

**VIRGINIA WOOLF**

**I BEGIN TO HEAR VOICES**

**Bath Literature Festival 2012**

Like many writers and readers I have often tried to think hard about the nature of the imagination; it used to be called fancy, and often involves unbidden thoughts- ideas that steal up on us when fancy roams, surprising us with their hidden charge; and in many ways the act of writing is an attempt to come to terms with the imagination, to take hold of it, define it, and pin it down lest it escape – it is not dissimilar to the act of trying to remember a dream.

The writer has to leave the real world, memorise it, think about it, re-imagine it, re-fashion it, and then bring it back to reality in definite, written form. It is an attempt to stop the passage of time- to make life, in the form of fiction, or art, stand still – and so defy time, transience, and death.

The process involves editing, making decisions, evaluating what is important and what is not - what has to be included and what can be left out.

This is what Borges called – the reasoning imagination.

But what happens if the writer gets lost or overwhelmed in the process, trapped between layers of memory, fact and imagination, unable to decide what is real, what matters, and what does not?

What happens when a writer is so overwhelmed, so unable to decide, that she can no longer wrestle with these decisions; she can no longer pin down the voices or trap reality?

On 28 March 1941, Virginia Woolf filled her pockets with stones and walked into the River Ouse.

For her husband, Leonard Woolf, it was, perhaps, a relatively ordinary day until the discovery was made. He was a punctilious man who had kept a journal every day of his adult life. In it, he recorded daily menus and car mileage. Nothing was different on the day his wife committed suicide; he even entered the mileage for his car. But on this specific day of his journal the paper is obscured by a smudge, a brownish yellow stain which has been rubbed or wiped. It could be tea or coffee or tears. The smudge is unique in all his years of neat diary keeping.

That day, a letter had been left for him on the table in the sitting room.

He found it, just before lunch, at one o'clock.

The letter begins:

*Tuesday*

*Dearest*

*I feel certain that I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices and can't concentrate so I am doing what seems the best thing to do...'*

It is dangerous to view the last words of a writer as a natural progression from all that has gone before and it's also dangerous to over-link a writer's life with their work; but in this case, the voices in Virginia Woolf's head seem to combine memory and the creative imagination to a maddening degree. What has now come to be known as "stream of consciousness" writing bears testament to what is, in essence, a haunted life – in which Virginia Woolf tries to retrieve and re-fashion the ghosts of her childhood and her former life and turn it into art.

It is certainly a life haunted by death.

In 1895, when she was thirteen, her mother died suddenly of rheumatic fever. Virginia's half-sister Stella tried to take her mother's place but died two years later of peritonitis. Early in 1904, her father died of stomach cancer and in 1906 her beloved brother Thoby, the model for the character of Percival in *The Waves* died of typhoid after a trip to Greece and Constantinople.

Virginia herself had her first serious illness in 1910, when she was 28, and struggled with headaches, sleeplessness and anorexia, while her sister Vanessa suffered a nervous breakdown. The following year Virginia wrote:

'Did you feel horribly depressed? I did. I could not write, and all the devils came out, hairy black ones. To be 29 and unmarried- to be a failure- childless- insane too, no writer.'

Shortly after she **did** marry, Leonard Woolf, Virginia Woolf suffered her worst breakdown ever, extending from the summer of 1913 to the autumn of 1915.

Doctors considered that her illness might be hereditary; and certainly her father, Leslie Stephen, had undergone some kind of breakdown while editing *The Dictionary of National Biography*, finding himself afflicted with insomnia, "fits of the horrors", "the fidgets" and "hideous morbid fancies." Her older half-sister Laura was confined to a mental institution. Within the Stephen family, Virginia was well known for her flights of fantasy and sudden violent rages. Her brothers and sister would call her by her nickname and joke 'Goat's mad.'

George Savage, the family consultant on nervous illness diagnosed Virginia as suffering from neurasthenia, an ill defined medical condition characterised by lassitude, fatigue, headaches and irritability. He had made the same diagnosis in the case of her father. More worryingly, and under the influence of contemporary eugenic theory, he believed that families like the Stephens, which had produced outstanding intellects, even some "men of genius" were also inclined to neurotic illness, melancholy, and nervous breakdown.

Dr Savage was not alone. Another nerve specialist, Theo Hyslop viewed mental illness as a sign of degeneration, and that these so called degenerates should be forbidden from having children by law. This perhaps accounts for Virginia Woolf's hostility to Doctors and other authority figures in her writing. Haunted by autobiography, one thinks of the character of Sir William Bradshaw in *Mrs Dalloway*, a Harley street Doctor who exercises a repressive authority for what he takes to be the good of society as a whole. He invokes the god Proportion, who "made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they too shared his sense of proportion."

But it was a trip to see two further Doctors, Maurice Wright, a nerve specialist, and Henry Head, a neuro-psychologist, that prompted Virginia Woolf's first suicide attempt. In 1913 she took 100 grains of the sleeping drug veronal from her husband's unlocked case and was only rescued by Geoffrey Keynes who was training as a House Surgeon and who raced off with Leonard to get a stomach pump.

Virginia Woolf could not face further treatment; but neither could she admit or accept that she was ill: merely anxious, guilty and unhappy; tipped into despair by the treatments to which she was subjected – not least the sleeping draughts that failed to put her to sleep and only increased her headaches.

Today, some researchers have tried to explain her condition as bipolar disorder, but I think it's perhaps a mistake to apply modern thinking to explain away a condition that was, perhaps, even more complex.

Anorexia was identified as a distinct syndrome from the early 1870's and was one of Virginia Woolf's main symptoms. In 1913 her weight fell to eight and a half stone and her periods stopped for three months. She later came to believe that that weight loss itself brought with it illness and hallucinations.

A further mental complication arises from the fact that both as a child, and later as a young adult, Virginia Woolf was sexually abused by both her half-brothers, first by

Gerald Duckworth, when she was six or seven years old – *I can remember the feel of his hand going under my clothes, going firmly and steadily lower and lower-* and much later by George who would come into the bedroom at night and “fling himself on my bed, cuddling and kissing and otherwise embracing me in order to comfort me...from the fatal illness of my father – who was dying three or four storeys lower down of cancer.’

If that is not enough to make someone nervous, untrusting, and on edge, it’s important to recognise the anxiety caused by the times in which she lived. The first suicide attempt was also made on the eve of the madness that was The Great War.

The “insane truth” of it all was concentrated into the character of the shell shocked soldier Septimus Warren Smith in Virginia Woolf’s novel *Mrs Dalloway*; a character with paranoid delusions of personal guilt and responsibility that are more than matched by the aggression and self-deception of the doctors who attempt to silence him and bury the guilt and terror that the war had left behind.

Septimus’s experiences in *Mrs Dalloway*, first published in 1925, are virtually the only record we have of what Virginia Woolf’s illnesses felt like from the inside. Like the delirious character of Rachel in *The Voyage Out*, Septimus imagines himself drowned or exposed on a high mountain ledge; like the old man in Woolf’s short story ‘Kew Gardens’, he identifies Thessaly as the country of the dead, fearing their return; and like Virginia in 1904, he hears birds singing in what he thinks to be Greek. It is a world in which the living and the dead can talk to each other.

Woolf articulates and analyses the stages of his madness. When his beloved friend Evans was killed, Septimus could feel nothing ( Virginia Woolf remembered her own embarrassed giggles at her mother’s death). This failure, as he sees it, is succeeded by terror, persecution mania, delusions of grandeur and finally despair in which he finds it impossible to tell whether anything in life now matters at all.

‘It might be possible, Septimus thought, looking at England from the train window as they left Newhaven; it might be possible that the world itself is without meaning..... In the street, vans roared past him; brutality blare out on placards; men were trapped

in mines; women burnt alive; and once a maimed file of lunatics being exercised or displayed for the diversion of the populace (who laughed aloud) ambled and nodded and grinned past him, in the Tottenham Court Road, each half apologetically, yet triumphantly, inflicting his hopeless woe. And would *he* go mad?’

It is despair borne out of seeing such suffering in war that nothing of the everyday matters any more. It is impossible to care or feel or distinguish one thing from another. The world itself is mad, and yet no one seems to recognise it to be so. In fact, only the mad are sane. The conceit is Shakespearean and reminiscent of Lear.

And, at the end of the novel, Septimus kills himself.

“He had thrown himself from a window. Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness.’

During the early years of the first war Woolf suffered from a similarly profound sense of alienation but her reaction to this feeling of separation and displacement was different. In 1915 she attended a concert at The Queen’s Hall where “the patriotic sentiment was so revolting that I was nearly sick.”

She was overwhelmed by what she called the “violent and filthy passions” on display.

‘I become steadily more feminist, ‘ she wrote, ‘owing to The Times, which I read at breakfast and wonder how this preposterous masculine fiction keeps going a day longer – without some vigorous young woman pulling us together and marching through it – do you see any sense in it? I feels as if I were reading about some curious tribe in Central Africa.’

The sheer scale of loss- a million British and Commonwealth soldiers killed and two million wounded - was almost impossible to confront; and then to have it come around again, for the second time in a life, a mere twenty years later, was unbearable.

Virginia's actual suicide (her third attempt) occurred in 1941, at the worst time of the Second World War when London was being bombed to bits.

In January 1941, reading about The Great Fire of London of 1666 she realised that once more 'London was burning. 8 of my city churches destroyed and the Guildhall.' Returning later that month, she took the Underground to The Temple to walk through her favourite streets between the Strand and the river- the streets where The Voyage Out had begun. There she "wandered in the desolate ruins of my old squares; gashed, dismantled; the old red bricks all white powder; something like a builders yard. Grey dirt and broken windows...all that completeness ravished and demolished.'

On her return to her home at Rodmell in Sussex, and haunted by visions of Oxford Street and Piccadilly she looked out at the snow covered Downs near her home and quoted "Look your last on all things lovely."

It was "the worst stage of the war...we have no future" a despair shared by her friend, the painter Mark Gertler who gassed himself in Highgate, and the old suffragist and pacifist Helena Swanwick who had committed suicide in 1939, unable to bear the thought of another War. The "sense of an ending" is doubled in a time where individual mortality is so connected to collective mortality.

As Julia Briggs writes in her literary biography of Woolf: "For those who had set out to study or change society or culture, to think or to write - whatever they had believed in, worked for, or celebrated seemed to have vanished; human ideals had been emptied and abandoned.'

Virginia Woolf had endured the many deaths of childhood, anorexia, sexual abuse and war; surely these are enough to cause mental instability in the hardest of souls?

Add all this, then, to the craft of writing.

I don't want to sound too precious about this but creativity is, by its nature, unstable. The artist lives both inside and outside the real world, moving between imagination and reality with such frequency that the two need to be kept distinct – like an actor

coming in and out of character, aware of the facts and emotions required while retaining some level of control and distance.

There is a cliché here, but clichés generally exist because they are true, about the creative imagination. Virginia Woolf's husband Leonard was fond of quoting Dryden; 'Great wits are sure to madness near allied' when discussing his wife's illness; and Shakespeare's Hippolyta says something similar at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. 'The lunatic, the lover and the poet are of imagination all compact.' In Henry James's short story *The Middle Years*, the only story I know, by the way, that is set in Bournemouth, the writer Dencombe explains with his dying breath:

'We work in the dark- we do what we can- we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art.'

Marcel Proust, whom Virginia Woolf greatly admired for his combination of sensibility and tenacity, once said that "Everything great in the world is created by neurotics. They have composed our masterpieces, but we don't consider what they have cost their creators in sleepless nights, and worst of all, fear of death."

Again, without wanting to be precious, the creative act does require solitude; a sustained work of art must necessarily involve separation from the world in order to write, or paint, or compose a piece of music. It requires seclusion and intense thought, a journey, as Edgar Allen Poe put it into "moods of mind exalted at the expense of the general intellect."

*"They who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream only by night. In their grey vision they obtain glimpses of eternity.... They penetrate, however rudderless or compassless, into the vast ocean of the "light affable."*

This separation from the world, while thinking harder and feeling more intensely can make every day life appear banal.

The artist is convinced that he or she is more acutely aware of the underlying truths and mysteries but, in so doing, finds it even harder to get back to real life. That's perhaps why you don't see too many writers in Tesco.

Yet reading and writing were, for Virginia Woolf, a way both of addressing and understanding her mental condition.

In her unfinished autobiography, she would explain how she had dealt with the meaningless shocks of life by translating them into 'a revelation of some order....it is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me.'

Her essay "On Being Ill" celebrates the pleasure of withdrawing from everyday life and engaging in fantasy and free association; 'how astonishing' she wrote "when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed."

The essay was written in response to TS Eliot's request for a contribution to the *New Criterion*, and was published in January 1926. The idea was to introduce the dramas or possibly wars that disease or disorder can impose. To convey such sensations, we need 'not only a new language....primitive, subtle, sensual, obscene, but a new hierarchy of the passions.' She opens up the changing perspectives that being ill can bring, finding in them sources of self-renewal. In this state of suspended animation, novels grow in the mind – 'the best of these illnesses,' she wrote 'is that they loosen the earth about the roots.'

She recommends that the invalid reads poetry rather than prose. "In illness words seem to possess a mystic quality. We grasp what is beyond their surface meaning, gather instinctively this, that and the other- a sound, a colour, here a stress, there a pause- which the poet, knowing words to be meagre in comparison with ideas, has strewn about his page to evoke, when collected, a state of mind which neither words can express nor the reason explain."

There is, she argues, a greater sensory awareness, when reason and clarity are suppressed.

You can find a contemporary parallel in the writing of Hilary Mantel, who has also written, recently and movingly about the nature of illness and how she uses writing to provide energy and drive in the search for well being and self-fulfilment. For any of you who came to hear her at Bath last year, you may remember how she talked about the voices “nattering” in her head from Thomas Cromwell to Marie Antoinette; and the idea of these crashing internal voices is at the heart of her novel *Beyond Black* where there is a sublime moment of psychic road rage when too many people are trying to get through to Princess Diana after her death.

This is an extract from her recent Diary and it bears a striking similarity to Woolf’s own Diaries:

‘When I write my diaries I talk to myself with an inward voice. For the next week I am conscious that my brain is working oddly. Imagine you were creating all your experience by writing it into being, but were forced to write with the wrong hand; you would make up for the slow awkwardness by condensing phrases, like a poet. In the same way, my life compresses into metaphor.’

The idea of listening to those inward voices and then condensing phrases, like a poet, is at the heart of Virginia Woolf’s writing; although Hilary Mantel has little time for Woolf’s essay ‘On Being Ill’, referring to it as “schoolgirl piffle.”

“I can’t understand what she means when she complains about the ‘poverty of the language’ we have to describe illness,” She writes. “For the sufferer, she says, there is ‘nothing ready made’. Then what of the whole vocabulary of singing aches, of spasms, of strictures and cramps; the gouging pain, the drilling pain, the pricking and pinching, the throbbing, burning, stinging, smarting, flaying? All good words. All old words.

I think this is harsh, but Virginia Woolf’s detractors have often been irritated by her privilege, unable to shake off the idea of an ambitious, superior, woman from Bloomsbury, with a Cook and a Maid and some questionable political attitudes by our

contemporary standards, putting her priorities in the wrong place, with little experience of “the real world” (whatever that is).

They do not care for what they see as preciousness, delicacy and over sensitivity.

BUT it required extraordinary discipline and stamina to achieve what she did.

Writing always does. What Henry James referred to as “the madness of art” requires obsessive dedication. You have to put the hours in – and, on a very much lighter note, since this talk is considerably short on alleviating jokes, I’d like to remind you of the answer P.G. Wodehouse gave when asking what the secret of great writing was. He replied: ‘It is the art of applying the seat of the trousers, to the seat of the chair.’

You just have to stick with it, and frankly you can’t get the words down on paper with such regularity and in so many drafts if you are mad. And so it’s worth pausing for a moment to think of the scale of Virginia Woolf’s literary achievement in the 1920’s alone.

Today crime novelists may be able to write a book a year, but many of our more interesting writers take quite a time: Kazuo Ishiguro averages one book every three to five years; Donna Tartt one book every ten years; J.D. Salinger wrote two major novels; Harper Lee only one- *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

But Virginia Woolf wrote five flat out masterpieces in nine years: *Jacob’s Room* published in 1922, *Mrs Dalloway* in 1925, *To the Lighthouse* in 1927, *Orlando* in 1928 and *The Waves* in 1931.

As a result I want to suggest that Virginia Woolf, rather than being some kind of delicate post-pre Raphaelite, was both obsessive and disciplined. The act of writing was a staging post, or a marker in the ground, a fixed point to which she could return- an imagined, fixed, home.

In other words, and without wanting to over-romanticise, she her writing saved her.

Certainly when Virginia Woolf was ordered to rest, her books were taken away and she was confined to only an hour's writing a day, her condition deteriorated.

For her, writing was the great healer; a way of tracking her mental processes and trying to pin them down; to still the hectic rush of her imagination in which time, sensation and memory overlaps, recapitulates and anticipates the future – often simultaneously.

How then did she capture this sensation of relentless imagination?

How did she find her style, her unique voice?

In her essay *Modern Fiction* Virginia Woolf provides a starting point:

“Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions - trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that if a writer were a free man and not a slave, he could write what he chose not what he must, if he could base his work on his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond street tailors would have it. Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display?”

In other words, life is a collage of events and ideas, thoughts and feelings, and it is the opportunity for a contemporary novelist to dart amongst them all, gathering material, looking for meaning, finding the telling, resonant instant amidst those myriad impressions, what the photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson would come to call “the

decisive moment,” celebrating the immediacy of life in which the smallest thing can become a great subject.

Memories combine with the creative imagination to define and discover images that are starkly lucid, accompanied by an elevated sensory awareness which is far more vivid than reality. They come “like silver bubbles from the floor of a saucepan; image on top of image” (The Waves p 41)

The poetic voice transmutes life into art, re-discovering and re-presenting intense bursts of feeling that can come as suddenly as a flock of birds starting up into the sky.

In fact here is just such an image taken from The Waves after a flight of swallows on the roof hear the noise of the scullery door being unbolted and suddenly take off.

Off they fly.

*‘Off they fly like a fling of seed.’*

I think it’s magical that Virginia Woolf compares the throwing down of seeds that the birds will eat with the upward trajectory of their flight; the simile is an inverted mirror image, catching the idea of sudden movement, flight and transience, upwards rather than downwards in eight words.

*‘Off they fly like a fling of seed.’*

Here is the same character, Rhoda, describing the blinding white intensity of a blazing summer day: “June was white. I see the fields white with daisies, and white with dresses; and tennis courts marked with white.”

And then when she looks at a blackboard full of arithmetic all she can see are the chalk marks: “her mind lodges in those white circles; it steps through those white loops into emptiness, alone.’

The whiteness eradicates all other colours with its blinding brightness.

Or take this other line from *The Waves*:

‘The day waves yellow with all its crops.’

The meaning is simple. Woolf is describing the sun rising and finally filling the day with its yellow fire. The sentence means something like: this is what a field of corn on a summer’s day will look like when everything is blazing with sunlight- a sea of moving colour.

‘The day waves yellow with all its crops.’

But she does not write that the crops are waving. The day itself waves; the effect is suddenly that the day itself, the very fabric and temporality of the day, seems saturated in yellow. And then that peculiar, apparently nonsensical *waves yellow* (how can anything wave yellow?) conveys a sense that yellowness has so intensely taken over the day itself that it has taken over our verbs too. Yellowness has conquered everything, and the sunlight is so absolute that it stuns us.

‘The day waves yellow with all its crops.’

Eight simple words evoke colour, high summer, warm lethargy, ripeness.

In an emotional landscape, where creative imagination and degrees of madness overlap, every sense is heightened.

Sounds too haunt the inner ear – the beat of the waves upon the shore; the sigh as the acorn of the blind was tugged across her childhood nursery floor by a light draught.

This is her first memory, described in “A Sketch of the Past”:

‘If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills- then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory. It is of lying half asleep, half awake in the nursery at St.Ives. It is of hearing the Waves breaking, one, two, one,

two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive.'

In this creative state these heightened moments of being, or what Wordsworth called "spots of time" allow revelatory imaginings in which the past becomes more present; and the real world is replaced by an alternative that is simultaneously clear and troubling.

Woolf's technique becomes increasingly detached from any literal description of reality. In her essay 'The Mark on the Wall' she suggested that future novelists would 'leave the description of reality more and more out of their stories, taking a knowledge of it for granted.

Consequently traditional methods of storytelling, within a clear structure, and observing the harmonies, are abandoned.

In fact the whole idea of sequential time, of one thing happening after another in chronological order, is abandoned.

A clear example lies in the novel "To the Lighthouse", a profound work of the redeeming imagination, in which the urge to transform, to transmute life into art, transcends the urge to record.

It is set, in the main on a family holiday on the Isle of Skye, a disguised version of Cornwall. . The parents, Mr and Mrs Ramsay, are acknowledged as versions of Virginia Woolf's parents, Leslie Stephen and Julia Duckworth.

The Ramsay's have eight children, as between them, did Virginia's parents.

It's a large cast, featuring the children, James, Andrew, Jasper, Roger; Cam, Prue, Nancy, and Rose - a young couple in love - a difficult atheist called Charles

Tansley, and the painter Lily Briscoe, whose lonely search for an art of space and mass and bright colour echoes Woolf's own quest for a new medium, a new novel.

The book is in three parts. The first begins with Mrs Ramsay sitting in the window, while her husband walks up and down on the terrace outside. Her son, James, wants to go to the lighthouse the next day but Mr Ramsay insists that the weather is changing, and they won't be able to go. At the same time, Lily Briscoe starts her painting. The second section of the novel deals with the passing of time; and the third part involves the voyage to the lighthouse itself.

The story itself is very simple, as **character, image and memory** cluster around two central ideas; the trip to the lighthouse and Lily Briscoe's desire to complete a painting. The novel is structured round a series of images which suggest the permanent jarring tension between permanence and evanescence, between things that last and things which don't; and Woolf's prose captures the extraordinary pulsing and momentary vacillations and vibrations between stability and flux, the momentary and the eternal, the trivial and the grave in daily life.

Lily Briscoe thinks "as she saw Mr Ramsay bearing down and retreating, and Mrs Ramsay sitting with James in the window and the cloud moving and the tree bending, how life, from being made up of little separate incidents which one lived one by one, became curled and whole like a wave which bore one up with it and threw one down with it, there with a dash on the beach."

The central section of the novel is called Time Passes – in which Woolf employs a quasi-Shakespearean double time scheme, compacting the passage of ten years into a single night, sandwiched between two day time episodes. All the events of those ten years are presented as memory and reflection as the neglected house by the seaside is re-visited and prepared for sale.

Anything that a Victorian novel might do in terms of factual event is pushed to one side; less dramatic endeavours, such as lighting a candle, reading a book, picking a bunch of flowers, and doing a bit of dusting- normal day to day stuff that will go on and on in human life (it does not matter who is picking the flowers or doing the

dusting) is placed in the foreground, while in the background the individual dramas are tidied away into little bracketed sections.

Prue Ramsay is married and dies a page later, in childbirth, in four lines; Andrew Ramsay is blown up in the war, and dies in three lines; and Mrs Ramsay herself dies in what is virtually a single line.

At the same time Mrs McNab, the seventy year old caretaker spends three pages dusting and tidying the empty house.

What is Virginia Woolf doing here and why are these deaths pushed into brackets as so many “by the ways” as the abandoned house gives itself up to nature?

Is it to show the casual indifference of Fate? That death can happen incidentally when life carries on?

This is how Mrs Ramsay’s death is described:

‘Mr Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs Ramsay having died suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty.’

A husband is either going to the bathroom or coming back, half-asleep. He expects a cuddle from his wife, forgetting that she is dead; like a man making two cups of tea in the morning after his wife is no longer alive.

It’s a simple matter of fact description that hides the enormity of loss

Everyday life carries on.

Virginia Woolf’s technique reminds me of the Auden poem *Musee des Beaux Arts* which describes a Breughel painting in which Icarus falls from the sky, having flown too close to the sun, and no one had noticed. You may remember the first four lines:

*About suffering they were never wrong,*

*The Old Masters: how well they understood*

*Its human position; how it takes place*

*While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along...*

Drama can interrupt narrative but it cannot stop it.

‘Mr Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs Ramsay having died suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty.’

And so what remains? Love, memory, the rock, the lighthouse, the empty house, Lily Briscoe’s painting, a work of art; moments of stillness.

Mrs Ramsay when she was alive, tried to find a still lasting moment within an unending rhythm of days that will outlast us. She wanted, like her creator, to stop time, for it to stand still. She wanted to create pools of tranquillity in the midst of flux, and for this she would be remembered by her children, by Lily in her painting, and by the novel itself, for the art of holding back time’s swift foot, the recurrent theme of Shakespeare’s sonnets, belongs as much to Mrs Ramsay as it does to the artist Lily Briscoe- or the novelist Virginia Woolf .

We know that while she was composing *To the Lighthouse* Virginia Woolf was reading her near contemporary Marcel Proust who had died in 1922 and whose masterpiece *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu* was appearing in England volume by volume. His project, although far more extended than hers, is not dissimilar in aim, as the critic Frank Kermode has pointed out.

“Her book too is about Time Lost and Time Regained; her book too seeks to relive and redeem and release loved ones from death into the eternity of art.’

And it is easy to see connections between the two works; the intense nostalgia for the seaside holidays of youth and the extraordinarily vivid evocations of sky and sea in terms of changing mood and colour; the loss and forgetting and resurrection of the

loved one - in *A la Recherche* it is the Narrator's grandmother, and in Woolf's novel it is Mrs Ramsay, a version of the mother she lost at the age of thirteen."

There is also the same highly wrought, impressionistic prose style which builds from word to sentence to paragraph to page like symphonic music.

Barbara Hepworth, the sculptor who lived in St.Ives, in Cornwall, where Virginia Woolf spent much of her youth, wrote in her notebook that "what one wants to say is formed in one's childhood and we spend the rest of our lives trying to say it."

This retrieval of the past is further developed in *The Waves*, a chamber-piece in which Virginia Woolf turns one authorial voice into many: three boys, Bernard, Neville and Louis, and three girls Susan, Rhoda, and Jinny. As in "To the Lighthouse" the novel is filled with children, and the name Jinny was Virginia's pet name on those childhood holidays- although she is not the character in the book who most resembles her.

The nine chapters of the book are prose poems that follow the six characters from childhood to old age and even death, interrupted by descriptions of sea, sun and sky.

Just as Virginia Woolf inverted what was important and what was not in the Time Passes section of *To the Lighthouse*, here she inverts what is spoken with what is not. In other words, this is all interior monologue, personal stream of conscience tracing, most of the time, what the characters are thinking rather than what they are saying

All the characters in the novel speak with passionate directness, but two of them are rather more detached from the narrative than the others.

They are Louis and Rhoda.

Louis, the Australian with a father who is a banker in Brisbane, thinks of himself as a social misfit – some have suggested he is a disguised version of TS Eliot – disguised as Australian rather than American with the name Louis because Eliot was born in St.Louis and the character shares the poet's sense of alienation, his pleasure in the

order of office life, his nostalgia for ‘loose slates...slinking cats and attic windows’ and for the cheap eating houses known as ABC’s .

It is not so far fetched. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* had been hand set and printed by Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth Press. In 1924 they also published Eliot’s *Homage to John Dryden*, which included his famous essay on ‘The Metaphysical Poets’ with its definition of poetry as amalgamating disparate experiences: falling in love, reading Spinoza, the sound of the typewriter and the smell of cooking might combine for example to form ‘new wholes’. Eliot spoke about “the saturated moment”, where that moment could be ‘a combination of thought and sensation.’

‘I hold a stalk in my hand,’ says Louis. ‘I am the stalk. *My roots go down to the depths of the world*, through earth dry with brick, and damp earth, through veins of lead and silver. I am all fibre.’

Compare this with Eliot’s need to get under the surface of the earth:

,  
*April is the cruellest month, breeding*  
*Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing*  
*Memory and desire, stirring*  
***Dull roots with spring rain.***

Then there is Rhoda, Louis’s eventual lover, and the other outsider, the most poetic character in the book, who stares at a blackboard and can’t do arithmetic, who quotes Shelley’s poem *The Question* and suffers from insomnia.

She is the closest character to Virginia Woolf herself. (Woolf even gives Rhoda her own childhood experience of existential horror as she tried to cross a puddle ‘when for no reason I could discover, everything suddenly became unreal; I was suspended; I could not step across the puddle; I tried to touch something, the whole world became unreal...’

“I remember thinking, how strange- what am I?”

Rhoda embodies her author's self-doubt and social anxieties as a young woman as well as her recurrent failures of confidence, her nervousness, and crucially, her impulse towards death.

At the beginning of the book she is not with the others but creates her own seascape using white petals in a basin of water. She is a chameleon, as a novelist must be:

'I have no face,' she says. 'Other people have faces: Susan and Jinny have faces; they are here. Their world is the real world. The things they lift are heavy. They say Yes, they say, No, whereas I shift and change and am seen through in a second..... I hate looking-glasses which show me my real face. Alone, I often fall down into nothingness.'

*Alone, I often fall down into nothingness.'*

We are close here to Keats's idea of negative capability; the idea that the writer can be in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason, and separated from the tale being told.

Virginia Woolf, like Rhoda, also hated looking into the mirror as it produced feelings of guilt and shame and uncertainty about identity.

This uncertainty is reflected in her social unease at a party at which, despite the presence of the others, she feels she knows no one. She stays by the window and looks at the moon, hoping for oblivion, until a man is introduced.

'I must take his hand. I must answer. But what answer shall I give? I am thrust back to stand burning in this clumsy, this ill-fitting body, to receive the shafts of his indifference and his scorn, I who long for marble columns and pools on the other side of the world where the swallow dips his wings.'

Woolf perfectly describes the feelings of social awkwardness, the embarrassment and the anxiety; the feeling of being alone at a party when you would rather be anywhere other than where you are.

For Rhoda, nothing makes sense; life is a series of random events that cannot be connected or analysed or put into any pattern that will allow it to be understood.

‘I cannot make one moment merge in the next. To me they are all violent, all separate; and if I fall under the shock of the leap of the moment you will be on me, tearing me to pieces. I have no end in view...’

Everything is felt with this burning intensity but it is isolated. Nothing connects. All is separate, sudden and transitory.

Rhoda is the observer, the poet who feels on the pulses and with such passion that, in the end she can no longer live.

We discover that she and Louis were lovers. They were last seen on a balcony together at Hampton Court after which we learn that, craving solitude, Rhoda left for a distant desert.

Her fate is buried in a Bernard interior monologue:

‘I went into the Strand, and evoked to serve as opposite to myself the figure of Rhoda, always so furtive, always with fear in her eyes, always seeking some pillar in the desert, to find which she had gone: she had killed herself.’

That is all we know. We are not told how or why or anything about the events leading up to this. She has gone to a desert to be on her own, like Simon Stylites, the ascetic hermit who ate little and lived on top of a pillar near Aleppo in Syria for thirty seven years - and to whom Eliot wrote a poem...

We know nothing more. Her voice is stilled.

All we do know is the starkness of those lines. ‘She had killed herself:’ perhaps, we might imagine, by marble columns and pools on the other side of the world where the swallow dips his wings.

These are Bernard's thoughts, and Bernard must press on to the next action and the next thought, telling us that "the rhythm is the main thing in writing", the need to get the beat into the brain; the rhythm of the waves of the sea which acts as a symbol of the unconscious, continuing to gather, rise, break, withdraw and renew.

The idea gives the novel its music ground or even drone; and we know that Virginia Woolf had Shakespeare's 60<sup>th</sup> sonnet in mind as she wrote:

*Like as the waves make towards our pebbled shore,  
So do our minutes hasten to their end...*

As I have mentioned, sea, sky, and the progression of the sun are described in a series of interludes between the chapters of *The Waves*, paralleling the passing of the day and the year with the passage of human life.

And it is the fall of the waves and the recurrent image of a "fin rising on a wide blank sea" that act as precursor and symbol of depression, horror, and failure- the fear of failure, the fear that all that you have done has been a complete waste of time, that none of it is any good, that it will all be forgotten, that lies like a toad in the mind of most creative people.

This is Virginia Woolf's diary entry for 15 September 1926:

'Woke up perhaps at 3. Oh it's beginning, it's coming- the horror- physically like a painful wave swelling about the heart- tossing me up.... Wave crashes. I wish I were dead! I've only a few years to live, I hope. I can't face this horror any more (This is the wave spreading out over me.'

She lived for another 14 years, attempting to come to terms with the irrational pain, the sense of failure, and the wave again, until life became unbearable. The voices become too loud, too insistent, and too confused and contradictory:

*Dearest*

*I feel certain that I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times and I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices*

And, in Eliot's words "human voices wake us and we drown."

Death by Water.

What remains? The work.

When her writing is at its best, and Virginia Woolf is in control, those same voices echo, profoundly, the way people think and feel. They show how the profound and the trivial can bump up against each other in the free form thoughts we have as we walk down the street, step on a train or watch the world go by; Charles Tansley's tie, the passing of the Reform Bill, sea-birds, the light of a butterfly's wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral.

Virginia Woolf knows that we can think about death while knitting a stocking, or we can listen to a loved one chattering on about nothing in particular and say to ourselves, like Mrs Ramsey 'Will you not tell me just for once that you love me?'

She draws attention to moments that matter vitally to one person but not to another, like the one day you forgot to pick up your eight year old child from school and thought no more about it until it is cast up before you, ten years later, when your child is a student – or when James Ramsay asks his Mother 'Are we going to the lighthouse?'

And she would have to say, 'No, not tomorrow; your father says not.' Happily Mildred came in to fetch them, and the bustle distracted them. But he kept looking back over his shoulder as Mildred carried him out, and she was certain that he was thinking, we are not going to the Lighthouse tomorrow; and she thought, he will remember that all his life.'

Virginia Woolf remembers everything and transmutes it into fiction. The past is ever present and everything is equally important. Sometimes there is no way of telling what matters and what does not. All is noise. All is confusion.

Her words jostle to form sentences and rush headlong into paragraphs. The language has a concentrated intensity. The prose is consciousness distilled, set out with a poetic rhythm that is unafraid to break off and then resume at a different pace and in a new direction.

Woolf takes our tangled consciousness to an extreme level that tries to pin down moments and meaning, no matter how ephemeral they might be, hoping for clarity of vision.

‘What is the meaning of life?’ Lily Briscoe asks at the end of ‘To the Lighthouse.’

‘That was all- a simple question: one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark.’

The respite from madness is found in these minor epiphanies, moments when she echoes Walter Pater’s desire at the end of his essay on The Renaissance – “To burn always with this hard gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy is success in life.”

Flames go out, but what light they bring.

‘Life stand still here,’ Mrs Ramsay says to Lily Briscoe as she too searches for clarity of vision, for shape amidst chaos.

She says it suddenly, as we might do, wanting a moment of happiness to last, a meal with friends, a view from a mountain, a child, your own or your grandchild, careless of time running through long grass towards you; a summer’s evening.

And this is what the novel does - as a form in itself.

It holds moments of being within its pages; past, present, and future; the living and the dead; voices spoken and unspoken; all that it means to have lived and thought are contained in one vision; with one voice- one clear voice; when all other voices cease to be:

Life stand still here.