

*The Political Psyche in British Modernism: Deleuzian Moments in
Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse*

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Within their respective disciplines of philosophy and psychoanalysis, Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Lacan share an understanding of subjectivity as disturbance in discourse and as libidinal flux. Although Deleuze's work expresses skepticism about the curative effects of psycho-therapy – the field of “dirty little secrets” (1977; 1987: 57) – his constructions of subversive assemblages and multiplicities interface with Lacan's configuration of the discourses of the hysteric and the analyst as irruptions into the registers of the university and of the master (*The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (1969-1970)). The (Lacanian) analytic encounter does not, as Deleuze claims (in “Dead Psychoanalysis: Analyse”), war against the unconscious as “negative [. . .] the enemy”(57); on the contrary, the desire of the analyst produces a hysterization of discourse, a disruption of master signifiers which mask the relation of power to the subject's lack. In Lacan's words, by approaching “the hole from which the master signifier gushes” (1991: 218), a Deleuzian cluster is potentially created, a new desiring machine, which affects socio-political space no less than the singular symptom.

My paper explores how the Deleuzian/Lacanian assemblage can be understood as a propeller of Virginia Woolf's experimental writing in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), in the sense that this writing goes beyond gender to *think* in poetic prose the possibility of social change and transformation of values. Before turning to certain exemplary aspects of Woolf's novel, I want to suggest that the assemblage, as illustrated by Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their book on Kafka (1975), turns into an agent of liberation only when interlaced with Lacanian cultural critique, an activity which involves subjective desire. On the surface, the assemblage, the novelistic assemblage, for instance, or the historical assemblage (as in feudalism, one of Deleuze's examples in “On the Superiority of Anglo-American Literature” ((1977)), appears as impersonal hybrids, a geography of relations between the animate and the inanimate, eclipsing libidinal elements. In a dialogue piece called “On the Superiority of Anglo-American Literature,” it is stated that the multiplicity in question is “made up of many heterogeneous terms and [. . .] establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns –

different natures. Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a 'sympathy'. It is never filiations which are important, but alliances" (1977; 1987: 52).¹ To an extent, a kind of a hidden polemic against the Oedipal model animates this illustration. Even if in certain assemblages, the feudal apparatus, for instance, composed of new alliances with the earth, war, animals, culture, games and women, desire flows between parts, binding them together in a functioning symbiosis, this is an abstract libidinal process, existing, Deleuze would maintain, on a higher empirical plane than habitual reality, dominated by Oedipal law and the attendant neurosis and obsession with a personal past.

Despite the anti-Oedipal polemic, multiplicity understood as a new relation – a *becoming* – undercutting the discourse of the master, coincides with the Lacanian analytic encounter, where ideally an ethical subjectification replaces previous identifications with more or less oppressive images of thought. Mark Bracher in *Lacan, Discourse and Social Change* (1993) convincingly shows how Lacan's dictum that "desire is the desire of the Other" links subjective economy to socio-cultural space and how the chief catalyst is a libidinal utterance or demand for fulfillment of a sense of lack (19-21). One of Bracher's apt examples from a range of cultural artifacts is Thomas Hardy's poem "Hap," which expresses an awareness of the failure of the Symbolic order as Other to provide a rationale for existential suffering: the speaker prefers a sadistic divinity who explains, "Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy"; a measure of comfort is to be found even in a despotic design: "Half-eased in that a Powerfuller than I/Had willed and meted me the tears I shed. But not so" (46). In Lacanian psychoanalysis, discourse, especially of the master and of the university, manipulates the propensity of the "want-to-be" (Lacan's term: "manque-à-être"), interpellating subjects to identify with essentialist images and fantasies which falsely represent them. It is this discursive dynamic, masking lack, which, as I mentioned above, the analytic encounter foregrounds and hystericizes. By confronting "the hole from which the master signifier gushes" and as a result sensing the Other's lack, the subject is empowered to produce his or her own signification. Because this process entails an *internal* challenge to the analysand's or audience's master

¹ Deleuze's full explication is as follows: "What then is an assemblage? It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogenous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns – different natures. Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a 'sympathy.' It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind." (1977; 1987: 52)

signifiers, it constitutes, according to Bracher, a more effective socio-cultural critique than explicitly political criticism such as Marxism or the radical skepticism of deconstruction (1-14). What I'm interested in examining is how modernist fiction, in the instance of this presentation, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, performs an internal political challenge to the power-knowledge realm and how in that process an oppressive image of thought is transformed into utopian desire, an impersonal will for the good of community.

It may be of some relevance here that Woolf herself had a rather ambivalent attitude toward psychoanalysis: on one hand, she promoted Freud's work, publishing the *Collected Works* in English translation through her own and her husband's press, the Hogarth Press; on the other hand, she resisted becoming intimate with the theory and was rather hostile to it as a mode of approaching literature. A revealing observation is made by Lyndsey Stonebridge that Woolf may have preferred to perceive her own fiction as a parallel activity to psychoanalysis, and it is known from her diaries that in retrospect *To the Lighthouse* functioned as a work of mourning for the loss of her parents, expressed in this way by the author: "I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and laid it to rest" (Stonebridge, 1998: 63). This statement has a bearing on the aspects of the novel I want to emphasize, that is, how the concern with the mother and the maternal can be profitably explored as an assemblage in Deleuze's sense of liberated desire and the anti-Oedipal collective.

During the heyday of feminist criticism in the early 1980's, readings of *To the Lighthouse* often focused on gender roles in the marriage of Mr and Mrs Ramsay, the couple based on Woolf's parents, Leslie and Julia Stephen, tending to fall into two camps regarding the mother, depicting her either as an idealized "angel in the house" or as a victim of patriarchal ideology, denied access to meaningful action, and hence compelled to engage in petty domestic power-plays. Despite often condescending critical attitudes, valuable observations are made about Mrs Ramsay's specific feminine attributes, for instance, her sensibility and compassion, her nursing talents and maternal care, her sense of social responsibility and her respectful regard for mundane reality. Within the Victorian domestic ideology of Woolf's novel, such humble, sensuous, concrete knowledge and the limited power tied to it are taken for granted, marginalized by the larger scope of the father's, Mr Ramsay's, masculine thinking, rooted in rationalistic epistemology and a philosophical tradition supported by a colonizing mentality and the politics of empire. Modelled on Woolf's father, Leslie

Stephen, a prominent late nineteenth-century writer and intellectual, Mr Ramsay's figure in *To the Lighthouse* is complex and suggestive, presented affectionately, critically and often in mock-heroic terms. Despite a satirical undertone, an early scene, centered upon the father's thought-processes, is crucial for outlining what Deleuze would call the novel's dominant *image of thought* and in suggesting how this image determines relations on the plane of habitual reality or – to use another Deleuzian formulation – on the plane of *organization*, which shapes subjects and develops forms according to a hidden, transcendent Law (1987: 68). Thus, the thinker's mind, even if "splendid" (39), moves teleologically toward a conquest of objects, ranking efficient leadership in terms of mastery of truth rather than of profound intellect or moral strength. Mr Ramsay's *gaze* upon the elemental world is emphasized in the passage, an imperial gaze, which, summoned by the philosophical heritage, hopes to pierce objects like a searchlight, bringing them up from darkness into the light of consciousness.

In contrast to Mr Ramsay's divisive reality, several so-called "moments of being" in the novel deconstructively stage a traversal of the traditional subject-object hierarchy, exploring the leadership potential of the marginalized qualities of the mother's voluptuous care. It is something of a commonplace within the criticism to regard Woolf's "moments of being" as fragmentary insights into evanescent meaning, flashes of joy or rapture, unsustainable as a world-view or empirical knowledge. Thus, in a recent study of English literature of the 1920s (1999), David Ayers considers such moments *isolated* openings onto human contingency, confirmations of Woolf's pessimistic existentialism. Contesting such definitions, I want to examine the possibility that in *To the Lighthouse* these are moments of *becoming*, in Deleuze's sense of *becoming a woman*; especially, I want to suggest that scenarios such as those of Mrs Ramsay in solitary reverie, of the Ramsays' banquet toward the end of the first part of the novel, of the artist Lily Briscoe's painting of the mother, and of the daughter Cam's thinking about justice in a concluding passage – I want to suggest that such moments are dimensions of a new assemblage constructed and held together by the disinterested desire of the maternal attributes, experimented with by Woolf, not imitated. In this instance, it is important to understand the implications of *becoming* as non-hierarchical proximity to the other, as "non-parallel evolution," where symbiosis is made possible in spite of absolute difference between elements (Deleuze 1987: 33).

In the remainder of this paper, I want to consider in some detail aspects of the first two scenes mentioned above, Mrs Ramsay in solitude and the banquet episode, and then suggest how succeeding generations, represented

by Lily Briscoe and Cam Ramsay, generate a thinking woman, whose mind, unencumbered by images of transcendence, moves toward the realization of an accommodating, just society. What I will be concerned with is how the dominant aggressive model of thought is engaged with, first in an almost hysterical manner as demand for fulfillment, and then as more consciously empowered discourse as a kind of *nomadic thought* takes over, eliminating hierarchy and establishing flows between all elements encountered. In an essay on *To the Lighthouse* as elegy (1992), Karen Smythe has aptly coined the term “think-act” to identify certain introspective passages, especially those connected with Lily Briscoe, the artist, as she channels memory into her painting. Also, in the case of Mrs Ramsay’s reverie, an act of thinking takes place, even though no tangible product follows: rather, it is possible to see that episode as mental drama, starting in a state of emptiness and dejection, a state similar to that of the speaker in Hardy’s poem, a desperate call for a transcendent rationale. Increasingly, though, the entrapment in the master’s discourse gives way to a sense of enjoyment of *not knowing* and of the dark life of the psyche, and what is described as the subject’s “wedge-shaped core of darkness” (69) comes to fold sensuously into the objects of the material world; at the climax of this participation, we witness Mrs Ramsay’s inner life illuminated by the strokes of light from the lighthouse: her gaze is on the softening of darkness: “she looked and looked [as] there curled up off the floor of the mind, rose from the lake of one’s being, a mist, a bride to meet her lover” (71).

This erotic image of thought’s co-habitation with the phenomenal world radically revises Mr Ramsay’s instrumental empiricism. In the last part of the novel, it is possible to see Lily reviving Mrs Ramsay’s “think-act” as she attempts to represent its newness on the painter’s canvas. But even if Mrs Ramsay herself does not produce a concrete work of art, the utopian effects of her desire can be detected in the gathering of guests for a banquet at the Ramsays’ summer residence. Here, I want to suggest, a *becoming* community animated by female leadership is experimented with. In fact, among the guests’ mental lives a similar erotic drama takes place as in Mrs Ramsay’s previous reverie: at first, trapped in virile egoism, in thoughts of self-preservation and aggressive identifications, in subtle rhythms all participants become aware of an ontological shift to an encounter on a superior plane of empirical reality.

The start of the dinner is marked by a reign of a cacophony of voices, each member of the party chained to the “I-I-I” (esp. 115), intolerant of others and of the seeming futility of the gathering. Taking her seat at the head of the table, the hostess thinks dejectedly both about the assembly and

about the meaning of life itself: “But what have I done with my life? thought Mrs Ramsay, [. . .] she [had] only this – an infinitely long table and plates and knives” (90). Aware of her duties of hospitality, of how “the whole effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her” (91), she nevertheless feels as if paralyzed, limited to an absolutely mundane vision: “as if a shade had fallen, and, robbed of colour, she saw things truly. The room (she looked around it) was very shabby. There was no beauty anywhere” (91). As if picking up on this solipsistic tune, the diners bewail their own situation, filled with self-pity, envy, *ressentiment* and petty self-gratifications. Thus, Mr Bankes, impatient with the slow progress of the meal, philosophizes no less nihilistically than his hostess, moving in thought from the “trifling” and “boring” occasion to questions about the meaning of life: “What does one live for? Why, one asked oneself, does one take all these pains for the human race to go on? Is it so desirable? Are we attractive as a species? Not so very, he thought” (97). Similarly, Charles Tansley’s working-class *ressentiment* tends to dominate the early evening mood, his sense of insecurity gnawing at his mind, prompting him to lash out against the “silly, superficial, flimsy” women and “the sort of rot these people wanted him to talk” (93). Even Lily Briscoe’s artistic temperament is oppressed by the self-serving ambiance, constrained by the pressure of habitual desires.

Progressively, though, as the evening deepens, candles are lit and the delicious Boeuf en Daube is served, the banquet scene, through an experience of a moment of being, is transformed into a dynamic multiplicity, sustained by experimental thinking about relations in space. Muted at the start, the hostess’ efforts of “melting and flowing and creating” (91) are echoed throughout the scene in Lily’s reflections about spatial problems in her painting, solved to some extent by getting rid of “awkward space” and by “put[ting] the tree further in the middle” (92). In fact, the formal consciousness of the artist stays close to the hostess’ domestic arrangements, entailing a sense of the expansion of space, of the folding of abstractions into ordinary encounters. Most significantly, the dinner episode denaturalizes the home or the house, evolving along the lines of Lily’s aesthetic problematic, mobilizing marginal shapes which consequently flow into the “awkward” center. The process can be likened to the *asignifying* movements Deleuze and Guattari detect in Kafka’s work, the *detritorialization* of stable forms so that hierarchical arrangements dissolve into “a world of pure intensities, in which all forms are undone, all signification as well, [. . .] in favor of [. . .] deterritorialized fluxes, or a-signifying signs” (1975: 24). Thus, in *To the Lighthouse*, on various levels

among the Ramsays' dinner guests, ego-driven *topoi* associated with domestic traditions and Oedipal arrangements are increasingly destabilized and broken up into variegated phenomena and pure intensities: emotional blocks such as Mrs Ramsay's *ennui*, Charles Tansley's class resentments, Lily's frustrations over love and marriage, Mr Ramsay's broodings on conquest, give way to desiring machines, to complex alliances between nature and the artificial, between the concrete and the abstract, between the image and the asignifying sign. As in the previous glimpse given into the mother's solitary thinking, an erotic crescendo dominates the collectivity of the banquet, a new assemblage, whose uniqueness can be termed a *phenomenology of voluptuousness*, dynamically marked by vulnerable, yet powerful, qualities of care, nurture and ethical sensibility.

The asignifying flow of the banquet scene can be most comprehensively traced as an experiment with language and especially as an exploration of poetic figures as potential agents of social change and of the transvaluation of values. Here, it is important to keep in mind the utopian dimension of moments of being as moments of *becoming*, as consituents of an inclusive, expandable collectivity, where elements evolve in an approximate and non-parallel manner. In their discussion of "minor literature," Deleuze and Guattari examine Kafka's practice of disrupting images so that they are emptied of conventional meaning and turned into "a sequence of intensive states, a ladder or a circuit for intensities that one can make a race around in one sense or another, from high to low, or from low to high. The image [. . .] has become becoming – the becoming-dog of the man and the becoming-man of the dog, the becoming-ape or the becoming-beetle of the man and vice versa" (22). Moving beyond the limits of images into states of metamorphosis, the work with language in the banquet passage resembles Kafka's radicality: in order to liberate Mrs Ramsay from subjectivity, constrained by dominant images of thought, the character dissolves into a kind of flux, *becoming* first "a hawk which lapses suddenly from its high station" (114), flaunting and sinking among the guests, and then approximating some supersensitive creature, who easily steals under water "like a light," illuminating the hidden life, the rippling streams and "the reeds in it and the minnows balancing themselves, and the sudden silent trout" (116). Within these superior empirical dimensions, Mrs Ramsay experiences image-less phenomena: her joy is a process of becoming a "fume rising upwards, holding [the dinner guests] safe together" (114); her sensibility turns into "antennae trembling out of her" (116); her listening eschews meaning and revels in the sounds themselves of conversation, "as if

they were voices at a service in a cathedral, for she did not listen to the words” (119).

This *becoming* entity, a mobility rather than a person, suggests a slippage in the narration of *To the Lighthouse* from mundane realism to the (Deleuzian) philosophical event, to that combination of extraordinary elements, which memory will carry into the future as vision. In *The Logic of Sense* (1990), Deleuze investigates words and events in the manner of the Stoics as material entities which achieve an ideality, not as realms of Platonic transcendence, but as *aleatory points* (56), elevated coincidences, belonging to “another dimension than that of denotation, manifestation, or signification” (52). The ideality of the Deleuzian event can be designated as *differential*, because it is not imbued by an essence but occurs as a contingent encounter between a range of elements: “bottlenecks, knots, foyers, and centers; points of fusion, condensation, and boiling, points of tears and joy, sickness and health, hope and anxiety, ‘sensitive points’” (52). The complex metaphoric drama referred to above stages an inclusiveness of non-hierarchically ranged items, held together within the mother’s fragile consciousness. In the last part of the novel, “The Lighthouse,” the maternal assemblage motivates the “think-acts” of succeeding generations, of Lily Briscoe, who in her abstract art memorializes an image-less vitality, and of the Ramsays’ daughter, Cam, who poetically contemplates cosmic co-being.

Even if Mrs Ramsay is physically absent from many of the memories Lily bases her art-work on, the older woman’s ethical directive dominates the composition. Thus, Lily’s memory flashes of the guests at the banquet in “The Window” section, of William Bankes and of the Rayleys, Paul and Minta, are less based on positivistic truth than on recognition and reverence for these characters’ irreducible otherness; their representations are epiphanic, suffused with singularity, not sites of identification, analysis and judgment. Lily’s think-act about Paul and Minna dramatizes their disintegrating marriage, positioning them in delicate harmony, first in lovers’ quarrel, the simmering violence suggested by their attitudes, the wife “eating her sandwich annoyingly,” the husband “in his pyjamas carrying a poker in case of burglars,” speaking “indignant, jealous words” (188). Later, resigned to the end of love, the Rayleys are depicted in an act of cooperation when their car breaks down: by their gestures, it can be intimated that “it was all right now. They were ‘in love’ no longer;” the careful juxtaposition within the memory flash convinces us that the couple are friendly, without sexual tension, Paul sitting “on the road mending the car” and Minta handing “him the tools – business-like, straightforward, friendly” (189).

The aesthetic consciousness which dictates the points of this representation is marked by disinterested affection, by what I want to term an *other-regarding* constitution. Similarly, within Lily's memory scenes, the very viscerality of William Bankes and Charles Tansley is rendered, the scientist's attentive intelligence and the political passion of the reformed misogynist, this "atmosphere" of the characters, in the manner of Mrs Brown from Woolf's essay "Character in Fiction," "pouring out like a drought, like a smell of burning" (425). The transvalued observer, capable of such reverential acts of imagining others, is crucially located in the maternal figure, memorialized by Lily as the "scene on the beach" (esp. 174-5; 186-7), an inflection of the numinous dinner party in "The Window" section. Here, the painter dips into the harmonious moment, entering this realm of the mind, this suspended "drop of silver" (187), as if through the gate of the elegiac *otium*, accommodation to loss in the *hour of peace*. In "Virginia Woolf's Elegiac Enterprise" (1992), Karen Smythe traces the change from the conventional pastoral faith in the comforts of the natural world to the modernist awareness of consolation as precarious substitution, as "*prosopopeic* 'visions'" (73). As shown both in *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs Dalloway*, visions may "ceaselessly float up, pace beside, put their faces in front of the actual thing"; despite this artifice, however, the imagined faces often overpower "the solitary traveller [. . .], taking away from him the sense of the earth, the wish to return, and giving him for substitute a general peace" (*Mrs Dalloway* 85). Lily's rendering of the scene on the beach promises an experimental figuration, infused with a disinterested desire to assemble singularities into vital encounters.

That this *otium* on the beach is ethically saturated is emphasized in Lily's painting, her spatializing of the moment as a place of worship: "Lily painting steadily, felt as if a door had opened, and one went in and stood gazing silently about in a high cathedral place, very dark, very solemn" (186). At the center, choreographing the respectful harmonies of the scene, dissolving the petty enmities of Charles and Lily, transforming the virile desires of everyday reality into a condition of "friendship and liking" (175), is Mrs Ramsay "watching them" (175), "silent [. . .] uncommunicative" (186-7), the source itself of the disinterested desire of the *becoming* assemblage.

As *To the Lighthouse* elaborates on the transvaluation of values, infusing those with maternal sensibility, the harmonious rhythms of the banquet scene in "The Window" carry into the creative activities of the last part, sounded on almost every level of the narrative, from the think-act to the painter's touch, from physical movement to observance, from closeness to distance, from interiority to cosmic vistas. That moments of being in the

novel promise a sustained *becoming*, a creative evolution toward the just society, can be attested to in Cam Ramsay's meditation upon global rhythm, upon the delicate balance she perceives between the island, her family's private resort, glimpsed from afar, and the universe at large, "Greece, Rome, Constantinople," "shapes of a world not realized" (205). Moving in her mind, like Lily, between intimacy and distance, Cam glimpses the irreducible multiplicity of phenomena, the "place in the universe" of the little island, "shaped something like a leaf stood on end with the gold sprinkled waters flowing in and about it" (205). Increasingly, "the slumberous shapes" in the young girl's mind will become illuminated, a house of light, perhaps, accommodating all difference.

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