Abysmal Reflections in
Virginia Woolf’s
To the Lighthouse

Gabriella Moise

University of Debrecen
Institute of English and American Studies
4032 Debrecen Egyetem tér 1.
http://tigris.unideb.hu/~aai/
moisegabriella@yahoo.com

University of Chicago
5801 South Ellis Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60637
http://www.uchicago.edu/
Adviser: Prof. W. J. T. Mitchell

Unique, an icon, strange in its measures, familiar in its heterogeneity, its facets, colours, shapes, the uncanny presence of the past, a conscious preservation of international heritage, some European eclecticism, vaguely hovering in the air—Chicago, the way we, me and my husband, a fervid devotee of architecture and modern art, saw “the Windy City” and tried to carve a little space out of it for ourselves. The campus of my host institution, the nationally renowned University of Chicago is located in Hyde Park, in the heart of Southside Chicago, an area with a majority of African-American population burdened with severe socio-political and economic problems, a place where the lack of public safety is an everyday issue; the campus being one of the most beautiful university sites, a Neo-Gothic gem of the city. You can reach downtown Chicago, known as “the Loop,” some 10 kilometers up North, by a commuter train. In its wide streets you can easily bump into a Marc Chagall mural (Four Seasons), Picasso (The Picasso) or Miró (Miró’s Chicago) sculptures among proto-skyscrapers (Burnham & Root’s Reliance Building), Louis Sullivan’s Carson Pirie Scott & Co evoking lavish ornamentation of Art Nouveau or contemporary star architect Frank O’Gebry’s open air concert hall (Jay Pritzker Pavilon). I shall apologize for presenting something unconventional in the “abstract” above, a snapshot of the place we had the chance to visit and inhabit, offering you what is necessarily missing from the rest of my report.
The six months I spent in a cultural and architectural treasure box, namely, Chicago with the help of the Fulbright scholarship provided me the opportunity to visit one of the richest capitals of visual culture studies in the US, the University of Chicago, and meet one of the “founding fathers” of the aforementioned (inter)discipline, W. J. T. Mitchell. The university incorporates individual departments (Department of Art History, Department of Visual Arts, Department of Comparative Literature), institutes and centers (Interdisciplinary Centers and Programs) dedicated to a multiplicity of different approaches merging theories of numerous disciplines related to the analysis of literature and the arts in general. Not unlike Chicago, the city itself, with schools and institutes (The Chicago School of Media Theory, School of the Art Institute of Chicago) devoted to the practice and theory of visual arts attracting emblematic theoreticians such as James Elkins, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Bill Brown or Joel Snyder, just to mention a precious few of them. I also had the chance to audit one of Professor Mitchell’s seminars (Space, Place, and Landscape), which proved to be fruitful not only for the sake of a weekly based personal encounter with him but the theme and assigned readings of the course to some extent overlapped with my own research project. Attending the course I could also get acquainted with a different mode of interaction of instructor and student, and I profited as a teacher how to exploit the underlying
potentials of visual material within the classroom or to find the perfect balance of the illustrations and the assigned reading in the course of a seminar.

The interaction of visuality and textuality has served my main field of interest for the past few years, a field leading me through more and more intricate passages of semiotics, aesthetics, art history, hermeneutics, or phenomenology—a list I willingly disregard to complete for obvious reasons—and the amalgamation of all these into one extremely heterogeneous unit which, for the sake of simplicity, I would call for my present purposes visual culture. Among others, the primary objectives of the scholarship were to complete the final phase of collecting sources for my doctoral dissertation and to accomplish the axial chapter of the dissertation (Abysmal Reflections, a working title). This unit elaborates the centrally positioned section of Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse, that is, “Time Passes” and its prevalently visual expressive mode from an essentially phenomenological perspective. “Time Passes” manifests the very essence of my broader research field, hence its central status within my exploration and the dissertation as well. This episode of my chosen primary material serves as a forcefield of the encounter between the visual and the verbal, the spatial and the temporal domains of fine arts and literature.

Scenes from the murals of the 53rd street Metra station
Rockefeller Memorial Chapel at Hyde Park, University of Chicago
Chicago landmark in the Loop, the El (elevated trains for local transportation)
In the course of my dissertation I employ a basically interdisciplinary approach to literature, focusing on the visual attributes of the textual, exploring the spatially/visually defined incisions in the texture of a narrative, the intersections of space and time, image and text, to put it simply, to “read” a literary piece as a painting. To the Lighthouse serves as the focal text of my exploration, embodying not only the experimentative attributes of Modernist poetics but also following the artistic and aesthetic principles of the age and its leading figures such as Roger Fry or Clive Bell. The novel thematises cultural, aesthetic, and socio-political issues of the early 20th century partly through the character of Lily Briscoe, a painter, who blends the figure of the literary and the artistic personae, Virginia Woolf, the writer and Vanessa Bell, her painter sister. Lily’s artistic crisis and dilemmas reflect upon the difficulties of accomplishing the non-mimetic painterly techniques, modes of abstraction, or the adequate employment of “significant form” (Clive Bell’s term). Her personal conflicts, evoking gender issues of a larger scale in the British public life, originate in her refusal of fulfilling socially inscribed roles—married woman, mother, the Angel of the House—presented first and foremost in the permanent confrontation with her counterpoint Mrs. Ramsay, the other compositional pillar of both Woolf’s novel and the verbally manifested painting of Lily.
Aesthetically, the novel follows the Post-Impressionist technical and compositional principles bearing most conspicuously Cézannesque plasticity of forms, colour scheme, spatiality, and structure; the French master being an emphatic inspiration to English artistic movements and collectives such as the Bloomsbury Group or the Omega Workshop. The density of images, poetic means, the adoption of colour-words, the abundance of allusions concerning the figure of the artist and his/her creative struggle, however, are far not the entirety of the instrumental palette of visuality in Woolf’s novel. The narrative produces painterly spatiality through the depiction of actual spaces (the summer cottage of the Ramsays and the lighthouse itself) and phenomenal ones (the body of Mrs. Ramsay, the artistic space opened up by Lily’s paintings), it fragments/intersects temporal linearity (the fundamental characteristics of texts) by inserting stills into the flesh of the suspended narrative flow, and provides textuality with a phenomenal substantiality and solidity of perceptible objects naturally inhabiting physical reality. Cézanne realizes and puts into practice the capacity of such painterly qualities, “he wanted to make Impressionism 'something solid, like the art in the museums' […] he was pursuing reality without giving up the sensuous surface” (Merleau-Ponty, Sense and Non-sense 12, emphasis added). This observation conveys two significant aspects of the interartistic analysis: on
the one hand, it highlights the emerging necessity of tangibility, plasticity, three-dimensionality on the primordially flat surface of paintings, on the other hand, it emphasizes the sensibility of the visual artifact, its perceptibility for the human consciousness.

Cézanne’s mode of representation apparently inspired not only the literary and artistic circles of English Modernists. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology rests on the primacy of visual perception, he locates the painter’s, more specifically that of Cézanne’s, eye and manner of viewing the world in the centre of his ontology. Both Cézanne and Merleau-Ponty searched for the invisible layer underneath the filmy conventionality and impressionistic familiarity of reality, for something solid, phenomenal, corporeal that could be embodied in the consciousness of others. This particular phenomenological perception and cognition formulates the theoretical basis of my dissertation, more specifically the chapter I completed during the course of the scholarship. The notion of the bodily rooted consciousness bridges the palpable and the intangible realms, an interrelatedness evoking the reciprocity of the sentient and the sensible, the touching and the touched, the seer and the seen. *To the Lighthouse* presents perfectly the interchangeability of such binaries within its own literary and textual context, inevitably being impregnated additionally with visual capacities. Parallel to the seen/
seer intertwining the novel performs the entanglement of the visual and the verbal, the spatial and the temporal transforming itself into a substance of excessive plasticity and fluidity. Abysmal Reflections, the analysis of the central section of To the Lighthouse primarily approaches the narrative from two directions. One emerges from the prevalence of the light-and-shadow motif, a painterly quality in itself, and the additional presence of reflections, manifested as thematic and structural mises en abyme, whose exploration I conduct with the help of Lucien Dällenbach’s theory of internal mirroring. The other interpretative point of entry is the textual representation of the Merleau-Pontyean chiasmic relationship of the spatial and the temporal, the sentient and the sensible. “Time Passes” is positioned as a bridge between the two peripheral chapters, supposedly conveying a primarily narrative and temporal linearity embraced by the thematically spatial anchorage of “The Window” (Part One) and “The Lighthouse” (Part Three). The juxtaposition of the spatial-temporal-spatial units reveals the strict compositional drive of the narrative, which arrangement is even more emphasized by the rich employment of mises en abyme related to: characters (Mrs. Ramsay–Lily; Julia Stephen, Woolf’s mother–Virginia Woolf–Vanessa Bell), motifs (Mrs. Ramsay’s knitting–Carmichael writing poetry), images (the erect body of Mrs.
Ramsay and the vertical dominance of the lighthouse; the stroke of light—the brushstrokes of Lily), or acts (Mrs. Ramsay creating a still life out of the set table—Lily rearranging components of the painting). The complexity of internal mirroring gains its ultimate significance through “Time Passes,” the way the second chapter functions as, to use Dällenbach’s term here, a “retro-prospective” (60) mise en abyme, condensing and engulfing precedent and prospective occurrences of the narrative. Considering the whole novel as a predominantly reflexive literary work in accordance with its Modernist poetics, “Time Passes” occupies the locus of the mirror itself. This narrative convolution evokes the strict compositionality of Post-Impressionist aesthetic principles, more particularly, Cézanne’s struggle with shapes, patches of colours, his arrangement of abstracted forms, and, parallel to this, Lily’s paintings as they appear in the novel.

Yet “Time Passes” denies its apparent temporality, and partly due to its reflective quality and its immense darkness—Virginia R. Hyman actually terms it as an “apocalyptic vision” (145)—it acts as the camera obscura of the narrative composition, a dark room that, ambivalently though, produces clarity of vision. “Every visual something, as individual as it is, functions also as a dimension, because it gives itself as the result of a dehiscence of Being. What this ultimately means is that the proper essence [le propre] of the visible is to have a layer [doublure] of invisibility in the strict sense, which it makes present as a certain absence” (Merleau-Ponty, Primacy 187). Merleau-Ponty emphasizes vision, the presence of images as an indispensable condition to get access to the world and its subsequent cognition. Visuality, being prior to language or concepts, opens up the “dimension” where the intertwining, the chiasmus of the “In Itself” and the “For Itself,” sentient and sensible, mind and matter, absence and presence could take place. Part Two lacks any, strictly speaking, description of physical reality of the characters’ life, it masterfully condenses a ten year long period of the Ramsays private life and offers a more universal historical overview of the external world including the WWI, hence its expressive modality is also the most imagistic, characteristically visual and poetic recalling a preverbal mode of existence and communication. In this sense Part Two manifests the invisible, a veiled terrain that incorporates the entirety of perceptibles, the relationship of the perceiving and perceived entities, additionally, the reversibility of these otherwise mutually exclusive contestants. It presents the node of the chiasmic relationship of the visible and the invisible through its extreme plasticity.

The immensity of the novel’s subversive potential, the fluidity of the text, its essentially visual/painterly quality offers numerous interpretative approaches out of which I followed the exploration of vision and visual perception within the context of phenomenological ontology. So far in my research of either To the Lighthouse or
the Woolf literature in general, I have not encountered this perspective of scholarly inquiry, covering the interartistic fusion of the visual and the verbal, with a conceptual framework built on French phenomenological philosophy.

Besides the accomplishment of the respective chapter introduced above I also had to map the theoretical background for the whole of my dissertation in accordance with its preliminary schema and collect the necessary secondary material. Among other objectives and most likely also inspired by such a rich academic and artistic milieu I made arrangements of a seminar course on the theory of visual culture. The course actually got its materialization under the title Through the Looking Glass—Introduction to Visual Culture in the academic year of 2007/2008 for 3rd and 4th year students. Additionally, I could enrich the range of the Literary and Cultural Theory lecture series with a lecture on the Theory of Visual Culture. These accomplishments served me as a springboard to extend the scope of my future research exceeding the primary aim of the dissertation and to enhance the studies of visual culture in my home institute which appears to be one of my basic ambitions to realize in the near future.

References:


