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**“There remained only the window”**  
**Windows and Doors in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse***  
**and *Mrs Dalloway*<sup>1</sup>**

*Windows and doors...Windows and doors...The difference is clear even to a child: the door – a borderline. Beyond the door another room, another space is opened up. You step inside and you, too, change. It is impossible not to change. The window, however, only lends its knowledge for a while. You glance in, and you have already forgotten.<sup>2</sup>*

This passage from Ludmila Oulitskaya’s novel articulates a certain difference between doors and windows, which question pervades Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* – although the nature of the difference is quite dissimilar in the two texts. Both writers address the issue of borderlines, but

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an abstract from a study written for the 2005 OTDK conference with the help and supervision of Dr. Tamás Bényei (University of Debrecen, Institute of English and American Studies).

The original paper is a reading of two of Woolf’s novels, *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs Dalloway*. The Lacanian concepts of the three psychic orders, the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real, as well as the various interpretations of metaphor and metonymy are used in order to provide a new approach to these much discussed texts and to show how they resist rigid interpretation schemes. The paper is organised around the triadic structure of window-door-window. The “first window” is the window of the look-out and the look-at, often serving as a reflective surface and thereby becoming connected to the Imaginary Order. In these cases, the equation of the two objects on either side of the window is based on specular relationship, which relates this aspect to metaphor. The door, on a basic level, might be said to pertain to the Symbolic (because of the questions it raises about language) and to metonymy (because it ensures passage and thus spatial relation). The “second window” is that of the jump-out, whereby it disrupts both the Imaginary and the Symbolic and becomes linked to the Real. On the other hand, it includes certain aspects of both metaphor and metonymy.

In this paper, I provide a brief summary of the introductory part of the original essay (in which all the concepts and terms were explained and illustrated with examples from the discussed novels). Following this, I discuss the various connotations of the door motif and of Lily’s painting.

<sup>2</sup> Ludmila Oulitskaya, “Kukockij esetei” (144). My translation.

while in Oulitskaya there is an explicit articulation of the matter, Woolf does not discuss the problem openly, but – intentionally or not – it is implied throughout her novel. Another difference is that whilst the quotation above refers to looking *in* (“glance *in*”), Woolf seems to be preoccupied more with the question of looking *out* of and looking *at* the window. On the other hand, Oulitskaya’s text investigates the door from the point of view of the subject behind it, who is ready to “step in” and “change,” whereas *To the Lighthouse* concentrates also on the observer, who is already inside, looking *at* the door opening.<sup>3</sup>

My argument in this essay is that doors and windows are more than merely two of the important motifs organizing Woolf’s text. In my reading of *To the Lighthouse* I will show how they organise themselves into an allegorical structure, working not just on the plot level but also self-reflexively referring to the novel’s textual strategies. They play an important role in the figuring of both interpersonal relationships and the connection between subjectivity and the outside world. They might also be said to reflect the novels’ rhetorical strategies, partly because of their connection to metaphor and metonymy.

My discussion will be loosely connected to the three psychic orders identified by Jacques Lacan: the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic, and to the various approaches to metaphor and metonymy.<sup>4</sup> What is important in my discussion is the role these poles play in the formation and sustenance of the subject. Woolf’s novels raise the question of the nature of subjectivity, and one way of describing the Woolfian investigation of the subject is to formulate it as a metaphorical question: is the subject hard and fixed or is it fluid? On this level, we can establish a connection between the Lacanian orders and metaphor/metonymy. The Imaginary provides one with a metaphoric identity (through a correspondence between ego and mirror-image), also implying fixity; while the Symbolic supplies one with a metonymic identity (the subject appears as a chain of signifiers), which implies fluidity. The first part of this paper investigates these questions in relation to the motif of the door in *To the Lighthouse*, while in the second part I shall look at the different implications of Lily’s painting.

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<sup>3</sup> In spite of their frequent occurrences in *To the Lighthouse*, doors and windows have as yet attracted relatively little critical attention. Although many readers have emphasised one or two of their aspects (T.E. Apter, 91; E.B. Rosenman, 90; M. Minow-Pinkney, 79; S. Davies, 122; J. Blotner, quoted by Goldman 60), no critic has tried to consider the full implications of these two motifs.

<sup>4</sup> Besides the Jakobsonian definition of metaphor and metonymy, in my reading I use the Lacanian adaptation of Freud’s ideas of condensation and displacement, and his rethinking of the concept of metaphor on the basis of the coinage of the word ‘famillionaire’ (from ‘familiar’ and ‘millionaire’) in Freud’s famous specimen joke.

## I. Doors

*I know something about  
Opening windows and doors  
(Peter Gabriel, "The Intruder.")*

Doors are connected to metonymy in the very basic sense that they allow movement and passage from one place to another. Through doors (and to a certain extent, windows) the outside can enter the inside of a house and vice versa and these borderlines gain special importance in the middle section of *To the Lighthouse*, "Time Passes," where it is the house that stands in the centre. Gaston Bachelard claims that "[o]utside and inside are both intimate, they are always ready to be reversed, to exchange their hostility," which is precisely what happens in "Time Passes." Bachelard goes on to say that "[i]f there exists a borderline surface between such an inside and outside, this surface is painful on both sides" (217-218), where this "borderline surface" includes doors and windows, the role of which is both to maintain this border (when closed) and to disrupt it (when open). Woolf's idea in "Time Passes" was "to give an empty house, no people's characters, the passage of time, all eyeless and featureless with nothing to cling to" (*Diary* 76). The deterioration of the inside already begins in "The Window" (the first part of the novel), where the children "bring in the outside," and where, as Mrs Ramsay laments, nobody cares to close the doors. The second part of the novel is characterized by a further "mingling of the outdoor and indoor worlds," claims Davies (8 122), where the borderlines are trespassed, even deleted, partly because "[s]ome of the locks had gone, so the doors banged" (*To the Lighthouse* 204).<sup>5</sup>

Doors are characterized by a kind of agentlessness in the sense that normally they are solid, and before one sees the person about to enter, one *hears* him/her or sees/hears the movement of the door. Thus the act 'precedes' the actor, the agent is suppressed or deferred in the action. The expression "the door opened" might be seen as the most typical metonymic sentence, where metonymy seems to transpose agency from the subject to an object.

'Time Passes' raises the question of agency and agentlessness with considerable acuteness and the question seems to be related to the motif of doors. In this part of *To the Lighthouse*, there is no *human* agent behind the movement of the doors, only "the little airs [...] coming through the rusty hinges" (*TTL* 187), which "mounted the staircase and nosed round bedroom doors [...] all together gave off an aimless gust of lamentation to which

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<sup>5</sup> *To the Lighthouse* henceforward abbreviated as *TTL*.

some door in the kitchen replied, swung wide, admitted nothing; and slammed to" (*TTL* 189). These agentless movements suggest a more radical significance to the elaborate description of turning handles and opening doors in the rest of the novel. In "Time Passes", there is no agency, no intention behind the opening and shutting of doors. Nevertheless, the text seems to be unable to give up agency: thus, human agency reappears as personification either of the door or of the forces behind the movement ("nosed," "lamentation," "replied"). Obviously, one cannot claim that the door as such "stands for" the impersonality of language as metonymy. Nevertheless, it might not be too much to claim that, in the larger framework of the door/window duality, and the whole of the 'Time Passes' section, doors are connected to metonymy, not only by allowing spatial passages, but also by suggesting the agentless functioning of language. Traversing and crossing characterizes doors, which can be paralleled to Malcolm Bowie's claim that the Symbolic "is the realm of movement rather than fixity, and of heterogeneity rather than similarity" (Bowie 92). This order is also connected to language and is bound together by the signifying chain, or the law of the signifier (Myers 22). Bachelard's argument connects language (the Symbolic) to the operation of doors (or even windows): "Language bears within itself the dialectics of open and closed. Through meaning it encloses, while through poetic expression, it opens up" (222). Significantly, Lacan uses doors "to show how in fact the signifier enters the signified" (Lacan 151), that is, he demonstrates the deficiencies of the Symbolic (lack of one-to-one relation between signifier and signified) through the image of doors. It is only language (the words "ladies" and "gentlemen" above the doors) that helps one to differentiate between two, otherwise identical, signifieds.

If language is able to create the illusion of subjectivity and agency, as it so emphatically does in "Time Passes," the suspicion arises that subjectivity might be a trope even when there is a "real" character behind the door. This is suggested by a sentence full of doors and windows towards the end of the second section: "At last, after days of labour within, of cutting and digging without, dusters were flicked from the windows, the windows were shut to, keys were turned all over the house; the front door was banged; it was finished" (*TTL* 210). The structure continues to be passive, agentless: even the return of humanity does not entail the return of agency – once it has turned out that agency is a verbal necessity.

In some instances in *To the Lighthouse*, doors are associated with physical contact (metonymy), even violence, which is in contrast with the different aspects of windows. While the window represents Mrs Ramsay, the door seems to be connected to Mr Ramsay and the children. It has thus actually two aspects: a violent/aggressive one and a tender/lively one, the former being connected to the father and closing doors, the latter to the children and

to opening doors. This latter aspect appears when “the door sprang open and in they came [the children]” (*TTL* 90), then “a hand flashed, the door opened, in came children rushing and tumbling; and went out again” (*TTL* 192). An image in Mrs Ramsay’s mind also connects two of her children (as well as Minta and Paul)<sup>6</sup> to the door: “She tried to recall the sight of them standing at the hall door after lunch” (*TTL* 86), this picture reappearing later, when “[s]he summoned before her again the little group on the terrace in front of the hall door, standing looking up into the sky” (*TTL* 94).

We can see how Mr Ramsay, the Father, “slammed out of the room” (*TTL* 40). Much later, losing his temper, he “banged out of the room” (*TTL* 214). There is a strange figurative reversal here, reinforcing the link between “agency” and doors: Mr Ramsay becomes the door through the unusual verb usage, also suggesting a very strong link between him and the (banging) door. Another instance is when “with his hand on the door, [Mr Ramsay] stopped; he turned upon them. Did they not want to go?” (*TTL* 218). Even though the door “escapes” now, still something violent is associated with the situation: Mr Ramsay forces the children to accompany him to the lighthouse. Even his mind is connected to doors if we observe how “he turned abruptly, slammed his private door on them” (*TTL* 42). As opposed to this, Mrs Ramsay’s way of thinking is connected to looking at or out of windows.

It might also be significant that if windows are linked to the realm of vision and the image, and doors to metonymy and language, a connection to doors might suggest an impairment and deficiency of vision, which indeed turns out to be the case: Mr Ramsay does not notice ordinary things like flowers and stars, which suggests that he has no eye for such things. This reinforces the idea of his association with language and the Symbolic, and contrasts him with Mrs Ramsay, the window and the eye, who is very much associated with tiny observations (the rooks, the moon and the stars). This also implies that Mr Ramsay can escape through the door, can leave it all behind, but Mrs Ramsay cannot leave her place which is within the house and allows her a position from where she can only *look* out.

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<sup>6</sup> Who are, in a sense, also her children.

## II. Lily's painting

Mrs Ramsay, sitting *in* the window and looking out from *behind* it, becomes the window in a sense. In the third section of the novel, "The Lighthouse," Lily relives and re-evaluates her relationship to Mrs Ramsay, while she is finishing the picture she began a decade ago when Mrs Ramsay was still alive. The painting is crucial in its relation to windows and in the way the novel figures the ambiguity of this motif. The door and the window seem to have aesthetic (and therefore self-reflexive) connotations. We can therefore ask: is *To the Lighthouse* a "door" or a "window"? Is Lily's painting a window (a self-metaphor, a "mirror-image" of the novel within itself) in any sense? Or is it a painting of Mrs Ramsay as "window"?

Shirley Panken claims Mrs Ramsay's position at the window to be her "vantage point" (149-150). During the first part it becomes a veritable focal point that everybody passes or looks at, ensuring a spatial, that is, metonymic, connection. However, this connection may also be seen as metaphoric, if we consider Elizabeth Grosz's definition of this trope: "Metaphor or condensation freezes and privileges repressed signifiers, leaving them active but confined to their own realm. They are no longer subject to change, being unrelated to and unmodified by relations with other signifiers" (Grosz 100). Mrs Ramsay's position in the window provides an instance of this idea of fixity: she becomes a point of reference, being fixed eternally in Lily's picture, thereby becoming related to metaphor.

The relation between Mrs Ramsay and the window, however, remains ambiguous for Lily. The window as such evokes in her the memory of Mrs Ramsay (Mrs Ramsay as window): trying to find a basis for her vision of her, Lily "looked down the railway carriage, the omnibus; [...] looked *at windows* opposite; at Piccadily, lamp-strung in the evening" (TTL 266, my italics). This instance suggests a *metaphoric* relation: it is not the same window where Lily saw Mrs Ramsay, and on the other hand, she does not look *in*, where she could see someone, but she looks *at*, as if the window was that which she was looking for, a substitute for Mrs Ramsay. At other points, the connection can be seen as spatial and thus *metonymic*: "She [Lily] looked at [the house] there sleeping in the early sunlight with its windows green and blue with the reflected leaves. The faint thought she was thinking of Mrs Ramsay seemed in consonance with this quiet house [...] She hoped nobody would open the window" (TTL 237).

Lily's painting condenses into itself several of the connotations of windows in *To the Lighthouse* (in a sense, Lily's painting is a mise-en-abyme, a window, for the novel to look at itself). It is related to the Lacanian Imaginary, because it implies fixity for Lily: her canvas has an "uncompromising white *stare*" (TTL 230, my italics), and "she exchanged the *fluidity* of life

for the *concentration of painting*" (*TTL* 233, my italics). Mrs Ramsay also accepts this fixity and seems to have felt an urge for it herself: "Mrs Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent) [...] In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs Ramsay said" (*TTL* 237).

For Lily, Mrs Ramsay occupies an Imaginary, narcissistic and fixed position, she is the (m)other to whom Lily turns for identification. Lily wants to fix her Imaginary (m)other in her painting. However, it is also a *representation* of Mrs Ramsay, and as such can be paralleled with language. There are several details that suggest this analogy: the repeated phrase, Charles Tansley's "women can't paint, women can't write" (see for example *TTL* 75, 233) which lingers on in Lily's mind; and at one point she juxtaposes vision and language by saying that "[p]hrases came. Visions came" (*TTL* 283), and that "'you' and 'I' and 'she' pass and vanish; nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint" (*TTL* 263). By this she also suggests that words and paint are the same in that they remain, the positions they create do not change, it is only those who occupy these that vanish and are exchanged for others. The fact that Mrs Ramsay is represented only as a "shape," and is distorted to such an extent that she is practically unrecognisable, means that she has also become a position that may be occupied by anyone else – which actually does happen: somebody comes into the drawing room, and sits down in a way "to throw an odd shaped triangular shadow over the step" (*TTL* 295, my italics), which is enough for Lily to paint a "Mrs Ramsay."

At the same time, the painting seems to be Lily's attempt to grasp the Real (as defined by Lacan), "the thing itself before it has been made anything" (*TTL* 283). In this sense, the "purple shape" of Mrs Ramsay in the painting can be seen as an attempt to get hold of "the thing" before it assumes recognisable features. Mrs Ramsay appears to be an unsymbolisable entity and in this sense becomes the opposite of the Symbolic, thus the picture can also be seen as non-symbolic, and Lily's painting as an attempt to "represent" Mrs Ramsay *as light*.<sup>7</sup> Lily in this case refuses (the) language (of the male).

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<sup>7</sup> Mrs Ramsay maintains a special, almost intimate connection with the strokes of the lighthouse, which she beholds (possibly) through the window: "Turning, she looked across the bay, and there, sure enough, coming regularly across the waves first two quick strokes and then one long steady stroke, was the light of the Lighthouse [...] and pausing there she looked out to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke" (*TTL* 94, 96). We can observe how she herself becomes the light, for "[o]ften she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work

In order to address the question of light in these instances, as well as the self-reflexive potential of the window motif, one may appeal to a very different discourse on visibility, that of Pavel Florensky in his book on Orthodox icons. Some of Florensky's passages seem to resonate with the texture and visual logic of *To the Lighthouse*, especially seen from the perspective of Lacanian metaphors. Florensky uses "window" as a metaphor for paintings, and his "typology" of windows is an aesthetic typology. His argument is that windows are never simply "windows": either they are merely wood and glass or they are the light that shines through them (27-28). The former possibility is related to western art, because it is basically representational. Contrary to this are the icons of orthodox Christianity, which are claimed to be *non*-representational, they are the thing itself (Florensky 31, 89). They are not the *re*-presentation of something absent, but the full presence achieved through the miracle of faith. The window then metonymically becomes light itself, they belong together and – in Lacanian terms – their relationship will pertain to the order of the Real. The golden background of Orthodox icons, then, is in Lacanian terms that impossible thing: a "representation" of the Real. Mrs Ramsay assumes this golden background by having "her head outlined absurdly by the *gilt* frame" (*TTL* 48, my italics). The golden background of the icons is pure light and not a representation of light or a medium that allows the passage of light. Mrs Ramsay as window from the medium, channel of light, becomes light – both for herself and for others. She becomes the light which defines the window as window.

Painters of icons produce their pictures based on their visions (Florensky 30), just as Lily has had her vision when she finishes her picture (*TTL* 306). "In an icon [...] one constructs that which is not available for sensual experience, and in order to at least observe its scheme one envisages its presence" (Florensky 82). It becomes something before sight and language, before it is "made something," which is precisely what Lily tries to paint, and therefore she envisions Mrs Ramsay's presence in "The Lighthouse": 'Mrs Ramsay! Mrs Ramsay!' she cried, feeling the old horror come back – to want and want and not to have. [...] Mrs Ramsay, it was part of her perfect goodness – sat there quite simply, in the chair, flicked her needles to and fro, knitted her reddish-brown stocking, cast her shadow on the step. There she sat" (*TTL* 296). Mrs Ramsay in and as the window thus becomes an icon in Florensky's sense.

Both Lily and Mrs Ramsay seem to wish to leave the Symbolic behind; they are involved in a peculiar kind of quest for the Real, and the solutions

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in her hands, until she became the thing she looked at – that light, for example [...] She looked up over her knitting and met the third stroke and it seemed to her like her own eyes meeting her own eyes" (*TTL* 97). (We can also view the window as an (Imaginary) mirror, in which Mrs Ramsay's "own eyes [meet] her own eyes," i. e. the stroke of the lighthouse.)

they find are quite different. Mrs Ramsay's seems to be of an Imaginary nature, a search by looking (at the strokes of the lighthouse, out of the window). Lily's solution is that of the artist: she attempts to "represent" the Real, thereby remaining within the limits of the Symbolic, at the same time, however, she is able to transcend it. Mrs Ramsay's emphasis on opening windows and the various instances of looking out of the window are paralleled with Lily's painting, which occupies a crucial role in the "allegorical adventures" of the window motif.

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