



“Time Passes”: Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* at 100
International Conference, Sorbonne Université, Paris, 1-3 July 2027

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Confirmed keynote speakers:

Rosi Braidotti (Utrecht University)
Jane Goldman (University of Glasgow)
Catherine Lanone (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle)
Kabe Wilson (Artist in residence, Jesus College, Cambridge)

Organizers:

Nicolas Boileau (Aix Marseille Université)
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CALL FOR PAPERS

*The Poets light but Lamps –
Themselves – go out –
The Wicks they stimulate
If vital Light*

*Inhere as do the Suns –
Each Age a Lens
Disseminating their
Circumference –*

Emily Dickinson, n°930 (1865)

There are works of art that, however true to their historical moment, continue to shine their light on successive generations. Not only do they convey renewed emotion to readers, but they also remain a constant source of inspiration. *To the Lighthouse* is undoubtedly one of those works, still deeply resonant a century later. Perhaps because it is an intensely autobiographical novel, transfiguring the personal experience of loss into a shared language, or because it raises the old question of how art can console in a new, genre-defying idiom. It may also be because the novel exemplifies a different strain of modernism, both “experimental” and “nostalgic” (Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 1996), “backward-turning but formally inventive” (Elizabeth Abel, *Odd Affinities*, 2024), which registers the aesthetic, ethical, and political break induced by the First World War, but also the haunting power of the pre-war past.

Like the members of her close circle, who unanimously praised the novel as a “masterpiece” (Virginia Woolf’s *Diary*, 23 January 1927), Woolf was certainly aware of its distinctive status. She

saw *To the Lighthouse* as the culmination of the “method” she had developed in her previous works, which, as Roger Fry observed, enabled her to “go backwards and forwards in time with an extraordinary enrichment of each moment of consciousness” (Virginia Woolf’s *Letters*, 27 May 1927). She was also fully aware that the combination of prose and poetry, particularly in “Time Passes” – which contains the “lyric portions” of the novel (*Diary*, 5 September 1926) – led her onto formally uncharted territory.

A century after its publication, writers, artists, and critics continue to engage with Woolf’s novel. Its “unsettled, sometimes conflictive dynamic of solace” (David James, *Discrepant Solace*, 2019), reflected both by the “break of unity in [its] design” (*Diary*, 20 July 1925) and in its final image – the line traced by Lily Briscoe on her canvas, both uniting and dividing – has proved a central concern for many contemporary novelists. Ian McEwan in *Atonement* (2001), Jeanette Winterson in *Lighthousekeeping* (2004), Ali Smith in *The Accidental* (2005), Maggie Humm in *Talland House* (2020), Cécile Wajsbrot in *Nevermore* (2021), and Namwali Serpell in *The Furrows: An Elegy* (2022) all return or refer to Woolf’s novel, sometimes critically, in order to explore or question the possibility for art to salvage the past, or bridge the gap with a sometimes dislocated present.

To the Lighthouse has also given rise to new forms of life writing. “Bibliomemoirs” such as Olivia Laing’s *To the River* (2011) and Katharine Smyth’s *All the Lives We Ever Lived: Seeking Solace in Virginia Woolf* (2019) highlight the reparative effects that Woolf’s novel has had on the authors’ personal lives (Monica Latham et al., *Recycling Woolf*, 2022). The novel has likewise inspired multimedia works such as Kabe Wilson’s *Looking for Virginia: An Artist’s Journey through 100 Archives* (2023), which explores the interplay between personal memories, archival research and literary criticism.

Perhaps the influence of *To the Lighthouse* has been most sustaining in times of crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic led writers such as Michael Cunningham (*Day*, 2023) and Olivia Laing (*The Garden Against Time*, 2024) to turn to Woolf’s novel in order to articulate the uncanny suspension of time, the odd “counter-surge” of beauty provided by nature (Laing), the impossibility of offering emotional support to the dying, and to properly mourn the dead. For Woolf scholars such as Laura Marcus, “Time Passes” also proved essential reading during Covid, “an interregnum, a space between [...] particularly fitted to [the] strange times [of the pandemic]” (David James, “Caring about Lyricality,” 2024).

Recent ecocritical readings (by Kelly Sultzbach, or Peter Adkins, among many others) suggest that *To the Lighthouse* – particularly the “Time Passes” section – has become central to reflections on nature in the Anthropocene. In *To the River and Nevermore*, Olivia Laing and Cécile Wajsbrot revisit Woolf’s “elegy” to express a new form of ecological grief – caused not only by human death, but also by human-induced environmental disasters – and ultimately, to reflect on human transience and nature’s resilience. In *Annihilation* (2014), Jeff VanderMeer conjures up images oddly reminiscent of *To the Lighthouse* to imagine new interspecies becomings and to anticipate radical forms of de-anthropocentrism.

As suggested by Peter Adkins, Derek Ryan, and Ruth Alison Clemens (*Reading Braidotti/Reading Woolf*, 2022), Woolf’s work has also significantly contributed to the development of ecofeminism. In *Posthuman Feminism* (2022), Rosi Braidotti highlights Woolf’s ability to “capture the elemental erotic energy of living matter” and use it to disrupt gendered categories structured around the male/female binary, thereby promoting modes of queer or trans sensibility. In *To the Lighthouse*, more specifically, Woolf’s exploration of forms of perception shaped by the rhythms of wind and waves anticipates certain developments in posthuman feminism, which challenge the hierarchy between the human and the non-human to explore their interactions through entanglements or mesh. By foregrounding non-human agency (waves, wind, decay, erosion), Woolf also unsettles human-centred temporalities, with “Time Passes” a case in point.

The emerging field of the Blue Humanities (Steve Mentz, 2023) has offered new tools to address the omnipresent water imagery of *To the Lighthouse*, a novel fundamentally structured around the sea, coasts, tides, and the weather. For Marlene Dirschauer (*Modernist Waterscapes*, 2023), “the materiality of water” in Woolf’s novel is at once “a structuring and destabilizing principle.” Such readings also open the way to a reconfiguration of the novel’s feminist interpretation, through concepts such as “hydrofeminism” (Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 2017).

Jane Goldman's 1998 collective volume, *Virginia Woolf: To the Lighthouse / The Waves*, and *The Cambridge Companion to To the Lighthouse*, edited by Allison Pease in 2015, offered comprehensive accounts of the novel's critical legacy over the decades. Following them, we invite contributors to consider the novel's twenty-first-century reception. How have recent global crises – environmental, sanitary, and geopolitical – reshaped our engagement with *To the Lighthouse*? Conversely, what aesthetic or ethical resources does Virginia Woolf's novel offer for thinking through the present? In what ways might it illuminate our contemporary moment?

By holding a centennial conference in Paris, the organizing committee also hopes to highlight the specific connection that Woolf's novel has had with France. "Time Passes" was first published as a stand-alone piece in the French journal *Commerce*, in a translation by Charles Mauron, in January 1927. In 1928, Woolf was awarded the French *Prix Femina-Vie Heureuse* in the "foreign book" category. *To the Lighthouse* has since occupied a central place in French Anglophone studies, as shown in critical studies by Chantal Delourme (*Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse: les arabesques du sens*, 2001) and Dominique Rabaté (*Le roman et le sens de la vie*, 2010).

Contributors are encouraged to consider *To the Lighthouse* from a range of critical perspectives, including: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, Ecocriticism, Elemental Studies, Environmental Aesthetics, Blue Humanities, New Materialism, New Sensory Studies, Sound Studies, Affect Theory, Gender and Queer Studies, Posthuman Feminism, Trauma Studies, Biomedical Humanities, Intermedial Studies, Transnational and Decolonial Studies, Food Studies...

Suggested topics may include, but are not limited to:

- The novel's genesis, historical context, and critical reception; its afterlives in translation, new artistic forms, digital humanities, and contemporary pedagogy
- Form and aesthetics: Woolf's method (*oratio obliqua*, stream of consciousness), generic hybridity, the dialogue with canonical genres, the novel as elegy, the interplay of irony and melancholy, prose and poetry, sublime and grotesque
- History, society, and politics: the Victorian legacy, inheritance and rupture, the pre-/post-war structure, imperialism, and class dynamics
- Time, memory, and loss: the passing of time, the artistic reconstruction of the past, trauma, mourning, melancholia, and spectrality
- Philosophy and perception: subject/object relations, the nature of reality, empiricism and materialism, matter and the immaterial
- Embodiment and the senses: the body, emotions, sensory experience, sound, music, and the role of light and optics
- Gender and domesticity: patriarchy, marriage, family dynamics, and everyday social relations
- Nature and the environment: the natural world, the elements, the weather and the atmosphere, ecological readings in the age of climate change, re-reading Woolf's seascapes with the Blue Humanities
- Art and visual culture: the sister arts, Bloomsbury aesthetics, and post-impressionism

Abstracts of about 300-400 words together with a short author bio-bibliography (150 words) should be sent to all three organizers by 15 September 2026:

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A selection of peer-reviewed articles based on papers given at the conference will be collected for publication.

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