

## *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf

Atwood, Margaret. *Writing with Intent: Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose: 1983-2005*. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2005.

I first read Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* when I was nineteen. I had to. It was on a course—"The Twentieth-Century Novel," or some such. I got on all right with the nineteenth-century novel—the works of Dickens were, I felt, just as such things should be, at least in England: lots of mad people and fog. Nor did I do too badly with certain twentieth-century novels. Hemingway I could more or less fathom—I'd played war as a child, I'd gone fishing a lot, I knew the approximate rules of both, I was aware that boys were laconic. Camus was depressing enough for the late-adolescent me, with existential angst and gritty, unpleasant sex in the bargain. Faulkner was my idea of what could be possible for—well, for myself as a writer (which was what I wanted to be), hysteria in steaming, bug-infested swamps being my notion of artistic verisimilitude. (I knew those bugs. I knew those swamps, or swamps very like them. I knew that hysteria.) That Faulkner could also be outrageously funny went—at the age I was then—right past me.

But Virginia Woolf was off on a siding as far as my nineteen-year-old self was concerned. Why go to the lighthouse at all, and why make such a fuss about going or not going? What was the book about? Why was everyone so stuck on Mrs. Ramsay, who went around in floppy old hats and fooled around in her garden, and indulged her husband with spoonfuls of tactful acquiescence, just like my surely boring mother? Why would anyone put up with Mr. Ramsay, that Tennyson-quoting tyrant, eccentric

disappointed genius though he might be? Someone had blundered, he shouts, but this did not cut any ice with me. And what about Lily Briscoe, who wanted to be an artist and made much of this desire, but who didn't seem to be able to paint very well, or not to her own satisfaction? In Woolf's world, things were so tenuous. They were so elusive. They were so inconclusive. They were so deeply unfathomable. They were like the line written by a wispy poet in a Katherine Mansfield short story: "Why must it always be tomato soup?"

At nineteen, I'd never known anyone who had died, with the exception of my grandfather, who'd been old and far away. I'd never been to a funeral. I understood nothing of that kind of loss—of the crumbling of the physical texture of lives lived, the way the meaning of a place could change because those who used to be in it were no longer there. I knew nothing about the hopelessness and the necessity of trying to capture such lives—to rescue them, to keep them from vanishing altogether.

Although I'd been guilty of many artistic failures, such was my callowness that I did not yet recognize them as such. Lily Briscoe suffers the aggression of an insecure man who keeps telling her that women can't paint and women can't write, but I didn't see why she should be so upset about it: the guy was obviously a drip, so who cared what he thought? Anyway, no one had ever said that sort of thing to me, not yet. (Little did I know they would soon begin.) I didn't realize what weight such pronouncements could have, even when uttered by fools, because of the many centuries of heavily respectable authority that lay behind them.

This past summer, forty-three years later, I read *To the Lighthouse* again. No particular reason: I was in that very Canadian space, "the cottage," and so was the book, and I'd read all the murder mysteries. So I thought I'd try again.

How was it that, this time, everything in the book fell so completely into place? How could I have missed it—above all, the patterns, the artistry—the first time through? How could I have missed the resonance of Mr. Ramsay's Tennyson quotation, coming as it does like a prophecy of the First World War? How could I not have grasped that the person painting and the one writing were in effect the same? ("Women can't write, women can't paint.") And the way time passes over everything like a cloud,

and solid objects flicker and dissolve? And the way Lily's picture of Mrs. Ramsay—incomplete, insufficient, doomed to be stuck in an attic—becomes, as she adds the one line that ties it all together at the end, the book we've just read?

Some books have to wait until you're ready for them. So much, in reading, is a matter of luck. And what luck I'd just had! (Or so I muttered to myself, putting on my floppy old hat, going out to fool around in my unfathomable garden.)

## ALSO BY MARGARET ATWOOD

## FICTION

- The Edible Woman* (1969)  
*Surfacing* (1972)  
*Lady Oracle* (1976)  
*Dancing Girls* (1977)  
*Life Before Man* (1979)  
*Bodily Harm* (1981)  
*Murder in the Dark* (1983)  
*Bluebeard's Egg* (1983)  
*The Handmaid's Tale* (1983)  
*Cat's Eye* (1988)  
*Wilderness Tips* (1991)  
*Good Bones* (1992)  
*The Robber Bride* (1993)  
*Alias Grace* (1996)  
*The Blind Assassin* (2000)  
*Good Bones and Simple Murders* (2001)  
*Oryx and Crake* (2003)

## NONFICTION

- Survival: A Thematic Guide to  
 Canadian Literature* (1972)  
*Days of the Rebels 1815–1840* (1977)  
*Second Words: Selected Critical Prose  
 1960–1982* (1982)  
*Strange Things: The Malevolent North in  
 Canadian Literature* (1996)  
*Two Solicitudes: Conversations [with  
 Victor-Lévy Beaulieu]* (1998)  
*Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on  
 Writing* (2000)  
*Moving Targets* (2004)

## POETRY

- Double Persephone* (1961)  
*The Circle Game* (1966)  
*The Animals in That Country* (1968)  
*The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970)  
*Procedures for Underground* (1970)  
*Power Politics* (1971)  
*You Are Happy* (1974)  
*Selected Poems* (1976)  
*Two-Headed Poems* (1976)  
*True Stories* (1981)  
*Interlunar* (1984)  
*Selected Poems II: Poems Selected and  
 New, 1976–1986* (1986)  
*Morning in the Burned House* (1995)

## FOR CHILDREN

- Up in the Tree* (1978)  
*Anna's Pet  
 [with Joyce Barkhouse]* (1980)  
*For the Birds* (1990)  
*Princess Prunella and the  
 Purple Peanut* (1995)  
*Rude Ramsay and the Roaring Radishes*  
 (2003)  
*Bashful Bob and Doleful Dorinda*  
 (2004)