

## **THE TROPE OF THE ISLAND IN THE FICTION OF VIRGINIA WOOLF**

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*Abstract: Quite unsurprisingly in the light of her belonging to an insular culture, Virginia Woolf confers complex symbolic values to the insular setting of her novels. Throughout her fiction, the literality of island habitation becomes a pretext for projecting the figurative significations of a time-honoured spatial metaphor in world literature. The island and its attendant ontology of insularity provides a signifying background for the novels' poeticised meditation on the nature of human existence and spirituality, on the psychological and axiological complexity of interpersonal relationships.*

*Keywords: island, insularity, art, space, individuality*

The island represents a potent metaphor at the centre of Virginia Woolf's highly poetical allegory of existence. Its range of significance is as multifarious as it is ubiquitous. To begin with, the Island as the geographical image associated with Britain or, somewhat improperly, England itself, constitutes not only a setting expected to come naturally to a novelist so quintessentially English in her evocations of life by the sea, but the iconic matrix of English cultural imagination. And although Woolf's prose is aimed at capturing the universal sap of our shared humanity, her characters' inscape is tuned to the unique natural and cultural rhythms of English land-/seascapes and cityscapes.

As she probes into the nature of human individuality, subjectivity and interrelationships, Woolf also illuminates the circumscribing contours of collective cultural individuality, that of the island nation. As the critic Gillian Beer puts it: 'England's is, so writers over the centuries have assured us, an island story' (Beer 265). The centrality of the island to the uninterrupted metanarrative of English nationhood and the construction of Englishness was famously inaugurated by Shakespeare's hymnal praise of 'this blessed plot, this earth, this Realm, this England' in *Richard II* (II. i. 42-52). In Gaunt's inflamed speech about the blessings of England's insular identity, the emphasis is on its quality of an untouchable, indestructible 'Fortresse built by Nature for her selfe', enclosed and protected by the sea 'as a Moate defensive to a house'. At the same time, this natural insulation against foreign aggression is complemented by the exceptionality of its people and civilisation: 'This happy breed of men, this little world'. The island nation's singularity is predicated not only on its fortunate geographical configuration but also on the self-contained, monolithic, unadulterated uniqueness of its culture and spirit, whose inestimable value is hyperbolically figured in the powerful image of 'This precious stone, set in the silver sea'. The island's worth is thus constructed as being twofold – that of a naturally safe haven sheltering an exquisitely distinctive culture.

Shakespeare's is the foundational prologue to what was to become an enduring and expanding myth of the insular nation, centred on an ordering in which centrality is emphasised and the enclosure of land within surrounding shores is the controlling meaning. [...] The island has seemed the perfect form in English cultural imagining, as the city has been to the Greeks. Defensive, secure, compacted, even paradisaical – a safe place; a safe place

too from which to set out on predations and from which to launch the building of an empire. (Beer 265, 269)

Shakespeare's mythologizing portrayal of England does not miss this ambiguous, bidirectional tension between land and water inherent in the image of the island and its nation, with its simultaneous inward and outward-looking reflexes – nestling within its rocky confines while contemplating the watery horizons inviting exploration:

‘England bound in with the triumphant sea,  
Whose rocky shore beates backe the envious siedge  
Of watery Neptune...’

Virginia Woolf's writing, in its turn, takes up and continues this tradition of imaging British nationhood through the rich imagery and connotative nuances of the island metaphor. Despite what many critics see as her ‘*opposition to patriarchy and imperialism, her determined assertion that she was no patriot, her emphasis on women's difference of view*’ (Beer 269), Woolf's figuration of the island draws on this mythical concept of Englishness defined by its cultural insularity. Like Shakespeare, she is equally alert to the dualistic perspective of British cultural identity, to its permeating spirit of liminal habitation of both land and sea. The world of her novels is unmistakably ‘this little world’ of islanders who, while self-assuredly contemplating the cultural solidity of their ‘precious stone set in the silver sea’ cannot help gazing into the watery distance and dreaming of venturing out towards the mysterious, alluring horizons across the sea.

Her most representative novels – *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, *Orlando*, *The Years* or *Between the Acts* – circumscribe her poetic reflections on the nature of inner life and existence to the larger framework of the communal experience of political and cultural history. From the indiscriminate flux of macro-history, her writing extracts and illuminates emblematic tableaux of a historically constructed English identity. As Beer observes, they are all ‘concerned with the representation of England and with difficult moments of historical national change’ by means of an idiosyncratic discourse and imagery bound up with ‘the concept of nationhood which relies upon the cultural idea of the island’ (Beer 265, 266). Of course, her engagement of the cultural and historical reverberations of the image remains entirely coherent with her own innovative aesthetics, with her particular artistic identification and filiations:

Woolf's quarrel with patriarchy and imperialism gave a particular complexity to her appropriation of the island story. At the same time her symbolising imagination played upon its multiple significations – land and water margins, home, body, individualism, literary canon (Beer 266).

The island of Woolf's writing signifies beyond the mere spatial image of water-surrounded land. It symbolises the solidity of home and homeland, being bound up more with the idea of deliberate human creation rather than that of a solid earth formation. It exemplifies the triumph of material and cultural civilisation, the endurance and solidity of human agency against the watery contingencies of the universal flux and tides of change which the sea evokes. It represents the firm order of human civilisation, reclaimed from the depths of universal, geological time and space. More specifically, her symbolic use of the island aligns with the specific mythology of English culture and literature.

If the sea bears associations with the neutral, impersonal conditions of universal existence, with the idea of flux and perpetual change, with the impassibility of nature itself, the island functions as an element of contained solidity and order, which conveys the idea of firmness and endurance amidst the inexorable flux. A mere speck in the infinite macrocosm

of time and space, the island stands for the self-contained human microcosm, where humanity has the power of ordering their living space, of establishing moral and ethical codes and create strongholds of civilisation from which they can master the elements and the natural forces impinging upon the fragility of human existence.

The island is a metonymic space of civilization and society, a slip of land reclaimed from the watery vastness by man's creative energy. At the same time, it also illustrates the singularity of individuality, of self-consciousness asserting its liberation from the indiscriminate, sweeping waters of non-entity. It is an image of the collective or individual human universe in its aspiration for permanence, substantiated through social, cultural and artistic action or creation. Within the macrocosmic scheme of things, the microcosm of human society and culture represents the bastion of human mastery over nature, the 'island of human order or human time (planned time, projected, plotted time) in the undifferentiated sea-flow of Time.' (Hardy 108) From a generalising perspective, it is a spatial metaphor for mankind's struggle to make his mark, to leave an enduring testimony of their passage that would withstand the tyranny of time and mortality in the indifferent immensity of the universe. In other words, it is the space of human achievement and fulfilment. More specifically, it pre-eminently typifies her legitimising rooting in and affiliation with the solidity and singularity of English culture and letters.

As one whose cultural and personal self-consciousness is so deeply steeped in the reality of belonging to an insular culture, Woolf exploits the symbolism of her insular settings beyond the literality of the island as a place of earthly habitation, adding new valences to the figurative significations of a time-honoured spatial metaphor in world literature. The symbolism of the island is most profusely evocative in *To the Lighthouse*, which, by weaving the richest web of symbolic suggestiveness, represents the crowning achievement of what is ultimately *Woolf's island story* (Beer 272) – a phrase which can fittingly describe both her entire oeuvre and this particular novel.

The insular setting – the Isle of Skye, in the Hebrides archipelago – provides a signifying background for the novel's poeticised meditation on the nature of human existence and spirituality, on the psychological and axiological complexity of interpersonal relationships. Suspended between sky and sea, the far-flung tiny island, somewhat at a remove from the centrality of the main British Isle, conveys the idea of an isolated, solitary space, illustrative of the individual's ineluctable solitude, notwithstanding the social or emotional proximity of others.

As in the case of her larger scale representation of the island as an objective correlative for the macro-historical construction of human civilisation or nationhood, her symbolic representation of the individual microcosm plays upon the dual dynamics of the land-water tensions and inter-conditioning meanings: 'The equal foregrounding of land and sea is crucial not only in understanding the uses of the concept in imperialism, but in the more hidden identification between island and body, island and individual.' (Beer 271) This figurative association of the island with the concept of human individuality is by no means a new or rare notion. John Donne's memorable assertion that 'No man is an island' paradoxically contains the contrary, affirmative possibility, stemming from what actually constitutes a quite commonplace assumption. Beer remarks: 'the words take their charge from their quality of paradox. They presuppose that the individual *is* ordinarily understood to be like an island.' (Beer 271)

Enveloped in their singleness of purpose, their idiosyncratic perceptions and manifestations, but most of all in their incomprehension of each other, the characters themselves are like islands in an archipelago, interlinked by a network of waterways yet irredeemably separate, distinct, self-contained worlds. The novel illustrates the troubled, vast emotional spaces which need to be crossed to truly reach another human being. Two sections

of the book stand out as excellent snapshots of fumbling attempts at this crossing: the silent interchange between Mr and Mrs Ramsay as they pass the time alone together at the end of their evening, and Lily Briscoe's struggle to respond to Mr Ramsay's pathetic silent plea for sympathy and attention as the novel closes. The island has often been seen as a space symbolic of the unknown, the alien, the miraculous, the uncanny, rife with mystery, secret knowledge, magic, strange ritual, wonders and miracles. In one form or another, all these leitmotifs inform the idiosyncratic inner space of the inmates of the Ramsay house, all of whom remain inaccessible islands, shrouded in mystery, locked up in their incomprehensibility both to and of others. The novel resonates throughout with the refrain-like reiteration of that chilling glimpse into the 'loneliness which was...the truth about things'. Mrs Ramsay's elegiac formulation of this ultimate truth further illuminates the island metaphor which permeates the novel.

The pervasive leitmotif of the island metaphorises their utter separateness while grappling with the confounding mystery of others. Each human being 'becomes an island, an isolation, in the severance of birth.' (Beer 271) Most of the characters are intrigued by the difficulty of reading and interpreting the others' personalities. Mrs Ramsay is constantly engaged in scrutinising the individualities of her husband, her children, her guests, her old friends. She tries to penetrate the uniqueness of their perceptions of themselves and their world, their idiosyncrasies, obsessions or secret dreams. While meditating on the peculiarities of her husband and children, whom she regards with motherly sympathy and even empathy, despite the differences which set them apart from or even positions them at odds with each other, she is particularly preoccupied with grasping the essential personality features of Lily Briscoe, Charles Tansley, Mr Bankes, Paul and Minta.

In their turn, the others seem enthralled by her beauty and ministering graces. The fascination of her powerful, presiding presence holds them in sway, each of them becoming engrossed in their attempt to define and pinpoint the nature of her thrall. Lily, fascinated into painting Mrs Ramsay's portrait, examines her with a gaze that goes beyond the painter's interest in understanding the inner substance of her subject. Her figure becomes the focus of Lily's thoughts, first of all as a traditional model of subdued, domestic femininity, which the emancipated, self-reliant and free-thinking female artist regards with mixed feelings of awe and revolt. Yet, try as she may, she cannot rationally account for her fascination with Mrs Ramsay's personality, whose eluding essence continues to baffle her.

This equation of individuality with insularity is poignantly borne out by Woolf's characters. Ultimately, they tend to remain indefinable and incomprehensible to one another, wrapped in their enigmatic secret drives and motivations, which the others struggle in vain to grasp or rationalise. Locked within the invisible confines of their incommunicability and incomprehensibility, they appear as being insular loci, socially or emotionally visible and connected to one another, yet irredeemably separate in their impenetrable isolation. 'The family group and the house are [...] contracted intensifications of the island concept'; and, in a further intensification, the final separation of the individual each from each is figured in the work: 'We perish Each alone', Mr Ramsay obsessively recalls.' (Beer 272)

Despite their deeply shared love, the Ramsays remain emotionally and psychologically closed to each other, despite their fleeting moments of insightful glimpses of the other's inscape – Mr Ramsay's turbulent universe of egotism, neediness and self-doubt and Mrs Ramsay's seemingly quiet world of unassuming selflessness and profound philosophical intuitiveness. Mr Ramsay's male subjectivity and his pursuits of ordering experience into patterns of rationality can be equated with the ordered solidity of the island, whose shores are constantly washed by the watery element, more suggestive of the protective, nurturing openness of feminine self-consciousness, with its continuing, changeless

fluidity of experiential and emotional bonding. However, their inextricable complementarity, like that of masculinity and femininity, is most aptly metaphorised by the island image, since

the concept 'island' implies a particular and intense relationship of land and water. [...] The idea of water is thus intrinsic to the island concept, as essential as that of earth. The two elements, earth and water, are set in play. An intimate, tactile, a complete relationship is implied between them in this ordering of forces. The land is surrounded by water; the water fills the shores. (Beer 271)

A special, intense, inextricable relationship it is indeed, but more often than not also tense, we may add, just as gender complementarity is intrinsic to the perpetuity of the world. This tense duality is reflected in the inseparable images of the shore and the waves, as well as in the Ramsay's continual contiguity and cross-reference:

Throughout the book, sometimes louder, sometimes muted, the sound of the waves is referred to. The sea is as much the island as is the land. The fisherman's wife, in the story Mrs Ramsay reads to James, longs for possession and for dominance, for control; that last wish is shared with Mrs Ramsay, and perhaps the other wishes too. (Beer 271)

However, there is another side to the picture of the self-contained, insular realm of individuality. The characters' separateness, though keenly felt, is charged, nonetheless, with the irrepressible impulse to reach out and relate to the others, to commune and transcend the boundaries of the self. After all, Mr and Mrs Ramsay are occasionally able to commune on the superior plane of unconditional love, despite their moments of muted antagonism or obstinate incommunicability. Of course, Mrs Ramsay is an undeterred facilitator and catalyst of the small community at the house. Like a priestess at the altar of an ideal of human caring and sharing, she takes it upon herself to bring people together, to help them reach out to the shore of their islands and engage in genuine communication with each other. Her penchant for matchmaking is telling in this sense, showing her preoccupation with such issues as compatibility, emotional fulfilment and the primacy of love and companionship in marriage.

At the end of the day, Mrs Ramsay denies the idea of the inherent human solitude, defying individual insularity by her attempts at togetherness. Her dinner performance represents a ritual meant to weave threads of communication between those gathered at her table, to entrap them in her the spider-like, gossamer web of togetherness and conviviality. Her self-assumed mission is to merge the disparate islands of individuality into a communal island of a community. At least fleetingly, they commune in their momentary sense of a heightened kind of sociality, supposed to last, however, in their shared memory of an exhilarating feeling of permanence. Hard as the task may be, she has them connect and open themselves to a moment of grace, much like a mysterious enchantress on an enchanted island who puts her guests under a spell. Ultimately, her final legacy to them of her existence is her ineffable demonstration of the possibility of our reaching each other's shores, of the human need to acknowledge not only the truth of endemic loneliness but also that other competing truth of our mutual permeability. As Beer argues: 'The island, to be fruitful, can never be intact. It is traceried by water, overflown by birds, carrying seeds.' (Beer 271) This miracle is repeated long after her death, when the family and some of the party reunite, in a tacit pledge to honour her memory. In the face of sweeping transience and the fragility of existence, the long overdue voyage out to the lighthouse represents another claim to a moment's renewed moment's grace, to salvaging some sense of life's meaning and purpose from the engulfing waters of oblivion: 'The lighthouse itself is the final island, the last signifying object, amidst the timeless breaking of the sea.' (Beer 272)

Mrs Ramsay's endeavour to defy time and oblivion in a rare moment of human solidarity is actuated by her aspiration to 'make of the moment something permanent'. To



her, human bonding constitutes a defence against death and forgetfulness, an insulation of her crafted island of togetherness against the indifferent sweep of time. Human contact is perceived as the ultimate triumph against the transience of existence, the only warranty of permanence in the perishable space of human affairs. The communion between individuals she strives for has the power to create an enduring island of sheer humanity amidst the vast emptiness of human solitude and estrangement lying in wait. At a figurative level, the island becomes that ineffable moment of mutual understanding, communication and sympathy.

On the Isle of Skye, within a social microcosm metonymic of human society, all inner conflicts arise from the apparent impossibility of 'bringing people together', of which Mrs Ramsay sometimes despairs, while continuing to grapple with it. The miracle eventually happens, though. Assembled at the large dinner table presided by Mrs Ramsay, as if on a fabled ark of more or less assorted personalities, they come briefly united in their shared recognition and sympathy. This moment rises like an island of light in the engulfing, dark sea of human solitude. It is, as it were, Mrs Ramsay's time capsule or bottle thrown into the ocean, a memory which evokes Wordsworth's 'hour of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower'. Yet, albeit briefly enveloped in a moment's grace of communality, each of them ultimately remains a separate island of the mind, an island of subjectivity. A human archipelago like the surrounding Hebrides, they are granted a fleeting sense of meaning and permanence while suspended between the island and the sea on the Isle of Skye.

The island has also been deployed in literary tradition as a trope for the creative isolation of the artist or philosopher, for the secret lab of artistic creation or superior knowledge, meant to defy time and mortality. That is why the Isle of Skye provides a symbolic setting for a quizzing philosopher like Mr Ramsay and an explorative artist like Lily Briscoe. Mr Ramsay could be seen as a parodic version of a latter-day Prospero, less self-assured in his mastery of knowledge, still probing for a consistent, cogent philosophical model in an age of doubt.

We might see it as an ironic inversion that it is Mrs Ramsay who comes closer to Prospero's secret knowledge and magical sway over the others, which is a subtly suggested challenge of male intellectual ascendancy. Her husband's emotional dependency on her reinforces the centrality of her vital role in a seemingly patriarchal household, in a reverence to the succouring power of her quiet, discreet femininity. Her death seems to engulf the deserted island of their domestic space, while Mr Ramsay is left adrift without his wife to praise and comfort him during his bouts of fear and anguish regarding the longevity of his philosophical work.

Mr Ramsay's philosophical prowess is also debunked by Andrew's explanation of it as thinking of a table when one is not there. It is the image which Lily comes to associate with Mr Ramsay, and her vision of his table up the pear tree with its legs in the air is comically derisive, if unintentionally so. Be that as it may, the island remains a fitting spatial metaphor for the loneliness of the philosopher's quest, single-mindedly grappling with the limits of the intellect in his hermetic, incommunicable sanctum.

Lily Briscoe's search for her artistic identity, for a unifying vision of inner and outer human reality, is also appositely located on the island, symbolic of the fertile sanctuary of Art. The transfiguration of reality through Art endows her, like any other artist, with the transformative power to create an element of permanence standing against the universal flow. The island's microcosm seems to catalyse Lily's artistic consciousness, inspiring her with an aesthetic vision able to capture the essence beneath the solid crust of the world of things. In her effort to aesthetically and philosophically distil the mundane material of human experience, the true artist comes to recreate the world in a freshly unique image.

Lily Briscoe begins the novel as a young, unformed painter attempting a portrait of Mrs Ramsay and James. She finds herself plagued by doubts throughout the novel, doubts

largely fed by Charles Tansley's cutting claim that women can neither paint nor write. Lily attempts to finally complete the painting she has been fashioning in her mind since the start of the novel. She reconsiders her memory of Mrs and Mr Ramsay, balancing the multitude of impressions from ten years ago in an effort to reach towards an objective truth about Mrs Ramsay's nature and the nature of life itself. Upon finishing the painting (just as the sailing party reaches the lighthouse) and seeing that it satisfies her, she realises that the execution of her vision is more important to her than the idea of leaving some sort of legacy in her work.

This island of a philosopher's and a painter's arduous quest for truth is also replete with the presence of the poet Augustus Carmichael, who completes the metonymic circle of human creativity inhabiting this enclosed space, a symbolic island of the arts. Much like Shakespeare's Prospero, whose knowledge and art transform the reality of his exilic island in a quasi-demiurgic state of empowerment transcending the limitations of human perception and creativity, Woolf's protagonists aspire to make their mark on the world, to overcome time and death through the miracle of intellectual or artistic creation. Instantiations of this elemental but supreme human endeavour permeate most of her novels, with characters such as Lily Briscoe, Jacob in *Jacob's Room*, Orlando or Bernard in *The Waves*. Both Lily and Bernard reach the conclusion that it is the artist's vision alone that can confront the force of time and destruction. Art and philosophy transcend life's finality on their solitary island, meant to resist the waves of time and oblivion. The island is Woolf's favourite trope, a powerful spatial symbol of loss, subjectivity, the nature of art and the problem of perception.

At the same time, the spatial signification of the island's liminality becomes mingled with the idea of the temporal insignificance of individual lives, societies and epochs in the atemporal flux of history. The novel also dramatizes and laments – through Mrs Ramsay's and her son's death, the dispersing of the family and the final rite of passage represented by the crossing to the lighthouse – the end of a way of life, the bygone Edwardian ethos that had cradled Woolf's own childhood by the sea. It is both a nostalgic tribute and a detached farewell to the past:

The island is here the place of intense life and the conclusion of that form of life, both private and the image of a community from whose values she was increasingly disengaged. *To the Lighthouse* is an elegy for a kind of life no longer to be retrieved – and no longer wanted back. (Beer 273)

Seen from a distance during the journey to the lighthouse, to Cam the island appears to assume the shape of a leaf or rock:

She gazed at the immense expanse of water. The island had grown so small that it scarcely looked like a leaf any longer. It looked like a the top of a rock which some big wave could cover yet in its frailty were all those paths, those terraces, those bedrooms – all those innumerable things.

Ultimately, the island is a just scrap of visible memory, a mere speck in the boundless waters of time that sweep over our earthly passage. Its once secure impression of solidity dissolves amidst the fluid siege of the vast sea and waves, like the seeming solidity of human existence under the sign of universal impermanence: 'In *To the Lighthouse* Woolf frets away the notion of stability in the island concept. The everyday does not last forever. The island is waves as much as earth: everything is in flux, land as much as sea, individual as well as whole culture.' (Beer 273)

Thus, the image of island, rife with that of the sea and the final voyage out, symbolically encapsulates experiential becoming and perennial change, self-realisation and

understanding, as well as reconciliation with the vagaries of the human condition through the waves of history. Sailing out equates with embarking on new experience by purging inner and interpersonal conflicts in a watery purgatory which in which memory and hope are reconciled at the meeting of earth and sea. While the island and its shores simultaneously convey not only ontological solidity and safety but also stagnation, the sea is the dynamic space of change and evolution. The characters' voyage of discovery, initiation and progress is metonymic of the perennial rhythms of the seas of human existence in general, where both the island and the sea symbiotically encapsulate the very cycles of earthly life and human culture.

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