

Dusting off the Classics: Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

Richard Sacks – Spring 2021 (section #2)

Handout #4 (for class of 6/2/21)



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1C – "What did it mean to her when a wave broke"

→ W.3 (pp. 15-16) "where she sat knitting, talking"^(p. 198):

But here, as she turned the page, suddenly her search for the picture of a rake or a mowing-machine was interrupted. The gruff murmur, irregularly broken by the taking out of pipes and the putting in of pipes which had kept on assuring her, though she could not hear what was said (as she sat in the window which opened on the terrace), that the men were happily talking; this sound, which had lasted now half an hour and had taken its place soothingly in the scale of sounds pressing on top of her, such as the tap of balls upon bats, the sharp, sudden bark now and then, "**How's that? How's that?**" of the children playing cricket, had ceased; so that **the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach**, which for the most part beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts and seemed consolingly to repeat over and over again as she sat with the children the words of some old cradle song, murmured by nature, "I am guarding you -- I am your support," but at other times suddenly and unexpectedly, especially when her mind raised itself slightly from the task actually in hand, had no such kindly meaning, but **like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life, made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea**, and warned her whose day had slipped past in one quick doing after another **that it was all ephemeral** as a rainbow -- **this sound which had been obscured and concealed under the other sounds suddenly thundered hollow in her ears and made her look up with an impulse of terror.** ¶ They had ceased to talk; that was the explanation.

→ W.11 (pp. 64-65) "where she sat knitting,...silent in the window alone"^(p.198):

Always, Mrs. Ramsay felt, **one helped oneself out of solitude reluctantly by laying hold of some little odd or end, some sound**, some sight. She listened, but it was all very still; **cricket was over**; the children were in their baths; **there was only the sound of the sea**. She stopped knitting; she held the long reddish-brown stocking dangling in her hands a moment. She saw the light again. With some irony in her interrogation, for when one woke at all, one's relations changed, she looked at the steady light, the pitiless, the remorseless, which was so much her, yet so little her, which had her at its beck and call (she woke in the night and saw it bent across their bed, stroking the floor), but for all that she thought, watching it with fascination, hypnotised, as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight, **she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness**, and it silvered the rough waves a little more brightly, as daylight faded, and the blue went out of the sea and **it rolled in waves of pure lemon which curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and the ecstasy burst in her eyes and waves of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind and she felt, It is enough! It is enough!**

1 – L.11 (p. 198): Lily still trying to "get round that one woman"

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 most some secret sense, fine as air, with which to steal through keyholes and surround her** where she sat knitting, talking, sitting silent in the window alone; **which took to itself and treasured up like the air which held the smoke of the steamer, her thoughts, her imaginations, her desires.** What did the hedge mean to her, what did the garden mean to her, **what did it mean to her when a wave broke?** (Lily looked up, as she had seen Mrs. Ramsay look up; she too heard a wave falling on the beach.) And then what stirred and trembled in her mind **when the children cried, "How's that? How's that?" cricketing?** She would stop knitting for a second. She would look intent. Then she would lapse again...

1A – "steal[ing] through keyholes [to] surround her"

→ TP.2 (pp. 125-126):

So with the lamps all put out, the moon sunk, and a thin rain drumming on the roof a downpouring of immense darkness began. Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, **the profusion of darkness which, creeping in at keyholes and crevices, stole round window blinds, came into bedrooms, swallowed up here a jug and basin, there a bowl of red and yellow dahlias, there the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers. Not only was furniture confounded; there was scarcely anything left of body or mind by which one could say, "This is he" or "This is she."**

1B – "treasured up like the air which held the smoke"

→ W.17 (pp. 104=105):

Everything seemed possible. Everything seemed right. Just now (but this cannot last, she thought, dissociating herself from the moment while they were all talking about boots) just now she had reached security; she hovered...like a flag floated in an element of joy which filled every nerve of her body...for it arose, she thought, looking at them all eating there, from husband and children and friends; all of which rising in this profound stillness (she was helping William Bankes to one very small piece more...) seemed now for no special reason to stay there **like a smoke, like a fume rising upwards, holding them safe together.** Nothing need be said; nothing could be said. **There it was, all round them. It partook**, she felt, carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, **of eternity**; as she had already felt about something different once before that afternoon; **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.**

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2C – "old pagan god...and the trident...in his hand" = Neptune/Poseidon:

→ **Virgil, *Aeneid*, 1.145ff. (Dryden's trnsl) = Neptune calming the storm at sea:**

The god [= Neptune] himself with ready **trident** stands,...

And o'er the seas his sov'reign **trident** rears,

Their fury falls: he skims the liquid plains,

High on his chariot, and, with loosen'd reins,

Majestic moves along, and awful peace maintains.

→ **Homer, *Odyssey*, 5.291-296 (Pope's trnsl.) = Poseidon rousing a storm at sea:**

He [= Poseidon] spoke, and high the forky **trident** hurl'd,

Rolls clouds on clouds, and stirs the watery world,

At once the face of earth and sea deforms,

Swells all the winds, and rouses all the storms.

Down rushed the night: east, west, together roar;

And south and north roll mountains to the shore.

2D – "a wreath of violets and asphodels":

→ **TP.7 (p. 135):**

In spring the garden urns, casually filled with wind-blown plants, were gay as ever.

Violets came and daffodils. But the stillness and the brightness of the day were as strange as the chaos and tumult of night, with the trees standing there, and **the flowers standing there, looking before them, looking up, yet beholding nothing, eyeless, and so terrible.**

→ **"asphodel" in *OED*:**

an immortal flower, and said to cover the Elysian meads. (Cf. **Homer *Odys.* XI. 539** Ἀσφοδελὸς λειμῶν [meadow of asphodel'.]) [E.g.] **1842 Ld. Tennyson *Lotos-eaters***

→ ***Od.* 11.538-540 (Butler's trnsl) where Odysseus utterly misreads Achilles):**

"When I had told him this, the ghost of Achilles strode off across **a meadow full of asphodel**, exulting [NOT!] over what I had said concerning the prowess of his son.

→ **Tennyson, final lines of "The Lotos-eaters" who urge us to abandon our voyage:**

Till they perish and they suffer—some, 'tis whisper'd—down in hell

Suffer endless anguish, **others in Elysian valleys dwell,**

Resting weary limbs at last on beds of asphodel.

Surely, surely, slumber is more sweet than toil, the shore

Than labour in the deep mid-ocean, wind and wave and oar;

O, rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more.

Note → **"violets"** 2x more in *TTL* (both in W.1, p. 14), and **"asphodel"** 1x (W.5, p. 28)



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2 – L.13 (p. 208): Lily & Carmichael in the middle ¶ of *TTL*'s final section

"**He has landed**," she said aloud. "**It is finished**." Then, surging up, puffing slightly, old Mr. Carmichael stood beside her, looking **like an old pagan god, shaggy, with weeds in his hair and the trident** (it was only a French novel) **in his hand**. He stood by her on the edge of the lawn, swaying a little in his bulk and said, shading his eyes with his hand: "**They will have landed**," and **she felt that she had been right**. They had not needed to speak. **They had been thinking the same things** and he had answered her without her asking him anything. He stood there as if he were spreading his hands over all the weakness and suffering of mankind; she thought he was surveying, tolerantly and compassionately, their final destiny. Now he has crowned the occasion, she thought, when his hand slowly fell, **as if she had seen him let fall from his great height a wreath of violets and asphodels** which, fluttering slowly, lay at length upon the earth.

2A – a few observations on L.13-¶2 phrasing in *VW*'s first notebook draft

1. Mr. Carmichael's French novel is "a staff" (not "the trident")
2. It does not include sequence about "thinking the same things"
3. The "wreath" is "of violets, of poppies" (not "of violets and asphodels")

2B – "It is finished" = Jesus' final words on cross in *Gospel of John* (19.30):

John 19.30 (KJV)

When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, **It is finished**: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost.

compare → *Matthew* 27.46-50 (KJV):

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, **My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?** ... And straightway one of them ran, and took a sponge, and filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink. ... Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost.

compare → *Luke* 23.46 (KJV):

And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, **Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit**: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost.

Note also → the last 2 sentences of the final ¶ of *TTL* (pp. 208-209)

With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; **it was finished**. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.