

“The very jar on the nerves”: reading Lily Briscoe’s painting with phenomenology

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She asked him what his father’s books were about. “Subject, 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.’”¹

1. **I**n *To the Lighthouse*, the problem Mr Ramsay, the philosopher, ponders, is how to think of the table “when you’re not there”. This problem assumes a world in which subjects and objects exist outside of perception, a dualist world in which the thing itself and its appearance belong to different regimes of reality. That is, Mr Ramsay’s problem lies in an abstract world *beyond* the visible. And indeed, Mrs Ramsay notes that her husband “never looked at things”, and was therefore incapable of perceiving what she could see, standing beside him on the lawn in the evening: “the first pulse of the full-throbbing star” (TTL 78).
2. Like Mrs Ramsay, Lily Briscoe, the painter, does look at the world. Her problem is different: how to think of what she *does* see. That is, her problem concerns vision. For in this novel, as in Woolf’s work more generally, artistic creation is inextricably linked to the perceptive act: to a certain kind of seeing, to a certain kind of feeling. Art is thereby clearly differentiated from philosophical reflection which seeks the answers to its questions in the world of immaterial “ideas” or in the rationality of formal logic, also associated with Mr Ramsay.² And yet, in this novel in which epistemolo-

1 V. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 28. References to this novel will subsequently be abbreviated to *TTL*.

2 It should be noted that the character of Mr Ramsay is complex and contradictory: Lily and Mrs Ramsay might feel very distant from his approach to the world, but they both admire him for his austerity and what they see as the power of his mind. However, Woolf’s critical and often ironical portrayal of the character — which can be seen in the scene parodying formal logic, in

gical questions are constantly raised, the quest for knowledge is not rejected; rather, alternative means of achieving it are privileged. Indeed, Lily's painting activity, often seen as a *mise-en-abyme* of Woolf's creative gesture,³ can be read as a quest for meaning. The importance of vision in Lily's painting process invites a parallel reading with phenomenology, the 20th century philosophical tradition that places perception at the heart of the search for knowledge.

3. Such an affirmation calls for two preliminary remarks. Firstly, Lily Briscoe's painting is read here as a process and not as a completed object: "painting" here is a practice, a gerund rather than a substantive. Such a reading is supported by the fact that novel contains no *ekphrasis*.
4. Secondly, reading Woolf with phenomenology, and, more specifically, with the work of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, implies adopting a certain position in the age-old debates over the relationship between literature and philosophy. As phenomenology eschews dialectical reasoning and aims at describing the world, this philosophical tradition is particularly open to readings with literature, as it does not *immediately* exclude other discursive regimes as modes of access to truth. However, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's attitudes towards the literary are not identical. To sum up this difference very briefly, Husserl's project is determined by a logocentric, teleological preference for discourse that may be filled by its meaning, by the presence of its object. Therefore literature, although considered equally as valid as philosophy in the phenomenological reduction,⁴ nonetheless ends up playing a subordinate role in the quest for truth or reality, as it is understood ultimately as a product of the *imagination*, providing at best mediated forms of representation of the world, and having a diminished truth claim as a result.⁵

which the philosopher manages to go from P to Q but can't seem to get to R, as well as in his representation from James' point of view as the sterile "brass beak" responsible for his wife's exhaustion, and as a tyrant in Cam's eyes — calls into question any parallel between a philosophy attributed to this character and the philosophy of the novel itself. Yet it is on the basis of such a parallel that many critics have read this novel and Woolf's work more generally. See for example S. Rosenbaum, who associates both Mr Ramsay's philosophy and that of Virginia Woolf with G. E. Moore (*Aspects of Bloomsbury. Studies in Modern English Literary and Intellectual History*, 21), or Ann Banfield, for whom Mr Ramsay's question, how to think of the table "when you're not there", is at the heart of Woolf's own epistemological interrogations, which Banfield links to Bertrand Russell's philosophy (*The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism*). On this point, note that Gillian Beer retraces Mr Ramsay's philosophy not to the Cambridge analytical philosophers but to Hume, with reference to Leslie Stephen, Virginia Woolf's father, who seems to have served as a model for Mr Ramsay, and who had worked on 18th century philosophers, including Hume (*Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground*, 34).

- 3 This interpretation, adopted by a majority of critics, seems to be supported by the fact that Lily paints Mrs Ramsay, who is often read as a figure of Woolf's own mother, Julia Stephen. This reading is supported by Woolf's diary entries of 28 November 1928, and also her autobiographical "A Sketch of the Past" (see *Moments of Being*, 81).
- 4 This speculative procedure is, however, difficult to both to define and to situate within the transcendental phenomenological "method" developed by Husserl in *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. See the discussion by Paul Ricoeur in his introduction to the 1950 translation of this work into French (*Idées directrices pour une phénoménologie*, in particular xvi-xx).
- 5 See on this point J. Derrida, *La Voix et le phénomène*, in particular chapter VII.

5. Merleau-Ponty, however, while situating his own work clearly *within* the speculative discursive regime,⁶ attempts to subvert this hierarchy, calling into question the capacity of language in either discursive regime to directly express truth.⁷ For him, both philosophy and literature participate in the same enterprise, that of *expressing* the world. The frontiers between the two disciplines are therefore porous. His own work, particularly in his later texts, acts out this interaction between the two disciplines, as he cites literary texts extensively and draws on them for some key concepts.⁸
6. It follows then that Merleau-Ponty's practice of philosophy, if not all his affirmations, shares a certain affinity with the arguments developed by Jacques Derrida in his essay "White Mythology" (*La Mythologie blanche*): that is, literature and philosophy's common basis in language, understood by Derrida as a fundamentally metaphorical system of signs, blurs the borderline between the two disciplines, and troubles any attempt to subordinate one to the other.⁹ Of course, this is not to say that fiction is a mode of philosophy, nor that philosophy is but another literary genre. At least since the 18th century's invention of "literature" in the modern sense of the word, literature and philosophy have been distinct both in practice and in codes. However, it *is* to refuse the establishment of clear-cut boundaries and hierarchies between the two. Virginia Woolf's own comments on George Meredith's novels may be recalled here:
- [...] when philosophy is not consumed in a novel, when we can underline this phrase with a pencil, and cut out that exhortation with a pair of scissors and past it into a whole system, it is safe to say that there is something wrong with the philosophy, or with the novel, or with both.¹⁰
7. Woolf thus both affirms the difference between philosophy and fiction, and suggests that philosophy might be "consumed" by the novel, as a blazing fire consumes wood, allowing for an intense interaction with it.

SEEING IS THINKING

8. I would like to explore this potential for interaction by examining some points of convergence and divergence between Woolf's representation of the creative process and phenomenology.

6 See his inaugural speech at the Collège de France, entitled "Éloge de la philosophie", and published in a volume of the same title.

7 See for example M. Merleau-Ponty, *Sens et non-sens*, 36-37.

8 Perhaps the most well known of these is the "flesh of the world" ("*la chair du monde*"), which is discussed in *Le Visible et l'invisible*. This term is both a reference to the Husserlian concept of *Leib* (often translated as *la chair* in French), and a citation of *Le Vent* by Claude Simon. See Emmanuel de Saint Aubert, *Du lien des êtres aux éléments de l'être : Merleau-Ponty au tournant des années 1945-1951*, 171.

9 See J. Derrida, *Marges — de la philosophie*. This is not to say that Merleau-Ponty and Derrida's positions on the status of language in general and of metaphors in particular are comparable.

10 V. Woolf, *The Second Common Reader*, 233-234.

9. Perhaps the most important point of convergence is that for Lily, the activity of *seeing* and of composing what she sees into a form, is in and of itself a mode of thinking, the source of a certain kind of knowledge. The final section of the novel, in which Lily will complete her painting, opens with Lily asking herself: “What does it mean then, what does it all mean?” (TTL 159), a question which reappears as a leitmotif throughout her painting process.¹¹ Looking for meaning *within* vision rather than beyond it brings Lily close to one of phenomenology’s central principles: the *appearance* of the world — its phenomenality — is not a screen but its very existence. Neither being nor meaning, neither subject nor object can be conceived of outside of perception: they are grounded in and founded by the perceptive act.
10. A second point of convergence is that this “vision” both *includes* and *goes beyond* the empirical object immediately offered to the senses; it embraces both the *visible* and the *invisible*. For Lily’s “vision” — her “picture” — cannot be located exclusively in the private interiority of her mind, nor can it be situated wholly in the world before her on the Ramsay’s lawn. It is in both at once, or rather, it emerges at the meeting of the two. Indeed, in the first part of the novel, she goes “groping” for “her picture” in the relationships between the objects before her (TTL 60), the form she is looking for lies *in* the hedge, *in* the wall, *in* the figure of Mrs Ramsay reading to James. And yet, “her picture” is not their equivalent and cannot be understood as simple imitation of the world. Rather, Lily aims to make visible the world’s invisible form, to expose the secret relationship she sees between the masses before her. Likewise, for Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, the visible emerges *from* and *in relationship to* the invisible.¹² The visible is only ever partial, and that which remains invisible surpasses, informs and structures the visible. This interpenetration of visible and invisible can be seen throughout Lily’s painting process. Indeed, Woolf’s use of the word “vision” plays on the ambiguity of this term, as its definition encompasses both the physical sense of sight and images which, though invisible to the senses, are seen by the mind’s eye alone.
11. However, though meaning resides in vision for Lily, the epistemological foundation that Husserl sought in reflexive perception eludes her. Granted, for Husserl, this foundation is always provisional and subject to revision, yet the knowledge it institutes for the philosopher remains inaccessible to Lily. I would like to suggest that this has to do with the way the novel represents *contact* with the object on the one hand, and the *position* of the subject on the other. These notions can be related to the phenomenological concepts of “intentionality”, “reflexivity” and the “flesh” or the “living body”. Secondly, I will discuss the nature of the invisible Lily attempts to make visible in her painting. For it also converges with and

¹¹ See, for example, TTL 175, 194.

¹² This is evident in Husserl’s theory of the “sketches”, for example. See, amongst other texts, §41 and §43 of *Ideas*. Merleau-Ponty explores the negativity inherent in the visible in depth in his final work, *Le Visible et l’invisible*.

diverges from the phenomenological conception of the invisible, notably concerning the relationship with the past that emerges during Lily's painting, as this activity also functions as an elegy.

VISION AS CONTACT

12. In the final section of *To the Lighthouse*, the kind of perceptive relationship Lily seeks to establish is described in the following terms:

What was the problem then? She must try to get hold of something that evaded her. It evaded her when she thought of Mrs Ramsay; it evaded her when she thought of her picture. Phrases came. Visions came. Beautiful pictures. Beautiful phrases. But what she wished to get hold of was that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it had been made anything. Get that and start afresh; get that and start afresh; she said desperately, pitching herself firmly again before her easel. (TTL 209)

13. Lily wants to “get hold of” *both* “that very jar on the nerves” *and* “the thing itself before it had been made anything”, that is, the experience of the moment of *contact* between the subject and the object. It is the genesis of perception itself she seems to want to capture. This contact is “jarring”, that is, disturbing, grating, disrupting. It ruptures the smooth forms of an objectified world, it resists the very process of objectification, and it affects the subject.
14. Such a desire to establish an unmediated contact with the world may be compared to a moment in what Husserl names “intentionality”. Intentionality is the movement of consciousness towards its object, which in turn constitutes consciousness itself. This movement situates consciousness not *immediately* in the realm of the ideal, but in the world which affects and thereby generates consciousness. Indeed, that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something is perhaps one of the most frequently quoted passages of Husserl's work.¹³ The subject and object of consciousness do not exist prior to contact through perception, but only as the results or effects of such contact.
15. Contact also plays a central role for Merleau Ponty: “Vision is meeting”, he writes in his late work *Eye and Mind* (*L'Œil et l'esprit*).¹⁴ Elsewhere in the same text, however, he associates this contact with a certain absence:

Vision is not a mode of thought or of presence to oneself: it is the ability I have to become absent from myself, to witness, from within, the separation of Being, only at the end of which do I return to myself.¹⁵

13 See E. Husserl, *Ideas*, §84. See also the canonical definition of intentionality in the *Cartesian Meditations*, §14.

14 “*La vision est rencontre*”. (*L'Œil et l'esprit*, 86 — my translation).

15 *Ibid.*, 81: “*La vision n'est pas un certain mode de la pensée ou présence à soi : c'est le moyen qui m'est donné d'être absent à moi-même, d'assister du dedans à la fission de l'Être, au terme de*

16. Note that when Merleau-Ponty says that vision is not thought, he is, of course, referring to “thought” defined as reflexive presence to oneself; he is not opposing vision to consciousness, but expanding the very notion of thought beyond reflexive operations. The privilege accorded here to a form of contact with the world that underpins but escapes reflexive mastery marks an important difference between Merleau-Ponty and Husserl. For Husserl, perception is intentional and *necessarily* reflexive, it inherently involves an almost simultaneous return to the self. This reflexivity allows knowledge of an object to be established intersubjectively and ideally. The “primordial unity” of subject and object through their contact forms the basis for their eventual reflexive distinction.¹⁶ The “thing itself” is thus made into “something” through the movement of reflexive intentionality, and any discordant “jar on the nerves” is smoothed away through the establishment of a certain subjective mastery. Merleau-Ponty, however, increasingly sought out the perceptive dimension that resists this reflexivity, the “untamed”, “raw” world that paradoxically both precedes and is generated by the reflexive movement, but is not absorbed by it.¹⁷
17. Lily Briscoe — the creator, the artist — also seeks this moment *before* objective form. In the manuscript for *To the Lighthouse*, “the very jar on the nerves, the thing itself” is followed by the following qualification: “the germ, in painting, in knowing, of all art and affection.”¹⁸ Though it is not in the final version of the novel, this fascinating statement — which again places painting and knowledge on par with one another — considers art and affect as *products* of this moment of contact at the phenomenal interface between the subject and the world, the moment before the “thing itself” has been objectified into “something”. This conception of art falls in line with the descriptions Woolf gives of the creative process elsewhere in her work. For this “jar” that precipitates the self into another regime of perception also prefigures what Woolf was to call a “shock” in her autobiographical “A Sketch of the Past”: that is, a privileged moment of access to a “reality” normally hidden behind the “cotton wool” of standardized appearance.¹⁹ In this text, Woolf describes such experiences as the basis for her writing.²⁰ The quest for “the thing itself before it has been made anything” may also be linked to Woolf’s frequent injunction for writers, for artists, for women, to “think of things in themselves”, an exhortation recurrent in *A Room of One’s Own*.²¹
18. However, the desire to get that “very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it had been made anything” leaves the artist in a paradoxical posi-

laquelle seulement je me ferme sur moi”. (My translation)

16 See E. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, in particular the fifth meditation. See also, on this point, the discussion in N. Depraz, *Transcendance et incarnation*, 46-49. The expression “primordial unity” [*l’unité primordiale*] is a citation from this work.

17 See in particular *Le Visible et l’invisible*. The French terms “sauvage” and “brut” reoccur in descriptions of this dimension.

18 See Hermoine Lee’s notes in *TTL* 257.

19 See V. Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 72.

20 *Ibid.*

21 See for example V. Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 109, 112.

tion: her “vision” cannot be grasped and objectified without losing this jar on the nerves. Lily’s problem could thus be restated in the following terms: how can one capture the form one sees *and* its shock; how can one get at “the thing itself” *and* make something of it, without losing its vibration, its motion, its emotion?

VISION AS POSITION

19. Just as the world is delivered from its objective contours in such an encounter, the subject is also affected by this perceptive experience. Indeed, in order to get at the “very jar on the nerves”, Lily must go beyond the confines of her own subjectivity.²² In the first section of the novel, seeing “her picture” — that is, the “vision” she wants to paint — means “subduing all her impressions as a woman to something much more general”. (TTL 60) In the last section, she must again “subdue the impertinencies and irrelevances that plucked her attention and made her remember how she was such and such a person, had such and such relations to people.” (TTL 172) This shedding of individualised identity allows Lily to resist an objectifying, externalised view of the world that closes her within herself; it allows her to experience the moment of co-creation of the subject and the world.
20. However, though this moment of contact involves going beyond oneself, it simultaneously draws attention to the singularity of the subjective position of the artist. Indeed, just after affirming the importance of experiencing the “very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it had been made anything”, Lily momentarily becomes incapable of feeling, which leads her to the following interrogation: “And if one can neither think nor feel, she thought, where *is* one?” (TTL 209)²³ Being affected by the world might require a certain level of desubjectivation, but it also situates the self within the world.
21. This explains the importance of distance, proximity, position and perspective and their limitations in Lily’s thought about her painting. “Distance had an extraordinary power”, she observes in the final section, when Mr Ramsay and his children in the boat “had been swallowed up” by distance, “were gone forever”. (TTL 204) “So much”, she muses later, “depends on distance”. (TTL 207) As Michael Levenson has pointed out, for Lily, knowledge of another person is equated with proximity, with penetrating his/her “hive”²⁴, occupying his/her space, and seeing from his/her perspect-

22 This is reminiscent of Woolf’s plea in “Modern Fiction” for the writer to create texts that do not give the impression of being “centred in a self”, but that “embrace and create that which is outside the self and beyond”. V. Woolf, *The Common Reader*, 156.

23 My italics.

24 This is the metaphor Lily uses for people in the first section of *TTL*. See 58 in particular.

ive.²⁵ Failing which — and Lily always falls short of her goal — Lily seeks to combine an infinite number of viewpoints on the object of desire.²⁶

22. The perceptive act in Woolf's novel thus both suspends and grounds the subjective position of the perceiver, which serves as the measure of such distances. This tension between institution and dispossession is also maintained in phenomenological conceptions of the subject. Key here is Husserl's *Leib*, a term translated into English as the "living body" or "the flesh".²⁷ The "flesh" refers to the animate, incarnate body, as opposed to the body apprehended as an object, which Husserl names *Körper*. In the "flesh", consciousness and body are inseparable, the one creating and allowing the other. Through this experience of our own body as "flesh", phenomenology attempts to surpass subject-object dualisms, situating the subject within the limits of the concrete, material world. The body forms the "fold" (*le pli*), as Merleau-Ponty would say, between subject and object, the site where the distinction between the two is both erased and established.²⁸

23. Whereas for Husserl, the "flesh" (*Leib*) is the foundation for understanding alterity and constituting knowledge as intersubjective,²⁹ Woolf's text explores the paradoxical nature of this subjective position, as Merleau-Ponty also does in his later work. Though Lily is "drawn out and haled away" (TTL 173) while painting, her perceptive experience also situates her materially in a limited, particularized position within the world. And indeed, Lily is highly aware of her physical surroundings and of the effects of distance and proximity, and she is also conscious of the absolute singularity of her experience. However, subjective possession is constantly counteracted by subjective dispossession in the painting process. When Lily, in the grip of a powerful emotion while painting, notes that "it was one's body feeling, and not one's mind," (TTL 194) these feelings anchor the subject in a body while withdrawing from that body the capacity to consolidate its position as a centre of knowledge. The "jar on the nerves" at the moment of contact thereby destabilises the self as much as it fortifies the self, just as the contours of the visible are both shaken and generated at this point.

25 M. Levenson, *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality*, 173-174. See for example the passage in which Lily equates intimacy with knowledge, TTL 57.

26 See for example TTL 214, when Lily remarks "one wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with [...] fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with."

27 On this concept, see in particular Husserl's fifth *Cartesian Meditation*. Note that this term has been translated into French as "*le corps vivant*", "*le corps propre*", as well as "*la chair*". Merleau-Ponty uses the term "*chair*" ("flesh") and develops this concept extensively in *Phénoménologie de la perception*. However, the term has already taken on different meanings by *Le Visible et l'invisible*. (see the final chapter in particular).

28 See *Le Visible et l'invisible*, 189.

29 See in particular the fifth of Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*.

TWO KINDS OF INVISIBLE

24. For Lily, distance is to be understood along the temporal dimension just as much as the spatial one. For the person who has “gone forever” is not Mr Ramsay, though he disappears temporarily with the children into the ocean’s blue that morning, but Mrs Ramsay, who, having died, has been placed at an incommensurable distance. Mrs Ramsay had figured in the first version of Lily’s painting described in the novel’s first section. In the last section of the novel, where Lily takes up the same painting again nearly a decade later, Mrs Ramsay’s absence upsets the balance between the masses that comprised her original “vision”, as there is now an empty space on the drawing room steps where she had once cast a shadow. And yet, Mrs Ramsay is still part of the “picture” Lily seeks.
25. This raises the question of the nature of the invisible Lily seeks to capture in her art. In Woolf’s novel, there are two aspects to this invisible: one may be understood in terms of presence, the other in terms of absence. Lily’s painting engages with both.
26. For both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, the invisible is generally thought of in terms of presence. For Husserl, the world presents itself to perceiving subjects as continuous flow of “sketches” that are always partial, never entire. The invisible therefore informs the visible, while going beyond that which is accessible at any given moment; this also means that the visible can never be totalised. For Merleau-Ponty, the invisible also doubles up and structures the visible, “scrolling”³⁰ onto the visible in a process he describes as “reversible” or “chiasmatic”, the invisible continually becoming the visible and vice versa. The visible and the invisible both participate in Merleau-Ponty’s “flesh of the world”, which is not to be confused with the “flesh” of an individual subject: the “flesh” of the subject, in Merleau-Ponty’s late work, depends on the “flesh of the world”, and the latter constitutes an almost a-subjective sensorial *dimension* that escapes reflexivity.³¹
27. This latent invisible that structures the visible manifests itself in Woolf’s text as a *rhythm* and a *liquid*. In her painting process, it emerges at the meeting between the self and the world, and yet it exceeds this interface:

Then, as if some *juice* necessary for the lubrication of her faculties were spontaneously squirted, she began precariously dipping among the blues and ambers, moving her brush hither and thither, but it was now heavier and went slower, as if it had fallen in with some *rhythm* which was dictated to her (she kept looking at the hedge, at the canvas) by what she saw, so that while her hand quivered with life, this *rhythm* was strong enough to bear her along with it on its *current*. Certainly she was losing consciousness of outer things. As she lost consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance, [...] her mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes, and names,

30 “Scrolling” here is my translation of the French term “*enroulement*”. See M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l’invisible*, 183.

31 See *ibid*, the final chapter entitled “*L’Entrelacs – le chiasme*”.

and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a *fountain spurting* over that glaring, hideously difficult white space, while she modelled it with greens and blues. (TTL 174)³²

28. The liquidity of Lily's mind seems to join and flow into the pulsating liquidity of the current in the world. Lily seems to *become* the very rhythm of the world, to be borne along this animate, impersonal dimension which appears when she had "lost consciousness of outer things", that is, when clear subject-object distinctions dissolve. This dimension could be read as the throbbings of the "flesh of the world" that structures perception through its living presence.³³
29. It is worth noting again here that perceiving this invisible presence *as rhythm* only compounds the difficulty of representation Lily is confronted with. Any attempt to capture and fix this rhythm would necessarily bring about its end. This difficulty is evident in the descriptions of the canvas in the novel, which all refer to gesture and movement: Lily's hand moves "hither and thither", it "flickers" and "dances" over the canvas, the lines she lays down are described as "running" up and across it, and in the final scene of the novel, the canvas is "blurred". (TTL 174, 225, 226) Painting here resists representation to the point that any stable description of Lily's work is evacuated from the text. Artistic creation is conceived of as an open-ended, dynamic activity, always about to recommence, to be "started afresh".
30. To think of painting in terms of rhythm is to think of it within time. However, the timeframe of this painting extends far beyond that particular morning on the Ramsay's lawn. As we've seen, while painting, Lily's mind "throws up" scenes, names, sayings, memories and ideas, and these involve a second type of invisible, one that may be understood in terms of *absence*: they usher the absent past into the present of the painting process. Indeed, the past is essential to Lily's painting: in "tunnelling her way into her picture", Lily is also tunnelling "into the past." (TTL 187-188) Mrs Ramsay's physical absence — her invisibility — is just as important in Lily's painting as her presence had been in the first section of the novel.
31. I would like to suggest that the effects of this second kind of invisible can be understood in terms of phenomenological conceptions of time, in which *retention* of the immediate past fundamentally affects and shapes the present,³⁴ on the condition that, following Jacques Derrida's reading of Husserl on this point, the distinction between *retention* and *memory* is abolished. Husserl differentiates between the immediate past, which contributes to the original "impression" made by the present through retention, and memory, which is characterised as representation of the past in the same mode as imagination: that is, re-presentation that functions inde-

³² My italics.

³³ It also seems to describe that which Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari would call a "plane of immanence" (*plan d'immanence*). See in particular the chapter entitled "*Le Plan d'immanence*" in *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie ?*

³⁴ See E. Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*.

pendently from the presence of the object concerned. Derrida troubles this distinction by showing the extent to which retention is always already a form of representation.³⁵ Derrida's critique of Husserl thereby withdraws from the present its original, foundational character by showing it to be *constituted* by representation. If we accept this reading, this allows for the distant past to affect and shape perception in the present according to the same principles as the immediate past, and without linear hierarchy.

32. Indeed, the memories and impressions that Lily reactualises as she paints involve events that the passage of time in the second section of the novel — “Time Passes” — clearly separates from the present of the novel's final section. These memories return to haunt Lily's present perception of the world; though they depict absent people, events and objects, they influence and shape her vision in the present.

33. It is important to distinguish between two forms of past recall that Lily experiences. They are contrasted in the following passage, where Lily is looking intensely at the empty space on the garden steps left by Mrs Ramsay's death:

It had seemed so safe, thinking of her. Ghost, air, nothingness, a thing you could play with easily and safely at any time of day or night, and then suddenly she put her hand out and wrung the heart thus. (TTL 194)

34. On the one hand, fixed representations of Mrs Ramsay may be safely recalled on the mode of conscious memory: as “ghosts”, “nothingness”, or, as Lily says a few lines above these, “that abstract one made of her”. These readily available images may be held at a distance, and they seem to have had their emotional sting removed, as they can no longer jar the nerves. On the other hand, the experience of Mrs Ramsay's *absence itself* jars the nerves violently, or rather, it “wrings the heart”. These powerful emotions come from an emptiness in the visible world, an emptiness that is experienced as a lack:

For how could one express in words these emotions of the body? Express that emptiness there? (She was looking at the drawing-room steps, they looked extraordinarily empty). [...] And then to want to not to have — to want and to want — how that *wrung* the heart, and *wrung* it again and again! (TTL 164)³⁶

35. This absent object paradoxically maintains its contact with Lily, for the jar on her nerves *proceeds* from this empty space. In her painting, it is not the objectified, harmless representations of Mrs Ramsay as a memory that Lily is after, but the wringing of the heart, the present experience of excruciating absence.

36. For the subject of Lily's painting is Mrs Ramsay's absence itself. How can an invisible that corresponds to no present reality still wring the heart? How can it be that an object forever gone still generates a jar on the

35 See J. Derrida, *La Voix et le phénomène*.

36 My italics.

nerves? How is it that absent objects retain their efficacy in the perceptive present, and affect the latter profoundly? And how can this efficacy be understood? Such are the questions Woolf's representation of Lily's painting process poses to phenomenology's privilege of presence in the present of perception. Her painting confronts the power the past has to return, to shape the perceptual experience in a paradoxical moment that conjugates both elegy and survival.

37. It would be easier to conclude this paper if Woolf's novel didn't leave these questions unanswered. As Woolf writes of Thomas Hardy, whose expression "moments of vision" she was to adopt, "the mind that is most capable of receiving impressions is often the least capable of drawing conclusions."³⁷ Only momentarily, and in a very unstable manner, does Lily seem to capture simultaneously her loss and its jarring pain in her "vision". This happens when she sees "some light stuff" (TTL 218) moving in the drawing room where Mrs Ramsay had once sat, casting the triangular shadow Mrs Ramsay had cast, and thereby restoring the balance Lily's painting had been lacking. Becoming a "wave of white", this movement eventually ushers the absent Mrs Ramsay into Lily's field of vision with all her attendant terror, jarring her nerves and wringing her heart:

Ah, but what had happened? Some wave of white went over the window and seized her and *tortured* her.

"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 simple, in the chair, flicked her needles to and fro, knitted her reddish-brown stocking. There she sat. (TTL 218-219)³⁸

38. Mrs Ramsay's materialisation "on the level of ordinary experience" seems to acknowledge the power of absent objects to shape perception just as much as real, physically present objects such as the table and the chair. However, this "vision" is precarious, as it is immediately modalised in the following sentence: "As if she had something to share", the text continues, "Lily went past Mr Carmichael holding her brush to the edge of the lawn." This modalisation immediately casts doubt on any attempt to translate this "vision" into intersubjective knowledge. And indeed, when Lily returns to her canvas, the vision has vanished, the steps are empty:

She looked at the steps; they were empty. She looked at her canvas; it was blurred. 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. (TTL 226)

37 V. Woolf, *The Second Common Reader*, 247.

38 My italics.

39. “Seeing clear” here is an evanescent event, lasting but a second, transposed into the subjunctive mood by “as if”. What she saw remains a mystery. And this untranslatable “vision” is only recognised as such when it is in the past, as indicated by the use of the past perfect: the “vision” is already at a distance, already gone. Thus, even when “finished”, Lily’s painting remains invisible to the reader. It is an “attempt at something” rather than a success;³⁹ a gesture in movement rather than an object the reader can represent. For her “vision” adheres to the moment of its apparition, and disappears with it.
40. As this “vision” resists reflexive recuperation in the form of conceptual knowledge or objectifiable, referential representation, Lily’s creative act seems closer to Merleau-Ponty’s project than to Husserl’s. However, in confronting the paradoxical power of absence to jar the nerves, to wring the heart and inform perception, Woolf prevents any simple equation of the invisible with presence, and disrupts the smooth “scrolling” of invisible onto the visible. This is because, as elegy, Lily Briscoe’s painting situates perception and creation in a precarious, a-linear movement of time, in which irreducible loss is perpetually at work within vision itself.

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39 See her predictions concerning her painting’s future (*TTL* 225).

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