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Caring about lyricality

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a close reading of Laura Marcus's styles of close reading, taking as its point of departure a lockdown recording (in spring 2020) of her lyrical rendition of the 'Time Passes' section of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. The essay pays particular attention to the enduring place lyricality occupied in Marcus's critical imagination, both as an object of analysis and as a feature of her own prose. David James argues that Marcus often modelled a mode of critical practice oriented around affectively attentive, densely exemplified, and above all intimate explications of literary expression – a practice whose lyrical textures were themselves a performative affirmation of what that intimacy could creatively and analytically achieve.

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A remarkable spring had indeed 'blustered in'.¹ And by the time Laura recorded her excerpt from *To the Lighthouse* in May 2020, people were already sharing their gratitude for the season's compensations at a moment when most other interactions felt obsolete. The fine weather offered a modicum of solace amid the ongoing toil of mutual isolation.² In an epilogue to her reading, Laura reflects on 'Time Passes' as 'an interregnum, a space between' – therefore 'particularly fitted to these strange times in which we're now living'.³ How emphatically suited was the Ramsays' deserted house, given the absent commotion and conviviality its rooms memorialise with the help of just a few belongings that 'alone kept the human shape'.⁴ But what seemed, and continues to seem, all the more fitting was the very style of Laura's enunciation: with lyrical intensity, her rendition offered its own interregnum within an interminable spell of dislocation punctuated each day by the dialling-up of uncertainty. In its poise alone, the reading

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stole an ameliorative pause, withstanding the viral clamour of apprehensiveness and speculation. Featuring images of locked-down New College, the accompanying video complemented Woolf's counterpointing of loss and lyricality, the largo dissolves between stills matching Laura's tempo. Opening in the College gardens, the video greets us with an empty bench that's instantly upstaged by a sprawling bank of daffodils dotted with lavender, a bed of crowding colours overtaking a scene 'from which life had parted'.⁵ Vacant cloisters yearn, palpably, for the community that's had to stay at home; yet dappled arches look resplendent thanks to those spells of prolonged sunshine that helped us endure regimes of restriction, while the view of darkened windows to now-redundant rooms is flamboyantly obstructed by bright, prolific blossom. Light and life outstrip pandemic gloom, as 'loveliness reigned and stillness, and together made the shape of loveliness itself'.⁶

The recording's redress appeared almost defiant, its composure the antithesis of a media environment that mandated and exploited states of constant worry. Laura's own intonations reciprocate that defiance. The upward lilt with which she moves each of Woolf's paratactic sentence-fragments into its assonantal neighbour, while giving time to assonance itself, allows the 'stray airs' of description to linger and resonate for longer than the concision of their taxonomical phrasing would seem, on the face of it, to allow.⁷ In an audible respect, Laura 'wholly resists' the onward pulse of Woolf's catalogue in order to amplify the lyricality of apparently denotative depictions, coaxing out the euphony from what is otherwise a relatively itemising portrait of domestic spaces that elegeise the bustle that 'once ... filled and animated' them.⁸ What might the stakes of this amplification be, and how might they inform the way we reread Laura's own styles of reading?

This, the fourth, section of 'Time Passes' arrives, we recall, abruptly after the sparsely reported death of Mrs Ramsay, the empty 'home' of its first sentence reiterating with such poignant proximity the sorrowfully 'empty' embrace of Mr Ramsay, outstretching his arms in grief.⁹ It would be all too convenient to prosecute the lyrical swell of the ensuing passage as merely an aesthetic bromide for the devastation that Woolf has just parenthetically relayed. But that would miss the point of the counterweight that's supplied, phonetically and grammatically, by the momentum of what follows – a counterweight that Laura nurtures. As we're introduced to a house that mourns and 'remain[s]', Laura strikes up a ground bass early on with the consonantal thrum of 'bedroom or drawing-room', an effect reinforced by 'turned' and 'opened', their propulsive accent suiting the eagerness with which glimpses of familial hubbub are retrieved in order to replenish, however fleetingly, the 'emptiness'.¹⁰ Such is the rhetorical precision with which Laura limns the paradox of parrying 'shadows' and 'wind' with 'a form from which life had parted': with that lilting clause, she modulates into a brightening key, her slightly rising intonation lending the phrase (again paradoxically, in the

context of a ‘solitude’ begotten by ‘vanishing’ lives) a vigour that somehow counters the loss it concedes. ‘Loveliness’ can, it turns out, ‘remain’ amid sorrow. We needed that memo in lockdown. Woolf’s dynamic descriptions – as the ‘stillness’ of the ‘clasped hands’ is eventually overtaken by all the ‘rubbing, snuffling, iterating, and reiterating’ that prepares for and culminates in the question of whether this lovely ‘shape’ will, in the face of loss, also ‘fade’ or ‘perish’ – stave off the vacancy out of which they ostensibly arise. Likewise, Laura’s reading style emits a repertoire of lyrical tonalities that reckon with the ‘emptiness’ of a home (and, by extension, a college) in reluctant disuse, before moving into surroundings whose ‘drone and hum’ assuage through iambic buoyancy the land’s weather-beaten sombreness.

With her reading’s counterweights in mind, I can’t help thinking that Laura would share Diana Fuss’s refusal to be soothed by permanent melancholy, however relentlessly despairing those lockdown months could be, accompanied as they were by daily supplies of doom-laced conjecture and swingeing officiousness. Her choice of ‘Time Passes’ for a period when many of us were wishing our time away confirms for me Fuss’s suspicion that we’ve perhaps been ‘too quick to dismiss the considerable reparative powers of elegy’ – a dismissal that comes easily for those critics, of course, who equate aesthetic succour with selling out – while offering a timely riposte to the assumption that ‘turning one’s back on the comforting powers of elegy, regardless of how small or great that consolation may be’, is necessarily ‘more ethical’.¹¹ Laura’s recording, by virtue of its own dire occasion, reminds us that ‘in a very real sense ethics *is* elegy: speaking, acting, and surviving in the face of loss, no matter how irretrievable those losses may be’. This is not to skirt those instances ‘when elegy’s rhetorical arts of resuscitation fail to console’; arguably, ‘Time Passes’ supplies only a partial lee in the maelstrom, a temporary refuge that if anything vivifies in our mind’s eye what damage the war, happening offstage, will wreak before the house can welcome back the ravaged Ramsays. Even so, the novel’s composition ‘is no less worthy, or less ethical, for the endeavour’.¹²

As with so many consolations, context is all. And it’s worth noticing how the register of Laura’s reading of this same sequence shifts with context, too. Consider the examination of *To the Lighthouse* in *The Tenth Muse*. There, in her dazzling chapter on Woolf and cinema, Laura observes that the novel ‘is concerned with traces, footprints, and the mask of beauty – Mrs Ramsay’s beauty – which is also a death mask with hollowed out objects and empty objects, containers of what has been and is lost’.¹³ Equally lyrical in its enumerative phrasing, she invites us to picture an archive of casings that testify to irretrievability. How different Laura’s plague-era parsing of these same traces and objects makes ‘Time Passes’ feel; how analeptic, to be precise, in 2020’s milieu of common despondency. Across her voiceover to snapshots of a spring bathed in sunshine and backdropped by devastation,

Laura reprises Woolf's 'fascination', as she would call it in *Dreams of Modernity*, with 'writing in and of the now', a fascination that no doubt intensified for many of us as the pandemic's suspension and reconstitution of diurnal rhythms wore on. Attuned to the way narrative momentum is convulsed by the histories with which it converges, Laura in effect read *to* the moment *at* a moment that vividly revealed to us all 'the asynchronicities contained with present time and the time of the contemporary'.¹⁴



Lyricality as register and restoration, then. Although these affordances are particularly evident in the New College recording, a certain care *for* the lyrical is discernible throughout Laura's criticism, but especially when the focus is Woolf. In-line quotation has a key role to play here, a strategy of evidential presentation that sees Woolf's vocabulary, idioms, and cadences reverberating with Laura's own critical lexicon. Strikingly, *The Tenth Muse* can be lyrical even when being purposefully repetitive. Laura captures the way perspective is diegetically thematized and formally metabolised in *To the Lighthouse*, as Woolf 'transmuted "point of view" into the observation of perception itself, looking at people looking and being looked at, and creating a complex interplay of eyelines and sightlines within the text'.¹⁵ The sibilant and assonantal rhymes (observation/perception, eyelines/sightlines) model the 'interplay' of dynamics they reference: their integration into a novel that reconfigures the representation of impressions as they ramify across felt experience and deliberative reflection is recapitulated by Laura's diction. Half rhymes and syntactic parallelisms soon return – almost motivically, no less lyrically – in her subsequent account of *rhythm* in *To the Lighthouse*, where she argues that 'the breaking of waves on the shore, and their lapping against the boat, becomes not only a marker of repetition and duration, but of the relationship between stasis and motion, and between singular and continuous action'.¹⁶ This combination of qualifying and elaborative clauses and their propulsive, sequential accretion, allows syntax to capture the quiddity of that interaction of 'stasis and motion' Laura tracks across the novel as she places it in conversation with 'the possibilities of a future or potential cinema'.¹⁷ Criticism as creative intimacy might be one way to refer to this interleaving of a particular style under analysis with the style *of* that analysis – an alignment Laura cultivates without ever surrendering hermeneutic freedom to phrasal emulation. The effect resembles that produced by free indirect discourse, whereby the 'narrative consciousness' of critical practice itself, to borrow her parlance, 'speaks in and through' the 'language' of a given sentence or scene, 'without becoming wholly identified with it'.¹⁸

Even summaries can exhibit this sort of creative intimacy – though, more often than not, they flout the remit of dutiful summarising. Preparing the

way for closer readings, Laura often takes the liberty to sketch the metaphoric and affective plenitude of oncoming material. In moving toward ‘Time Passes’, she offers something of a prelude, which far from being consigned to rudimentary description is executed with the same verve as a full-throttle analysis:

The ten-year passage of time in the central section of *To the Lighthouse* is also the passing of one night, between the days of ‘The Window’ and ‘The Lighthouse’, from the midnight hour when the lights are extinguished to the breaking of dawn and of the veil on the sleeper’s eyes. During this interlude, the narrative oscillates between absolute stillness and the eruptions of nightmare, in which the world tosses and turns.¹⁹

Simulative yet undemonstrative, the summary’s performativity can be felt in both grammar (those restless clauses) and diction (as the hushing sibilance of this nocturnal caesura gives way to the alliteratively terse picture of a realm overturned). I say performative because Laura’s sentences enact, and not simply impart, the rhythm and impress of the sequence she sketches. And in this instance, lyricism makes no pretence of counterpoising the ‘breaking’ and ‘eruptions’; rather, it communicates the convulsions of seismic history as much as the fragile succour of localised ‘stillness’, whose phonematic cousin soon ‘tosses’ away all respite.

Later in the same commentary, lyricality suffuses analysis with somewhat different – though no less performative – results. Turning to the end of *To the Lighthouse*, she examines one of Lily’s efforts to reconjure Mrs Ramsay, at the very inception of her marriage, after Mr Ramsay ‘stretched out his hand and raised [Lily] from her chair’. Lily submits to the mnemonic resonance of this gesture, envisaging how Mrs Ramsay too might have ‘let herself be helped’ by her husband-to-be. Thereafter, ‘[t]ime after time the same thrill had passed between them’, imagines Lily. While ‘smoothing a way for her ants’, Lily assures herself that she’s ‘not inventing; she was only trying to smooth out something she had been given years ago folded up; something she had seen’.²⁰ Although Laura doesn’t quote the sentence that directly follows, it earmarks her transpiring focus, when Woolf explains that

in the rough and tumble of daily life, with all those children about, all those visitors, one had constantly a sense of *repetition* – of one thing falling where another had fallen, and so setting up an echo which chimed in the air and made it full of vibrations.²¹

For Laura goes on to offer a commentary on repeated verbs that also responds in kind – which is to say, through its style – to the signifying work repetition carries out through alliteration and recursion:

The repetition of ‘smoothing’, ‘smooth out’ calls attention to the term, which Woolf also uses in the variant edition of ‘The Cinema’, in which she wrote of future film: ‘The past could be unrolled, distances annihilated, and the gulfs which dislocated novels ... could, by the sameness of the background, by the

repetition of some scene, be smoothed away'. The unrolling of the past suggests that it takes the form of a painting or a screen. Repetition (of gesture, attitude, relationship) has caused the past to become furled and folded. Lily is seeking to smooth out the surface on which the first scene played itself out, and it is essentially gestural and cinematic—'He stretched out his hand and raised her from her chair'—by contrast with the passage from 'A Sketch of the Past', in which Woolf's memories of her mother are 'frozen' (despite her imagined gesticulations) in, and by, the arrested beauty of her photographic image.²²

Repetition, in Laura's reading, offers an aperture for both affiliation and contrast. An implicit defence of repetition's polysemy (across 'gesture, attitude, relationship') and intertextual span, it's also a demonstration, in her *own* prose, of how lyrically repetition can propel analysis itself. Notice the deliberate alliteration, as Laura 'calls attention' to the way the past can 'become furled and folded', a signature effect of Woolf's enveloping impressionism as it telescopes recalled and immediate experience. Repetition's multiple valencies are thereby animated by a form of attentive explication that reciprocates the verbal character of its own discrete object of analysis. Once again, exegesis turns out to be closer to free indirect discourse, as its linguistic texture weaves with the 'unrolling' fabric of Woolf's 'gestural and cinematic' recapitulations.

This elegant *enfolding* of evidence into the sinew of explanation and argument also obtains when the scale of the topic happens to be more structural. Stepping back at this level, Laura's purview expands. She connects quite different episodes of *To the Lighthouse* yet still incorporates (as in her more localised stylistic or grammatical units of analysis) in-sentence quotations, interlacing them within the larger architecture of her observations in ways that actively meld the construction of those observations with the expressive features of examples whose interrelation becomes the very subject of inquiry. Here Laura refers to Woolf's admission in her diary that she's "'casting about for an end" to the novel', a task that revolves around and remains compounded by 'the problem of bringing Lily and Mr Ramsay together'. In the proceeding commentary, Laura's own prose reprises this task of reconciliation and fraught coalescence in its notation of motivic doubling and opposition:

Woolf's problem with the structure of her novel is echoed in Lily's with that of her painting: 'For whatever reason she could not achieve that razor edge of balance between two opposite forces; Mr Ramsay and the picture; which was necessary'. [Woolf's] diary entry sheds light on the extensive use of parentheses throughout the novel, which becomes a way of finding an alternative narrative temporality, a modernist simultaneity which breaks with the conventions of linear form. It also provides a link between the 'double vision' (linked in turn to the structures of ambivalence) upheld by the novel: the doubleness of thought (Lily's 'feel[ing] violently two opposite things at the same time' or Cam's sense that 'they were doing two things at once'); the doubleness of the central image of the novel, the lighthouse, which for James is both 'a

silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye that opened suddenly and softly in the evening' and 'a stark tower on a bare rock'; and the doubleness of the novel's closure, which mirrors the dualities (and the splitting) of sea and shore, art and life, past and present, repetition and newness, the ideal and the real, experience and representation (Mr Ramsay's arrival at the lighthouse rock, Lily's drawing of the line which is also the lighthouse).²³

The discussion's evidentiary span is astonishing, its clausal pairings of topics traversing an encyclopaedic range of reference yet focused around common tropological resonances. With a prolonged catalogue – moving nimbly from 'thought' to 'image' and finally to 'closure' – Laura affiliates characters' feelings at quite separate moments to chart the implications of Woolf's 'double vision', recurring as it does in the contours of characters' reflections, as an echoed motif, and ultimately as an organisational touchstone. Critical deliberation is synonymous with an act of making in its own right: making sense of a metaphor, certainly; but also *remaking* criticism's register and grammar.

Interpretation thus remains consonant with the linguistic itineraries of the writing it's so immersed in, and from which the structural 'problem' of Woolf's novel is disentangled through a careful threading of quotations that wouldn't otherwise be affiliated. We might go so far as to suggest that Laura's own critical discourse thereby involves *us* in the apprehension of a problem that's at once emotional and compositional – nowhere more tangibly, of course, than for Lily in the end. As a result of the elegance of evidence's incorporation into her commentary's syntax, Laura yields a knowledge about how the novel 'mirrors' its own 'dualities', before finally returning us to Woolf's principal fulcrum, which itself depends on representation – or specifically, on the depiction of an affectively charged attempt at representation – as though the lighthouse is nothing more than a postponed destination without the painting we've been led, through war and bereavement, to anticipate:

Standing on the lawn as she sets up her canvas, Lily 'felt curiously divided, as if one part of her were drawn out there – it was still day, hazy; the Lighthouse looked this morning at an immense distance; the other had fixed itself doggedly, solidly here on the lawn'. Between these two selves and these two locations her empty canvas rises up, 'white and uncompromising'.²⁴



Reading Laura reading like this leaves me, on the one hand, inclined just to watch: to notice how her in-line quotations braid the lyricality of cited text with the facility of explication, as interpretation merges with, without ever being compromised by, the generosity of accommodating substantial portions of Woolf's language. The effect is one of watching a virtuosic handler of materials and resonances; but also, I think, of being given a chance to interact with an intensive and densely exemplified means of following –

and ultimately feeling – distinct details, as they move into each other’s orbits of reverberation. What Laura models for her readers seems in fact to resonate with what Roger Fry identified for Cézanne’s viewers, recalling her account from *Rhythmical Subjects*: namely, the way ‘lyrical emotion’, a ‘constant’ element for different stages of the artist’s oeuvre, ‘finds its expression in a “rhythmical feeling” on the part of discerning viewers which is “unbroken and all pervading”’.²⁵ Instinctually, Laura would always share that sense of discernment, enabling us to become close reading’s beneficiaries more so than its admiring bystanders.

Nevertheless, I’m still content to stand by and observe the process. And as inclinations go, just watching might have something in common with Andrew Miller’s preference for letting quotations stand for themselves, unobstructed by any inquisitorial ego. For his part, this impulse to step back and indulge in critical underplay is so strong as to make him ‘dream of a book composed solely of quotations, as if I were simply to say, “There it is.” As if I could simply point’.²⁶ Charming though Miller sounds in what is essentially a delicate defence of appreciation, I can’t help feeling that Laura wouldn’t put up with that prospect for long. She was too committed an analyst – too interested in ‘all that makes the coil and spring of our being’, as it’s called in *The Waves*, in ‘the unconscious hum of the engine’ – to abnegate the opportunity for inquiry, scrutiny being tantamount to responsibility.²⁷ A temperament oriented around pointing alone would, for Laura, never pass muster, however precious she made gallery visits seem, thanks to the acuity, energy, and surprise she brought to any exhibition, often by solely pointing and looking (while inviting you to do the same).²⁸

Likewise, though listening to Laura reading has an affective economy all of its own, the response it engenders seems no less interactive. For she wouldn’t want us to feel coerced into a corner of passive appreciation and mournful gratitude. Quite the opposite: the ‘Time Passes’ recording for New College is undoubtedly salving; but, in its moment, it was also an invitation to reflect on the ‘challenge’ Woolf faced in trying to ‘capture’ the present’s ‘fugitive energies without thereby destroying them’,²⁹ in Laura’s words, a challenge that resurfaced in allowing a modernist elegy to speak to our own consternation, at a time when commentators were quick to universalise the social experience of a crisis that in reality seemed all the more *uncapturable*, not to say thoroughly unequal, at the level of workaday endurance. And then there’s the unavoidable torque – as impressionist elegy turns into a specific eulogy to the reader we miss – a torque that compounds the pathos of Laura’s recording, but that also invites us to discern in that reading, as I’ve tried to do across her criticism, ‘the value to which lyric especially ministers’, in Jonathan Culler’s account, including ‘a love of a sonorous phrase, the memorable formulation’, or ‘an elegant piece of

sonority'. All of which comprises an 'event' in language that not only 'can be reproduced in the present of articulation' but that also 'create[s] the need to be heard again'.³⁰ I'm hardly alone in cherishing the event – the simple gift – of hearing Laura again, even if listening to her caring about the lyricality of Woolf's prose alongside scenes of a vacated New College is to acknowledge, aching and inescapably, her absence. The final shot of the empty, sun-splashed bench in the cloisters is even more shattering for the way the seat hungers for an occupant, for someone willing to steal a few minutes in repose. Irresistibly, the pathos of that closing image is accentuated by the bench's invitation for us to picture Laura herself, as I can't help doing, pausing there awhile, intercepted by the chance to entertain a bit of 'scene-making', in her words – defying her diary's demands with customary irreverence, if only for a minute.³¹

At the same time, I can imagine her, gently yet impishly, foiling this kind of response to the bench's solicitations, by asking why we should desire even in sadness a sitter in recess. Might a seat be no less beautiful in disuse? Is it not stirring enough as 'the thing that exists when we aren't there', in Woolf's laconic expression from 1926?³² For the absence of an onlooker is perfectly apt, capturing figuratively – by virtue indeed of the absence of any figural agent of description – what it means to delineate 'the world seen without a self', an injunction from *The Waves* that Laura links to the non-anthropocentric perspectivism of 'Time Passes'. Moreover, in her reading of that same segment of 'Time Passes' in *The Tenth Muse*, Laura reaches for Woolf's essay on 'The Cinema' for blueprints of an experience of narrative viewpoint that doesn't depend upon an implied or elucidating observer, with persons and events conveyed 'as they are when we are not there'. To narrate in this way, writes Woolf, is to 'see life as it is when we have no part in it', in the recognition that 'beauty will continue to be beautiful whether we behold it or not'.³³ Does this not underscore Laura's implicit purpose in the New College recording, to suggest that the places to which we longed to return in the pandemic could be eviscerated of sociality yet somehow still endure, still 'remain'? Laura would be the first to remind us that "Beauty" was, for Woolf, an overdetermined concept and attribute', and that appreciating how the world can be exquisite yet indifferent to our capacity to behold it as such won't be comforting for everyone.³⁴ But she was also, in her recording, trying to remind us, I feel, that reckoning with 'life as it is' at a time when we could collectively 'have no part' in each other's lives is what literature invites us to do, in ways that can make isolation bearable.

In one respect, then, Laura's reading may indeed 'seem to be removed', lending *us* the brief respite to feel removed too 'from the pettiness of actual existence, its care, its conventions', to recall Woolf's take on the 'reality' evoked by early cinema.³⁵ However, in the context of 2020's fraught and

foreboding sense of suspended time, Laura was also returning us *to* that existence, in order to contend with the loss of our usual conventions, yes, but also to contemplate the need to care differently about an existence we had so easily taken for granted. For her part, she cared about the work lyricality can perform – its capacity to provoke and console with equal measure, its compatibility with lament yet also with uplift. Of course, the recording's interchange of image, text, and voice could not have anticipated the labour of commemoration it continues to undertake. By drawing to a close with a portrait of a college bench in waiting, the final shot may well epitomise what it means to record *impersonally*, without a focalising consciousness, 'the shape of loveliness itself'. Yet it also illustrates, searingly, how it is that we can be 'brought to a halt', in Laura's phrase, 'by "a scene" that is so resonant that it becomes a permanent dimension of the reader's experience'.³⁶



That poignant scene certainly stays with me, though I admit Laura wouldn't want us to stop there, stilled by grief. No, she'd urge us to plumb that resonance, reopening it to deliberation rather than preserving it in sorrow's amber. This might lead us to wrestle with what literature permits us to *know* otherwise about loss, and to care for what writers have to say about working *with* loss, even if what they say means the gulf that remains is no less inscrutable, the companionship cut short still irremediable. For 'this is how it should be', as Freud pointed out, 'the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish',³⁷ the only way too of beginning to ascertain how hearing a piece of writing, however familiar and critically popular, can bring you 'to a halt'.

Fathoming some of this out would complement Laura's own concern with the 'ends' to which literature's 'knowledge is transmitted from one text to another and across the decades'.³⁸ So what's in the transmission for an inconsolable reader? Well, one of the takeaways of the cinematic depersonalisation of 'Time Passes' might be that

'absence' is also to be understood as 'invisible presence' (a central concept for Woolf herself, who used it to describe the continuing influences upon her of 'ghosts', and her dead mother in particular, a theme at the very heart of *To the Lighthouse*) as well as, or rather than, the distancing, displacement or even total evacuation of the subject from the world viewed.³⁹

By the same stroke, though, it's wishful, for now, to think that the figuratively soothing notion of Laura's 'invisible presence' could somehow prevail over a pervasive sensation of 'total evacuation', whose effect leads one to feel, in Isobel Armstrong's moving metaphor, that 'a huge piece of life has broken away and fallen into the sea – like those images of melting glaciers where we see great segments of ice falling away'.⁴⁰ Indeed, at this juncture, I can't help feeling that it's no coincidence that listening to a recording of a

passage that strives to see a world without a self while making unmissable the person we miss resembles one of the principal ‘paradoxes’ of *To the Lighthouse*, whose narrative, as Laura reminds us, ‘figures absence in more substantial terms than presence’.⁴¹

This novel was a tough act to follow, by Woolf’s own admission. She’d set the bar formidably high by writing something ‘freer and subtler’ than *Mrs Dalloway*; the advantage, if indeed this latest venture had made her ‘method perfect’, would be that style ‘will now stay like this’ and ‘serve’, Woolf hoped, ‘whatever use I wish to put it to’. Nonetheless, the genesis of an even more adventurous novel seeped in, and Woolf provisionally sketches the ‘semi mystic’ *Orlando* in which ‘time shall be utterly obliterated’ and ‘future shall somehow blossom out of the past’. Just ‘one incident – say the fall of a flower – might contain it’, predicts Woolf, careful though she is not ‘to force this’.⁴² Gratitude for an ordinary, happenstance ‘incident’ – sensorily dense and captivating yet immeasurable and likely ephemeral in its repercussions – seems almost heretical at a time when intersecting emergencies have consumed intellectual agendas. Understandably, critics have increasingly voiced their impatience with literature as a portal to contemplation, insisting instead that we seek in writing more immediate springboards for righteous transformation.⁴³ How romantic it is to arrogate to ourselves such consequence. Much like the modernist novelist coordinating formal innovation with political commitment in Laura’s account, perhaps the scholar today who’s more circumspect about overpromising on systemic impact ‘has the more difficult (and, perhaps, more significant) task of finding a balance between involvement in “life” and the aesthetic retreat’.⁴⁴ While caring for the lyrical might not seem, at first, like an especially fervid response to crisis, in doing so Laura achieved her own equipoise of engaging with the present and presenting us with some respite.

To admire this respite now is also, inevitably, to reflect – much like Woolf did in winter 1926, having finished in her latest ‘passage’ for *Lighthouse* – ‘on people going away & the effect on one’s feeling for them’.⁴⁵ Lacerating though the going away is, there’s nothing to stop its ‘effect’ signalling, as it does for me, all the ways that Laura happens to be here again. In this instance, detaining me before Salomon van Ruysdael’s *Eisvergnügen auf der Merwede bei Dordrecht* (*Winterscene at Dordrecht*), his 1653 oil-on-oak rendering of icescape frivolity. I wondered why Laura hadn’t moved on. What exactly, in a sky-dominated depiction of leisured folks standing around watching others frolic and slip on the frozen Beneden Merwede, could be waylaying her? I must have been ready to press on, giving short shrift to a hibernal vista with too much going on. For here, in the Kunsthaus, we had to make the most of some gallery-going liberty ahead of a busy symposium at the University of Zürich. The morning was running out. But Laura had a flair for deflecting urgencies. She had spotted motion in Ruysdael’s

handling of mid-range bustle and wanted me to notice it too. ‘There is movement’, she said, gently countering my impatience, reaching out as though reaching into the scenery’s receding zones of commotion. This fleeting yet meticulous gesture tracked the direction of a flock of skaters, leaning forward in their exertions, minuscule yet still distinguishable, committed to speed. Virtually choreographed in unison, their collective momentum had been all-but lost on me, distracted as I was by the pomp and stasis of the foreground’s festooned horse with its gilded carriage. With her demonstrative generosity, then, Laura helped me appreciate the dynamism so easily missed amid that scene’s superabundant figures. My overlooking this ‘rhythmic feeling’ was no doubt compounded by a hefty dose of art-historical overwhelm, the entirely unremarkable side-effect of aesthetic saturation that is both the compromise and privilege of hopscotching around exhibitions so vast. What a classic Laura Marcus moment: turning her own observation of neglectable rhythms into a reason to show you something that then emerges, instantly and unforgettably, as essential to how the work in front of you *happens*. I can only ventriloquise it as an invitation to linger that was careful, as ever, not to be pedagogical, and rather mischievous in its resolve: *actually, no, you’re not moving on just yet; stay with the scene, look again, give it time*. Now there’s consolation, knowing you’ve been shown things you would never have noticed by someone who once discerned them with effortless – and infectious – precision. Sly in its intrusion, the past tense has a savage knack of catching you off guard. As it does for me here. Yet the loveliness held by that memory’s shape remains.

Notes

1. Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, ed. Margaret Drabble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 175.
2. Naturalists worked fast to give an account of that period: see Michael McCarthy, Jeremy Mynott, and Peter Marren, *The Consolation of Nature: Spring in the Time of Coronavirus* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2020).
3. Laura Marcus, ‘New College Reads to You: *To the Lighthouse*, by Virginia Woolf. Video by Christopher Thompson, audio by Dan Jefferies, and produced by Erica Longfellow, Christopher Skelton-Foord, and Sam Brown: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_jE6cxRm8E Given that I make extensive reference to this video in what follows, readers may wish to view the recording (5 mins, 15 secs in its entirety) before continuing with the essay.
4. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, pp. 175–76.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 175

10. Ibid., pp. 175, 176.
11. Diana Fuss, *Dying Modern: A Meditation on Elegy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 6, 5.
12. Fuss, *Dying Modern*, 7.
13. Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 148.
14. Laura Marcus, *Dreams of Modernity: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 253.
15. Marcus, *The Tenth Muse*, 146.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Laura Marcus, *Virginia Woolf*, 2nd edn. (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2004), p. 99.
19. Marcus, *The Tenth Muse*, p. 146.
20. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, pp. 267–68.
21. Ibid., p. 268, my emphasis.
22. Marcus, *The Tenth Muse*, p. 155.
23. Marcus, *Virginia Woolf*, pp. 109–10.
24. Ibid., p. 110.
25. Laura Marcus, *Rhythmical Subjects: The Measures of the Modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 231–32.
26. Andrew H. Miller, *On Not Being Someone Else: Tales of Our Unled Lives* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), p. 178.
27. Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, ed. Gillian Beer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 218.
28. Jo Winning movingly relays how much she loved accompanying Laura to galleries, trips that often were made possible (as I remember with such humour and affection) only by playing truant from conferences. As Winning recalls, throughout an exhibition, Laura ‘had this wonderful mix of curiosity and erudition’ (Winning, ‘Laura Marcus [7 March 1956–22 September 2021]’, ed. George Potts and Santanu Das, *Critical Quarterly*, 64.1 [2022], p. 16).
29. Marcus, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 31.
30. Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 353.
31. Marcus, *Dreams of Modernity*, p. 227.
32. Woolf, Saturday 30 October 1926, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. III: 1925–30, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth, 1980), p. 114.
33. Woolf, ‘The Cinema’ (1926), quoted in Marcus, *The Tenth Muse*, p. 148.
34. Marcus, *The Tenth Muse*, p. 153.
35. Woolf, ‘The Cinema’ (1926), *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life*, ed. Rachel Bowlby (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. 55.
36. Marcus, *Dreams of Modernity*, p. 226.
37. Sigmund Freud, p. 239: To Ludwige Binswanger (11 April 1929), in *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, ed. Ernst L. Freud, trans. Tania and James Stern (London: Hogarth, 1961), p. 386.
38. Laura Marcus, ‘The Legacies of Modernism’, in Morag Shiach (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 96.
39. Marcus, *The Tenth Muse*, 115.

40. Isobel Armstrong, in George Potts and Santanu Das, eds., 'Laura Marcus (7 March 1956–22 September 2021)', *Critical Quarterly*, 64.1 (2022), p. 14.
41. Marcus, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 93.
42. Woolf, Tuesday 23 November 1926, *Diary*, pp. 117–18.
43. Following Iris Murdoch, Namwali Serpell observes that

literature and ethical deliberation have this in common: they are very complex, variable, temporal processes of thinking that don't necessarily bear on external acts. This should both encourage us to use literature to deliberate about ethics and remind us that to deliberate is not the same as to act.

But she then adds that in a time of crisis we 'can keep writing and reading and thinking – it soothes, if nothing else – but it won't necessarily do anything to save us right now' (Serpell in conversation Maria Tumarkin 'Unethical Reading and the Limits of Empathy: Two Writers on the Ethics of Pen and Paper', *The Yale Review*, <https://yalereview.org/article/namwali-serpell-tumarkin-unethical-reading-and-limits-empathy>). Anna Kornbluh has been even more strident about reclaiming critique as the scene and source of literary studies' tangible interventions:

We must, in the present, make claims about causality, systematicity, and the revaluation of values, so we can make the very specific move to counter rapacious greed with rapid decarbonization. ... Critique and its cartography of other spaces enjoins us to stand up.

As such, 'Wild imaginings, big abstractions, and brassy syntheses are less bad' than the 'resignation' of 'weak theory' or 'postcritique' ('Extinct Critique', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 119.4 [October 2020], p. 775). This kind of evangelising about criticism's ability to confront the world's escalating emergencies has neatly dovetailed with what John Guillory describes as the prominence of 'topicality' through 'the foregrounding of political thematics in teaching and scholarship, along the claims for the socially transformative effects of these thematics'. With research and pedagogical agendas alike thereby 'reoriented' around 'concepts and problems defined by their contemporary relevance', it should come as no surprise that the 'overestimation' of literary scholarship's real-world effects, suggests Guillory, has become a symptomatically dominant response to the discipline's own social and institutional precarities. Consequently, the inflation of criticism's hypothetical agency acts 'as a compensatory response to uncertainty of aim' within the increasingly corporatized university (*Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022], pp. xii, xiii, 9, 10).

44. Marcus, *The Tenth Muse*, p. 106.
45. Woolf, Saturday 11 December 1926, *Diary*, p. 119.

Disclosure statement

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