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**GEOMETRY BY THE BOOK:  
A DIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS OF  
THE FICTION OF VIRGINIA WOOLF**

by

MARY CLAIRE BRUNELLI

Alison Case, Advisor

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the  
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To Professor McWeeny, whose guidance has taken me from “forms both pale and glowing” to the geometry of my own completed work.

To my Hotchkiss teachers who, four years ago, encouraged my first endeavor in analyzing the fiction of Virginia Woolf:

Mr. Marchant, who trained me as a re-writer;

Mr. Frankenbach, who made me take the plunge into the life of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

To my Mother, who drew me into the horizon and raised me in proportionality with her world. She gave me sight so that I may have my own vision. I owe it all to her.

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## Introduction: The Book You Can See

Beneath my eyes opens – a book; I see the bottom; the heart – I see to the depths.

(*The Waves*, 214)

What can you see in a book? How can it look? What shapes does it reveal? How can writing develop dimension in order to be considered a form of art? Reading the fiction of Virginia Woolf offers an adventure in geometry. She asserts that: “The ‘book itself’ is not form which you see, but emotion which you feel” (*On Re-reading Novels*, 340). This essay encourages a visualization of the emotive intent of her fiction as a spatial function. I am not arguing that Woolf deliberately tailored her work to represent recognizable Euclidean forms. My purpose is to evoke geometry as a way of re-envisioning the book that you read as a narrative construction in and of varying dimensions. These forms of our secondary sight, subjective shapes of the reader’s imagination, are fictions themselves and thus correspond to the literature they describe. Like the fiction of Virginia Woolf, they are products of human imagination, intellect, and emotion. They represent the myth of spatial grandeur that overpowers the flatness of reality, the flatness of a page in a novel. This illusion of space transforms the book itself that you *see*, into a work of art that you *feel*.

Woolf believed that the art of fiction relies on the correspondence of aesthetics and emotion. The forms that arise from this intersection are emblematic of the work’s humanity, its ability to convey the experience of living in a way that is somehow meaningful to the reader. Her ideas reflect the philosophy of Formalism,

which asserts that the formal qualities of a work determine its artistic value. This concept is derived from Plato's notion of *eidos*, which describes the abstract shape representative of some material thing. In late nineteenth-century Europe, artists and writers took new interest in this ancient idea.

Among Woolf's close friends in the Bloomsbury group, artists and art critics Roger Fry, Clive Bell, and Vanessa Stephens Bell devoted their works to Formalist theory. The Bloomsbury contingent claims that art acquires its aesthetic value based upon its form, method of production, visual aspects, and medium. The ability of a geometric construct to communicate emotion qualifies it as a work of art. Clive Bell promulgates the idea that art is characterized as having a Significant Form, governed by "mysterious laws," capable of provoking a particular "Aesthetic Emotion" unique from the emotions of everyday life (Bell, 11). Roger Fry elaborates on Bell's work and specifies the qualities of design that are emotionally evocative: line, mass, space, light and shade, color, and the inclination to the eye of a plane (Fry, 22). The arrangement of these elements into some kind of "purposeful order" (20) expresses beauty and sensitivity through the inspired structure.

The act of form, the manipulation of lines into gestures of humanity, is the preoccupation of all the arts. Unlike the readily understood shapes of the visual arts, literature depends upon a different set of optics for its Significant Form to be realized. Russian Formalism, a school of literary criticism that developed during the same time period, transfers the principles of Bloomsbury Formalism to the art of literature. Through "scientific" objective analysis, the Formalists identify linguistic devices that contribute to the overall artistry of the text. Key to their methods is

distinguishing the two components of narrative. The *fabula* is the chronological sequence of events that make up the story, and the *sjuzhet* is the creative representation of those events in the novelistic discourse. The reader's perception of form as "a complete thing, something concrete, dynamic, self-contained" (Eichenbaum, 112) is due to the stylization of the *sjuzhet*. Literature's *sjuzhet* finds its correlative in art's Significant Form: both are representations of reality mediated by human aesthetics. Thus the *storyshape* is constructed upon the narrative.

In her critical essay "The Russian Point of View," Virginia Woolf lauds certain Russian novelists (Tchekov, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoi) for their ability to evoke human experience through the duality of soul and life. In so doing, they eschew the traditional framework of their Victorian contemporaries and produce novels that may seem inconclusive and disconnected. Woolf argues that these Russian geniuses planned for a greater design, one that emancipates the soul from the formal constraints of conventional novel-writing:

The method which at first seemed so casual, inconclusive, and occupied with trifles, now appears, the result of an exquisitely original and fastidious taste, choosing boldly, arranging infallibly, and controlled by an honesty for which we can find no match save among the Russians themselves...In consequence, as we read these little stories about nothing at all, the horizon widens: the soul gains an astonishing sense of freedom. (185)

By evading the structural expectations of English Victorian literature, the Russian writers effectively achieve a Significant Form for their work, visible in a "new panorama of the human mind" (186). They capture passion within a unique narrative shape that is more natural and true to the experience of living. Woolf seeks to emulate the Russian method in her own fiction. She too strives to convey "such revelations as we are wont to get only from the press of life at its fullest"

(186). In her essay “Modern Fiction,” Woolf compares the similar experiences of reading, writing, and living, as she ventures her idea for a new narrative form:

Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being “like this”. 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. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, 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. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? (160)

Woolf aspires to create a Significant Form for her fiction that will realistically convey the experience of living through physical, intellectual, and emotional sensations. Though seemingly disordered and asymmetrical, this sort of narrative proposes a form that is genuine to the human consciousness and harmonious in virtual space. Literature uses language to conjure a meaningful shape that is capable of inspiring the Aesthetic Emotion: “The test of a book (to a writer) is if it makes a space in which, quite naturally, you can say what you want to say.... This proves that the book itself is alive: because it has not crushed one thing I wanted to say, but allowed me to slip in, without any compression or alteration” (17 March 1930; *Writer’s Diary*, 153). In Woolf’s fiction, the illusionary Significant Form is meant to be the geometric equivalent of real life. The reader is meant to recognize similar patterns in his or her own thoughts that will intensify the experience of reading.

Woolf's works are not concerned with simply reporting plot, but with capturing the "essential thing" that is common to both reality and fiction. The "book itself" is formal context for transcribing the otherwise amorphous "uncircumscribed spirit" at the heart of all aesthetic experience: reading, writing, seeing, thinking, and feeling.

The Formalist approach to art and literature manifests an affinity for geometric integrity. Therefore, both media depend on the emphatic creation of lines and shapes. Art is defined a spatial medium: it is realized simultaneously as a visual form, which remains static in our sight. Writing, on the other hand, is a temporal medium that relies on the irreversible succession of events. The inherent linearity of story-telling frustrates Woolf because it is are not true to the impressionistic landscape of the mind. Her writing seeks to maximize the aesthetic potential of fiction by transcending its temporality through the illusion of space. German critics use the term *Anders-streben*, literally "other-striving," to define the passage of one art to another through the exchange of spatial/temporal properties. Woolf's fiction evokes the visual arts (painting, in particular) in many ways. She appropriates the temporal and spatial potential of both artistic media to accomplish the transformation of the "book itself" into a figure of geometric significance. This dimensional increase occurs within the space of the narrative, the *sjuzhet*, the Significant Form of the work.

However, the geometric structure imposed upon the novel is a subjective vision of the reader's imagination. The advance of literature into the domain of the spatial arts marks the movement from reality to fictionality. In *Vision and Design*,

Fry defines the “imaginative life of man,” which contains memory, emotion, and perception. Art, and fiction for that matter, are both expressions and stimuli of the imaginative life, which, as a form liberated from the conditions of reality, requires a specialized set of optics. Viewing art is much like reading a book in that one must appreciate the intersection of vision, concept, and emotion in order to comprehend the proposed spatial design as a reconstruction of reality.

Frank Kermode describes the creative action of the novel as the imposition of myth: “The imagination is a form-giving power, an emplastical power; it may require...to be preceded by a ‘decreative’ act, but it is certainly a maker of order and concords” (144). Fiction, which by its very definition intimates *untruth*, demonstrates a rupture with reality through its relationship with time. Rather than abiding by the uni-dimensional order of *chronos*, novels focus on particular instances of *kairos*, which are significant events.<sup>1</sup> Within the novel, the succession of *kairoi* may not necessarily be chronological, but is arranged into a meaningful design. The manipulation of these time-based instances launches literature into the spatial mode. The temporal *storyline* is contorted into a geometric *storyshape* that is independent of real-time or real-space.

Given the spatial import of Virginia Woolf’s fiction as it may be conceived within the optical imagination, it is therefore appropriate to address the methods of her writing as ventures in geometry. The following essay is divided into four chapters, each which considers a particular aspect of narrative as a dimension of a spatial text: storyline, novel form, character, and theme. I analyze some of her short

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<sup>1</sup> These two words refer to the ancient Greek concept of the dual nature of time. *Chronos* refers to sequential time, while *kairos* refers to a particular moment of time that is somehow significant.

stories, and five of her novels: *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, and *Between the Acts*. My purpose is to approach the fiction of Virginia Woolf as a geometric function, by which the "book itself" may be rendered visible according to the "emotion which you feel." Only a fictional geometry may incarnate the book you *can see*.

## Chapter 1: Storyline and the Anti-Linear

In literature as in geometry, the first act of form is the manipulation of line. This uni-dimensional unit is equivalent to the *fabula*, the ever-consecutive and irreversible *chronos* underlying a fictional work. Virginia Woolf saw that in order to create a “new form for a new novel” (26 January 1920; *Writer’s Diary*, 22) she would have to reconfigure the storyline. Twisting the straights into something anti-linear, the *storyshape* develops a space of its own, designated by the *sjuzhet*. Woolf’s earliest endeavors in line-bending evoke a form that is unconventional by traditional literary standards, but seems to be a more authentic representation of the experience of living: the spiral. “Suppose one thing should open out of another,” she muses (*Ibid.*). The progress of the pages should not be restrained by the rigorous laws of *chronos* and *logos*<sup>2</sup>, but should saunter along the spiral of the sometimes slow-time snail. This creature of delay, pondering, and dreams becomes the inspirational image for Woolf’s venture of form. An internal metaphor for the narrative structure at hand, the snail crawls through the pages of many of her stories.

*Kew Gardens*, a short story written in 1919, shares the focalization with a snail that is traversing the soil of the gardens. With its dawdling pace and roundabout voyage, the snail is a metaphor for Woolf’s “new” novel and is compared to the “angular green insect” that represents the conventional Victorian novel.

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<sup>2</sup> Logos is a Greek term that may be translated as “word” or “reason.” In philosophy and literature, it refers to the logical argument or reasoned discourse directing a body of work.

In the oval flower bed the snail, whose shell had been stained red, blue, and yellow for the space of two minutes or so, now appeared to be moving very slightly in its shell, and next began to labour over the crumbs of loose earth which broke away and rolled down as it passed over them. It appeared to have a definite goal in front of it, differing in this respect from the singular high stepping angular green insect who attempted to cross in front of it, and waited for a second with its antenna trembling as if in deliberation, and then stepped off as rapidly and strangely in the opposite direction. (91)

Once again, we see how line implicates the integrity of the form it creates. Where the snail is curvaceous, the insect is an “angular” construction of uncompromising straightness. Solid green in color, the insect, without flexibility or creativity, imitates the grass around him. The snail shell, on the other hand, is painted in primary colors that can be mixed to create any hue in the visible spectrum. Here, the creatures part ways. At his slovenly speed, the snail experiences all the textures of the journey across the earth, its horizontal hardships and glistening moments, as when the world is illuminated through a bead of dew. The insect travels high above the ground, his antennae rigid but unfeeling.

For Woolf, the snail is a symbol and source of infinite contemplation, as in another short story from 1917, *The Mark on the Wall*. This piece traces the mental musings of the female narrator who notices a small, round mark upon the white wall. The unidentifiable and inexplicable mark has a centrifugal force that provokes her psychological unwinding. The plot refuses the directional linearity of *fabula* in favor of a story that simply revolves. In her critical essay “Modern Fiction,” Woolf defends her narrative intent: “Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness” (161). In *The Mark on the Wall*, drawing lines between the “atoms”

of thoughts creates a shape like that of the mark itself. Though “not entirely circular,” the narrator’s psychological sequence orbits around a fixed point, an intellectual stabilizer, a motif bound, static, and indistinguishable. The mark remains ambiguous until the final line of the story: “It was a snail” (89). This simply stated revelation is all we need to justify the text.

Woolf’s novels also recall the image of the snail. Enclosed within the hard shell of beginning and end, the internal narrative blooms into a spiral. Repetition of scenes and phrases, chronological looping, and shifting focalization intimate a circular motion underlying the text and allow for the expansion and compression of narrative space. However, her novels are also intensely conscious of their temporal shell. This chapter will consider the novels *Jacob’s Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, and *Between the Acts*, each which demonstrates a uniquely innovative formal constitution. These novels, similar in their method of revolving narration, can be seen as having secondary shapes imposed upon their basic snail-shell circularity. Incidentally, the dimensions of these shapes are determined by their title motifs. Boris Tomashevsky identifies these motifs as *bound* (as opposed to *free*) because they are essential to the coherence of the work. Thus each novel achieves spatial significance through a distinctive geometry.

The dimensional parameters of *Jacob’s Room* are quite literally the walls of the private rooms that have housed various periods of his adolescence: his dormitory at Cambridge University, and his apartment in London. The three descriptions of these two rooms that are staggered throughout the text are united

by the repetition of images and of word phrases. These motifs stabilize a spatial structure overtop a rather convoluted narrative.

The first time we enter Jacob's chamber, in Chapter Three, the architectural unit reflects the young man's role and duties as a scholarly servant of the British Empire, and the objects therein offer clues to Jacob's personal history and future. The physical things within the space replace the presence of Jacob himself, who is not only absent from the premises but also barely known as a character within the novel itself. Jacob's existence is a mere suggestion, like a subtle breeze: "Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker armchair creaks, though no one sits there" (*JR*, 38).

In Chapter Five, we are again invited to enter Jacob's private quarters, but now he is living on Lamb's Conduit Street in London. The furniture (three wicker chairs and a gate-legged table) and presumably his library have been relocated from his dormitory. The rooms are notable for their eighteenth century décor: "The rooms are shapely, the ceilings high; over the doorway a rose, or a ram's skull, is carved in the wood. The eighteenth century has its distinction. Even the panels, painted in raspberry-coloured paint, have their distinction..." (71). This elliptical suspension is repeated during our second and final admission to this place. Of the three descriptions of Jacob's rooms, this central segment implies narrative unity through the evocation of empty spaces.

In the final chapter, we return to the London apartments after their owner has died in World War I. As always, Jacob's room lacks Jacob, but now we are overwhelmed by the certainty of his absence. This is a static space, one that is

practically frozen in time, where objects *déjà vu* rest immobile and words are repeated in the empty air. The two previously cited descriptions are reiterated almost verbatim: “The eighteenth century has its distinction...” and “Listless is the air in an empty room....” These rhetorical repetitions give a sense of continuity to the structuration of the novel and also to its protagonist. Jacob is continuously and eternally non-present. The empty substance of his being is replaced by the spaces of his life: Jacob’s rooms. As in the first chapter, when his brother beckons for him on the beach, Bonamy shouts his friend’s name and receives no response. Jacob is forever silent. The room is now truly a mausoleum, a place where the dead are remembered by the trinkets they have left behind; such a space provides appropriate closure for the novel.

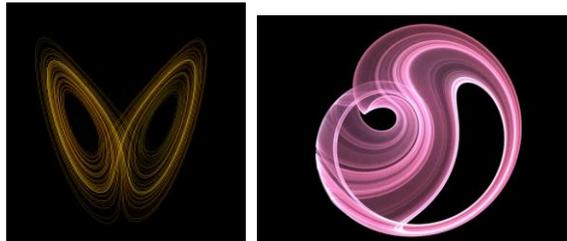
While *Jacob’s Room* is constructed around an absence of its protagonist, *Mrs. Dalloway* derives its geometrical structure from the use of Clarissa as its fundamental unit. Clarissa’s human presence buttresses the beginning and the ending of the novel, from her perch on the curb of Victoria Street to the end of her party: “For there she was” (*MD*, 194). Although the *sjuzhet* spirals about London, focalizes with several other characters, and circles back into memories, it consistently returns to inhabit Clarissa’s perspective. Her narrative line weaves back and forth through various dimensional modes that juxtapose reality and imagination, action and thought, and present and past. These metaphysical and meta-temporal fluctuations suggest a spatial structure to encompass the multi-dimensional gestures of the narrative. Furthermore, they serve as the dimensions of Clarissa’s own prismatic existence, since, as Woolf asserts: “It is to express

character...that the form of the novel...has been evolved" (*Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, 2-3). Both these ideas about the spatialization of narrative and the individual geometry of characters will be discussed in later chapters.

In her critical essay "Narrating the Unbounded," Jo Alyson Parker evaluates the narration of *Mrs. Dalloway* through the lens of chaos theory, which studies dynamical systems in order to explain how patterns of order emerge from random behavior. Chaos theory considers those unpredictable phenomena of nature that classical physics cannot but dismiss. Parker argues that *Mrs. Dalloway* is a case study for chaos theory because the "roving trajectory of focalization" (93) is a mechanism of randomness that bears an ordered existence within a bounded area (the space of the novel as expressed within seventeen hours on June thirteenth). Passing through various individual consciousnesses, the narration develops a certain order by acknowledging the interrelations of characters in space and time. Clarissa herself imagines something like a spider's web connecting her to other people around the city: "And they went further and further from her, being attached to her by a thin thread (since they had lunched with her) which would stretch and stretch, get thinner and thinner as they walked across London; as if one's friends were attached to one's body" (*MD*, 112). Within the world of the novel, everybody is relative, even those characters who never encounter each other. The book imposes a network about seemingly random individual characters.

The spiraling focalization can be visualized in a figure called a strange attractor, which is a virtual representation of a chaotic system. This non-linear form of non-integer dimension expresses the seemingly paradoxical notion of "bounded

randomness” (Parker, 17). The strange attractor exhibits a definite spatial-temporal pattern of unpredictable evolution. Parker relates the novel’s narrative to a particular configuration called the Lorenz attractor. Also termed the “butterfly,” this figure, when viewed from another angle, also resembles the shell of a snail. As in *Kew Gardens* and *The Mark on the Wall*, the spiral form of this gastropod reappears to virtually exemplify another aspect of narration in Woolf’s fiction: focalization.



Parker asserts that the strange attractor particular to *Mrs. Dalloway* constitutes the character of the protagonist. Since Clarissa is the fulcrum of the narrative trajectory, both as subject and object of focalization, she is analogous to the strange attractor that dictates the evolution of the dynamical system. Like the strange attractor that cannot be represented by integer dimensions, Clarissa’s human substantiality is not definable, but is certainly apprehended. For example, Peter Walsh notes how her presence provokes his own emotional vigor:

What is this terror? What is this ecstasy? he thought to himself. What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement?

It is Clarissa, he said.

For there she was. (194)

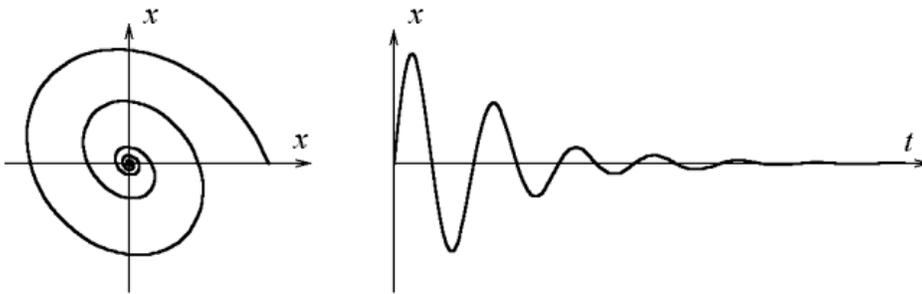
Beyond the woman in the green dress, Clarissa is a dynamic presence that is not necessarily apparent from her superficial identity as a “seemingly shallow society matron” (Parker, 88). As the traveling focalization considers her persona from

various angles, Clarissa emerges as the “infinite sum of other consciousnesses” (96). Like the novel that bears her name, Mrs. Dalloway can be perceived as a virtual figure, but “chaotic” contours of her form elude exact “dimensional” definition.

By describing the narrative of *Mrs. Dalloway* as the figure of the strange attractor, Parker effectively proposes a Significant Form for the work. She compares the narrative to an algorithm that allows for infinite local variations within the restrictions of place, time, character, and action. Like the strange attractor, the dynamical narrative exhibits an irregular geometry that cannot be predicted by the Euclidean universe. Its form is determined by the *storyline* that traverses space but does not fill it because it has no points of intersection. It can only be charted in a fractal dimension, which guarantees the freedom of chaos. Parker suggests a Significant Form that takes shape according to the properties of time and space, but that cannot be produced by Euclidean theory.

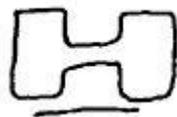
By drawing a strange attractor in three-dimensional space, one can approximate a geometric form to represent the chaotic system. When applied to the inner workings of *Mrs. Dalloway*, this figure, called a fixed-point attractor, evokes the translation of the  $n$ -dimensional narrative structure to the two-dimensional medium of the novel. This geometrical form represents the curvilinear path of the narrative that orbits about a stationary point: Clarissa Dalloway. The protagonist’s function as the point of stasis for the system is analogous to her thematic role as a bound motif (though certainly *not* as a *static* motif). Clarissa is the focus of order for the narrative system, whose “chaotic” elements have been restrained into phase-space representation. The following figures, representations of the fixed-point

attractor in virtual space, may also be considered as diagrams of narrative, which describe the personage of Clarissa as an aggregate of ulterior perceptions. The right-hand figure models time displacement, which honors the inherently temporal property of literature. Intersections with the  $t$ -axis signify moments of “this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway” (*MD*, 11), when the narration assumes Clarissa’s voice. The figure on the left represents displacement and velocity, suggesting the “roving trajectory of focalization” that zooms around London, capturing moments of simultaneity and memory.



The phase space visualization of the fixed-point attractor brings us back to the molluscan motif that generally characterizes Woolf’s narrative style. The snail, as an expression of *sjuzhet*, is a creature of sloth and dynamism in space-time, one that catalyzes extension and compression, delay and acceleration.

Although keeping with the curvaceous tendencies of snail-shell narration, *To The Lighthouse* is dominated by a polygonal construction. In her “Notes for writing,” Woolf explains that she conceived of her novel as “two blocks joined by a corridor” and drew the following image:



(*The Original Holograph Draft*)

*To the Lighthouse* is divided into three parts, with the “corridor” representing the passage of ten years time. In doing this, Woolf designs her own challenge of achieving unity within a cleaved text. The geometric integrity of the novel’s form depends upon the development of two bound motifs: the lighthouse and Lily Briscoe’s painting.

Boris Thomashevsky’s dissertation on “Thematics” helps us understand the functioning of these two motifs within the space of the narrative. Motifs are critical to both the *fabula* and *sjuzhet* in that they link the various themes that make up a work of fiction. The *fabula* depends on the presence of bound motifs, which affect the causal-chronological progress of the novel. In *To the Lighthouse*, the lighthouse and the painting create the structural frame of the “two blocks” of narrative. In the first section “The Window,” the Ramsay family proposes an expedition to the lighthouse, which is foiled by foul weather and socio-domestic complications. At the same time, Lily Briscoe struggles to paint a picture. These two endeavors are only realized in the final section “The Lighthouse.” The ten-year “corridor” that marks the postponement of the voyage is the same that interrupts the process of Lily Briscoe’s painting. Lily’s speech act asserts that the Ramsay’s arrival at the lighthouse is simultaneous with the completion of her painting. “ ‘He has landed,’ she said aloud. ‘It is finished.’” (*TTL*, 211).

The lighthouse and the painting are particularly powerful motifs because of their temporal duration. They belong to a special class called introductory motifs because they require the supplementation of additional motifs to be fulfilled.

According to Thomashevsky, introductory motifs may involve a task, delay, pursuit,

or progress. In Woolf's work, the lighthouse and the painting survive the passage of time and the passage of the novel. They are the thematic jointure that unites the two blocks of the story, reinforcing the work's polygonal structure. However, by their nature as introductory motifs, they also evoke the curvilinear spiral. While the movements of voyage and of art-making result in obvious physical displacement and change, the narrative returns to dwell upon the two bound motifs of the lighthouse and the painting. Thus the linear expression of these two motifs is at once straight (in that they ride on the back of *chronos*) and circular: a snail shell.

However, the harmonious spiral design of the narrative is interrupted by a "savage break" (Lee, 476). The interior chapter "Time Passes" is notable because of its peculiar relationship to *chronos* itself. This short section explains the changes within the abandoned Ramsay house on the Isle of Skye during the span of ten years, including a violent hurricane and the death of Mrs. Ramsay. However, the accelerated rate of time is juxtaposed by slow, tarrying descriptions of the desolate house and overgrown gardens. Woolf articulates her self-prescribed challenge in her diary: "I have to give an empty house, no people's characters, the passage of time, all eyeless and featureless with nothing to cling to" (30 April 1926; *Writer's Diary*, 87). By this method, time is transposed into space, creating a volume of temporal dimensions. This figure is the expression of *sjuzhet* in defiance of *fabula*: a vertical line rupturing the horizontality of chronological plot-sequence.

This is a line that Woolf will not bend, but will use to ascertain the unity of the novel by its very uncompromising straightness. When discussing her plan for *To*

*the Lighthouse*, Woolf resists assigning any explicit meaning to this central line, but does not deny its capacity as a symbol:

I meant *nothing* by *The Lighthouse*. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refused to think them out, and trusted people would make it the deposit for their own emotions – which they have done, one thinking it means one thing or another.  
(27 May, 1927; Letter to Roger Fry; Qtd. in Hussey, lx)

This passage obfuscates our idea of the author's intent for the novel. This "central line" may be understood in two ways. Within the book's formal architecture, it is the division that bisects the text and ruptures the chronological cadence of the narrative: the middle chapter entitled "Time Passes." On a thematic level, the line refers to the novel's most prominent motif that presents itself in each of the three chapters as a horizontal consistency: the building of the lighthouse itself. In both cases, the central line upholding the novel's two-fold structure adheres to the principles of Bloomsbury Formalism. As Roger Fry asserts: "In a picture, unity is due to a balancing of the attractions to the eye about the central line of the picture" (21). The line is therefore the essential stroke for the novel to achieve its Significant Form. Buttressed by the Aesthetic Emotion of the reader, the line aspires beyond the first dimension and promotes a spatial-temporal understanding of the book itself.

In considering the thematic value of the line, we may see it as representational of the two motifs that dominate the story. The lighthouse is a building whose vertical grandeur informs its very function. Poised on the brink of land and sea, it delineates the two elements. However, the lighthouse is also an emblem of unity for mankind as its bright beam guides ships to their homes. Within the chapter "Time Passes," Woolf evokes the dualistic powers of the lighthouse:

“Some cleavage of the dark there must have been, some channel in the depths of obscurity through which light enough issued...” (135). Moreover, the lighthouse radiates a beam that sweeps through the darkness horizontally, creating a disk of light perpendicular to its proper form. The lighthouse illuminates the truth of a world made visible by the bright ring around it. The revolving motion of the beam evokes the snail-shell spiral. The lighthouse is a powerful geometric symbol of unity because it recognizes both spatial axes through the expression of linearity and circularity. Thus the lighthouse comes to embody the structural purpose of the “savage break” in the novel’s form: a line that is at once dividing and unifying.

Lily’s painting also exemplifies this purpose. In the final scene of *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe viciously bisects her completed canvas: “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” (211). This aggressive vertical intersects all the other gestural diagonals “running up and across” the canvas, but it doesn’t seem to have any personal, representational, or symbolic meaning. It is purely structural, like the binding of a book that keeps all of the pages intact. This is another vertical line that delineates spaces, making “two blocks” out of the canvas. Similar to the “long steady stroke, the last of the three” (66) of the lighthouse beam sweeping over the dark horizon, this “stroke” of the brush finalizes the painting’s completion.

With *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf demonstrates how imposing *vertical* linearity (as opposed to the horizontality of *fabula/chronos*) can accomplish formal unity. Moreover, she proves that this straight line may be reconciled with the bending lines associated with the style and shape of the narration. In her next formal

venture, Woolf develops both concepts by essentially reducing the shape of the spiral to an endless circular progression of verticals, horizontals, and diagonals. *The Waves* is a novel that questions the values of both *fabula* and *sjuzhet* by proposing “an action outside of time, in which sequential event would be abandoned as well as character” (Alexander, 147). It suggests a form that alters the dimensions of conscious reality in the effort to become what Woolf calls “an abstract mystical eyeless book – a playpoem” (7 November 1928; *Writer’s Diary*, 134). Furthermore, it conjures geometric figures symbolically associated with nature, cosmogony, and the human psyche.

The spherical structure of the novel recalls the spiraling movement of its title motif: waves. The repeating curls of water that grow and collapse upon each other suggest the circulating focalization of the narrative through the voices of six characters. Their thoughts are expressed in tagged dialogue, as if the interior discourse of the mind has been spoken aloud. Despite these “vocal” rounds, the language of the text remains consistent; all the characters “speak” in the same style. As the opposite of free indirect discourse, this peculiar method unites all the characters under a common language, creating the auditory illusion of a single, authorial narrator. In a similar way, a wave of water that approaches the shore is an optical illusion, for it is actually made up of multiple repeating waves rolling through each other as they cover distance.

The circular motion of waves is reflected in another natural cycle: the arching voyage of the sun across the sky that determines the passage from night to day. In the novel, each of the nine chapters is introduced by a description of the seascape at

a particular time of day, which corresponds to a developmental stage in the characters' lives. These interludes exist outside the *fabula* yet serve as a symbolic backdrop for the diegesis. Without narrating progression, they invoke temporality as a metaphorical concept and endow the subsequent chapters with a sense of *chronos*. These sections at once spatialize the narrative into atemporal blocks of experience and unite all nine within a whole temporal unit: a single day.

In these descriptive sections, the sun is the central figure: a circle of light giving life to a matrix of horizontals and verticals. The opening of the novel recounts the genesis of an abstract world of lines:

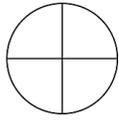
Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually.

As they neared the shore each bar rose, heaped itself, broke and swept a thin veil of white water across the sand...Gradually the dark bar on the horizon became clear...Behind it, too, the sky cleared...as if the arm of a woman couched beneath the horizon had raised a lamp and flat bars of white, green, and yellow, spread across the sky like the blades of a fan...Slowly the arm that held the lamp raised it higher and then higher until a broad flame became visible; an arc of fire burnt on the rim of the horizon. (*W*, 7-8)

The sun, spherical center of creation, which illuminates the linear composition of the natural world, also invokes the dawn of human consciousness. As the lamp ascends, the "arc of fire" develops into a "ring," a "loop of light," and a "globe," images that constitute some of the earliest impressions in the first chapter. As a symbol of totality and absolute consciousness, the circle is an important motif within the novel.

The landscape is assembled by a succession of horizontal bars, which are perpendicularly intersected by the vertical stature of the woman holding a lamp, a

figure remarkably similar to that of the lighthouse. From the beginning, the narrative evokes the following shape:



The cosmogonous significance of this shape is further elaborated by Jean Alexander's hermetic analysis. She evokes the cabalistic design that describes the forces of the universe (fire, air, water, and earth) and notes how the characters' sensations are a response to the natural elements: "The texture of the human experience or consciousness is in harmony with the events of external nature" (227). After considering various occult symbolisms associated with this geometric figure, Alexander also proposes that within the circle of the novel, chords come to represent characters, images, and events that striate the work's total design.

This geometric figure also expresses the temporality of the novelistic medium. Within the circular entirety of the narration, *chronos/fabula* is a horizontal line intersected by nine instances of *kairos* verticals, the static moments of being represented by a particular time of day and the corresponding narrative. Rhoda evokes this idea in the first chapter: "Look, the loop of the figure is beginning to fill with time; it holds the world in it" (*W*, 21). The world of the novel, a discrete unit of fictional time, is contained within a creative circle, resulting in a Significant Form expressing all the geometric gestures of vision, nature, mysticism, and human consciousness.

Woolf's next novel, *Between the Acts*, presents the inverse of the temporal framework established in *The Waves*. The structure of this work is similarly

spatialized by narrative alternations. The story takes place over the course of one day in June 1939, during which a small village performs an informal pageant intended to summarize the history of England from the time of Shakespeare to the present. The continuity of the story proper is interrupted by the three acts of the play, each of which is meant to represent a given stretch of history. The space of the narrative is informed by the simultaneous compression and expansion of temporality. The passage of centuries is imposed upon the length of a single day; history collapses into the present.

The novel itself and the play within are two fictional media that must be expressed by the same *fabula*. The action of the novel, which recounts the lives, thoughts, and interactions of characters, occurs between the three acts of the play, in which already fictional persons aspire to the secondary fictionality of thespians. As a work of double-sided fiction, *Between the Acts* suggests a narrative helix whose integrity is artistic illusion. Neither the novel nor the play exist as an independent structure but function as complements, with the dimensions of one defining the space of another. The acts of the play seem to construct their own shapes within the surrounding space of the novel's narrative. Like vertical pillars, they are units of condensed time structuring the horizontal chronology of the primary *fabula*. As in *The Waves*, the spatial form of the narrative is relegated by its relationship to time.

In each of these five novels, Significant Form is achieved through geometric gestures. Woolf experiments with the interaction of *fabula* and *sjuzhet* to conjure various expressions of line: spirals and straights, arcs and intersections. Lines traversing the dimensions of space build forms upon the narrative. These figures are

the illusions of fiction, just as these fictions are the illusions of reality. The Euclidean universe offers infinite potential for a narrative line that discovers the space beyond its uni-dimensional trajectory.

## Chapter 2: Novel Form in a Few Dimensions

By merging the temporal art of *fabula* with the spatial art of *sjuzhet*, Virginia Woolf constructs a Significant Form for her writing. Within this imaginative structure, certain literary features contribute to the effect of spatialization. This chapter will examine how imagery, language, narration, and time suggest geometric functions. Woolf's writing plays with the elastic dimensions of time and space to approximate the "form which you feel" (*On Re-reading novels*, 340).

Since the spatial quality of Woolf's literature deliberately evokes the pictorial arts, it is important to note Woolf's knowledge of two consecutive movements in painting: Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. Originating in France in the latter third of the nineteenth century, Impressionism is a style characterized by small distinct brushstrokes, juxtaposition of colors, open composition, mundane subject matter, peculiar angles of sight, and emphatic treatment of light. Impressionist art does not seek to produce an accurate depiction of reality, but a subjective vision of that which is seen. Roger Fry extols the innovative methods of the Impressionists, who introduce an unfamiliar optical language to represent ordinary life:

They...reduced the artistic vision to a continuous patchwork or mosaic of coloured patches without architectural framework or structural coherence. In this, impressionism marked the climax of a movement which had been going on more or less steadily from the thirteenth century – the tendency to approximate the forms of art more and more exactly to the representation of the totality of appearance. (7)

Fry values Impressionism because it relates to his ideas on Significant Form in its "insistency on the principles of structural design and harmony" (8), thus emphasizing the importance of aesthetics over accurate rendition.

The Impressionist influence in Woolf's work is most clearly evident in her descriptions of settings. In these passages of *ekphrasis*<sup>3</sup>, or word-painting, her fiction is suspended in a tableau of lyrical depiction. Scenes emerge as light-dappled visions of color counterpoint, quixotic imagery, anthropomorphized nature, and sensory language. These passages evoke the style and subject matter of much Impressionist painting. Consider the opening paragraph of *Kew Gardens*:

From the oval-shaped flower-bed there rose perhaps a hundred stalks spreading into heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves half way up and unfurling at the tip red or blue or yellow petals marked with spots of colour raised upon the surface; and from the red, blue or yellow gloom of the throat emerged a straight bar, rough with gold dust and slightly clubbed at the end. The petals were voluminous enough to be stirred by the summer breeze, and when they moved, the red, blue and yellow lights passed one over the other, staining an inch of the brown earth beneath with a spot of the most intricate colour. The light fell either upon the smooth, grey back of a pebble, or the shell of a snail with its brown, circular veins, or falling into a raindrop, it expanded with such intensity of red, blue and yellow the thin walls of water that one expected them to burst and disappear. Instead, the drop was left in a second silver grey once more, and the light now settled upon the flesh of a leaf, revealing the branching thread of fibre beneath the surface, and again it moved on and spread its illumination in the vast green spaces beneath the dome of the heart-shaped and tongue-shaped leaves. Then the breeze stirred rather more briskly overhead and the colour was flashed into the air above, into the eyes of the men and women who walk in Kew Gardens in July. (90)

This lengthy description in fact illuminates a very small space of the world, remaining within the optical range of the tiny snail nestled among the leaves. We perceive in terms of colors (red, blue, yellow, brown, grey, silver, gold), shapes (oval-shaped, tongue-shaped, heart-shaped, circular), and the reflections of light.

Like an Impressionist work, the total vision is achieved through the juxtaposition of

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<sup>3</sup> The Wikipedia definition of ekphrasis recalls the Formalist purpose: "Ekphrasis has been considered generally to be a rhetorical device in which one medium of art tries to relate to another medium by defining and describing its essence and form, and in doing so, relate more directly to the audience, through its illuminative liveliness."

tones that merge in the optical field to create new colors and shapes. The image cannot be decoded unless viewed from a distance and set within a manageable frame of reference: in art, the canvas; in literature, the story.

As with “reading” an Impressionist painting, visualizing Woolf’s writing involves a process of defamiliarization, which establishes a certain distance between the reader and the text. Just as a recognizable scene is shattered into color-shapes, a half-heard dialogue is an arrhythmic exchange of incoherent phrases:

‘Nell, Bert, Lot, Cess, Phil, Pa, he says, I says, she says, I says, I says, I says –’  
‘My Bert, Sis, Bill, Grandad, the old man, sugar,  
Sugar, flour, kippers, greens  
Sugar, sugar sugar. (93)

To exacerbate the rhetorical confusion, Woolf eschews encapsulating this disjointed discourse with normal grammatical signifiers and syntax. Words are smattered over the page like dabs of paint on a canvas. To be logical (thematic) or merely coherent (grammatical), words require dimensions, beginning with the basic, proper transcription of language. Denied immediate understanding of the text, the reader cannot unravel the plot in a chronological manner but must continue reading to discover some unified meaning. Thus defamiliarization emphasizes the work’s dimensional parameters, which delineate a spatial structure bounded by the beginning and the end. This alternative way of reading, or *seeing* a text suggests another dimensional extension: the distance between the reader and the story. Defamiliarized narrative requires a spatial understanding, or a visual reading, in order to discover its “purposeful order” (Fry, 20).

Defamiliarization is an aesthetic associated with Modern art (from the period approximately 1860-1970), be it visual or rhetorical. In painting, the method

develops a geometric expression through the progeny of the Impressionist school. In continual support of contemporary art, Fry coined the term Post-Impressionism and organized the new movement's first exhibition in November 1910, which featured the works of Van Gogh, Cézanne, and Gauguin. These paintings differ from those of their predecessors in the treatment of color and form. Post-impressionists consider color as a means of emotional expression, and often deliberately choose unnatural hues. In opposition to the open compositions and hazy figures of Impressionism, the new artists seek to restore geometric order. They do this by reducing objects to basic shapes and by planning their canvases about specific forms.

Woolf practices the same sort of abstraction in her writing. Post-impressionist painting often relies on the abstraction of recognizable objects into shapes of color. The purpose of this creative representation is to convey a different understanding or "reading" of that object, of its situation in space, and of its geometric status as translated by visual codes. The still-life, or *nature-morte*, is a popular genre of Modern painting that emphasizes shape, color, and design. The tableau avoids a narrative reading: there is neither story nor character; everything is understood spontaneously. Rather, the value of the piece is in its composition. The subject matter is of little importance other than as a structural element, and therefore is deliberately mundane – perhaps some fruit, kitchenware, flowers, and some kind of drapery. These objects, which in an earlier age would not have been considered appropriate for high art, are transfigured by abstraction, and made meaningful as formal elements of composition. In the process of defamiliarization, things are redefined by vision.

The following scene from *To the Lighthouse* describes the aesthetic experience of viewing a still life. Rose has assembled a centerpiece of various fruits and objects on the dining-room table. The compositional harmony of this arrangement touches Mrs. Ramsay's aesthetic sensibility, which elevates the mundane table-setting to an artistic creation in her eyes. Transfixed by her vision, Mrs. Ramsay overlooks the real function of the objects. She forgets that the colorful orbs are actually fruit that can be eaten. When offered a pear, she declines because she cannot imagine disrupting the balanced arrangement:

No, she said, she did not want a pear. Indeed she had been keeping guard over the dish of fruit (without realizing it) jealously, hoping nobody would touch it. Her eyes had been going in and out among the curves and shadows of the fruit, among the rich purples of the lowland grapes, then over the horny ridge of the shell, putting a yellow against a purple, a curved shape against a round shape, without knowing why she did it, or why, every time she did it, she felt more and more serene" (110).

When somebody takes a pear from the pile, Mrs. Ramsay feels that the whole thing has been spoiled. She no longer sees art, but a heap of edible produce. Like the *nature-morte*, the aesthetic power of the subject is not what it truly *is*, but the human sentiments that it inspires. This power is a function of its Significant Form.

As she observes Paul Cézanne's painting *Still Life with Apples*, Woolf contemplates the values of subject and form within the artistic medium:

There are 6 apples in the Cézanne picture. What can 6 apples not be? I began to wonder. There's their relationship to each other, & their colour, & their solidity....The apples positively got redder & rounder & greener. I suspect some very mysterious quality ... in that picture... The longer one looks the larger and heavier and greener and redder they become.  
(18 April 1918; *Diary: Vol. I*, 140-141)

Woolf sees that the representation of an object as it realistically *must* be enervates its essential force. In its abstracted form and negative definition (what it is *not*) the

object gains potential and a life force of its own. The object is appreciated for *how* it is, not *what* it is.

As a sub-style of Post-Impressionism, Cubism further effectuates the artistic practice of defamiliarization. Cubist painters sought to reanalyze vision in a way that distorts depth perception yet encompasses a multitude of viewpoints in space. Surface planes intersect and slide over each other, thus splintering objects into geometrical shards that are reassembled into new, angular forms. Roger Fry, who exhibited some works of early Cubist artists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque at his two Post-Impressionist Exhibitions, describes the “extreme” defamiliarization effectuated in Picasso’s *Head of a Man* as “purely abstract language of form – a visual music” (157). Fry’s comment speaks to the principle of *Anders-streben*, suggesting that the abstracted forms on the canvas evoke the qualities of other arts, language and music.

Indeed the Cubist aesthetic translates to Woolf’s fiction as well. Like a Cubist artist, Woolf strives to evoke a multi-dimensional vision within a two-dimensional medium (in her case, the novel). Just as the Cubists fractionalize scenes into shapes to impair depth perception, Woolf’s narratives are presented as fragmented forms that deny causal-chronological sequence. On a smaller scale, disruptions of grammar and syntax distort the reader’s comprehension of the story, or in other words, visualization of the *sjuzhet*. Additionally, Woolf’s narratives exhibit frequent changes in focalization in the same way that a Cubist painting will incorporate multiple visual angles to explore a single object or scene. In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe contemplates a Cubist approach to her understanding of Mrs. Ramsay, whom she is

trying to depict in her painting: “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” (201). This novel describes and enacts the parallel struggle of painter (Lily) and writer (Woolf) to represent the geometric totality of a thing in a single artistic vision. The “abstract language” of Cubism offers a means for the simultaneous expression of their arts. In vision and in literature, defamiliarization opens up the pathways of imagination and the possibility for spatial reconstruction by the artist.

The Russian Formalists value the effect of defamiliarization in art and literature. Victor Shkolovsky argues that art is meant to perplex or “deautomatize” our perception of the world so that we may better appreciate the metaphysical details, textures, and sensations of living:

Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. (12)

Art that refuses to present the viewer/reader with something that is easily recognizable proves its *durability*: one must delay and deliberately think about the work at hand. Through its own spatial assertion, “the thing is made that endures” (*TTL*, 107). Defamiliarization appeals to both time and space in order to construct a significant structure. Thus the reader/viewer is brought into a heightened sensitivity and aesthetic consciousness for the artistic magnitude of the work.

The novel offers the prime medium for Shklovsky’s principle. *Sjuzhet*, as the denatured form of *fabula*, lends itself to temporal caprice on several levels. The very project of reading, which translates the action of the text to the (imagined)

sensation of that action in the mind of the reader, necessarily implicates delay: we cannot know a novel spontaneously. Everything the text communicates is defamiliarized action, which requires at least some measure of intellectual exercise. Certain narrative maneuvers further exacerbate and delay the reader's comprehension. When denied immediate understanding, the reader resorts to interpretation and conjecture, a creative process of building forms. These precocious structures of plausible promise evolve and morph as the reader explores more of the text. Woolf's novels demonstrate how the defamiliarization of story implicates a spatial form for the plot. Motifs, repetition, parallelism, wavering focalization, and discontinuous chronology extend the dimensions of literature into geometric virtuality.

Woolf's fiction is bound together by a vocabulary of images that texturize the experience of reading. By Boris Tomashevsky's definition, these significant images are motifs that structuralize the novel's thematic layout. In Woolf's writing, motifs are often ordinary sights that become somehow symbolic as they reappear throughout the text: "The passion of existence has been known through them or in their company, not at one moment but in a continuity and in diversity" (Alexander, 223). Symbols introduce another dimension of sight and significance to the written work. They suggest a person or concept that is not explained or described, and rely on the reader's discerning mind to acquire meaning. Some symbols already discussed include the lighthouse, the waves, Big Ben, Lily's painting, and the snail that migrates through several of her texts.

Like Virginia Woolf, Lily Briscoe is a character who thinks in images, which may be understood as symbols. Lily's surrealist sight imposes the imagined image upon perceived reality and provokes a symbolic meaning. She associates Mr. Ramsey's scholarly work with a scrubbed kitchen table, an image that interrupts her optical vision whenever she thinks of him. As she walks through an orchard and thinks of his work, Lily sees a kitchen table "lodged now in the fork of a pear tree" (*TTL*, 27). This distorted vision is a result of word-picture association and the circumstances of dialogue and setting. It is most likely that Mr. Ramsey's books, which are supposedly about "subject and object and the nature of reality" (26), would condemn Lily's unnatural hallucination.

Lily's artistic vision responds to a multitude of sensational and psychological stimuli:

All of this danced up and down, like a company of gnats, each separate, but all marvelously controlled in an invisible elastic net – danced up and down in Lily's mind, in and about the branches of the pear tree, where still hung in effigy the scrubbed kitchen table, symbol of her profound respect for Mr. Ramsey's mind, until her thought which had spun quicker and quicker exploded of its own intensity; she felt released; a shot went off close at hand, and there came, flying from its fragments, frightened, effusive, tumultuous, a flock of starlings. (28)

Her vision has its own elastic action potential, which gains force from the jumbling of dialogue, consciousness, landscape, and imagination. The narration of this section imitates the visual muddle by blurring the lines between dialogue, objective voice, description, and internal reflection. The psycho-visual ataxia results in a dual explosion: the flight of the flock of starlings and Lily's mental paroxysm.

Like the author who created her, Lily speaks in symbols within her own art. In her picture, abstract shapes bear symbolic import, such as the purple triangle that

is meant to represent Mrs. Ramsay reading to James. Just as Lily declares that the triangle is not the absolute subject of her painting, Woolf's writing avoids a purely Symbolist reading. The apparent symbols within Woolf's novels lack specific meaning. Her symbols invalidate the traditional, direct relationship between the signified object/person and its signifier(s). Instead, motifs serve as markers in space, calling the reader's attention to certain moments or referencing other places in the text. Moreover, the conceptual move from motif to symbol is another way of imagining a Significant Form, one whose geometry is built upon thematic connections.

Woolf uses motifs to evoke the geometric potential of narrative through passages of description and by suggesting symbolism. In *Jacob's Room*, her methods construct Jacob's room from the foundations of the written text. The novel includes three detailed descriptions of his rooms. Such passages constitute what Thomashevsky would term a static motif, since it does not alter the action of the *fabula*. As a function of the *sjuzhet*, these motifs suggest dimensional extensions in both space and time. Panoramic detail evokes the three-dimensionality of the *topos*<sup>4</sup>, while the very bulk of language employed to explore this place suggests an instance of *kairos*. The length of time it takes to read the passage takes liberty from *chronos* by retarding the tempo of the *sjuzhet*. The *kairos* of space exemplifies the purpose of Significant Form. Thus description and symbolism within the text propose a room that seems real and inhabitable, though it is usually empty.

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<sup>4</sup> *Topos* is the Greek word for "place," or a space with set boundaries. As a literary term, it refers to rhetorical convention or a motif.

In a novel where the protagonist is most often absent, in an architectural unit void of human life, we discover clues to Jacob's character through a network of images. Nearly every object in Jacob's sparsely furnished room is symbolic of his personal history and duties as a servant of the British Empire. The décor, paneled walls painted raspberry in the eighteenth century, situates Jacob in the timeline of British history: the first quarter of the twentieth century. He is the inheritor of a powerful Empire with a rich literary tradition. His Cambridge education trains him to uphold the prestige of his noble country, and so his room is also filled with the accoutrements of a university scholar: notes and pipes, society cards, ruled paper, an essay, and a heap of books. The tomes in Jacob's library indicate what curriculum was deemed essential for a well-read mind: a knowledge of French, the Classics, the sciences, art, history, biographies, and seminal British writers including the Elizabethans, Spenser, Dickens, Carlyle, and Jane Austen. While certainly worthy of the esteem they have been given, books have essentially raised Jacob since he left for school in 1906. Their respectability and authority is practically parental, usurping the role of Jacob's own mother, whose flattened likeness is remembered in a photograph.

At this point in history, the British Empire requires more than just intellectual devotion. Three objects foreshadow Jacob's early death on the battlefields of World War One. The "petals of poppies pressed to silk between the pages" (*JR*, 38) of his Greek dictionary allude to the famous Flanders Fields, celebrated in a 1915 poem by John McCrae, where poppies bloom amidst the graves of fallen soldiers. Another *memento mori* is the black wooden box with his name

written on it in white paint, which resembles a coffin. The ram's skull carved into the wood of his doorway not only connotes decay and death, but also refers to Mars the Greek god of war. Amidst all these elegiac symbols stands a jar of flowers.

Twitching in the breeze from the open window, they are otherwise detached from any apparent meaning, except that they may serve as a funerary offering to one who is going to die young.

Detailed by a web of symbols, Jacob's room is portrayed as more than just a three-dimensional unit of architecture. Objects that evoke his past, present, and impending death suggest a space of temporal *durée*, one that does indeed survive its owner. The final scene, in which Bonamy and Mrs. Flanders return to the room after Jacob's death, implies the victory of place over person. The sound of Jacob's name echoes away into silence and his old shoes, now useless, are to be thrown away. Only the empty shell of his room remains, its timelessness honored by the various architectural "distinctions" of the eighteenth century. Thus space and time, the dimensions of geometry, outlast the story of a human life. This correlates to the idea of Significant Form as a multi-dimensional *sjuzhet*: Woolf's fiction is animated and survives by the illusory form it passes over the text. The literal-virtual space of Jacob's room is a metaphor for Woolf's endeavor to create "a new form for a new novel" (26 January 1920; *Writer's Diary*, 22).

Motifs may also serve as jointures in the geometric structure of the narrative. As points of transition, they link consecutive passages and enable a shift in scene or focalization. In the first chapter of *Jacob's Room*, a large black rock along the shoreline serves as a fulcrum for character perception and as a fixed point

determining spatial relationship between characters within the same setting.

Charles Steele has set up his easel to paint the seascape, in which the faraway rock appears as a black blob on the canvas. Jacob, as a young boy, is climbing to the top of the rock. Mrs. Flanders searches for Jacob on the beach, but she is so close to the rock that she does not see her son who is playing right above her. These three characters relate to the rock by varying distances, which alters each one's perception of it. The vision of the reader is most similar to that of Charles Steele, who perceives from afar. In the textual tableau, we too recognize the unifying force of the big, black rock, "that note which brought the rest together" (5). Like the "central line of unity" in a Significant Form, the rock is a focus of order and proportionality. It facilitates a change in focalization and refers to the orientation of characters in space.

The rock motif demonstrates the *Anders-streben* of painting and writing. Its function is both spatial and narrative: to create structuration. Woolf avoids endowing the rock with any specific symbolism; it is merely a building block for the story. Once its purpose is fulfilled within the passage, the rock disappears from our "sight" within the text. Jacob descends from his perch and runs towards another rock on the beach. He believes it is a large black woman sitting in the sand and calls out for his Nanny. When Jacob comes close enough to realize his mistake, he feels "lost" (6) and starts to cry. His vision has betrayed him. The rock is a rock and nothing more. In the eyes of the reader, this means the mere substitution of stones. We are now focused on one rock rather than another, but the equilibrium of the whole canvas has been disturbed. Jacob's shock recalls our own dependence on

visual coherence. Like the paintings of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, Woolf's writing disturbs our security in ocular recognition.

In Woolf's novels, the most powerful spatializing motifs are those that recall the medium's temporal trappings. Woolf evokes time, or *chronos*, as a way of orienting characters in space. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the regular peals of clock towers (Big Ben and St. Margaret's) are heard throughout London and suggest the proximity of characters within the city. Like the lighthouse and Jacob's room, Big Ben is another architectural motif with thematic significance. In fact, Big Ben is a twice-bound motif, critical to the progress of the story, and emblematic of the time-dependency of narrative. It also elicits a symbolic reading. As a major London landmark, it celebrates British patriotism through the very evocation of time passing. Citizens are reminded of the prestigious history of their country and feel themselves a part of a tradition and of a place. Big Ben announces the present with echoes of the past, transforming a history of *chronos* into a legacy of *kairos*. In the silence between its tolling rounds, people lose their sense of community and heritage. Without Big Ben dictating a "purposeful order" to unite them in space and time, they become detached forms in an incongruous canvas-text.

In the absence of the great clock, the present roars in a meaningless silence: "As a cloud crosses the sun, silence falls on London; and falls on the mind. Effort ceases. Time flaps on the mast. There we stop; there we stand. Rigid, the skeleton of habit alone upholds the human frame. Where there is nothing..." (49). This short passage, the only instance of present tense throughout the novel, asserts the importance of appreciating the temporal dimension of lived experience. The virtue

of a given moment is in its relationship to the past and future. In an isolated unit of *chronos*, people lack purpose and direction. Frozen upright as hollow shells of anatomy, they become atemporal blocks of static space. By geometric analogy, a single point has no dimension unless it is part of a line. Big Ben restores the human frame with feeling of national identity that compels Londoners to go about their day in their city. Clarissa too is animated by the sense of community that takes its root in patriotism: “She, too, loving it as she did with an absurd and faithful passion, being part of it, since her people were courtiers once in the time of the Georges, she, too, was going that very night to kindle and illuminate; to give her party” (5). The Dalloway dinner party is another point in the line of British history, an event that achieves *kairos* significance because of its relation to a legacy of splendor. Big Ben, as a symbol of time and *topos*, validates the space of the living, endowing bare skeletons with human flesh and conscious minds.

Big Ben evokes a temporal concept that is strictly linear: it signifies a movement towards an ending. Numerous characters, those who have reached middle age, ruminate upon their own mortality that seems increasingly imminent. With every stroke, Big Ben tolls a funerary march that interrupts the pleasant flow of life with a reminder of the inevitable human fate. Clarissa recognizes her own fear of death in the person of Lady Bruton:

She feared time itself, and read on Lady Bruton’s fact, as if it had been a dial cut in impassive stone, the dwindling of life; how year by year her share was sliced; how little the margin that remained was capable any longer of stretching, of absorbing, as in the youthful years, the colours, salts, tones of existence. (30)

Clarissa's frequent digressions into her memories suggest her desire to escape from the progression of life into death. Her narrative enacts the struggle to break from the linearity of *fabula* through the subversion of time itself. Although memories of summers at Bourton cannot preserve her in eternal youth and will not stall the ticking clocks, they perpetually exist within the mindscape of her present. The text employs the simple past tense to express the entire spectrum of the story, from past through the present. Within the narrative, every moment of Clarissa's existence is part of an atemporal abyss. Through memory, her past informs the dimensionality of her present. Thus her experience of life is not purely linear, but creates a spatial form by looping backwards in time. Diversions into the past deflect the reality of *chronos* and momentarily assuage Clarissa's anxiety about death.

The peal of the bells, which arouses Clarissa from her memories, also heightens the reader's spatial awareness within the novel by recalling the ubiquity of the present moment and of the immediate surroundings. Within the temporal range of the plot, approximately seventeen hours on the day of June thirteenth, characters exist in disparate locations throughout London. References to present time serve as ballast that enables Woolf to expand the topographical domain of the story and to introduce multiple lines of narrative. Although they must be described in sequence (since this is the nature of written narrative), scenes may occur simultaneously.

For example, the plot captures two events within the time frame of 11:30 to 11:45. Peter Walsh, just departed from the Dalloway home at Westminster, marches up Whitehall to Trafalgar Square, then continues up Cockspur, Haymarket, and

Regent's to reach Regent's Park where he sits down on a bench and falls asleep. When he awakens, he watches two children playing with pebbles. The little girl dashes off and collides into Lucrezia Warren Smith, who has left her husband Septimus on another bench only yards away. As if transported through the body of the running child, the focalization switches to Lucrezia and we are now privy to her thoughts. She observes "the kind-looking man" (65) who shows his watch to the little girl. Though unnamed, this man is probably Peter Walsh. When Lucrezia returns to her husband, the focalization changes yet again to capture Septimus' fantastical musings until Lucrezia asks for the time: a quarter to twelve. At this point, the independent trajectories of the three characters converge in time and space. As Peter walks by the seated couple, the two men regard each other. The man in the gray suit (Peter) and the young man in the overcoat (Septimus) are strangers within the story, but their narratives are intertwined through a virtual relationship (70-71). Throughout the novel, instances of spatial-temporal overlap between characters of independent narratives often signal a switch in focalization.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the trajectory of the narrative discourse depends on the movement through space. In fact, the actions of the major characters can be traced upon a map of London. Woolf's attention to the cartographical accuracy of the story correlates to her insistence on indicating the time. By establishing these global limits, Woolf establishes a network of geometric relativity by which she introduces a situation of parallelism. According to Tzvetan Todorov, parallelism is a method of repetition in variation that "reveals the resemblance between two different and apparently independent phenomena" (260). Indeed, a well-to-do society matron and

a psychologically disturbed war veteran are not figures that would likely intersect. Although they never meet each other in the story, Clarissa and Septimus exist simultaneously in the city of London. Their closest “encounter” is after Septimus’ death, when Clarissa hears of an anonymous suicide. Their meeting occurs beyond the space-time progression of the plot. Nonetheless, Woolf insists that the form of her novel relies on the interaction of her two protagonists: “Septimus and Mrs. Dalloway should be entirely dependent upon each other” (Letter from 14 June 1925; Qtd. in Parker, 97). The juxtaposition of these characters offers two alternate visions: “the world seen by the sane and the insane side by side” (14 October 1922; *Writer’s Diary*, 51). Clarissa and Septimus should be considered as forms in relation to one another, whose parallel existences structuralize the novel. However, the resulting geometry is beyond the Euclidean dimensions of space and time. This parallelism creates a spatial form that is not apparent during one’s reading, but which can be recognized by the end by discovering the meaningful sympathy between Clarissa and “this young man who had killed himself” (*MD*, 184).

The preoccupation with time highlights the abrogation of cause-effect sequence within the novel. Given the subversion of temporal linearity, the reader must consider a spatial approach to the narrative. If we were to chart plot on a temporal grid, with one axis expressing the events of the *fabula* (a range of approximately thirty years), and the other expressing the time of reading the text (not a specified amount), the resulting figure will represent the yawing path of the

*sjuzhet* through approximately seventeen hours on June thirteenth.<sup>5</sup> Episodes from the plot-time present as well as memories of various characters design this spatial form, which is built from the dimensions of time as expressed by *sjuzhet*. In other words, we have a construction of *kairoi*, significant moments aligned to make a pattern in geometric space.

Unlike the characters' various walking routes throughout London, this narrative pathway, though rendered visible in space, does not demand a particular shape. Its virtual reconstruction is subjective to the mind of the reader who must grapple with temporal inconsistencies, geographical bounds, and switches in focalization. Woolf uses many innovative methods to encode the "purposeful order" of the narrative within a form that is aesthetically appealing, yet challenging to read. Her fiction demands an active reader who strives to configure the narrative workings into some Significant Form that is meaningful to him or her.

The opening passage of *Mrs. Dalloway* demonstrates how the interplay of various narratological gestures evokes the geometric expression of the *sjuzhet* through the dimensions of both time and space. The *fabula* can be easily envisioned on a coordinate plane with space and time marking the two axes. We can plot the progression of Clarissa's day from the curb of Victoria Street to her drawing room in a series of coordinates that connect into a line traveling through seventeen hours.

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<sup>5</sup> Jo Ann Parker proposes this exercise to demonstrate how the indeterminable temporal trajectory of the narrative of *Mrs. Dalloway* exemplifies a chaotic system. This nonlinear pathway revisits certain episodes of the past (such as the summer at Bourton) and completely bypasses others (such as Clarissa's life as a young wife and mother). Moreover, the narrative sometimes returns to the past through the focalization of another, or several other characters. This dynamical structuration, best depicted by a strange attractor, is discussed in Chapter 1.

However, the modulations in narrative voice signify a more dynamical structuration underlying the plot.

The narration begins in reported indirect style, in which some heterodiegetic third-person identifies Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway as the speaking subject of the sentence: “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself” (3). The second paragraph continues in the same style, but further clarifies the authorial position of the narrator, who can not only hear Clarissa’s voice, but can also know her thoughts: “And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning – fresh as if issued to children on a beach.”

The slight shift prepares us to make the plunge into the complete free indirect style of the second paragraph. We hear Clarissa’s own voice describing her own thoughts in the moment: “What a lark! What a plunge!” (3). Through this method, Woolf preserves the separate integrities of the narrator and the subject, but also reaches a certain level of intimacy with her protagonist. The paragraph then pursues a serpentine stream-of-consciousness that pulls us through Clarissa’s thoughts and memories. Globed by the unique mindscape of the character, this unreal anachrony *feels* real and relevant because of the fluidity of the narrative transition and the delightful lyricism of her articulated thoughts. Furthermore, the employment of stream-of-consciousness juxtaposes the unreal stasis of the interrupted present and carries the progression of *chronos*. Clarissa’s psychological eloquence conjures a form that is timeless and sublime, which elicits the aesthetic pleasure of reading.

Somewhere between the unraveling past and the quiescent present, we lose sight of our protagonist. The artistic shape of her absent-minded musings undermines the “here” and “now” of the given moment, though we know that the place is Victoria Street and the time is around eleven in the morning. Yet from the beginning of the novel, Woolf foreshadows the temporal irregularities we will see in her writing. The very first line demonstrates a subversion of the present. *Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.* If we were to translate this to direct speech, we would get: *Mrs. Dalloway said, “I will buy the flowers myself.”* The speech act occurred in the past, and the subordinate verb “will buy” is in the future. Mrs. Dalloway has not yet bought the flowers, though she intends to do so. This structure leaves us with a curious gap in the present instant. *What* is Mrs. Dalloway doing right *now*?

A rapid shift in focalization brings us back to the London present and identifies the bird-like lady perched on the curb of Victoria Street as Mrs. Dalloway. The narrative transition, swinging about the personage of Clarissa who suddenly becomes the object of sight rather than the seeing subject, is treated with such organic ease that it is barely perceptible to the reader. In the following excerpt, the first paragraph shares the vision of Scrope Purvis; by the second paragraph, we are back with Mrs. Dalloway:

She stiffened a little on the kerb, waiting for Durtnall’s van to pass. A charming woman, Scrope Purvis thought her (knowing as one does know people who live next door to one in Westminster); a touch of the bird about her, of the jay, blue-green, light, vivacious, though she was over fifty, and grown very white since her illness. There she perched, never seeing him, waiting to cross, very upright.

For having lived in Westminster – how many years now? Over twenty, - one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was

positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed! (4)

The fluidity of the transfer in focalization is achieved by evoking relationships between the two characters, even though, in fact, they barely know each other. The first is the present circumstance, the fact that both Scrope Purvis and Clarissa Dalloway find themselves on Victoria Street at eleven in the morning, where they can both hear the toll of Big Ben. The second is that they are neighbors in Westminster. As the perspective changes hands, both characters mention Westminster, a common place that unites them in thought, while in the present moment, Victoria Street lies between them.

*There! Out it boomed.* Big Ben makes its first appearance as a significant motif within the story. The “leaden circles” of its sound echo throughout the air and then “dissolve” into time past. Through the synesthetic gesture of endowing sound with weight and shape, this image exemplifies the transformation of time into space. Thus Big Ben imitates the endeavor of form that characterizes Woolf’s fiction: giving the inherently temporal medium of literature a spatial shape. Her fiction stimulates this aesthetic *Anders-streben* to maximize its geometry along the dimensions of time and space. Of such writing, the thing is made that endures.

### Chapter 3: Character Shapes and Volumes

For Virginia Woolf, the success of the novel depends on its ability to capture character. In her critical essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” she asserts this claim and comments upon the cases in which literature has succeeded and failed in humanizing the people it describes. It is not enough that the characters merely be characterized; they must be “real, true, and convincing” (4) representatives of the human condition. She rebukes the Edwardian writers who are unable to grasp “whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing” (*Modern Fiction*, 160). Their work rigidly adheres to narrative conventions at the expense of the humanity they are trying to evoke. Woolf argues for the reverse: that the integrity of character must dictate the structure of the novel: “I believe that all novels...deal with character, and that it is to express character...that the form of the novel so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved” (*Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, 2-3). In translating this statement to the principles of Bloomsbury Formalism, we can deduce that characters determine the dimensions of the novel’s Significant Form. Their truthful humanity is the “common ground” (18) that invokes the Aesthetic Emotion and invites the reader to intimately engage with the story.

Woolf’s fiction is highly preoccupied with the treatment of character, which is invariably linked to her experimentation with the novel form. Each of her works demonstrates a different approach to the subject of character and narration. This chapter will demonstrate how characters validate the story surroundings by their

geometric integrity and purpose, whether they serve as a structural framework, symbolic shapes, or prismatic vessels of human experience.

Woolf's first experimental novel, *Jacob's Room*, manifests the writer's difficulty in capturing character by creating a protagonist that is equally elusive to the reader. The style and narration of the discourse occlude our understanding of Jacob, whose personality and story are conveyed in fragmented scenes recounted by some obscure, unnamed, third-person narrator internal to the diegesis. Although other characters offer impressions and opinions about him, the reader can never perceive of Jacob as an entire being: he is a composite of disparate perceptions.

Nonetheless, our phantom-like protagonist constitutes the *fabula* and *sjuzhet* as a vacuous space upholding the scaffolding of the novel. Makiko Minow-Pinkey describes the bizarre spatial configuration of the narrative: "Jacob is a lacuna in the consciousness of the text, an absent centre, a fissure in the novel round which the other characters gravitate. This technique of 'deletion' to create a central lacuna in the novel is Woolf's specific against Edwardian realism" (28). Woolf pronounces her ambitions through the voice of her ambiguous protagonist: "I am what I am and intend to be it," for which there will be no form in the world unless Jacob makes one for himself" (34-35). Jacob himself refuses definition, the narrator offers no assistance, and the novel refuses to let him be defined.

Unlike the amorphous Jacob Flanders, Clarissa Dalloway imposes a substantial presence that may be apprehended as a geometric figure in virtual space. Throughout the novel, Woolf evokes Clarissa's prismatic qualities, even in her very name, which means "clear and bright." By definition, a prism is a "transparent

body ... used for separating white light passed through it into a spectrum or for reflecting beams of light” (Merriam Webster Dictionary). Likened on several occasions to a diamond and an icicle, Clarissa is “pointed, dart-like, definite” (*MD*, 37).

In visualizing her “assembled...diamond shape” (38), we understand how she relates to the people and places around her: collecting light inwards, then reflecting and refracting its beams at various tangents. As a function of the diamond form, her party, where she will “kindle and illuminate” (5), is an expression of her voluminous and faceted personhood. Each person receives light from a different surface of her diamond shape. As the narrative weaves through the focalizations of various characters, Clarissa’s shape is revealed from multiple visual angles. Although these accounts agree on some observations (for example, her “bird-like” demeanor), descriptions of Clarissa necessarily deviate depending upon that character’s personal relationship to her. Clarissa muses over the difficulty of completely knowing another person, including herself: “She felt herself everywhere... To know her, or anyone, one must seek out the people who completed them, even the places...the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death” (153). The prism of her character, although a recognizable geometric form, is jarringly “transparent” (75, 77). Like Jacob, the space within her being is nebulous despite its definite dimensionality.

However, Clarissa’s prismatic transparency indicates not an internal void but a light-filled core. As a humanized shape, Clarissa possesses a Significant Form herself. Just as a prism realizes its aesthetic potential by facilitating the osmosis of

light, so does Clarissa “illuminate” through the artistry of giving a party. Considered a “perfect hostess,” Clarissa emanates light like a diamond: “This object round which the essence of her soul is daily secreted, becomes inevitably prismatic, lustrous, half-looking glass, half precious stone” (109). The light refracted through her shape is the artistic expression of her essential being, a glow released from the confines of geometry, a free form avatar of who she truly is.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay is another woman of geometric character. Lily Briscoe, determined to portray Mrs. Ramsay in her painting, is frustrated by the woman’s enigmatic personality, which seemingly defies depiction. Rather than aiming to reproduce her likeness, Lily imagines Mrs. Ramsay in symbolic shapes. Like Clarissa, Lily ponders the difficulty of knowing people: “How then, she had asked herself, did one know one thing or another about people, sealed as they were? Only like a bee, drawn by some sweetness in the air intangible to touch or taste, one haunted the dome-shaped hive” (54). Lily’s optical vision reformulates reality according to her thoughts, and she abstracts Mrs. Ramsay’s seated figure into “an august shape, the shape of a dome” (55). This shape, half-visual and half-metaphorical, is unsatisfactory to Lily: “But this was one way of knowing people, she thought: to know the outline, not the detail” (198). Like the shell of a snail, the hive is but the superficial covering of the soul within.

Once again, Lily seeks a geometric shape to represent Mrs. Ramsay on her canvas. A purple triangle captures an abstraction of her vision of Mrs. Ramsay reading to James. Mr. Bankes is appalled that the beauty of Mrs. Ramsay and the sacred theme of the Madonna and Child has been “reduced” (56) to an impudent

purple polygon, but Lily defends her decision in the name of the overall design of the canvas: "She knew his objection – that no one could tell it for a human shape. But she had made no attempt at likeness, she said...the picture was not of them....A mother and child might be reduced to a shadow without irreverence. A light here required a shadow there" (55-56).

Lily's choice of a triangle brings to mind the art historic legacy of this shape, which connotes family, sacredness, cosmic order, balance, and fertility. It is the basic composition of most Renaissance painting, especially religious works representing the Holy Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) or the Holy Family (Mary, Joseph, and Jesus). Its form suggests balance and order, and is used in much architecture. In occult tradition, the triangle is also a symbol of gender, depending on which way it is tipped. The down-pointing triangle, which evokes the female pubic shape, represents woman and fertility. The orientation of the triangle in Lily's painting is unclear, but given these interpretations, it seems an appropriate geometric emblem for Mrs. Ramsay. Sacred domesticity, maternity, stability, and fecundity are the defining qualities of Mrs. Ramsay's social existence.

However, the triangle expresses who she is for other people. This shape is planar, flat, and objective. Mrs. Ramsay does not think of herself in such terms, but as the three-dimensional rendition of such a form: "a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others" (65). The additional dimension indicates the private soul, an internal depth protected beneath her outer shell. In this secret dimension, Mrs. Ramsay discovers the freedom to be: "This core of darkness could go anywhere, for no one saw it. They could not stop it, she thought, exulting. There

was freedom, there was peace, there was, most welcome of all, a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability" (65-66). This is Mrs. Ramsay's Significant Form, the geometry of her self-expression.

The concept of a wedge-shaped core is essentially congruent to that of a triangular prism, a figure that appears again in the novel. When Mrs. Ramsay is hosting her guests, she thinks of a ruby, a precious stone that collects and radiates light:

There is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures. (107)

The ruby recalls Clarissa Dalloway's representation as a diamond. Both women, in performing as hostesses, demonstrate the qualities of gemstones that refract light through the atmosphere, illuminating a scene of social harmony.

For Mrs. Ramsay, the wedge-shaped core and the ruby resonate truthfully with her character, and therefore bring her a sense of peace. They are comforting because they feel immortal; they will survive her earthly existence in flesh and blood. These similar, if not congruent, volumes have different relationships to light. The wedge-shaped core exists in an invisible darkness and represents the secret privacy of her soul. By contrast, the ruby expresses her social function because it brightens the surrounding environment. This duality embodies the personage of Mrs. Ramsay, an enigma that can only be partially described through the abstract evocation of geometric forms.

*The Waves* is a novel that conjures characters as symbolic shapes, which are a function of their six individual perceptions and Bernard's narrating voice. In Jean Alexander's analysis of *The Waves*, she identifies the formal structure of the novel to be a circle, a shape of mystical import. The circle motif appears throughout the novel, most evidently as the orb of the sun, and symbolizes unity. Each of the six protagonists identifies this shape in a different vision, indicating his or her awareness of individuality and community. Bernard and Neville describe the sun as a loop of light and a globe, respectively; Susan sees a curled caterpillar; Rhoda imagines a bowl of mackerel; Louis thinks of curls of smoke; Jinny imagines bubbles in a saucepan. Alexander interprets these images as soul-shaping perceptions: "The only relationships known are those of metaphor, and each child is in a closed circuit of object (like) subject" (151). Even Percival is perceived as a character in the round "a globe whose walls are made of Percival, of youth and beauty" (*W*, 145). Personhood, hardened by the experiences and sensations of life, is the spherical encasement of the tender amorphous soul. This image recalls Woolf's symbolic snail, who appears again in this novel: "A shell forms upon the soft soul, nacreous, shiny, upon which sensations tap their beaks in vain" (255).

Furthermore, Alexander argues that the frequent visions of the circle in the first chapter indicate the children's acknowledgement of the cosmogonous "master design, a completeness that is spontaneously and intuitively known at the dawn of being, before identity has separated the parts from the whole" (163). As the children mature, they appropriate different shapes inspired by the geometry of the external world. For example, when Susan leaves her home in the country, she envisions the

city as a collection of blocks: "But I have seen life in blocks, substantial, huge; its battlements and towers, factories and gasometers...These things remain square, prominent, undissolved in my mind" (*W*, 215). Alexander notes that when a character visualizes or embodies these rectilinear shapes, he or she deviates from the roundness of the true being and feels of discomfort. By contrast, the characters reclaim circularity when they behave in accordance with their inherent personal nature: "When the circle is not present to the senses in the external world... the mind constructs steel rings of poetry, or blows bubbles of language, or dances in a sphere" (Alexander, 164). The circle is the integral symbol of the spirit; its shape is experienced and expressed through the art of living genuinely.

The discomfort of Rhoda, who constantly feels excluded from the sensations of life, is evidenced by her inability to relate to the circle: "Look, the loop of the figure is beginning to fill with time; it holds the world in it. I begin to draw a figure and the world is looped in it, and I myself am outside the loop" (*W*, 21). Louis notes his friend's consternation at the blackboard: "And as she stares at the chalk figures, her mind lodges in those white circles; it steps through those white loops into emptiness, alone. They have no meaning for her. She has no answer for them. She has no body as the others have" (22). Rhoda's failure to circumscribe herself foretells her voluntary retreat from society and her eventual departure from the world.

Bernard, whose monologue concludes the novel (suggesting that the monotone narrative is delivered entirely in his voice), continually evokes circular forms. After his first vision of the sun's "ring," he also describes circles that are

perceived by the other characters. His vision draws the shapes within the narrative, just as his voice speaks for the other characters. Furthermore, the overall form of the novel, which evokes the circular cycles of nature, also reflects the geometric predilection of its primary narrator.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the circles that appear within the *sjuzhet* and that order the *fabula* are a function of subjective narrative; they are symbolic, thematic, and structural.

Bernard also thinks of his own life as a form with “roundness, weight, and depth” (238), or “a solid substance, shaped like a globe” (251). Like Clarissa Dalloway, Bernard’s art assumes the Significant Form of his own being. As a writer, his art involves the choice and arrangement of words “curling like rings of smoke” (132). These words are the rhetorical translation of the experiences of living: “the bubbles are rising like the silver bubbles from the floor of a saucepan; image on top of image” (49). They must be shaped into some communicable form. Woolf sympathizes with Bernard’s challenge to find a meaningful pattern to express the mind’s “myriad impressions” (*Modern Fiction*, 160). The circular form of *The Waves* is as much a projection of Bernard’s sensibility as it is of Woolf’s creativity. As the geometric correlative of its primary narrator, the novel-circle indicates another authorial attempt to the capture a fictional character.

Woolf’s challenge in character representation is enacted within the story itself. Midway through the novel, the children have acquired differing modes of vision and expression as they grow into adulthood. The shapes of their alternate

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<sup>6</sup> The novel form of *The Waves* is discussed in Chapter 1. The narrative perception, which cycles through the six main characters, evokes the motion of waves. In addition, the overall structure of the narrative is pinioned by the arching orbit of the sun around the Earth.

experiences are incongruent to the circular geometry of their shared community.

When the characters reconvene, they try to merge the various geometric gestures that have affected them to create a volume through which they can relate to one other:

“Like” and “like” and “like” – but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing? ...There is a square; there is an oblong. The players take the square and place it upon the oblong. They place it very accurately; they make the perfect dwelling-place. Very little is left outside. The structure is now visible; what is inchoate is here stated; we are not so various or so mean. This is our triumph; this is our consolation. We have made oblongs and stood them upon squares” (*Rhoda speaking*, 163).

The oblong, with its extended length, will not fit into the perfect form of the square. They try different combinations, placing the square atop the oblong, and the oblong upon the square. The resulting composite forms are always unbalanced since the dimensions of its two quadrilaterals are dissimilar. Alexander proposes that this curious construction indicates geometric disorder, “a figure which demonstrates esthetically a moral disproportion” (170).

However, the mere effort towards consolidating human relationships gives the characters a sense of “triumph,” and “consolation.” The structure resembles a house, which is a symbol of family, friendship, and unity. This polygonal construction is “accurate” and “perfect” in its purpose as an earthly abode, sheltering community within its strong, stable walls. In terms of Bloomsbury Formalism, it is the Significant Form that reconciles the “various” and “mean” tangents of individual experiences by connecting verticals and horizontals. The effort towards geometric harmony is not in vain.

As with the Significant Form of a work of art, this is a shape conjured by a subjective vision. It is a “semblance,” and as such it is only an approximation of the geometric truth that “lies beneath,” which is the mystical circle that globes the entire novel. Rhoda’s inability to conjoin the oblong and the rectangle recalls her geometric struggle at the blackboard. Nonetheless, the quadrilaterals she envisions are inscribed within the circular expression of the novel. Her geometrical character may not be able to conform to the ideal “roundness” of community and life experience, but it is nonetheless represented within the shape of the novel. *The Waves* is an “accurate” and “perfect” architecture because it accommodates various geometric gestures within its essential circle. As such, it is a celebration of the writer’s endeavor to capture characters within the sound structure of his or her work.

## Chapter 4: Depth Deception

A story and a painting bound within a book: *To the Lighthouse* is a novel that engages in double-*Anders-streben*. Not only do Woolf's narrative techniques evoke pictorial art, but the story itself also incorporates the act of painting. Thus the novel demonstrates a two-fold attempt at spatialization through the production of art. Just as Woolf evinces a geometric form for the book, the character Lily Briscoe aims to represent spatial harmony within her painting. This chapter will discuss how *To the Lighthouse* raises questions of vision, volume, and human relationships through the implication of geometric structure. As two artists united in their endeavor, Virginia Woolf and Lily Briscoe create art according to the principles of linear perspective. The illusion of spatial depth is essential to achieve the "purposeful order" (Fry, 20) of the story, the painting, and the human lives captured within Woolf's fiction and Lily's canvas.

*To the Lighthouse* the novel and Lily Briscoe's painting both aspire towards spatial illusion. In the advancement of form from the two-dimensional plane to three-dimensional space, the art of painting has developed a system of linear relationships between arbitrary marks and an internal "vanishing point" to imply depth and volume.<sup>7</sup> The human eye can learn to recognize and interpret the underlying geometric matrix as a spatial representation of an anterior world. Linear perspective invites the viewer to both interiorize and to feel himself on the interior of the essentially two-dimensional scene. When applied to the novel, linear

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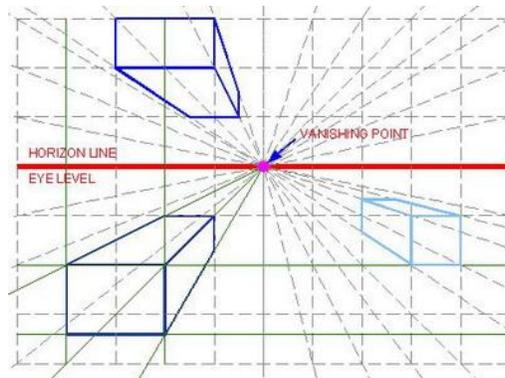
<sup>7</sup> During the Italian Renaissance, Filippo Brunelleschi invented linear perspective as a geometrical method for drawing space.

perspective is an expression of the *sjuzhet*, in that it conjures an imaginary space for the diegesis. The reader is meant to feel incorporated into that space insofar as he or she can understand and relate to the written narrative.

Vision and narration are both subjective human functions that depend upon the experience of a particular set of optics, which may be those of an internal character. Literary focalization is the narrative screen between the reader and the diegesis; its perspective conveys the *sjuzhet* as a form representing the *fabula*. The power of focalization is both structural and emotive, for it describes the psychosomatic relation between vision of the focalizer and the thing that is seen. Roger Fry cites the “inclination to the eye of the plane” (22) as one of the critical emotional elements of design. In the novel, that particular “inclination” is an anthropomorphic perspective as defined by emotions, past history, present conditions, and future desire of that being. Thus artistic vision and literary voice are parallel functions. As mimetic expressions of reality framed by a particular vision, they present “scenes” both recognizable and transformed. This unique reformation of space (and time, if we consider writing) is effective and possibly meaningful.

In *To the Lighthouse*, this parallel is brought to life by the figure of Lily Briscoe, who catalyzes the double *Anders-streben* as both a focalizing character and a painter pursuing spatial order. Like linear perspective, focalized fiction is a spatial construct determined by the experience of a character. Both systems maintain the illusion of geometric depth by the action of some fixed point that determines order. In art, linear perspective achieves coherence by organizing lines and shapes about a significant spot on the horizon. This *vanishing point* is where all parallel lines

(orthogonals) of a plane other than that of the canvas appear to converge. From this mark emerges a network of volumetric shapes related to each other through a schema of proportionate ratios. However, the vanishing point itself is identified as the absence of dimension: it is so far distant that it exists beyond the range of human sight and therefore cannot be depicted on the canvas.



In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily's struggle to reconcile the "relation of masses, of lights and shadows" (*TTL*, 56) implies that her painting needs a vanishing point to give it spatial coherence. This is not to argue that Lily is literally employing the technique of linear perspective. Rather, her painting is an attempt to virtually represent the conceptual relationships within the novel by discovering the metaphorical vanishing point that proportionalizes them. The spatial expression of the painting is constructed according to the principles of linear perspective; it not necessarily the exact depiction of spatial depth.

As Lily pursues her art, social culture, human nature, life, death, and foul weather all perplex the proposed order of the perspective scheme attempted within her canvas and within the world around her. Woolf's task in *To the Lighthouse* is to create a Significant Form that resolves the conflicts within the story and the painting. Moreover, her writing must express the artistic endeavors of the two

female characters Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay. Though of different media, their works are co-dependent and contingent on the idea of linear perspective. Woolf's novel is a geometric *Gesamtkunstwerk* that requires the manipulations of the dimensions of space and time in order to fulfill the numerous artworks it contains.

The creation of Lily's painting reflects the process of her life. As an unmarried woman without any apparent family ties or fortune, Lily is an unconventional figure by Victorian standards. She values her independence, which gives her the occasion to paint, and is critically aware of the fallacies (and *phallicies*) of the socio-domestic system. At the same time that she willfully refuses to meet its demands, Lily resents her exclusion from the society that denounces her condition: "all except myself, thought Lily, girding at herself bitterly, who am not woman, but a peevish, ill-tempered, dried-up old maid, presumably" (155). Without wealth, husband, or legacy, a woman's social existence is limited and precarious. The fact that Lily wields a paintbrush renders her situation even more deplorable.

Lily's unstable social identity, the confused coagulation of her socio-economic reality, moralistic principles, and human desires, directly corresponds to her relationship to Mrs. Ramsay, who is a living symbol of ideal Victorian womanhood. Generous hostess, protective mother, encouraging wife, and beautiful physical specimen – these are her virtues from which she derives a certain power within the micro-culture of the Isle of Skye. Her influence is effective on the interpersonal level; hosting dinner parties, arranging expeditions, and planning marriages inspire harmonious interactions among her family and guests. Lily perceives the social network that has been facilitated by Mrs. Ramsay, yet is

sometimes reluctant to be a part of it. Lily resists what Mrs. Ramsay prescribes for her: marriage and domesticity, the compromise of the Victorian woman.

...Gathering a desperate courage she would urge her own exemption from the universal law; plead for it; 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. Then, she remembered, she had laid her head on Mrs. Ramsay's lap and laughed and laughed and laughed, laughed almost hysterically at the thought of Mrs. Ramsay presiding with immutable calm over destinies which she completely failed to understand. (53)

Though reluctant to abide by Mrs. Ramsay's scheme, Lily, like every other character in the novel, is enamored of Mrs. Ramsay's personhood. As one without a mother and without claim to any female-associated role, Lily considers herself "childlike" beside the beautiful matriarch. She envisions Mrs. Ramsay at the very center daily life, both as a dominating force that orders human relationships, and as an intimate, tender friend.

Mrs. Ramsay is an artist of the social medium. She constructs a space that is also dependent upon the "relation of masses" (56) in the way that she coordinates social interactions. To do this, she must orchestrate conversation that resolves the clash of personalities and the conflicts that may ensue. The opening moments of the novel demonstrate Mrs. Ramsay at her work. Charles Tansley supports Mr. Ramsay's prediction that the next day's expedition to the lighthouse will have to be postponed due to foul weather. Mrs. Ramsay cannot bear to witness the household atmosphere succumb to the gloom of disappointment, and says, "But it may be fine – I expect it will be fine" (8). To her, Mr. Tansley's pessimistic forecast is detestable and indecent, for she would rather preserve the high-spirits of hope than admit to the

meteorological truth. Her children are spiteful towards the man whose words have lambasted their plans, and Mrs. Ramsay senses that they may openly insult him: "Yes, he did say disagreeable things, Mrs. Ramsay admitted; it was odious of him to rub this in, and make James still more disappointed; but at the same time, she would not let them laugh at him" (9). Mrs. Ramsay knows that her children consider Mr. Tansley to be a "miserable specimen" (11): nonathletic, caustic, bombastic, pessimistic, and pathetic in his hankering over Mr. Ramsay, who is his tutor in metaphysics. Although somewhat partial to their view, she aims to assuage the social dynamic because "she could not bear incivility to her guests, to young men in particular...Indeed, she had the whole of the other sex under her protection; for reasons she could not explain..." (10).

Mrs. Ramsay's efforts to welcome and appease men precipitate from a consciousness of the supposed inferiority of her own sex. She accepts Victorian gender roles and strives to fulfill the standards of femininity. She encourages such decorum upon her daughters and berates them for mocking Mr. Tansley. According to her principles, Mrs. Ramsay invites him into her private company so that he may not feel excluded from her home: "He had followed her into the drawing-room, that young man they laughed at; he was standing by the table, fidgeting with something, awkwardly, feeling himself out of things, as she knew without looking round" (13). With his abrasive demeanor, Mr. Tansley is a shape without a space. To give this forlorn form dimensional significance, Mrs. Ramsay must design a place where it can acquire substance and weight to exist in proportionality to other forms/people within range.

Mrs. Ramsay demonstrates similar artistry in the fulfillment of her duty as a wife, by validating the “form” of her husband. Mr. Ramsay, the great metaphysician, is paranoid about his professional career and his personal worth, fearing that his written work will be forgotten by future generations and that he has already reached the frontier of his intellectual capacity, which, if measured on the scale of the alphabet, would be quantified by the letter R. Mrs. Ramsay knows how she can provide the “sympathy” he demands: by asserting his patriarchal rule over a pleasurable domestic scene:

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 ... 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. Flashing her needles, confident, upright, she created drawing-room and kitchen, set them all aglow, bade him take his ease there, go in and enjoy himself...She assured him, beyond a shadow of a doubt, by her laugh, her poise, her competence...that it was real. (41)

Mrs. Ramsay surrounds her husband with a home: a three-dimensional space that accommodates his shape with implied proportionality. Moreover, it is the wife’s duty to make up for her husband’s disagreeable behavior that vexes the family unit sprung from his very loins. Overly invested in his own mental pursuits and emotions of self-pity, Mr. Ramsay psychologically distances himself from the people around him. He is often associated with imagery of solitude: a vertical stick in the horizontal shoreline, or a “desolate seabird” on a spit of land (47). Mrs. Ramsay brings him in to shore, establishes him in society, and honors him in the household.

While Mrs. Ramsay’s performance as a hostess, mother, and wife exemplify her artistic power, she is also the subject of another artist’s endeavor. Lily Briscoe,

equipped with paintbrush and palette, aims to paint what she sees. Although never revealing the explicit content of her picture, Lily does reference certain features of the beach landscape (a hedge, a wall, a tree) and other characters (Mrs. Ramsay and James). Her depiction of this domestic world is a symbolic evocation of the woman who manages the interaction of the people therein. On the subconscious level of Lily's vision, Mrs. Ramsay is the subject underlying her painting; though she is not explicitly (or realistically) represented, her presence must be effected throughout.

The difficult process of painting reflects the even more "difficult business of intimacy" between human beings (*Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, 17). The success of Lily's painting hinges upon how well Lily can *know* Mrs. Ramsay, how completely she can ingrain this woman's image and essence within the canvas. Lily understands the complexity of Mrs. Ramsay's character as something that can be visually perceived and intellectually apprehended:

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. Among them, must be one that was stone blind to her beauty. One wanted some secret sense, fine as air, with which to steal through keyholes and surround her...her thoughts, her imaginations, her desires. (*TTL*, 201)

The challenge of virtual depiction depends on the recognition of Mrs. Ramsay's exterior constitution and interior disposition. Each of the fifty pairs of eyes has a unique spatial relationship to Mrs. Ramsay, and thus can *know* her by a different perspective. Lily seeks a multi-dimensional optics that will reveal the totality of Mrs. Ramsay's spatial form. However, Lily is also aware that Mrs. Ramsay is more than just a material presence. Her existence affects the objects, people, and places around her in ways that are both visually and viscerally perceptible: "What was the spirit in

her, the essential thing, by which, had you found a crumpled glove in the corner of a sofa, you would have known it, from its twisted finger, hers indisputably?" (52). As Lily tries to identify the "spirit," she notes the spatial resonance of Mrs. Ramsay's figure even in its non-presence. This recondite sensibility will help Lily to continue painting in Mrs. Ramsay's absence. However, Lily's beginning efforts at depiction are rooted in her optical understanding.

As a visual artist, Lily thinks in terms of imagery. Aware of the mysterious private self that is "sealed" within, she sees Mrs. Ramsay as a "dome-shaped hive" (54). Indeed, Lily's optical vision has abstracted Mrs. Ramsay's seated figure into "an august shape, the shape of a dome" (55). This shape is both literal and metaphorical, but in both cases superficial: "But this was one way of knowing people, she thought: to know the outline, not the detail" (198). Mrs. Ramsay remains impenetrable.

Next, Lily tries a new shape without any visual likeness. A purple triangle comes to represent Mrs. Ramsay reading to James, for which "she made no attempt at likeness" (55). Mr. Bankes is disturbed by this reduction of the sacred theme of Mother and Child, and more specifically of the beauty of Mrs. Ramsay to an abstract shape. Lily asserts that the painting is not *about* the purple triangle, though this shape is a key component in its design. Though a function of optical perception, the triangle is also a symbolic tribute to a certain aspect of Mrs. Ramsay's personage: motherhood. Even Lily, the younger of the two women, experiences Mrs. Ramsay's maternal character in their adult friendship. The choice to represent motherhood precipitates from Lily's personal desire for a mother figure to guide and protect her as she strives to maintain her integrity and autonomy in society.

The Victorian value system encourages the collapse of female individuality into a generic vision of “womanhood.” As a shape on Lily’s canvas and as a woman in society, Mrs. Ramsay is limited to a superficial representation that obscures the distinctiveness of her character. Mrs. Ramsay herself realizes the indefinable spirit within the “shell” of her external self: “So boasting of her capacity to surround and protect, there was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by; all was so lavished and spent” (41). She imagines herself as a “wedge-shaped core of darkness,” one that is invisible and eternally recessed in depth. As Mrs. Ramsay has enough trouble defining her proper being, Lily’s quest to know her is even more challenging.

Lily’s two-fold struggle to know Mrs. Ramsay and to paint her picture is concerned with the representation of dimensionality. This is not to say that Lily’s painting is effecting an *accurate* portrayal of spatial depth. In fact, her desire to see from “fifty pairs of eyes” simultaneously suggests the Cubist approach of depicting multiple angles of vision in the single plane of the picture. Rather, Lily aims to paint a *convincing* portrayal of spatial depth by evincing the interrelatedness of forms. As a function of Mrs. Ramsay’s role as a social artist, spatial coherence is a crucial quality for Lily’s painting as well. Since the Italian Renaissance, artists have employed linear perspective to illustrate three-dimensional space. Lily also makes use of this traditional method, but not in the expected way. As the primary subject, Mrs. Ramsay is incorporated into the illusory system not as a shape like any other, but as the stabilizing focus of its construction: the vanishing point. Just as a vanishing point cannot have a shape, neither can Mrs. Ramsay – neither domed,

triangular, nor wedged. She must be recognized as an absence, a “center of complete emptiness” (182), but she is nonetheless crucial.

Mrs. Ramsay’s activity as a “social artist” parallels the structural function of the vanishing point. In the novel, Mrs. Ramsay facilitates relationships between characters in the same way that the vanishing point aligns forms along invisible orthogonals to give them the semblance of volume. Characters take their position in the story plane through their relationship to Mrs. Ramsay, and they are able to understand other figures through their shared orientation towards her. Likewise, the vanishing point validates forms by manipulating their designs in order to establish their proportionality and interrelatedness in space.

However, the nucleus of depth illusion cannot be explicitly represented in its own domain. Although indicative of a definite location within the spatial field, the vanishing point is without dimension it all: invisible, unoccupiable, and therefore undepictable. Identifying the vanishing point is a process of indirect portrayal. It is in the *process* of depiction, of drawing orthogonals, that the vanishing point is discovered on the canvas. In considering *To the Lighthouse*, the art-act itself is the only way that Lily can come to know Mrs. Ramsay and thus to capture her essence within the picture.

The cultural forces that impede Lily’s art are the same that obscure her vision of the “spirit” Mrs. Ramsay. While Mrs. Ramsay becomes imprisoned in the socially constructed paradigm of womanhood, Lily’s pursuit of art is regarded as unbecomingly unfeminine. In particular, Mr. Ramsay’s presence exacerbates both women’s situations. His parasitic demand for constant attention and praise from his

wife exhausts and depletes her spirit. After Mrs. Ramsay's decease, Mr. Ramsay forces his demands upon Lily, who is reluctant to give him such sympathy. His shadow looms over her unfinished canvas as a threat to its completion:

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 could not see the colour; she could not see the lines; even with his back turned to her, she could only think, But he'll be down on me in a moment, demanding – something she felt she could not give him. (152...153)

The collapse in the delicate domestic order that had been arranged and upheld by Mrs. Ramsay corresponds to the visual chaos on Lily's canvas.

Another male anathema, Charles Tansley, scoffs at the attempts of the amateur artist at her easel. By social edict, women are not meant to create art: "Women can't paint, women can't write..."(51) – his words haunt Lily's creative optics for a decade. She feels that the entire world, susceptible to the prescribed perception of male vision, mocks her endeavor. Lily's painterly style of abstraction and depicting non-reality reflects her dissatisfaction with the world in which she lives. In order for her to overcome these gender-related obstacles, Lily must abandon social consciousness and reduce her own being to its abstract essence. The artistic sensibility must be androgynous, anonymous, and clear-sighted:

Certainly she was losing consciousness of outer things. And as she lost consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance, and whether Mr. Carmichael was there or not, her mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting over that glaring, hideously difficult white space, while she modeled it with greens and blues. (163)

*Women can't paint.* Not in this world. The space of artistic creation is exterior to worldly tags of gender and personality, and so Lily must identify herself in a more

elemental sense. Her painting represents a universe not born of “woman,” and as such, one that may indeed reduce motherhood to a purple triangle without compunction. After all, the idea of female standards is contrary to what her art is *about*.

In the imagined deconstruction of her own being to take on the role of the artist, Lily loses geometric dimension to become a void, a negative space. This psychological dismantling is essential for the synthesis and achievement of her two goals (establishing perspective in her painting and knowing Mrs. Ramsay). Lily’s self-reduction parallels Mrs. Ramsay’s own transformation into the vanishing point of perspective space. Discovering Mrs. Ramsay correlates to a venture of self-discovery. Both women achieve meaning through the act of painting the picture: Mrs. Ramsay as the origin of spatial order and Lily as the artist who accomplishes creation. The resulting picture indicates the convergence of subject and object, of vanishing point and viewer.

Just as Lily Briscoe requires a metaphysical diminution to define herself as an artist, Mrs. Ramsay experiences a similar dimensional transfiguration as she approaches a truer comprehension of herself. She recoils within the architecture of her social persona to exist only as the disembodied *punctum* at its center: “All the being and doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others” (65). In this existence of lowest terms, Mrs. Ramsay could *fit* as a point of focus for Lily’s art. However, the process is not so simple. Mrs. Ramsay’s very conception of herself as a “wedge-shaped core” is incompatible with the role

she must play in the linear perspective system. To insert a volumetric shape into the vanishing point implies the imposition of another three-dimensional world within the one signified by the painting. This tertiary construction is a universe of unknown potential, where the point is free to roam in a space uncharted and undetected by the plane of the painting. Mrs. Ramsay, by fixing herself to one point of zero dimension, recreates herself as a shape of unlimited power and mobility in an imperceptible world:

It was thus that she felt herself; and this self having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures...This core of darkness could go anywhere, for no one saw it. They could not stop it, she thought, exulting. There was freedom, there was peace, there was, most welcome of all, a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability. (66)

As Mrs. Ramsay points out, the de-dimensionalization of self gives a sense of authenticity and freedom. It perpetuates the possibility of self-creation. Like a visual artist, Mrs. Ramsay reconstructs an idea of herself in spatial terms. As Lily tries to summon "the essential thing," she does not imagine this wedge-shaped core of darkness because she wants to associate the woman with a visible form.

Correspondingly, Lily has difficulty envisioning the vanishing point that will arrange the forms on her canvas. As virtual references to Mrs. Ramsay, both the wedge-shaped core and the vanishing point are representative of spatial meaning while eluding proper depiction.

This new conception of Lily's work reveals a truth that linear perspective isn't quite able to acknowledge: the very fact that it *is* constituted around negation. Perspectival art must deny the true nature of the vanishing point that holds together the entire depth system in order to maintain its status as mimetic and illusionistic.

Lily's recognition of Mrs. Ramsay as a generative *punctum* signifies a new understanding of her painting as she labors towards its completion. The challenge of her art is not to defy traditional modes of representation, but to realize a spatial system structured around a mobile, perhaps even ungraspable, but productive absence. The essence of the vanishing point, and of Mrs. Ramsay, is relational rather than substantive content. The same principle may be applied to the artist, whose creative process is as much a matter of self-abnegation as it is of self-creation.

Lily's imagination substitutes the metaphysical deconstruction of self with the formation of exterior shapes. By this action, the artist can draw herself into her own illusion. While Mrs. Ramsay's wedge-shaped core is invisible, Lily's painting is necessarily visual and depends upon the relationships between multiple forms. Guided by the vanishing point, linear perspective allows her, and any viewer for that matter, to gain entry to the two-dimensional medium. As Lily *dissolves* in the real world, she *materializes* in the painting she creates: "Against her will she had come to the surface, and found herself half out of the picture, looking, a little dazedly, as if at unreal things..." (181). Rather than being merely the screen that separates tangible reality and the illusory geometry of the canvas, Lily's presence resonates throughout. It is her vision that regulates the configuration of reality into relatable forms of spatial sense. Every line and shape expresses her subjective geometry. "But this is what I see; this is what I see," she repeats (23), seeking inspiration, motivation, and courage to continue her work. As an artist and as the seeing subject, Lily is defined by her vision. Her battle to paint from her unique optical palette

mirrors that of self-expression. Every stroke of the paintbrush communicates what Lily means to say, but cannot voice: "This is what I am."

Within the geometric construct of her own artistic creation, Lily is reborn.

Her soul escapes the 44-year-old female body and returns to its primal state:

Always (it was in her nature, or in her sex, she did not know which) before she exchanged fluidity of life for the concentration of painting she had a few moments of nakedness when she seemed like an unborn soul, a soul reft of body, hesitating on some windy pinnacle and exposed without protection to all the blasts of doubt. (162)

Not only does she define herself as the one who paints the picture, but also as the invisible force orchestrating the proportional relationships among the objects in her picture. Each shape bears the birthmarks of its optical mother.

The feeling of metempsychosis is inherent to the art of linear perspective, which encourages the viewer to feel present within his or her vision: "The vanishing point is the anchor of a system which *incarnates* the viewer, renders him tangible and corporeal, a measurable, and above all a visible object in a world of absolute visibility" (Qtd. in Rotman, 14). In applying this concept to Lily's painting, the vanishing point once again resonates with Mrs. Ramsay as the source of illusionistic reincarnation. It is she who reigns as the mother of all within the artistic medium. Everything within the spatial domain of the painting is thus considered the posterity of Mrs. Ramsay. This designation suits Mrs. Ramsay's maternal character within the novel. Described as "a rosy-flowered fruit tree," a common allusion to fertility, Mrs. Ramsay's purpose is to "surround and protect" all the other characters so as to maintain domestic harmony (*TTL*, 40). With the yearnings of orphan-hood

persevering in adulthood, Lily too invokes the maternal qualities of Mrs. Ramsay. In being drawn to Mrs. Ramsay, Lily is drawn by Mrs. Ramsay in her own canvas.

As an artist, Lily is also an agent of creation. She is responsible for Mrs. Ramsay's revival within her painting, just as Mrs. Ramsay (the vanishing point) gives life to all forms within the perspectival domain. Through the process of painting, Lily comes to understand the nature of her own relationship to this woman. It is more complex than the purple triangle of Mother and Child; it is a rapport of visible and invisible geometries conjured by the reciprocal creative forces of the two women. The painting, which is a product of their symbiotic artistry, also commemorates their real-life human relationship. Just as Mrs. Ramsay can be apprehended, known, and portrayed in the media of both art and life, Lily too is subject to an imaginary spatial division. As the artist with a paintbrush, she is external to the canvas. As a human being seeking to understand the psychic self of another, she becomes present within her picture. The linear perspective of the painting suggests the physical (though illusory) distance between her disjointed body and spirit:

Lily stepped back to get her canvas – so – into perspective. It was an off road to be walking, this of painting. Out and out one went, further and further, until at last one seemed to be on a narrow plank, perfectly alone, over the sea. And as she dipped into the blue paint, she dipped into the past there. Now Mrs. Ramsay got up, she remembered. (175)

As Lily's body moves away from the easel, her spirit advances forward into the canvas and towards the vanishing point (Mrs. Ramsay). The distance implied by the linear perspective system correlates to Lily's parallel existence as both external

subject and internal object of art. In both cases, the vanishing point is forever distant and unattainable.

However, in order for Lily to breach the space separating her from Mrs. Ramsay, the perspectival system must fall. This occurs when Lily changes perspective and embodies her imaginary avatar within the painting. From this standpoint, she can look out into the world beyond the canvas and recognize the linear perspective system that arranges the forms of the external world. She now views real life as a tableau of depth illusion constructed by human relationships in which Mrs. Ramsay fulfills the function of the vanishing point. By acknowledging the creative action of Mrs. Ramsay, Lily relates the content of her painting to life on the Isle of Skye. Within her canvas, she identifies the spirit of Mrs. Ramsay to be the *punctum* about which other forms must be balanced. The personal relationship between the two women allows for the communion of their spirits through the process and product of the painting. Lily *can* reach the vanishing point because she has captured “the essential thing” in Mrs. Ramsay. The self-same artwork that implies a spatial distance between the two women also celebrates their convergence. Thus the system of linear perspective collapses, along with the illusion of depth. The consequent foreshortening of space requires an alternate way of seeing and evaluating the painting. In this flattened mode, perspective diagonals lose significance, shapes lose their setting, and proportionality is moot. This moment intimates a transformation of the artistic process, which shifts emphasis from spatial soundness to symbolic meaning.

When Lily returns to her easel ten years later, the “problem of space” has not yet been resolved. With the passage of time, many things have changed on the Isle of Skye. Most significantly, Mrs. Ramsay has died. Lily finds herself twice orphaned as both a “child” without a mother and as a visual artist without a vision. As one whose mind has always operated through imagery, Lily struggles in the lack of a living model. However, Lily discovers that she can use the properties of her mind to envision Mrs. Ramsay. Guided by her memory, Lily is able to continue her painting: “And as she dipped into the blue paint, she dipped into the past there. Now Mrs. Ramsay got up, she remembered” (175). The vision of the past imagined in the present abrogates the spatial constructs of distance between the two women, whether imposed by the reality of death or by the painting of linear perspective. Memory is an ambiguous property of temporality, at once calling attention to the duration of time and willing its negation. Through the art-making process and within the medium itself, Lily must reconstruct her relationship to Mrs. Ramsay while considering this new dimension of time.

For Lily, the physical act of painting correlates to psychological time-travelling in the evocation of memory. When she returns to her easel, her brush strokes dapple the canvas in a rhythm that reflects the atemporal oscillations of her imagination. In the syncopation of brushstroke and pause, Lily enacts the translation of time into space:

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 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. (161)

As she continues working in this tempo, making art becomes a looping process of free association of memory, visual stimulation, and the physical act of painting. At a certain point, her mind ceases to focus on the present optical vision (the hedge and the canvas) and instead tunnels into the depths of its memory:

Then, as if some juice necessary for the lubrication of her faculties were spontaneously squirted, she began precariously dipping among the blues and umbers, 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...her mind kept throwing up from its depth, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting over that glaring, hideously difficult white space, while she modeled it with greens and blues. (163)

As Lily delves deeper into the past, her painting pace slows. Time obscures the vision of the memory just as it retards the progress of her painting.

One particular memory inspires Lily's creative proliferation. She recalls a scene on the beach in which Mrs. Ramsay writes letters by a rock while she and Charles Tansley play a game of throwing stones into the water. The apparent amity between her and Mr. Tansley contradicts the behavior of their private interactions, in which he mocks the notion of a woman creating art: *Women can't paint, women can't write*. However, in her retrospective vision, Lily observes how Mrs. Ramsay "resolved everything into simplicity; made these angers, irritations fall off like old rags; she brought together this and that and then this" (164). Lily realizes that her memory has been "re-fashioned" into a tableau of harmony and order "almost like a work of art" (164) due to the commanding presence of Mrs. Ramsay.

Furthermore, this memory enhances the idea of Mrs. Ramsay as the human incarnation of a vanishing point. By organizing social interactions in the space of life, she creates a shape of Significant Form, which, according to Clive Bell's definition, amounts to a work of art that defies the passage of time: "Great art remains stable and unobscure because the feelings that it awakens are independent of time and place" (Bell, 37). The vision of memory represents a solidified moment, a shape of immortal value for the painter. Lily recalls Mrs. Ramsay's social orchestration and relates it to her own artistic struggle:

Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent) – this was the nature of the revelation. In the midst of chaos there was a shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said. "Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!" she repeated. She owed it all to her. (*TTL*, 165)

The continued progress of Lily's painting depends upon the recollection of the past. With the power of retrospect, Lily learns from Mrs. Ramsay's artistic method. Although time is an essential dimension of Lily's development, she aims to produce work that is independent of time, something permanent in the very nature of memory itself.

However, memory alone cannot replace Mrs. Ramsay's presence on the canvas or on the Isle of Skye to resolve the "problem of space." Mrs. Ramsay's death troubles Lily's already precarious relationship to her art. On the level of the painting itself, the implications of Mrs. Ramsay's death are catastrophic: absence of the vanishing point signals the destruction of linear perspective; spatial disharmony thwarts her piece. Lily continues to struggle with formal composition: "But the dead, thought Lily, encountering some obstacle in her design which made her pause and

ponder, stepping back a foot or so, oh, the dead!" (178). Her artistic challenges correspond to renewed complications in Lily's social identity. Having lost her friend and protector, she is once again exposed to the "demons" that proscribe her art. She is uncomfortably conscious of her unmarried status, of the paintbrush in her hand, and of the new social dynamic on the Isle of Skye.

Without Mrs. Ramsay managing the inter-personal landscape, her family and friends cease to relate to one another. Paul and Minta (a marriage willed by Mrs. Ramsay) have divorced; James and Cam detest their father; old Mr. Carmichael vegetates in a chair without any semblance of consciousness to the world around him; and Mr. Ramsay is even more desperate for "sympathy." Without his wife, the widower appeals to the only other female creature nearby, the "dried up old maid" with a paintbrush. Although his groveling pleas for attention make her cringe, Lily nonetheless feels pressured to act in Mrs. Ramsay's shadow and comfort this insecure male ego. She also realizes that taking on Mrs. Ramsay's "womanly" role would compromise her own self-integrity and mission as an artist: "The sympathy she had not given him weighed her down. It made it difficult for her to paint" (174). Lily needs Mrs. Ramsay to buffer her from the demands of society so that she can continue her project. Other characters also suffer from the lack of their mother/wife/hostess – not that they necessarily *miss* her, but that they are now unable to humanly function in their current social scene. Persons are not in proportion. No one has made it to the lighthouse. As Lily notes in regards to her painting: "The problem of space remained" (174).

Yet in the project of painting, Lily sees the possibility of resurrecting the dead through the power of memory. As she did ten years earlier, Lily tries to visualize Mrs. Ramsay: "She looked now at the drawing-room step. She saw, through William's eyes, the shape of a woman, peaceful and silent, with downcast eyes... Yes, thought Lily, looking intently, I must have seen her look like that" (180). This figure is a realistic, perhaps idealized, vision of Mrs. Ramsay's beautiful physicality. It is not an abstract, geometric representation such as the dome-shaped hive, purple triangle, or wedge-shaped core. It also does not truly capture the "spirit within her." The woman on the steps is not a dynamic presence; she is a body that cannot endure, a vision that cannot be sustained. As Lily was beginning to discover ten years ago, Mrs. Ramsay's physical likeness is not what matters in the creation of her picture. When Lily looks back at the steps, they are "extraordinarily empty" (181). She feels the pangs of lack: "To want and not to have, sent all up her body a hardness, a hollowness, a strain. And then to want and not to have – to want and want – how that wrung the heart, and wrung it again and again! Oh, Mrs. Ramsay!" (181-182). Her plaintive cries for the lost mother will not bring Mrs. Ramsay back to the beach where she once sat writing letters. Lily must understand how reconcile this loss while respecting her own integrity: how to persevere in her art, and how to commune with a society shadowed by male dominance.

In art as in life, Lily's success depends upon her understanding of the principles of linear perspective. As noted, the idea of a vanishing point as the negation of space corresponds to Mrs. Ramsay's artistic practice within the social medium of her life. Her wedge-shaped core is a virtual illusion of the unseeable

space she would represent on the canvas. Now that she is dead and Lily is painting from past experiences of her, Mrs. Ramsay continues to fulfill that role in her existence as a memory. The spatial definition of a vanishing point correlates to the temporal definition of a memory. Memory eludes the present moment while suggesting the existence of temporal duration, just as a vanishing point eludes virtual depiction while suggesting the coherence of space. Once she understands this connection, Lily can envision what Mrs. Ramsay was meant to be all along: a center of complete emptiness: "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" (182). Mrs. Ramsay is apprehended as a substantial, productive absence. Thus memory is another way of approaching "the problem of space."

Like perspective painting, memory is an act of vision. It is a way of creating a spatial illusion on the premise of a lack. It involves a process of de-dimensionalization in the dismantling of space-time realities to create something enduring and meaningful: "Nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint" (182). Making art is a process of abstract reduction that is reflected in the life of the artist (as Lily must disassociate from her worldly identity) and in the understanding of Mrs. Ramsay as a vanishing point. Accordingly, de-dimensionalization also confirms the painting's completion. With the final brushstroke, Lily defies the visual meaning of the space she has created: "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 center” (211). Traversing the unreal distances constructed within the canvas, the line connects the foreground, which is the position of the seeing artist, to the vanishing point, thus symbolizing the spiritual union of Lily and Mrs. Ramsay. The distance between them has been breached and transposed from space to time: ten years have been foreshortened by the power of memory.

This line is at once unifying and dividing. As an unexplained but apparent symbol in Lily’s painting, it relates to the Bloomsbury dialogue on the subject of form. As Roger Fry states: “In a picture, unity is due to a balancing of the attractions to the eye about the central line of the picture” (21). In letter to Fry discussing her novel *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf asserts that the central line is indeed the “essential thing” validating her composition: “One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refused to think them out, and trusted people would make it the deposit for their own emotions” (Letter from 27 May 1927; Qtd. in Hussey, lx). In accordance with the Formalist principle and with the construction of the novel itself, Lily’s painting depends upon that central line. It suggests a direct path uniting all planes of depth in the illusory space, while dividing the canvas into two sections. Its compositional function identifies the central line as the one true orthogonal of the picture.

In regards to its visual significance, the line also implicates all the aspects of Lily’s relationship to Mrs. Ramsay both within her canvas and in real life. It establishes the boundary between the two women: the time of ten years and the

space between life and death. It also implies the convergence of the artist and her subject (or viewer and vanishing point), which negates the distances implied on the canvas. In terms of Lily's psychology, the line indicates that she is now able to accept her separation from Mrs. Ramsay because she has discovered a means of getting closer to her through her art.

That being said, the line is not seen in Lily's optical reality but rather pertains to the illusion of her painting. Like the depth-determining orthogonals of linear perspective, like the vanishing point, and like the wedge-shaped core, the line is invisible to the eye. It conducts an imaginary sight-path that allows Lily to traverse time and space to draw the umbilical cord between herself and the mother she never had. This final stroke resurrects Mrs. Ramsay through the Lily's self-assertion as a painter. Lily has completed her art and redeemed life in the same gesture. She lays down her paintbrush in extreme fatigue: "I have had my vision" (211).

Lily's vision, Mrs. Ramsay's vision, and Woolf's vision may or may not be one and the same. I would not argue that all three artists deliberately use the techniques of linear perspective to conceive of their works. However, each woman is highly conscious of the importance of geometric order. Picture-painting, social-scheming, and fiction-writing are relational through their expression of order, proportionality, and depth illusion. In each medium, the process of art-making is a similar experience that is actually enhanced by the simultaneous projects of the other two women. Our reading of *To the Lighthouse* is a surrealist venture through various dimensional reconfigurations of space and time that incorporate multiple modes of vision in order to appreciate the triple-*Anders-streben* at hand. Upon the uni-

dimensional *fabula* and the two-dimensional canvas, we can see volumes. *To the Lighthouse* is a book of unlimited volume, a book unbound in the imaginary universe of art and fiction.

## Conclusion: The Structure is Now Visible

“Like” and “like” and “like” – but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing? ...There is a square; there is an oblong. The players take the square and place it upon the oblong. They place it very accurately; they make the perfect dwelling-place. Very little is left outside. The structure is now visible; what is inchoate is here stated; we are not so various or so mean. This is our triumph; this is our consolation. We have made oblongs and stood them upon squares.”  
(*The Waves*, 163).

As with life, writing is like playing with blocks. That is what I realized during the process of writing my Thesis. With a pattern of words, Woolf speaks in shapes to come closer to the truth. I too have tried to build forms with the forms I have been given. This is communication. This is art. This is the book you hold in your hands: some kind of rectangle that you can see, and some shape of narrative that you can feel.

In the struggle to identify the dimensional constructs of Woolf’s fiction, I too have labored to find a Significant Form for my own words. I know that what I have made may be changed or knocked down. What I hope is that I have made something visible and accessible, that my reader will recognize the geometry of my work: “that certain emotions have been placed in the right relations to each other” (*On Re-reading Novels*, 343). Shall I place the oblong upon the square, or the square upon the oblong? Shall I move that tree to the left?

Whatever the result, there is a result. Something is made that endures. And maybe it will be hung in the servants’ bedrooms, or be rolled up and stuffed under a sofa – or worse – be stored as an online document, the type-print-text dormant in

virtual digitality. But something was made that mattered, and for that reason alone it is *accurate* and *perfect*. To me.

I have had my vision. I hope you can make it yours.

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