succession of words. But the reconciliation between truth and plot requires something more: the story of the boat which leads the tyrant and his rebel children to the lighthouse. In a way, it is still the tragic plot, inserted between the still lyricism of Mrs Ramsay’s gathering of “this and that then again this” and the great lyricism of the confrontation with the overwhelming wave. But the tragedy proves to be a tragedy of the end of tragedy. It turns out that the conspirers will definitely not kill the tyrant. Cam is not a fierce Electra. Instead it is an Iphigenia, the loving daughter, the tragic heroine who puts an end to the cycle of vengeance and sacrifice. And even James, the avenger, accepts the paternal praise for his steering.

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18 *Ibid.*, 209.

19 *Ibid.*, 186.

20 *Ibid.*, 172.

21 *Ibid.*, 176.

22 *Ibid.*, 175.

At stake is much more than the happy end of family story. The lighthouse is the destination towards which two chains of events must converge: the one determined by the will of the tyrant, which is also the tyranny of the plot, and the one determined by the succession of gestures made by the sailor — the rebellious son — to cleave through the waves. At stake is the construction of the modern fiction that must tell the truth of universal life in the form of a family plot. The task can only be achieved in a dialectical form. There is no revelation of the source of light. The lighthouse is reached at a moment when it casts no light at all. The light of reconciliation between truth and plot is definitely split between the narration of a family story and the process that makes a line appear on an invisible canvas. It is split between two ways of dealing with the wave: the way of James the sailor, coming to terms, minute after minute, with the variations of the wind on the sea, and the way of Lily the artist, “down in the hollow of the wave” and seeing “the next wave towering higher and higher above her”<sup>23</sup>.

18. Can the life of the waves be expressed in one narrative? In the eponymous novel Bernard wants to draw a “wandering thread lightly joining a thing to another”<sup>24</sup>. Such a thread, Neville says, fails to tell only one thing: “what we most feel”. It is doomed to the vain attempt of “breasting the world with half-finished phrases”<sup>25</sup>. Bernard himself knows the reason for this: it is impossible to “embrace the whole world with the arms of understanding”<sup>26</sup>. As a matter of fact, there are no arms for understanding: arms are made to cleave knowingly through the wave or transmit onto the canvas the overwhelming fall of the wave, at the risk of being drowned. For a moment one can enjoy the peace of the “sunless territory of non-identity”<sup>27</sup>. But one cannot live on this territory. One has to gather sensations in the form of a self and to link words in the form of stories. As we live it and as we try to write it, life is doomed to be split between the kingdom of identity and the kingdom of non-identity. It is possible to turn the dramatic opposition between the housewife and the mad man into a moving mosaic — or polyphony — of six figures of experience, six combinations of the experience of identity with the experience of non-identity and to make them coexist, melt into one another or part in turn. But the problem comes back in the end: no self can embrace the life of the One. All stories are lies, but there must be a beginning and an end. For this to happen, the mosaic must be reduced again to a duality: there is the figure of radical non-identity, Rhoda who has no face and cannot link a moment to another moment. And there is the figure of the storyteller, Bernard, who can never stop linking things with things and moments with moments. Rhoda must die and Bernard has to finish the story alone. The wandering thread is a

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23 *Ibid.*, 172.

24 V. Woolf, *The Waves*, 36.

25 *Ibid.*, 51.

26 *Ibid.*, 85.

27 *Ibid.*, 87.

broken thread. The life of the soul can only be told as a combination of incompatible stories.

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