To the Lighthouse (1927): a choreographic re-elaboration

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1 To the Lighthouse is rightfully considered to be Virginia Woolf’s most accomplished work of fiction. The present stage adaptation was initially conceived and performed at Université Bordeaux Montaigne, France, under the choreographic guidance of Hélène Duval (Département danse, Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada). During the Spring Semester of 2017, some forty graduate students from the English, General Linguistics and Performing Arts departments were involved in writing a “minimalist script” and collecting movement material for the choreography. The workshops were held at the Arts Centre (Maison des Arts, Domaine Universitaire, Pessac). Participants reflected in pairs before engaging in activities with the rest of the group. Diaries were kept, and a film was made that documents the dynamics of the creative process (in French).
Figure 1

WORKING ON THE SCRIPT

Figure 2

DISCUSSING OPTIONS
SELECTING MOVEMENT MATERIAL

REFLECTING ON GESTURE FORM
Figure 5

EXPERIMENTING WITH SHORT GESTURE SEQUENCES

Figure 6

GIVING CHOREOGRAPHIC INSTRUCTION (HÉLÈNE DUVAL)
PUTTING THE CHOREOGRAPHIC PIECES TOGETHER
GROUPS PERFORM GESTURAL CHARACTERIZATIONS OF MR RAMSAY, LILLY BRISCOE AND MRS RAMSAY

2. Undergraduate students from the Fine Arts Department were invited to sketch the participants as they sat or engaged in movement exercises. One of them, Emma Kradaoui, produced a remarkable collection of drawings that students later printed into their diaries.

*A sketch of the present*: Emma Kradaoui at work
In May 2017, eleven students volunteered to prepare a “portable” version of the piece, to be performed at the TILLIT festival in Vercelli (Teatro in Lingua, Lingua in Teatro, dir. Pr. Marco Pustianaz, Università del Piemonte Orientale, Italia). The group travelled to Italy as an amateur company (Choreographers of Speech) with funding from the academic council for innovation (Université Bordeaux Montaigne). Three drama students – Fabienne Paris, Cyril Teillier, and Louise Bernard – were among the performers. They agreed to adapt Hélène Duval’s choreographic work to the stage and did a remarkable job. The following pages explore the dynamics and aesthetics of their transposition, with special reference to the TILLIT script and performance on 31 May 2017.

Short public presentation

Choreographers of speech are delighted to present a stage adaptation of Virginia Woolf’s novel To the Lighthouse (1927). Virginia Woolf was only 13 when her mother died. For many years, she was “obsessed” by the loss. Then, one day, in London, as she was walking across Tavistock Square, she felt the urge to write a piece of fiction inspired by her own childhood experience. This, she felt, was the only way she could trace her mother’s “invisible presence” in “the cathedral space” of remembrance, and be at peace with herself.

To the Lighthouse was written by Woolf in just a few weeks. The general structure of the novel has been entirely preserved, with its three main divisions: “The Window”, “Time Passes”, “The Lighthouse.” But the plot had to be reduced to bare essentials and the original set of characters cut down to three protagonists: Mr Ramsay (a figure inspired by Virginia Woolf’s own father, Leslie Stephen), Mrs Ramsay (a fictional character...
reminiscent of Virginia Woolf’s mother, Julia Prinsep), and the painter Lily Briscoe (a keen observer of the “patterns” of life, like Virginia Woolf herself). The young James and Cam Ramsay, as well as two older village women, also make fleeting appearances.

The performers are graduate students who are currently enrolled in two distinct masters degree programs: 8 are English language majors (including a visiting American student from the University of California), 3 are drama specialists (who have co-directed this piece, initially choreographed by Hélène Duval from the University of Quebec in Montreal).

Adapted plot summary

In the first part (The Window), the Ramsays are shown spending their summer holidays on the Isle of Skye. Their house has a commanding view of the bay, with a lighthouse in the distance, beaming at night. The children would love to sail and deliver parcels to the lighthouse keeper. Mrs Ramsay is sensitive and supportive but, much to James’s annoyance, Mr Ramsay coldly predicts that the sea will be too rough for the excursion, and is proven right. The war breaks out (1914-18).

The house is “left” and “a profusion of darkness” insinuates itself into the “deserted” rooms (Part 2 – Time Passes). The reader incidentally learns that Mrs Ramsay and two of her children have died. Some ten years elapse before the Ramsays decide to come back (Part 3 – The Lighthouse). One of their former guests, Lily Briscoe, a painter, is with them. As she struggles to complete a painting that she had left unfinished, she “dips” her brush “into the past.” She realizes that Mrs Ramsay’s quiet but intense presence “brought everyone together.” “Mrs Ramsay! Mrs Ramsay!” she cries out in despair “as if to abuse her for having gone.” Meanwhile, Mr Ramsay and his children finally make it to the Lighthouse. As Lily applies the final brushstroke to her canvas, her own mental journey comes to an end and she ceases to be tormented. A sense of peace and completeness is restored at last.

To the Lighthouse (1927): a minimalist script for a short stage performance

The novel uses a “small canvas” (Sampson 1970: 877), which both facilitates and legitimises compression. Major syntactic adjustments nonetheless had to be made.

Figure 10

BREAKING THE WAVES: SEA AND LHIGHTHOUSE MOVEMENTS
Prologue

V. WOOLF: I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else. One day, as I was walking, I made up To the Lighthouse. Why then? I have no notion.

VOICE: The book was written very quickly. One thing burst into another, like bubbles blown out of a pipe.

VOICE: Ideas... voices... scenes... came from a world far away.

I The Window

VOICE: La finestra.

VOICE: La fenêtre.

VOICE: Das Fenster.

JAMES: Mother, can we go to the Lighthouse?

CAM: We have parcels for the Lighthouse keeper and his son!

VOICE: Stockings.

VOICE: A pile of old magazines.

VOICE: Some tobacco.

JAMES & CAM: Please!

... 

MRS RAMSAY: Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow.

MR RAMSAY: But it won't be fine!

... 

VOICE: The same dreary waves breaking week after week.

VOICE: The windows covered with spray!

JAMES: The Lighthouse keeper and his crippled son!

CAM: They must be bored to death! Sitting all day with nothing to do!

VOICE: Shut up for a whole month!

VOICE: How would you like that?

... 

LILY: To be silent, to be alone.

MRS RAMSAY: But what have I done with my life?

... 

JAMES: Perhaps it will be fine tomorrow!

MR RAMSAY: But it won't be fine.

CHORUS: No going to the Lighthouse, James!

II Time passes

VOICE: Il tempo passa.
VOICE: Le temps passe.
VOICE: La maison vide.
...
VOICE: One by one the lamps were all extinguished.  
VOICE: Darkness flooding in.
VOICE: Darkness in the drawing room.
VOICE: Darkness in the staircase.
VOICE: Darkness in the bedrooms.
VOICE: Darkness.
...
VOICE: Nothing moved, nothing stirred.
VOICE: The house was left; the house was deserted.
VOICE: Only the lighthouse beam entered the rooms for a moment.
...
MRS BAST (CLEANER 1): They never come.
MRS MCNAB (CLEANER 2): They never send.
MRS BAST (CLEANER 1): They never write.
MRS MCNAB (CLEANER 2): The war!
VOICE: Der Krieg, C’est la guerre!
...
VOICE: Night.
VOICE: Night succeeds to night.
VOICE: The nights now are full of wind and destruction!
VOICE: Mrs Ramsay died in London, last night!
VOICE: But what after all is one night?

III The Lighthouse

VOICE: Il faro...
VOICE: Le phare.
...
VOICE: The peace has come again.
VOICE: The house is full again.
VOICE: Back after all these years!
VOICE: And Mrs Ramsay dead!
VOICE: What does it mean then, what can it all mean?
...
[First focus on Lily Briscoe] [Comments by the Mrs Ramsays]
VOICE: Lily never finished that picture.
76 Voice: She will paint it now!
77 ...
78 [First focus on Mr Ramsay] [Comments by the Lily Briscoes]
79 Voice: Mr Ramsay!
80 Voice: That man never gave!
81 Voice: That man took! 22
82 ...
83 [First focus on Mrs Ramsay] [Comments by Mr Ramsays]
84 Voice: Mrs Ramsay!
85 Voice: She brought everyone together! 33
86 Voice: Giving, giving, she had died! 34
87 ...
88 [Second focus on Lilly Briscoe] [Comments by the Mrs Ramsays]
89 Voice: Can’t paint. Can’t write! 35
90 Voice: Where to begin? 36
91 Voice: Life, stand still! 37
92 ...
93 [Second focus on Mr Ramsay] [Comments by the Lily Briscoes]
94 Voice: Now he wants to go to the Lighthouse!
95 Voice: He’s sitting in the middle of the boat, with the children. 38
96 Voice: The sails flap over their heads. 39
97 [Second focus on Mrs Ramsay] [Comments by the Mr Ramsays]
98 Voice: Mrs Ramsay on the beach. Do you remember? 40
99 Voice: Mrs Ramsay in all her beauty. 41
100 Voice: Mrs Ramsay resolved everything into simplicity. 42
101 ...
102 Chorus: Mrs Ramsay has faded and gone. 43 Mrs Ramsay! Mrs Ramsay! 44
103 ...
104 Mr Ramsay: There’s the Lighthouse! We’re almost there! 45
105 Lily: They have landed! It is done. It is finished! 46
106 Lily: I’ve had my vision. 47

An insight into the re-elaboration process

Just as Virginia Woolf’s starting point was “a walk around Tavistock Square,” 48 so the students’ first assignment was to go out for a stroll in a public park or around the main campus site. Hélène Duval insisted on everyone opening themselves up to their immediate surroundings and collecting sensory material that might later be reused as “composition material,” with conscious attention paid to light, colour, sound, smell, texture, motion, temperature, as well as mood changes and fleeting impressions.
During the walking and sensing exercises, participants were encouraged to revisit some past situation, some special “moment” that had “come unexpectedly to the surface,” some personal “discovery” about the world or about themselves that they wanted to “go back to, turn over and explore,” to use Virginia Woolf’s own terms and artistic method. Hélène Duval was particularly insistent on performers gaining an embodied awareness of the creative process underlying artistic composition. In her oral and written instructions, she stressed the importance of emulating Virginia Woolf’s perception- and memory-based stance, by physically re-enacting the “walks,” by navigating their inner and outer worlds, by allowing thoughts, feelings, recollections, “moments of being” or “non being” to emerge. Provisions were made for students who could not engage in the outdoors exercises.

The vast performance space at the University Arts Centre, where the workshops were held, symbolically stood for the “cathedral space” of personal memories. The students worked in pairs, then in small groups, to develop kinetic evocations of their sensations, building on Laban’s notions of “effort” and “shape” (Laban 1943). Virginia Woolf, it may be recalled, had an extraordinary capacity for registering and recalling intimate perceptions (Fusini 2006). As dynamic tableaux and short gesture phrases were composed, the pictorial element in Woolf’s narrative strategy (Lacourarie 2002), the “transparency” an “opacity” phenomena in her writings (Lanone 2013) were experienced and physically enacted.

Once this essential preparatory work was completed, students were instructed to develop a kinetic characterization of Lily Briscoe, Mr Ramsay or Mrs Ramsay. Simple movement sequences, evocative of the core personality and interactional features of the three characters, were designed and rehearsed in small groups. Thus, firm steps, angular shapes, brisk hand gestures, and sneering facial expressions were spontaneously produced by the participants to mark the tyranny and insensitive rationality of Mr Ramsay, leaving no room for the positive expression of his “stoicism” (Bradbrook 1978: 282-85). As expected, Lily Briscoe’s art and observational skills dominated in the various kinetic characterizations that were developed. Brush strokes provided a metonymic starting point to evoke Lily’s identity as a painter, but were later stylised, so that the somewhat naïve iconicity of the hand movements was ultimately overcome. Meanwhile, the quiet, unassuming, Mrs Ramsay was perceived as perpetually “giving,” walking in circles, floating meditatively about.

All the coordinated movements were performed in groups of 4 to 6: “the Lily Briscoes,” “the Mr Ramsays,” and “the Mrs Ramsays.” The gesture sequences were highlighted in the opening and closing moments of the performance, but occurred over and again throughout the piece, in the form of “a kinetic leitmotiv.” On occasion, interactional frames between the Mr Ramsays, the Lily Briscoes and the Mrs Ramsays were set up, with groups following each other, observing each other, or even mixing with each other.

The gesture sequences were originally performed in complete silence, so as to orchestrate a Woolfian “return” to bodily perceptions and motions (Smith-Di Biasio, 2010). The continuous flow of movement, on the stage, was resonant with the “stream of consciousness” technique used in the novel, “the unbroken flow of thought and awareness in the waking mind”, the mingling of “sense perceptions with conscious and half conscious thoughts, memories, feelings, and random associations” (Abrams 1970: 164-5).
Verbal statements borrowed from the original inner monologues of Lily Briscoe and the Ramsays were later added for the TILLIT piece: while one group would silently engage in the kinetic characterisation of a protagonist (e.g. Mrs Ramsay), a second group would watch close by and a third group would make some terse comment (e.g. “Giving, giving she had died”; “Mrs Ramsay resolved everything into simplicity”). The focus would then shift to another protagonist. The changing “perspective” on characters and events, which is an essential feature of To Lighthouse (Scifoni 2007), thus received tangible expression on the stage (Figures 19-21).

Woolf’s short poetic interlude on the passage of time (Part 2 – Time Passes), which has often been the target of severe criticism, proved to be “successful in its context” (Sampson 1970: 876). Students and instructors found the war, the “darkness” and the empty house particularly inspiring, while Max Richter’s music gave a moving intensity to the scene. The score was initially composed for Wayne McGregor’s choreography (“Woolf Works” 2015) and released by Deutsche Grammophon in January 2017. In the TILLIT version, the performers stood in circles. Each embodied a silent piece of stone or furniture, gathering dust. Then came Mrs Bast and Mrs McNab, moaning and cleaning. The circular structures gradually started to corrode and dissolve, as silence, humidity and darkness invaded the empty house (Figure 12). Finally, the war broke out and brought about commotion and disarray (Figures 13-15).

Throughout the performance, the presence of the waves could be felt, endlessly lashing against the shore. At key moments, the entire group stood in a line and engaged in a collective swell: bobbing up and down, rising and falling with the tide, resisting then yielding to the pull of gravity, upstage and downstage. Some occasionally stopped and turned, to evoke the verticality and rotating beam of the Lighthouse (Figure 10). Until everything froze: Lily had had her vision.

Figure 11

PART 1 – “BUT WHAT HAVE I DONE WITH MY LIFE?”
Part 2 – "Darkness. Nothing stirred, nothing moved."

Part 2 – "The War!"

PART 2 – "DER KRIEG!"
Part 2 – "C'est la guerre!"

PART 2 – “BUT WHAT AFTER ALL IS ONE NIGHT?”

Part 3 – “THE PEACE HAS COME AGAIN. THE HOUSE IS FULL AGAIN”
PART 3 – MR RAMSAY / LILY BRISCOE / MRS RAMSAY

PART 3 – "LILY NEVER FINISHED THAT PICTURE."

PART 3 – "THAT MAN NEVER GAVE. THAT MAN TOOK!"

PART 3 – "MRS RAMSAY RESOLVED EVERYTHING INTO SIMPLICITY."
PART 3 – “MRS RAMSAY HAS FADED AND GONE”

CHOREographers of SPEECH


NOTES


2. English version, adapted from the original Italian presentation, delivered on stage by Jean-Rémi Lapaire.

3. “(When the book was written) I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her.” (Moments of Being, “A Sketch of the Past”, 1978 [1939-40]: 94).

4. 540 words now compress 69709 words of complex narrative; 12 minutes of coordinated physical action now express the extraordinarily rich and fragmented inner world of the dramatis personae.


7. Hélène Duval is a professor of dance pedagogy at UQAM (Université du Québec à Montréal), Canada. While visiting Université Bordeaux Montaigne, she choreographed To the Lighthouse to music composed by Max Richter and released in 2017 (Three Worlds : music from Woolf’s works). Over 30 students were involved in the project.

8. Teatro in Lingua, Lingua in Teatro (TILLIT 2017 - UPO), Teatro Civico, Vercelli, Piemonte, Italy, 31 May-1 June 2017. The final script was written by Jean-Rémi Lapaire, after “creative rewriting sessions” with the drama students.

9. The opening lines of the performance are based on “A sketch of the Past” (1939-40)- a 90 page “memoir” edited by Jane Schulkind and published in Moments of Being (1978). Childhood memories are prominent, one leading to another and revealing “moments of “being” or “non being” (81). In the process of “fixing one’s mind” on “colour-and-sound memories” (77), while grasping “some real thing behind appearances” (84), the “memoir writer” experiences both “difficulty” (75) and ecstasy: “Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we–I mean all human beings–are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art” (84).


11. Adapted from “A Sketch of the Past” in Moments of Being (1978: 94): “Then one day walking round Tavistock Square I made up, as I sometimes make up my books, To the Lighthouse; in a great, apparently involuntary, rush. One thing burst into another. Blowing bubbles out of a pipe gives the feeling of the rapid crowd of ideas and scenes which blew out of my mind, so that my lips seemed syllabling of their own accord as I walked. What blew the bubbles? Why then? I have no notion. But I wrote the book very quickly.”

12. Adapted from To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 1, Chapter 1, 10. “(...) if they did go to the Lighthouse after all, it was to be given to the Lighthouse keeper for his little boy, who was threatened with a tuberculous hip; together with a pile of old magazines, and some tobacco, indeed whatever she could find lying about, not only wanted, but only littering the room, to give those poor fellows who must be bored to death sitting all day with nothing to do but polish the lamp and trim the wick and rake about on their scrap of garden, something to amuse them. For how would like to be shut up for a whole month at a time (...) to see the same dreary waves
breaking week after week, and then a dreadful storm coming, and windows covered with spray, and birds dashed against the lamp (…) How would you like that?"

13. Opening line, To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 1, Chapter 1, 9.
15. Adapted from To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 1, Chapter 1, 10.
16. To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 1, Chapter 11, 60.
17. To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 1, Chapter 17, 78.
21. To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 2, Chapter 1, 117.
22. Adapted from To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 2, Chapter 2, 117: “So with the lamps all put out, the moon sunk, and a thin rain drumming on the roof a downpouring of immense darkness began. Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness which, creeping in at keyholes and crevices, stole round window blinds, came into bedrooms (…) Nothing stirred in the drawing-room or in the dining-room or on the staircase.”
23. To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 2, Chapter 9, 128.
24. Adapted from To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 2, Chapter 9, 128: “It was beyond the strength of one woman, she said. They never sent. They never wrote. There were things up there rotting in the drawers - it was a shame to leave them so, she said. The place was gone to rack and ruin.”
26. Adapted from To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 2, Chapter 3, 120: “[Mr Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty.]”
27. Opening line, To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 2, Chapter 3, 119.
28. Adapted from To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 2, Chapter 10, 133. “Then indeed peace had come. Messages of peace breathed from the sea to the shore (…) Lily Briscoe stirring in her sleep clutched at her blankets as a faller clutches at the turf on the edge of a cliff. Here eyes opened wide. Here she was again, she thought, sitting bolt upright in bed. Awake.”
29. Adapted from To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 3, Chapter 1, 137. “For really, what did she feel, come back after all these years and Mrs Ramsay dead? Nothing, nothing – nothing that she could express at all.”
30. Opening line, To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 3, Chapter 1, 137.
31. To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 3, Chapter 1, 139.
32. Adapted from To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 3, Chapter 1, 140: “That man, she thought, her anger rising in her, never gave; that man took.”
33. Adapted from To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 3, Chapter 3, 150: “(S)he brought together this and that and then this.”
34. To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 3, Chapter 1, 140.
35. To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 3, Chapter 3, 149.
38. To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 3, Chapter 4, 152.
39. To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 3, Chapter 4, 151.
40. Adapted from To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 3, Chapter 3, 149: “And then, she reflected, there was that scene on the beach. One must remember that.”
42. To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 3, Chapter 3, 150.
43. To the Lighthouse ([1927] 1977), Part 3, Chapter 5, 162.
44. *To the Lighthouse* ([1927] 1977), Part 3, Chapter 11, 186.
45. *To the Lighthouse* ([1927] 1977), Part 3, Chapter 12, 188.
46. Adapted from *To the Lighthouse* ([1927] 1977), Part 3, Chapter 13, 191-92: “‘He has landed,’ she said aloud. ‘It is finished.’ (...) It was done; it was finished.”
47. Closing line of *To the Lighthouse* ([1927] 1977), Part 3, Chapter 13, 192.
51. *Maison des Arts*, Domaine Universitaire, Pessac, France.
53. Fr. « Trouver ce qui pourrait être la signature gestuelle du personnage. »

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