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Food for Thought: Of Tables, Art and Women in
Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

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Abstract

This article examines art as it is depicted ekphrastically or merely suggested in two scenes from Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*, to critique its androcentric assumptions by appeal to art criticism, feminist theories of the gaze, and critique of the *en-gendering* of discursive practices in the West. The first scene concerns Mrs Ramsay's art-informed appreciation of her daughter's dish of fruit for the dinner party. I interpret the fruit composition as akin to Dutch still life paintings; nevertheless, the scene's aestheticisation of everyday life also betrays visual affinities with the female nude genre. Mrs Ramsay's critical appraisal of ways of looking at the fruit – her own as an art connoisseur's, and Augustus Carmichael's as a voracious plunderer's – receives a philosophical slant in the other scene I examine, Lily Briscoe's non-figurative painting of Mrs Ramsay. The portrait remediates artistically the reductive thrust of traditional philosophy as espoused by Mr Ramsay and, like the nature of reality in philosophical discourse, yields to a "scientific" explication to the uninformed viewer. Notwithstanding its feminist reversal of philosophy's classic hierarchy (male knower over against female object), coterminous with Lily's early playful grip on philosophy, the scene ultimately fails to offer a viable non-androcentric outlook on life.

Keywords: *To the Lighthouse*, en-gendering (Teresa de Lauretis), gaze (Laura Mulvey), aestheticisation of everyday life, art, *pronkstilleven* ("banquet still life" painting), "still life of disorder" (Norman Bryson), philosophy, orientation (Edmund Husserl)

No, she [Mrs Ramsay] said, she did not want a pear. Indeed she had been keeping guard over the dish of fruit (without realising it) jealously, hoping that 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; until, oh, what a pity that they should do it – a hand reached out, took a pear, and spoilt the whole thing. In sympathy she looked at Rose.
(Woolf 259)

Thus sounds the climax of the dinner party offered by Mrs Ramsay to their summer guests, in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Part I. Thus feels the female protagonist about – and is *visually feeling* – the cornucopia (“the dish of fruit”) created by her daughter Rose for the feast. If the “aestheticisation of everyday life is a constant theme in Woolf’s writings” (Humm 219), *To the Lighthouse* provides as good an instance as any in Virginia Woolf to examine it at work. Indeed, nowhere better than in the description of the dinner party or of the “flamingo clouds” (Woolf 196) can we enjoy such aestheticisation vicariously through a character, respectively Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. The question arises, though, whether aestheticisation compensates for the frustrations of everyday life experienced by Mrs Ramsay¹ or for the dearth of life perceived by Lily in (Mr Ramsay’s) philosophy,² within the fictional world; whether aestheticisation enhances readerly experience along pictorial lines that run with, or against, or indifferent to modernist art, at the reception end; or whether it points to non-aesthetic and non-fictional issues altogether.

This article examines two scenes in *To the Lighthouse* which centre on art-informed perception and artistic creation: Woolf’s approach to art suggests an uneasy commerce with the *en-gendering*³ of art, i.e. with the gendering of the artist’s and the viewer’s gaze, but especially of the object of the gaze.⁴ Art, traditionally assumed to be the realm of imaginative freedom, nevertheless does pose constraints, most of which emanate from its androcentric perspective,⁵ for androcentrism grounds our spatiotemporal and cognitive orientation and thus the world’s apparent unfolding, to use Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological terms. Husserl locates the centre of experience (the “I”) literally in the here and now: this is where one’s *orientation* – as physically grounded cognitive starting point, if afforded by one’s social and biological inheritance (Ahmed 151-4)⁶ – proceeds as the world of objects (and values associated therewith)

unfolds (Husserl 51-3). Like philosophy, art is traditionally a “discipline” that has disowned and ousted women, or has at best relegated them to a supportive role: the muse, an object of meditation/ the gaze, or an artist producing minor art. Ironically, women have afforded much of the painter’s artistic/ existential orientation whilst becoming the disorientated/ disinherited party. In Woolf, both middle-aged Mrs Ramsay and her younger painter friend Lily Briscoe, differences notwithstanding, cannot but adopt the only position available to them socially, men’s. As my investigation suggests, Woolf’s women cannot carve out a non-masculine position to contemplate a dish of fruit, wonder at the object of philosophy, or remediate the mother-child relation, but resort to the default masculine painterly, philosophical or religious imaginary of the West.

A Dish of Fruit and the Appropriative Gaze of Art

With an art connoisseur’s eye further enabled by contemporary cinematic techniques,⁷ Mrs Ramsay reappraises the *still life* composition on the table, quoted above (Woolf 259), virtually as picturesque shapes of a natural landscape turned into a *landscape painting*,⁸ albeit set on an ordinary table, not easel, yet in admittedly less ordinary convivial circumstances. Regarding the latter, Mrs Ramsay’s dinner party has all the trappings of a particular Baroque still life subgenre, the seventeenth-century Dutch *pronkstilleven* (“banquet still life”), which features luxurious objects (exquisitely crafted silverware, glassware and Chinese porcelain) and fruits, pies or seafoods (see Tables 1.1, 1.2). Woolf juxtaposes fruit and shellfish in her description as do, for instance, the Flemish David Rijckaert II (1586-1642) in *Still Life with Trays of Oysters, Dried Fruit, Chestnuts and Sweets* (private collection, Spain) and *Still Life with a Silver-Gilt Covered Cup, Glasses, a Plate of Oysters, a Capon and a Chinese Porcelain Plate with Sweets*, or the Dutch Abraham Hendricksz. van Beyeren (c. 1620, 21-90) in *Banquet Still Life* (c. 1653-55; Seattle Art Museum), *Still Life with Lobster and Fruit* (prob. early 1650s; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) or *Banquet Still Life* (1667; Los Angeles County Museum of Art). Famous for his

pronkstilleven with rich seafoods, van Beyeren is doubly interesting in our case. His *Still-Life with Landscape* (1650; The Princely Collections, Vienna) features a window that opens on to a landscape: its generic porousness virtually anticipates Woolf's glissando from the still life to the landscape painting in the description of Mrs Ramsay's perception of the dish of fruit.

A caveat is necessary. My painterly analogies throughout this essay do not claim any direct artistic influence of any particular painting on Woolf's novel but only outline shared aesthetic concerns. In the National Gallery, London (henceforth NGL), which she visited since childhood, Woolf must have seen both still lifes (Tables 1.1, 1.2) and landscapes; some of the latter are interesting for their chiaroscuro and elevated viewpoint, not just undulating skyline (Table 2). Woolf saw other paintings during her extensive travels abroad, if indeed not to the Netherlands: Spain and Portugal, via France (1905); Greece and Turkey, via France and Italy (1906); France (1907); Wales, Italy and France (1908); Italy and Germany (1909); France, Spain and Italy (1912); France and Spain (1923); and France (1925). Her travels to France and Italy (30 March-28 April 1927) only shortly precede the publication of *To the Lighthouse* (5 May 1927).

To revert to Woolf's banquet dish of fruit in *To the Lighthouse*, here the static surface of perspectival *pronkstilleven* paintings is enlivened cinematically in non-illusionistic three dimensionality, if ekphrastically so. Rose's composition, which her mother surveys *cinematically* – Mrs Ramsay's "eyes had been going in and out among the curves and shadows of the fruit" (Woolf 259) – is a picturesque landscape of *lowland grapes* and *horny shell ridges*,⁹ of ups and downs,¹⁰ of (implicit) light and (explicit) shadows, framed as cinematic close-ups caught by a slow camera tracking from one fruit to another and back. Mrs Ramsay repeats the visual gesture of juxtaposing colours (in somewhat fauvist fashion, yellow alongside purple, the colours which Lily Briscoe also juxtaposes in her non-figurative painting) and also shapes (with a Baroque painter's flair).

Yet, the curvaceous fruit shapes on the table in Mrs Ramsay's still life (Woolf 259) evoke like curvaceous human forms, women's, in the

nude genre. In Woolf, the barely perceptible *generic connection*, I submit, has to do with the work of the gaze in the overall dinner scene, simultaneously appropriative and art-informed. An early description of Mrs Ramsay's perception – and jealous guarding – of the dish of fruit demonstrates the discursive cornucopia informing her appraisal of Rose's opulent arrangement:

Now eight candles were stood down the table, and after the first stoop the flames stood upright and drew with them into visibility the long table entire, and in the middle a yellow and purple dish of fruit. What had she done with it, Mrs. Ramsay wondered, for Rose's arrangement of the grapes and pears, of the horny pink-lined shell, of the bananas, made her *think* of a trophy fetched from the bottom of the sea, of Neptune's banquet, of the bunch [of grapes] that hangs with vine leaves over the shoulder of Bacchus (*in some picture*) Thus brought up suddenly into the light *it seemed possessed of great size and depth* . . . and to her pleasure (for it brought them into sympathy momentarily) she saw that *Augustus too feasted his eyes on the same plate of fruit, plunged in, broke off* a bloom there, a tassel here, and returned, after feasting, to his hive. *That was his way of looking, different from hers. But looking together united them.* (Woolf 250, my emphasis)

Not only does art furnish the perspectival schema and vocabulary through which Mrs Ramsay contemplates the cornucopia on the table, but it also dramatises the gaze, which is consistent with the art critical view that "All painting requires looking, but *still life evokes looking*" (Leppert 44, my emphasis). With Mrs Ramsay and Augustus Carmichael, Woolf actually thematises *ways of looking*, as well as a gender differential, where the *en-gendering* of the gaze elicits a feminist critique: Mrs Ramsay appraises the gaze ("feasted his eyes") and action ("plunged in, broke off") of Carmichael as appropriative feasting, akin to rape, even as *gazing* at the dish, however differently, *unites them*. The jarring difference between the two ways of looking may turn out to be precarious. For the time being, though, let us further read Woolf's scene through an art critical lens: "still life additionally often evokes smell, taste, hearing, and touch. Perhaps more than any other sort of painting, still life reminds us of our own embodiment, to the extent that it so specifically relates us as physical and sensory beings to the material world" (Leppert 44). Its often sensuous multi-sensoriality, I suggest, renders still life the deceptively de-

anthropomorphised twin of the languorous *female* nude (e.g. Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*) as opposed to the heroic male nude (e.g. Michelangelo's *David*, yet not also his God-Adam pair in the Sistine Chapel's Creation of Adam fresco).

Woolf's dramatisation of the gaze benefits from the dramatic elasticity of language. On the one hand, sighting the dish of fruit makes Mrs Ramsay "think of a trophy fetched from the bottom of the sea" (Woolf 250): in the context, *trophy* arguably also evokes a metaphor for women as the prize won in men's rivalries. On the other hand, the "dish of fruit" recalls for us now one of the many derogatory epithets for women through the pejoration of terms of endearment (Schulz 84-5), *dish* (in informal English). Terminological dynamic notwithstanding, the arts have translated the sexual feast for men into the more (or less) mythologically veiled object of the nude genre for men to *feast their eyes on* (Woolf 250).

There is more to Woolf's turn of phrase ("feasted his eyes"; "plunged in"; "broke off") in relation to still lifes. Whatever ethical-religious warning the *vanitas* still life subgenre may have sounded by paradoxically inviting the viewer to "take in" its lush forms, Woolf spins it in subtle feminist terms. The dish of fruit spoilt by Carmichael exposes, and warns against, men's (sexually) appropriative gaze and practices which art "sublimates" in, say, Rubens's *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (prob. 1635-40, NGL; 1824 acquisition) and various Venus pieces, such as Titian's *Venus with a Mirror* (c. 1555; National Gallery of Art, Washington DC), Rubens's *The Toilet of Venus* (1613; private collection) and *The Toilet of Venus* (c. 1628-29; Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid), or Velázquez's *The Toilet of Venus* ("The Rokeby Venus," 1647-51, NGL; 1906 acquisition). Carmichael's plundering of the dish of fruit generates *disharmony* in Woolf's still life. So do the peeled fruit, half-eaten food and precarious balance of pewter plates and overturned vessels in the Dutch "still life of disorder" (Bryson 121-3, 132), a "wreckage of the meal" (Bryson 140) like that in Willem Claesz. Heda's *Still Life: Pewter and Silver Vessels and a Crab* (prob. c. 1633-37, NGL; 1896 acquisition) and, save fruit peeling, Pieter Claesz.'s *Still Life with Drinking Vessels* (1649, NGL; 1910 acquisition). Woolf's "plunged in" and "broke off" express the violence of representation in *pronkstilleven*

paintings like Pieter Claesz.'s *Still Life with Turkey Pie* (1627; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), which juxtaposes pewter plates containing oysters or pie (as well as a lemon, salt, pepper and olives), with a knife, a nautilus cup and in the background a large pie with a turkey atop. (Scattered in between them on the white damask table cloth there are also nuts, bread rolls, a Wan-Li bowl with fruit, a *roemer* and a pewter jug.) Feasting one's eye on such a banquet still life makes one participate metaphorically in killing life forms to serve as the painter's model, as the knife powerfully suggests, whilst *enjoying* the scopophilic experience despite the *guilt* it engenders (Leppert 44). Thus, still life rehearses, time and again, "the relation of the object world to the human subject who is unseen but imagined" (Leppert 44): supposed eaters, but also artist and viewers.¹¹ In doing so, still life thinly veils desire, pleasure and power, to take my cue from Richard Leppert (43-4), in ostentatious economies of abundance which encode an *erotics of looking* (44) – the same as in female nude paintings.

If fruit plundering in Woolf's ekphrastic still life can also metaphorise rape of women as the sine qua non condition of female life under patriarchy, then this reading may shed a new light on Mrs Ramsay's anxieties, right before the dinner party, about Rose's grim future (Woolf 239), unlike Prue's (259). Mrs Ramsay seemingly projects her own filial relationship with her mother onto Rose, yet, I suggest, the pattern such projection draws on may also connote relationships under patriarchy, where it is the "lot" of women to suffer and be consumed – with grief or through interactions with men:

What was the reason, Mrs. Ramsay wondered, ... divining, through her own past, some deep, some buried, some quite speechless feeling that one had for one's mother at Rose's age. Like all feelings felt for oneself, Mrs. Ramsay thought, it made one sad And Rose would grow up; and Rose would suffer, she supposed, with these deep feelings Choose me a shawl, she said, for that would please Rose, who was bound to suffer so. (Woolf 239)

To understand my reading of a patriarchal undercurrent in the pre-banquet scene, let us return to Woolf's dish of fruit qua *pronkstilleven*. In this capacity, the cornucopia encapsulates the problematics of *excess* in still

lives: as paintings, they point to class-specific conspicuous consumption of art; as representations of food, they recall the crucial role of sustenance (Leppert 45, 55), which the social subaltern is tasked with providing; yet as allusions to femaleness, also through the latter, they problematise, I would argue, the very en-gendering of art. Woolf's verbs ("feasted his eyes"; "plunged in"; "broke off") are particularly suggestive of the disavowals with which the male artistic and receptive elite has explained away the sexually titillating scopophilic pleasures elicited by the nude genre. Or has it? The Flemish *Cognoscenti in a Room Hung with Pictures* (c. 1620, NGL; 1889 acquisition) thematises unabashedly the scopophilic male gaze relative to the nude: two young men in the foreground (centre right) respectively explain and ogle a titillating painting of three nude or quasi-nude young women, whilst two other men look respectively at the connoisseur and advertently at the viewer. More decorously, Honoré Daumier draws, in *The Connoisseur* (c. 1680-85; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), an *elderly* man who relaxes in an armchair in his collector's *studiolo*: he contemplates a Venus de Milo statuette (atop a round table) which the male eyes of the other artworks also ogle!¹²

At one remove, the readers of *To the Lighthouse* are invited to contemplate an ekphrastic *genre painting* (see Table 3) which includes the *pronkstilleven*:

Now all the candles were lit, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candle-light, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table . . .

Some change at once went through them all . . . and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there. (Woolf 250-1)

Not only does Woolf's description flirt with cinematic techniques, including panning across the long dinner table ("the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candle-light, and composed . . . into a party round a table") and the approximation of an aerial shot ("they were all conscious of making a party together *in a hollow, on an island*"). It also suggests that being thus "composed" cannot but turn the people "conscious" of their temporary condition as participants in a tableau vivant. Under the circumstances, what would be the temporary condition

of the readers who visualise this tableau vivant cum genre painting centred on the dish of fruit being plundered by the poet – what superb feminist irony! – Augustus Carmichael? Do readers share in Carmichael's act?

An Art of Disembodiment? Lily Briscoe's Madonna and Child

"Although the word 'art' appears only three times in the novel, *To the Lighthouse* captures some of this artistic ambience and is generally considered to be Woolf's most accomplished fictional portrait of an artist in the character of Lily Briscoe" (Humm 215-16). Many critics have addressed the novel's art-conscious make-up, whether by examining its formalism, inspired by Roger Fry's¹³ painterly aesthetic (Briggs 102), or by branding *To the Lighthouse* "the post-impressionist novel," with Lily Briscoe as "surrogate author" (McNeillie 18-19). Some of the interpretations reviewed by Su Reid (39-40) appear to be "repressive" through their imposition of a fixed meaning and "also confusing because they try to equate theories about non-representational form in art with the words in the novel, which claim to be representational" (Reid 40). My own comparison of the dinner party with still life (and even genre) paintings may strike readers as yet another misplaced effort to read art into a novel and thereby close off interpretation. However, I focus on Woolf's dramatisation of the gaze in scenes whose painterly affinities nonetheless suggest her discontents with women's social and perhaps epistemic condition.

I propose here a brief comparison of Lily Briscoe's non-figurative painting with Andrew's illustration of his father's philosophy. When Lily gasps, puzzled by Andrew's "Subject and object and the nature of reality" (Woolf 196), she actually *wonders meta-philosophically*: "she said Heavens, she had no notion what that meant" (196). Woolf subtly overwrites the reported exchange, but especially its aftermath, as itself an arena for philosophical contestation, after re-enacting in a nutshell the *originary* moment of philosophy: according to Socrates, wonder prompts "What is?" (Plato, *Theaetetus* 155d, qtd. in Rubenstein, "Disavowal" 11-12). Granted that philosophy emanated from wonder, thereafter the

philosopher “navigates . . . maieutically” (Rubenstein, “Twilight” 65) to help the neophyte to understand “what on earth knowledge (*epistêmê*) really is” (Plato, *Theaetetus* 145e, qtd. in Rubenstein, “Twilight” 65). However, Socrates and subsequently a host of philosophers, including Aristotle and Descartes, disown wonder as philosophy’s point zero in favour of reason, in a quest for causal knowledge spurred by the latter (Rubenstein, “Disavowal” 12-14).

Considering her subsequent jocular mood (Woolf 196), I suggest that Lily also scoffs *meta-socially* at the empty pretentiousness of the philosophers’ abstruse jargon and pursuits. Andrew obligingly and condescendingly instructs Lily how to comprehend the nature of reality: by thinking of a *kitchen table* when she is not there (196). His kitchen-table argument by analogy renders Andrew a philosopher himself, for his image appropriates the denigrated domestic chores in the metaphor of sweeping clean one’s mind before engaging oneself philosophically (Descartes 12; Bordo 627; le Doeuff 6-7; cf. Rooney 80; Thompson 49-50). On the other hand, Lily’s playful mental follow-up exercise challenges the male philosopher’s position of authority, for her imagery pursues Andrew’s philosophically robust analogy to its (il)logical end. Lily disingenuously reverses philosophy’s abstract reductionism to champion phenomenologically the gross homeliness of the kitchen table indecorously upturned and smugly “lodged . . . in the fork of a pear tree” (Woolf 196) – reminiscent of the Dutch “still life of disorder” – to enable perfect vision/ understanding of philosophy’s repressed sexuality and disavowed social elitism.

Yet Lily herself courts reductionism in her own work. A brief contextualisation is necessary. Woolf dubbed *To the Lighthouse* an “elegy,” in deference to the past of Part I which Part III recuperates with a difference into the present. In Part III, the past becomes Mrs Ramsay’s spiritual *gift* to the present.¹⁴ After ten years, 71-year-old Ramsay, with Cam and James, reaches the lighthouse; seeing them there releases Lily’s vision, and the painter can literally add the finishing stroke to her canvas (334) – in both cases, however, through symbolically severing the umbilical cord with Mrs Ramsay.¹⁵ Lily’s has been indeed a painstaking *conception* – her very word when Lily explicitly compares the anguish of

attempting to capture her vision on canvas with childbirth: “made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child” (Woolf 193).¹⁶

The painting pays a *tribute* (Woolf 218) to the late Mrs Ramsay, whom it depicts as other-related: Mrs Ramsay with her (then) little son James evokes the Madonna with Child. From its earliest mention in Part I, Lily’s is an *abstract* painting, a grid composition with a “triangular purple shape” (217) amidst the “running lines” that “lightly scored” her canvas in “blues and umbers” and in “greens and blues” (297). No Mondrian, Lily constructs her “gridlike picture [in] greens and blues . . . , the true colours of the island . . . , rather than the false green-grey hues [Woolf 186] favoured by the modish artists [188] of ‘The Window’” (Bradshaw 136). However reductive of life, Lily’s painting does not sever itself from the former either, at least chromatically. The *vision* (Woolf 334) the artist has after ten years enables her to complete the painting by drawing a line in the centre – of the same or of another painting?

In this connection, two details are worth noting. I will start with the more obvious intratextual allusion in Woolf’s ekphrasis of Lily’s painting. A fleeting vision during the dinner party makes Lily move the salt cellar across the patterned table-cloth as a reminder that she should alter her composition:

She remembered, all of a sudden as if she had found a treasure, that she too had her work. In a flash she saw her picture, and thought, Yes, I shall put the tree further in the middle; then I shall avoid that awkward space. That’s what I shall do. That’s what has been puzzling me. She took up the salt cellar and put it down again on a flower in the pattern in the tablecloth, so as to remind herself to move the tree. (Woolf 241)

Lily’s mnemonic repurposing of the salt cellar not only reconnects highbrow activities – painting – with the neglected table, like in Andrew’s philosophy lesson, but also repeats traditional philosophy’s reductive thrust: tree-salt cellar-line. It is, however, the resonances of the portrait proper, the Madonna with the Child, which deserve both intra- and extratextual attention. Mrs Ramsay hurts for her six-year-old son James, whom Ramsay teases callously about their voyage to the lighthouse by continually mentioning bad weather. She detests her husband, yet most

often displaces her resentment onto the younger philosopher, Charles Tansley (Woolf 183, 189). Tansley notwithstanding, the three Ramsays' relationship transfigures, I would argue, Christianity's premier kyriarchal family, Mary, Jesus and God the Father, as Woolf intimates: "*If her husband required sacrifices (and indeed he did)* she cheerfully offered up to him Charles Tansley, who had snubbed her little boy" (191, my emphasis). Ironically, a tense father-son relationship also offered the incentive for a Holy Family reinterpretation in the visual arts, Max Ernst's, one year before *To the Lighthouse* was published, in the controversial surrealist painting *Young Virgin Spanking the Infant Jesus in Front of Three Witnesses: Andre Breton, Paul Eluard and the Painter* (1926; Museum Ludwig, Cologne).

Ironically, the first character who sees Lily's unfinished canvas is a man, William Bankes; since the botanist cannot understand her abstract approach, he asks Lily to explicate it. The episode inverts the engendering of cognitive roles in the early philosophy episode between Lily and Andrew, but retains abstract notions and the term "reduction" – doubled in Bankes's thought and then in an unassigned thought – as central principles. The only major difference concerns the aftermath of the explication, here no longer twisted irreverently:

What did she wish to indicate by *the triangular purple shape*, "just there?" he [Bankes] asked. It was Mrs. Ramsay reading to James, she [Lily] said. She knew his objection – that no one could tell it for a human shape. But *she had made no attempt at likeness, she said*. For what reason had she introduced them then? he asked. Why indeed? – except that if there, in that corner, it was bright, here, in this, she felt the need of darkness. Simple, obvious, commonplace, as it was, Mr. Bankes was interested. *Mother and child* then – objects of universal veneration, and in this case the mother was famous for her beauty – *might be reduced, he pondered, to a purple shadow without irreverence*.

But the picture was not of them [Mrs Ramsay and James], she said. Or, not in his sense. There were other senses, too, in which *one might reverence them*. *By a shadow here and a light there*, for instance. Her tribute took that form, if, as she vaguely supposed, *a picture must be a tribute*. *A mother and child might be reduced to a shadow without irreverence*. *A light here required a shadow there*. He considered. He was interested. *He took it scientifically in complete good faith*. The truth was that all his prejudices were on the other side, he explained . . . But now – he turned, with his glasses raised to the *scientific examination of her*

canvas. The question being one of *the relations of masses, of lights and shadows*, which, to be honest, he had never considered before, he would like to have it explained – what then did she wish to make of it? . . . She could not show him what she wished to make of it, could not see it even herself, without a brush in her hand. She took up once more her old painting position with the dim eyes and the absent-minded manner, *subduing all her impressions as a woman to something much more general*; becoming once more under the power of that vision which she had seen clearly once and must now grope for among hedges and houses and mothers and children – her picture. It was a question, she remembered, how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left . . . But the danger was that by doing that the unity of the whole might be broken. (Woolf 217-18, my emphasis)

Unsurprisingly, Lily's painting yields to the botanist's "scientific examination" as if it were an unfamiliar specimen. Nothing remotely like scientific interest does Woolf describe, however, in Bankes's response to the fruit and shellfish cornucopia in the dinner party episode: Rose's still life composition doesn't strike him as incongruous or unusual, as abstract – it presents no interest at all. Rather, Bankes enjoys the Boeuf en Daube whose rich colours and texture are described by Mrs Ramsay (Woolf 253).

Woolf subtly ironises Cartesian philosophers like Ramsay as but a *phantom-like disembodied mind* unable to enjoy life or perhaps to enlighten others apart from his (its?) own caste. Their philosophical accomplishment, pigeonholing everything into ludicrously narrow categories, entails reducing difference and beauty:

Naturally, if one's days were passed in this seeing of angular essences, this reducing of lovely evenings, with all their flamingo clouds and blue and silver to a white deal four-legged table (and it was a mark of the finest minds to do so), naturally one could not be judged like an ordinary person. (Woolf 196)

Woolf's feminist irony implies that sustenance (eating to exist), if sublimated and reified, is the disavowed core to which "the finest minds" will *reduce* (Woolf 196) reality's multifarious nature to teach *cogito ergo sum*. Yet, Lily's non-figurative painting is no less reductionist than Ramsay's philosophy, albeit not devoid of a non-masculinist suggestion. Abstraction and reductionism seemingly reign supreme when "the triangular purple shape . . . was Mrs. Ramsay reading to James" (Woolf

217); Lily's "triangular purple shape" represents no trinity, perhaps not even a triangle (unless the relationship between mother and son becomes the missing third). Paradoxically, though, Lily's *triangular shape*, rather than definite *triangle*, dissolves entities to a pre-Symbolic, i.e. semiotic, condition of indistinctness – the very opposite of philosophy's knower/known hierarchy – yet appositely so regarding Mrs Ramsay's other-relation. Nevertheless, what drives Lily in her art seems fully compatible, *mutatis mutandis*, with what drives Ramsay in his philosophy as explained by Andrew: she "subdu[es] all her impressions as a woman to something much more general" (Woolf 218) – to an artistic principle as decreed by her male forebears (Bryson 175-8). Now in Lily's visual parsing of her painting, the *shadows* – indeed, not of fruit, but from brushstrokes – and *lights* explicitly interrelate, unlike in Mrs Ramsay's parsing of the dish of fruit. So do Lily's *masses*, not *shapes* (as the ones Mrs Ramsay juxtaposes), even as this threatens to *break the unity* of her composition (Woolf 218).

Until the very end, and from early on in the novel, Lily despairs of her painterly halt: strive as she may, she cannot capture the elusive vision onto her canvas. Save the artistic epiphany which ends the novel with the happy completion of her painting, her blockage parallels Ramsay's philosophical loop. His philosophical tracts have become repetitious, symptomatic of philosophical vagueness in the epistemic sense;¹⁷ in his youth, though, he could boast rigorous philosophical linearity, like the rigid succession of piano keys or alphabet letters (Woolf 203-5). Except for their fields, Lily and Ramsay are the two faces of the same phallogocentric coin: they cannot fully enjoy life, which they nevertheless strive to capture in their respective discourses, for their minds are mired in the inherited abstract schemata which purport to explain the nature of reality. Nor, for that matter, is Mrs Ramsay's aestheticisation of everyday life any better equipped to circumvent reductive biases. Her cinematic gaze surveys the cornucopia and its pillage with the male connoisseur's appreciation of curvaceous shapes, visibly vegetal yet implicitly female, which male masterminded art genres have long taught us to collapse.

Yet the novel offers more than one philosophical or artistic lesson, or indeed one about their interrelatedness, to ponder. Meta-discursively, Woolf herself is the artist-philosopher who teaches an impersonal and

cynical lesson in Part II (“Time Passes”), the hinge between the philosophy and arts lessons of Part I (“The Window”) and the diffuse philosophy of artistic vision of Part III (“The Lighthouse”). Part II renders the WWI experience through descriptions of nature as indifferent to human suffering. Such Stoic cynicism is augmented through the use of parenthetical comments, which here note, exclusively between square brackets, the few acts not always directly connected with the war (the marriage and childbirth-related death of Prue, the deaths of Mrs Ramsay and Andrew, the latter on the French front, the success of Mr Carmichael’s poetry volume).¹⁸ Woolf has suspended human life itself – even the Cartesian cogito – by allowing a dispassionate camera-eye to record the lush world, which unfolds now not from the orientating Husserlian “I” but from a disorientated camera “eye” that gropes around overgrown holiday house and war-destroyed places alike. The dish of fruit has been ruthlessly plunged into and plundered through the irrationality of *man*-waged war, and the cynical Stoic outlook cannot suggest a standpoint from which to gaze at life without spoiling or abusing it.

Conclusion

Mrs Ramsay’s perception of the dish of fruit in painterly terms of still life and Lily Briscoe’s playful phenomenological re-viewing of Andrew’s analogy for the nature of reality, might suggest the self-empowerment of these female characters along the lines of Virginia Woolf’s feminist slant. Nonetheless, we should note that Mrs Ramsay enjoys visually (yet shuns tasting) the fruit cornucopia, which she regards (in both senses) in terms laid out by male artists in a marginalised-*cum*-feminised genre – the still life, yet also genre painting (Bryson 147-78) – that welcomed female painters only to keep them in their minor place (174-8). Are the merits of her artistic connoisseurship credited within as without the text? We remember her as the middle-class housewife with a charitable inclination. When Lily de-alienates – through whimsical levitation – the defamiliarised kitchen table (qua philosophical analogon) to reintegrate it into (aestheticised) everyday life, is this phenomenological take constitutive of and memorable about her persona? Her Mother and Child

modernist pastiche remediates the abstract reductionism of traditional philosophy as espoused by the Ramsay father and son (a Cartesian-minded duo turned trinity through their philosophical allegiance as other-relation), rather than the subject of much religious iconography. The dining table and eating as commensality appear to orientate Mrs Ramsay's life as other-related; fleeing relationships or painting (them) grid-like appears to orientate Lily Briscoe's, just as philosophising in piano-key linearity orientates Ramsay's.

In Cartesian terms, the kitchen table in Andrew's analogon orientates an understanding of the nature of reality in the absence of any distracting *res extensa*, e.g. other people and human activity save the *cogito*. The philosopher can handle reality – the kitchen table – conceptually exclusively after emptying the kitchen/ world, after “disembodying” it. Lily Briscoe's painterly vision of the Mother and Child composition also works through reductive disembodiment to lines and masses: mind, eye and brush articulate the modernist belief that reality yields to unravelling and can be captured in abstract patterns. Only Mrs Ramsay's Baroque cornucopia seems to welcome gazing at and feasting on the dish/ world – until one intuits the dangers that lurk in the appropriative gaze of onlookers, ready to plunder and ravish the beauty of a nature whose curvaceous fruit shapes metaphorise female ones. The painter's mind-eye-brush may be no different from the philosopher's mind-eye-pen when a fully bodied still life composition yields conceptually to a nude painting which metaphorises women's/ the world's availability “on hand” for grasping it phenomenologically – or otherwise.

Appendix

Table 1.1: *Still life paintings acquired by the National Gallery, London (NGL) before 1926*¹⁹

Source: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/explore-the-paintings/browse-by-century?decade>

TITLE	ARTIST	DATE	NGL ACQUISITION
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<i>Still Life: A Goblet of Wine, Oysters and Lemons</i>	Jan van de Velde	1656	Presented by Lord Savile, 1888
<i>Still Life: Pewter and Silver Vessels and a Crab</i>	Willem Claesz. Heda	prob. c. 1633-37	Presented by Henry J. Pfungst, 1896
<i>Still Life with Drinking Vessels</i>	Pieter Claesz.	1649	Salting Bequest, 1910
<i>Still Life [vanitas]</i>	Jan Davidsz. de Heem	c. 1664-65	Salting Bequest, 1910

Table 1.2: *Still life paintings acquired by the NGL after 1926-27*

Source: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/explore-the-paintings/browse-by-century?decade>

TITLE	ARTIST	DATE	NGL ACQUISITION
<i>Still Life with a Pewter Flagon and Two Ming Bowls</i>	Jan Jansz. Treck	1651	Bought, 1931
<i>Still Life with a Lobster</i>	Willem Claesz. Heda	c. 1650-59	Presented by Frederick John Nettlefold (whom Woolf did not know personally), 1947

Table 2: *Landscape paintings acquired by the NGL before 1926*

Source: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/explore-the-paintings/browse-by-century?decade>

TITLE	ARTIST	DATE	NGL ACQUISITION
<i>A Landscape with a Waterfall and a Castle on a Hill</i>	Jacob van Ruisdael	prob. 1660-70	Bequeathed by Johann Moritz Oppenheim, 1864
<i>Mountainous Landscape with Figures</i>	in the style of Salvator Rosa	after the seventeenth-century	bequeathed by Mrs F. L. Ricketts, 1886

<i>A Mountainous Landscape</i>	Roelant Roghman	c. 1665	Bought, 1891
<i>A Dune Landscape</i>	Willem Buytewech the Younger	prob. 1660-70	Bought, 1910
<i>A Landscape with a Farm by a Stream</i>	Adriaen van de Velde	1661	Salting Bequest, 1910

Table 3: Genre paintings acquired by the NGL before 1926

Source: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/explore-the-paintings/browse-by-century?decade>

TITLE	ARTIST	DATE	NGL ACQUISITION
<i>A Musical Party</i>	after Caspar Netscher	after 1665	May Bequest, 1854
<i>An Old Peasant Caresses a Kitchen Maid in a Stable</i>	David Teniers the Younger	c. 1650	Bought, 1871
<i>A Woman Playing a Lute to Two Men</i>	Gerard ter Borch	1667-68	Bought, 1871
<i>A Merry Company at Table</i>	Hendrick Pot	1630	Bought, 1889
<i>An Interior with a Man offering an Oyster to a Woman</i>	Jan Steen	prob. 1660-65	Salting Bequest, 1910
<i>A Peasant Family at Meal-time ("Grace before Meat")</i>	Jan Steen	c. 1665	Salting Bequest, 1910
<i>Peasants Merry-making outside an Inn, and a Seated Woman Taking the Hand of an Old Man</i>	Jan Steen	prob. 1645-50	Salting Bequest, 1910

Notes:

¹ The thought of relative impoverishment, thence also the sparseness of their Isle of Skye summer house, beleaguers Mrs Ramsay (Woolf 240; 223, 252), who needs to make sure that they can “feed eight children on [Ramsay’s] philosophy” (Woolf 195) and also entertain their friends.

² I have examined the philosophical and feminist stakes of the episode elsewhere (Ciobanu, “Forever Eating the Past”); some of my early conclusions will be useful in the final section of this paper.

³ The spelling is Teresa de Lauretis’s (240) and highlights the *gendered production* of (in Woolf) the subject/viewer position as male and the object/viewed position as female or feminised.

⁴ My concern with the thematisation of gazing in *To the Lighthouse* draws loosely on Laura Mulvey’s psychoanalytic approach to the differential gendering of gaze and the gazed in mainstream Hollywood cinema.

⁵ See Fernald (85-115) on the intersection of Woolf’s feminism with her critique – in her essays, novels and contributions to London literary magazines – of the public sphere in its (in)capacity to include and represent women.

⁶ Sara Ahmed (151-4) cogently notes that such intertwined personal-orientation cum world-unfolding does not occur haphazardly. Rather, Husserl’s orientation crucially depends on his entitlement to a certain occupation by virtue of a privilege the philosopher was born into, such as maleness and middle-class background in a patriarchal society unavoidably androcentric in outlook and historically hierarchically organised.

⁷ See Maggie Humm on Woolf’s photographic and cinematic vocabulary and technique in her works. Woolf’s artistic exposure was broadened in adulthood also through interactions with artist friends and her active engagement with cinema criticism and photography. Strangely, save for mentioning that *To the Lighthouse* “capture[s] Mrs Ramsay in a post-impressionist brush-stroke” (Humm 229) in Lily’s painting, Humm virtually overlooks the novel.

⁸ Etymologically associated with, and conceptually drawing on, the painters’ visual mannerisms, *picturesque* entered English in the early eighteenth century via the French calque of the Italian *pittresco* (from *pittore*, “painter”). The notion describes natural scenery by implicit recourse to art, thus enabling – yet also constraining – the average onlooker to appraise beauty in nature (only) insofar as it seemingly follows an artistic precedent or template.

⁹ The shell returns, in a *memento mori* context, in “Time Passes” – the middle part which alludes to the horror of the Great War: “The house was left; the house was deserted. It was left like a shell on a sandhill to fill with dry salt grains now that life had left it” (Woolf 282).

¹⁰ Woolf undermines the phallogocentric tyranny of idioms by focusing on *shadows* (if my paradox may be excused). Nevertheless, she reinforces the symbolic vertical topography erected in the West: Mrs Ramsay ostensibly surveys the table from a high standpoint, like in seventeenth-century Dutch banquet still lifes (Berger 27-30). The symbolic feminine gendering of shells somewhat

equivocates the masculine trajectory of the gaze along the objects to be “consumed.”

¹¹ In this connection, see Gerard ter Borch’s *A Woman Playing a Lute to Two Men* (1667-68, NGL; 1871 acquisition), a genre painting whose “deliberately ambiguous” relationship between the figures invites the viewers “to decide whether this is just a happy domestic scene, or possibly a scene taking place in brothel” (<<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/gerard-ter-borch-a-woman-playing-a-lute-to-two-men>>).

¹² “Daumier often pictured the broad spectrum of enthusiasts attending exhibitions or visiting artists’ studios; here he portrayed the model connoisseur engaged in the rapt contemplation of his collection” (<<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/333915>>).

¹³ A friend of Virginia Woolf’s, artist and art historian Roger Fry organised the 1910 Post-Impressionist Exhibition that first brought the work of Cézanne and Van Gogh to London (Reid 39).

¹⁴ See Simpson (85-107) on the gift economy of *To the Lighthouse* and the dangers of its patriarchal misuse against women of whom the gift of selflessness is required.

¹⁵ Lily has been feeling her smothering influence even after Mrs Ramsay’s death (Woolf 328-9).

¹⁶ *Conception* names an equivocal act in the West, one nested in the uterus as in the mind (the latter presumably since Zeus’s parthenogenetic birth of Athene), which accordingly testifies to the masculine appropriation, in mythology, philosophy or the arts, of the feminine principle to name, among others, *brainchildren* whose *paternity* men pride in.

¹⁷ See Quigley on early-twentieth-century debates about vagueness in philosophy, familiar to Woolf since she also had philosopher friends, like Bertrand Russell (Quigley 64-5). For some philosophers, vagueness is epistemic; for others, it is semantic, and therefore vague language undermines philosophical realism (18-20).

¹⁸ See Allen (60-1, 70-5) on the import of *parenthesis* in enabling textual and especially thinking mobility – particularly in opposition to the rigidity of institutionalised thought in the academy and the Victorian constraints on women’s speech – as sometimes visualised in the characters’ strolling.

¹⁹ All tables include merely a representative selection, ordered by acquisition chronology.

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