

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* the concept  
of androgyny

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The purpose of this paper is to present, in the novel *To the Lighthouse*, the development of one of Coleridge's concepts: "The truth is, a great mind must be androgynous."

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf comments on this famous quotation. It is important to see in which way she interprets it, because this will constitute one of the essential elements of *To the Lighthouse*. First, she assumes that there are two sexes in the mind, and they must be reconciled or united, acting in a constant intercourse to achieve complete satisfaction. Only the androgynous mind is naturally creative: it is transformed into a fountain of creative energy after the reconciliation of opposites that coexist in it. The interdependence of the two forces, or of the two approaches, constitutes the harmonized "whole."

Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, as some critics point out, would represent the masculine and feminine approaches to life. The masculine approach would be associated with sterility, rationality, abstract and logical reasoning of facts, while the feminine approach embodied by Mrs. Ramsay is associated with creativity, intuitive search, imagination, sensibility to things and people, and the search for something permanent in the multiplicity of experience. There is no doubt that Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay represent two different approaches to life: the two poles are the emotive and the intellectual. It is also clear that Mrs. Ramsay is the one that has, in a higher degree, the experience of reality, finding, more constantly than the others, some glimpses of "eternity".

However, their sexual roles should be taken only as metaphors for the difference of approaches to life. The idea of one-sidedness that we seem to find in the beginning of the novel is gradually overcome as we perceive that both characters present, in different degrees, the desirable reconciliation of opposites. The initial and negative perception of Mr. Ramsay is given to the reader through James' point of view, and this is due to his sense of being deprived by his father's constant demands on his mother. However, there are many hints that Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay share the same qualities, although in different degrees, and so do almost all characters in the novel. There is a bi-polarity in the two characters. Although Mr. Ramsay's pole is established in

terms of analysis and separation of things (as expressed, for example, through the metaphor of the alphabet), and Mrs. Ramsay's pole is to blend things, to see the whole, we find a duality in both of them. For example, in pp. 160-161, Mrs. Ramsay thinks that "in active life she would be netting and separating one thing from another..." The incongruity found in all characters also adds to this idea of duality. We have, for example, Mr. Ramsay who is a great philosopher and yet so petty and with a tendency to dramatize himself; or Mrs. Ramsay, who allies beauty and the wish of being flattered, and so on.

To the degree the characters achieve a reconciliation in themselves, they are able to reconcile the inner and outer views of reality and achieve their visions. Both Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay evolve towards this fusion. There is a constant tension between the two types of reality - the perceiving subject and the perceived object, and the goal is a kind of understanding in which both are contained. The novel, thus is constructed in terms of the objects as material and the subject's response to it. The search for a wholeness of vision is the search for the moment of reconciliation of perceptions and feelings, or outer and inner reality, into a whole.

The vision each character has of the objective reality is influenced by his emotions, feelings, and mind. It is not a mechanical copy of the outside world; rather, it constitutes an organic perception in Coleridge's sense. It is an interiorized imitation of the object that is filtered through the characters' inner reality. The mind combines all these perceptions into a unity, a whole, and this is, according to Harvena Richter, "a process that corresponds to what we loosely term imagination".<sup>1</sup> This unity, however, depends on a complex relationship of emotions, and on the inner tension of the characters. When all this is synthesized and the character achieves unity in himself and with the world outside of consciousness, he acquires his vision. We can conclude from this that all characters are potentially "viewers". Depending on this reconciliation of opposites inside and outside consciousness, they achieve the moment of total experience. Each perception, then, becomes an act of creation, and to this extent all characters become artists of their own experiences. We can relate this to Coleridge's concept of primary and secondary imagination in a loose way. All characters possess the secondary imagination; some, however, are better viewers than others, and are able to achieve moments of integration, of wholeness, that are almost like "a work of art." The objective material and the subjective response to it become fused in these moments, and the viewer in a way dominates the chaos of experience.

Mrs. Ramsay is the character that achieves these visions

more often. She is often associated with the image of a fountain from which creative energy emanates, being the best viewer of all. To suggest the reconciliation of tensions in her, we can quote a very significant passage in which she is described in terms that suggest the image of a male sexual organ: "Mrs. Ramsay... seemed to raise herself with an effort, and at once to pour erect into the air a rain of energy, a column of spray..." We see then that it would be a very limiting statement to establish the opposition or the tension of the two different views of life in terms of masculine and feminine roles, since the description itself points to the idea of combined opposites in the same person. Mrs. Ramsay is, in this section of the novel, (the same as Lily, in Part 3), the best viewer, whose aim is to triumph over the chaos of experience, bringing things into unity, putting them in terms of a whole. She is constantly striying to establish a harmonized relationship among people, between subject and object, between herself and the outside world (life is sometimes seen by her as an antagonist). She wants to absorb this external world and achieve balance with it. The best example of this attitude on her part is the dinner. The dinner is her creation, is her work of art: she wants to unify, to organize, to take something out of the flux, the confusion, and the chaos, and she achieves this in this moment. In the dinner, the characters are brought into a harmonious whole as if "they had their common cause against that fluidity out there" (p. 147). And Mrs. Ramsay understands that "nothing needs to be said... There it was, all round them. It partook... of eternity; as she has already felt about something different once before that afternoon; there is a coherence in things, a stability; something is immune from changes 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;... Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures" (p. 158).

Mr. Ramsay, in spite of his presentation of a "masculine" approach to life, is another example of the androgynous vision. He is not as developed a character as Mrs. Ramsay. He remains too much a type, but in some moments we realize that there is an integration between him and Mrs. Ramsay. During the dinner scene, for example, when Mr. Carmichael asks for another plate of soup, "they looked at each other down the long table sending those questions and answers across, each knowing exactly what the other felt" (p. 144). A better example is found on page 57. After his intellectual search expressed through the image of the letters of the alphabet (suggesting the fragmentation of reality as he analyses and separates its parts),

having had no success, he goes back to his wife, "bending his magnificent head before her - ,,, he does homage to the beauty of the world." After that, at the end of the section "The Window", although they don't talk, there is complete communication between them. He knows she loves him, and she knows that his words about the weather are correct: it won't be fine the next day, which proves that his approach to life also has elements of truth. This emphasizes the idea of polarity and reconciliation found throughout the novel. At the end of the novel, Mr. Ramsay undertakes the trip planned by his wife ten years before. In this trip, communication is established between him, Cam, and James, as he tries to make them both happy. As he conciliates for a moment his inner thoughts and preoccupations with the outside world (in this case represented by Cam and James), he reaches the Lighthouse.

The movement towards the Lighthouse is then the search for a balance with the world outside oneself, and Mr. Ramsay, Cam, and James achieve it in the trip. The world of the mind and external reality are finally reconciled and harmonized, an androgynous relationship is established. Lily solves the problem in her painting and the others reach the Lighthouse.

Lily's painting parallels not only Mrs. Ramsay's visions but also the novel itself, and it constitutes an example of androgyny. The painting and the novel converge to the same point and end together. Mrs. Woolf's concept of the novel, of the creative process, and of the artist's mind finds a good expression through Lily's words and search. She thinks that "in the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability" (pp.249-250). In the novel there is a constant transposition of what is still and what is moving, and Lily thinks that through the art of painting she will exchange the fluidity of life for something stable.

In the painting, Lily tries to relate and reconcile two opposite masses into a unity, and at the same time she tries to understand the relationship that existed between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. Both questions are resolved together, as she wishes, after having her vision of Mrs. Ramsay, to share it with him. Only after gaining insight into those human beings and their relationships is she able to balance the "mass on the right" with the "mass on the left". resolving the problem of formal relationships she was faced with. Similarly, an act of creation for Virginia Woolf is brought about through the creative power of the androgynous mind: it is based, according to Susan Bazin, on a "dual vision of the evanescent and the eternal and the need to bring the two into equilibrium".<sup>2</sup> It is

important to note, then, that Mr. Ramsay's pole was often associated with the awareness of the "shifting", the evanescent aspect of life, while Mrs. Ramsay searched the "solid," the "permanent," the "eternal." Throughout the novel, as we have already pointed out, there is a constant tension or contrast between flux and eternity, or the chaos of life and the moment of experience, which is eternal and timeless. When Lily balances her feelings between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, she has her vision, thus showing the dualistic aspect of reality.

At the same time Lily, Cam, and James understand that our view of people and things depend on our perspective, and, as James points out, "nothing was simply one thing" (p. 273). James realizes that as a child he saw the Lighthouse from land as a "silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye, that opened suddenly, and softly in the evening" (p. 276). Now he sees it, from a closer perspective, as a "stark tower on a bare rock," and he realizes that both are the Lighthouse, both are true. Cam goes through the same experience, as she sees the island from the sea; so does Lily. She realizes that "so much depends upon distance: whether people are near us or far from us; for her feeling for Mr. Ramsay changed as he sailed further and further across the bay" (p. 284). This gaining of insight reconciles, then, subject and object in a moment of equilibrium.

All these similar experiences are summarized in visual terms at the end of the novel, when Lily is trying to achieve "that razor edge of balance between two opposite forces: Mr. Ramsay and the picture; which was necessary" (p. 287). In her mind she establishes the balance between the triangle that represents Mrs. Ramsay (who is seen through her memory since she is remote in time) and the shape of Mr. Ramsay sailing towards the Lighthouse (and he is remote in space). As her perspective of both of them changes, she reconciles them, and "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" (p. 310).

The understanding that reality is dual is what allows them to have their visions. Lily's painting is an androgynous work of art, and so is the novel, because both try to apprehend the dualistic nature of reality.

Bazin points out that Mrs. Woolf "saw the evanescent in terms of color, transparency, or movement, and the eternal in terms of shape, heaviness, or durability."<sup>3</sup> Lily expresses this idea when she thinks that "beautiful and bright it should be on the surface, feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into another like the

colours in a butterfly's wing; but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron." The artist and the writer must reconcile both aspects: they must see the parts, but also the "invisible underlying whole." That is why, when she is painting, Lily thinks that she is exchanging "the fluidity of life for the concentration of painting," as she pursues the truth, the unity behind appearance. That is also why Mrs. Ramsay looks for "the still space that lies about the whole of things." The perception of this whole is the moment of which "the thing is made that remains for ever after." As we are able to grasp these moments, we are artists, we "partake of eternity," as Mrs. Ramsay puts it. This eternity, of course, does not refer to the physical aspect of things. Mrs. Ramsay dies, the canvas will eventually be destroyed, and the novel itself will be forgotten (as Mr. Ramsay says, one day nobody will read Shakespeare). Also, interestingly enough, Lily's vision takes place in her mind, not in the canvas, which shows that the vision is a state of mind, not a thing in a concrete level. It is not the actual picture that remains, but rather the vision achieved in the mind.

Having the vision, Mrs. Ramsay, Lily, and the others grasp the permanent shape, the reality that exists beneath change. Experiencing the whole, in a way, men repeat, as Coleridge has said, "in the finite mind the act of creation of the infinite I am."

We can also establish a comparison with Coleridge in the importance given to the creative process and to the concept of the work of art as a whole. Mrs. Woolf once wrote that "painting and writing have much to tell each other: they have much in common. "As we saw, the process of painting the canvas and resolving the tensions involved in it parallel the process of development of the novel. In p. 32, for example, Lily refers to the "flight between the picture to her canvas" and to the problem of passing "from conception to work." It is thus interesting to notice that the perception of reality is expressed by Mrs. Woolf through visual imagery: the line that Lily draws in the center of the canvas; the triangle; Mrs. Ramsay's perception of herself as a "wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others" (p. 95), etc. Mrs. Ramsay's own perception of herself agrees with Lily's idea of her as a triangle, and is expressed through a visual image. The novel itself becomes an image: the reader must perceive the whole of its design, and his interest, as Mrs. Woolf once pointed out, should be in "the effect of the book as a whole in his mind." The reader must be conscious of the unity, of the pattern which lies behind the complexity of the novel.

The structure of the novel, or its "design", becomes

extremely important. The sense of wholeness is also expressed through the structure, since in Part III the trip to the Lighthouse, suggested in Part I, is finally accomplished. The novel evolves towards the Lighthouse, as the title suggests, and it becomes an element of unity. Also in the third part, Lily completes her painting. Although it is not the same canvas used by her in Part I, she tries to solve the same problem of formal relationships that she faced before. Both things, the trip and the painting, are completed simultaneously. Parts I and III are also similar, as they are long, expanded presentations of a few hours, ten years apart, while Part II covers those ten years in an abbreviated, contracted form. In Part III scenes of Part I are recalled. The central events of the two long parts, the dinner and the trip to the Lighthouse, become moments of vision as a sense of oneness is achieved by the characters that undergo the androgynous experience.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Harvena Richter, Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 36.

<sup>2</sup>Nancy Topping Bazin, Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973), p. 44.

<sup>3</sup>Bazin, op . cit., p. 44.



Cage: A sense of imprisonment

Pope shouting 1951 oil on canvas by  
Francis Bacon