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Dialogue, Silence, and the Self

In To The Lighthouse

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is a tremendously volatile yet fragile web of dialogue. The dialogism of the novel creates an interactive domain for different voices and thus privileges the individuality of the characters in a kind of "unfinalizability" that embodies the novel. Carnavalesque discourse works in concert with dialogism, where the permanent operation of dialogue prevents the establishment of any sort of hierarchical structure. Although the problem of knowledge of others' minds is of importance in the novel, psychology is clearly more central than epistemology: each character takes shape primarily in the ever-shifting and unreliable memory of the other characters. Woolf maintains optimism, however, in depicting our search and desire for this kind of knowledge in its full human complexity and many-sidedness. One also notices the lopsided ratio of internal action to external communication in the text. Most of the characters confront this inadequacy of language, hovering around one another's "sealed hives...drawn by some sweetness or sharpness in the air intangible to touch or taste," (Woolf, 51) as Lily articulates. In striving for the knowledge of others, characters must first confront their own selves. By looking not at how style parallels meaning, but how style itself means, one must analyze what literary critic Rebecca Saunders calls "unclaimed consciousness"—the portions of the text that cannot be positively designated as the consciousness of any character—and the use of the pronoun "one" in the novel. This essay will examine the rich intricacy of Virginia Woolf's language in *To the Lighthouse* in three parts: a close Bakhtinian reading of dialogism and carnival, the human epistemological desire and insufficiency to understand and access 'the other,' and the concept of the 'self.' The substantial moments of silence between characters and the futility of words envelop the entire novel and together play a significant role in appreciating the power of language in the silent spaces in which a disjointed intimacy resides.

In his essay, "Dialogism and Carnival in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*," professor Hamed Faizi turns to Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of dialogism and carnival. According to Faizi, dialogism is "a way of looking at things that always insists on the presence of the other, on the inescapable necessity of out-sidedness and unfinalizability." (Faizi, 1) Bakhtin's theories revolve around the notion of dialogue where a person's identity and consciousness are shaped by his/her interactions and relationships with others. "Unfinalizability" is a key feature of dialogism that allows dialogue to exist on a continuum over the course of time. Faizi references Bakhtin: "In a Bakhtinian ideally polyphonic novel, the voices inside the discourse fully respond to the presence and desires of each other." (Faizi, 1) Polyphony, in this sense, creates more dialogic space, allowing all voices to be heard. In Woolf's novel, all of the characters are always in polyphonic discourse with one another where no hierarchy can be established. This sort of dynamic discourse continues throughout the novel, which reflects the unfinalized nature of dialogism. According to Bakhtin, "this [unfinalizability] is due to the unique nature of the object itself: the novel is the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted ... The generic skeleton of the novel is still far from having hardened, and we cannot foresee all its plastic possibilities."

(Faizi, 2) In *To the Lighthouse*, this quality is portrayed by the fact that characters' opinions about one another are continually changing, always being shaped and reshaped by new encounters. As a result, there is no final resolution or final word to the narrative.

Woolf employs Mrs. Ramsay to play the vital role of a linking agent among the characters, so much so that her absence in the final two sections of the book causes all things to become ruptured. Toward the end of the novel, Lily thinks, "As if the link that usually bound things together had been cut, they floated up there, down there, off, anyhow. How aimless it was how chaotic, how unreal it was, she thought, looking at her empty coffee cup." (Woolf, 110) With Mrs. Ramsay's death, all cohesion is lost. The summer home, the family, and dialogue between characters slowly unravel and begin to corrode. Mrs. Ramsay serves as an example for the unfinalizability in the novel as well. Her disposition towards Charles Tansley is never finalized. In one moment, she loathes him for his hurtful words towards James, and at other moments, her feelings soften toward him: "She looked at him. He was such a miserable specimen, the children said, all humps and hollows." (Woolf, 6) She even develops a liking towards him on their walk: She liked him warmly at the moment Till she gathered that he had got back entire self-confidence, had recovered from the circus, and was about (and now again she liked him warmly) to tell her." (Woolf, 12) This affirms the dialogism in which characters' thoughts of each other are ever changing. Bakhtin remarks:

They will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue. At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue's subsequent development along the way they are recalled and reinvigorated in renewed form. Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival. (Bakhtin, *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, 170)

Another example of this mechanism is the dinner party, during which Lily Briscoe asks Mr. Tansley to take her to the lighthouse and he responds with rather unexpected sentiment: "Judging the turn in her mood correctly—that she was friendly to him now—he was relieved of his egotism, and told her how he had been thrown out of a boat when he was a baby; how his father used to fish him out with a boat hook, that was how head had learned to swim." (Woolf, 70) Here Woolf invites the reader to observe the internal monologue of Charles Tansley. The quote begins with his internal assessment and navigation of the social atmosphere around him, more specifically between him and Lily. With the affirmation that Lily was now friendly to him, he proceeds to express his softened feelings by sharing his childhood memories.

The notion of carnival is another key notion in Bakhtinian theories that functions in dialogic discourse as well. What is of primary significance in carnival is the feature that multiple voices come together to act upon each other in such a way that paves way for characters to assert their individuality. In a visual perspective, carnival can be thought of as an extensive matrix across which no vertical structure of hierarchy can be found. Faizi writes: "A Carnavalesque narrative discourse is established through which the voices that yield to be dominant...could not be established as a hierarchical position and... loses its authoritative position as the other characters attend the dialogue in the context of the novel." (Faizi, 1) In the novel, Woolf perhaps makes Mr. Ramsay's voice most dominant, but the continual resistance from the agents of the discourse, especially during the dinner party, "promises the formation of a widespread sense of carnival that no dimension of his existence can go out of it." (Faizi, 2) Woolf in a sense nullifies Mr. Ramsay's tyranny and considers character marginalization, more specifically the character development that stems from that marginalization in a dialogic background.

In the novel, there is a constant desire to know the minds of others, to enter their “sealed hives” and discover what lies behind the “sweetness or sharpness” (Woolf, 51) that lures them in. All of the characters want access to the other in this way. The first section of *To the Lighthouse* depicts both “our epistemological insufficiency toward one another and our unquenchable epistemological longing.” (Nussbaum, 732) Lily ponders the question of knowing others’ minds: “How then, she had asked herself, did one know one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were? Only like a bee, drawn by some sweetness or sharpness in the air intangible to touch or taste, one haunted the dome-shaped hive, ranged the wastes of the air over the countries of the world alone, and then haunted the hives with their murmurs and their stirrings; the hives, which were people.” (Woolf, 51) In her complex image, Lily indicates through the metaphor of bees and their hives both that knowledge of the mind of another is a profound human wish and that this knowledge is unattainable. The hives are sealed and whatever sweetness or sharpness that lures one is merely superficial—all one can do is hover around the outside, listening to the hums and whirrs of the vibrant life within. The problem with access to the other is the rather imperfect nature of language, the instrument we use to make ourselves available to one another. Nussbaum believes that “the meanings of the common language become inflected with the peculiarities of each person’s history and character and taste, in such a way that, although in principle language we might express the peculiar character of an individual’s thought, in fact, the shopworn common language of daily social interchange rarely does so.” (Nussbaum, 735) Language, in short, issues from a personal history. It verbalizes the speaker’s meanings, which are often highly idiosyncratic. What is interesting, however, is that the characters, as much as they desire to know each other, almost always resist being known. They speak and act in ways that distance themselves from others.

It is in the silent spaces of the novel where much of the authentic, evocative communication between characters takes place. Words often seem insufficient in conveying what the characters desire whereas a silent dialogue between characters who understand each other seems to illuminate the most fundamental truths. Woolf’s writing style depicts the disconnectedness that her characters experience. She writes in long, winding sentences of internal monologue that embody a poetic, often non-linear quality. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay’s relationship is largely defined by meaningful silences, and both characters encounter this constant and dramatic human struggle with language during a pivotal scene in *To the Lighthouse*. Mrs. Ramsay enters the study and immediately knows, “she wanted something more, though she did not know, could not think what it was that she wanted If only he would speak!” (Woolf, 117-118) Mrs. Ramsay is desperate for some kind of connection between herself and Mr. Ramsay, something she cannot exactly define, but knows that it can only be accomplished through his words. Later when he finally speaks to her, it is Mr. Ramsay who becomes desperate for Mrs. Ramsay’s reciprocal voice. He “wanted her to tell him that she loved him.” (Woolf, 123) Once again, they communicate in silence: “As she looked at him she began to smile, for though she had not said a word, he knew, of course, he knew, that she loved him. He could not deny it ... she had not said it: yet he knew.” (Woolf, 124) There is so much that is left unsaid between them that carries so much significance. Even though Mrs. Ramsay wants to speak, “not for the world would she have spoken.” (Woolf, 20) Even though Mr. Ramsay wants to speak, “he passed her without a word, though it hurt him that she could look so distant, and he could not reach her.” (Woolf, 65) It is in these scenes of loving silence that the reader feels the disjointed intimacy that binds the two characters.

One reason why so much is thought and so little is spoken is because the characters believe that their words do not do their thoughts justice. Another is that their thoughts and desires are so contradictory

that they often do not even know what they are trying to put into words. Lily expresses her frustration with expressing herself as an artist: "What was the problem then? ... It evaded her ... phrases came. Visions came. Beautiful pictures. Beautiful phrases. But what she wished to get hold of was that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything." (Woolf, 193) Lily wants to share an emotion but she "could not say what it was." (Woolf, 131) She is unable to authentically grasp, in this case with paint in place of words, what she feels. Silence has the power of uniting the characters as well. At the dinner party, as soon as the candles are lit, "some change at once went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there." (Woolf, 97) Silence and vision unites Mr. Ramsay and his children as well on their trip to the lighthouse in the final section of book: "They all looked. They looked at the island together, their point of vision focusing on the same object." (Woolf, 166) It was "looking together [that] united them." (Woolf, 97) The characters oscillate between being aware and unaware that "it was not knowledge but unity that [they] desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself." (Woolf, 51) In this way, Virginia Woolf creates small moments that capture the "final significance of the soul's place in compelling intimacy, contrasting the strength of the human soul with the spoken and written word." (Hirt, 69) To Woolf, the essence of life which creates and secures the voiceless understandings of intimacy possesses the most extraordinary influence of all. The rich, complex relationships between the characters highlight the need for closeness and the awareness of commonalities between spouses and strangers allows the characters to bond closely in the silence.

Above all, the novel shows us the strength of shame as a motive for this self-concealment that is so prevalent in *To the Lighthouse*. Charles Tansley's anger and hopes of denouncing the Ramsays stems from a profound feeling of embarrassment and inadequacy that he does not fit in, does not belong. He desperately conceals this insecurity beneath his angry silence. For Mr. Ramsay, the root of shame is not linked to class but is more personal—the sense of professional and intellectual failure that underlies his tyrannical manner: "It was a disguise; it was the refuge of a man afraid to own his feelings, who could not say, This is what I like—this is what I am; and rather pitiable and distasteful to William Bankes and Lily Briscoe, who wondered why such concealments should be necessary." (Woolf, 45) However, for Mr. Ramsay, concealment is a way of attaining power. He does not try to conceal shame for the purpose of soliciting attention and comfort from those around him, especially women. Nussbaum states that Mr. Ramsay "makes himself more emotionally transparent, in a certain way, than the other characters do...but even this transparency is both statement and demand:" "He sighed profoundly. He sighed significantly. All Lily wished was that this enormous flood of grief, this insatiable hunger for sympathy, this demand that she should surrender herself up to him entirely, and even so he had sorrows enough to keep her supplied forever." (Woolf, 151) It is apparent here that Mr. Ramsay's motive is not just to table shame—he wants his weakness to be noticed at times and desires some sort of emotional reciprocation. At this point, Nussbaum offers an interesting argument. She writes, "Even when we have what seems most like frankness, we may have something far more complicated and strategic. The very concept of frank depiction of the inner may itself involve an oversimplification." (Nussbaum, 739) She suggests that Woolf sees the problem of other minds not simply as an epistemological problem, a problem of evidence and certainty, but above all an ethical problem, a problem produced by the motives and desires with which people approach beings who are both separate from them and vital to their projects.

Responding to the saturation of hiddenness and reclusiveness in the novel, Woolf's characters try to solve the problem of knowledge by attempting to possess, to grab hold, even to become one with the other's thoughts and feelings. For possession would be, it seems, the most satisfying solution to their epistemological problem. The most elaborate case of this is Lily's effort to know Mrs. Ramsay:

Sitting on the floor with her arms round Mrs. Ramsay's knees, close as she could get, smiling to think that Mrs. Ramsay would never know the reason of that pressure, she imagined how in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her, were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public. What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers? What device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored? Could the body achieve, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intricate passages of the brain? Or the heart? Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? (Woolf, 50-51)

Nussbaum remarks, "Lily's attempt to know Mrs. Ramsay...is unilateral; it coexists with her own amused pride in her own self-concealment. This suggests that the project of knowing, as she conceives it, has itself something of the desire for power in it, just as strategic as the desire to protect herself from knowing." (Nussbaum, 742) Lily thinks of the project of knowing as a kind of reading. We as the readers go inside her mind and read her internal landscape that the other characters cannot see. At times reading is not intimate enough, for it substitutes an internal object for an external one, but does not really yield the grasp of what it is like to be that person, to have ownership over that person's thoughts and feelings. It is this, not just propositional 'book-knowledge' that Lily desires. She ultimately fails to unite herself with Mrs. Ramsay, "Sitting on the floor with her arms round Mrs. Ramsay's knees, close as she could get...nothing happened. Nothing! Nothing!" (Woolf, 51) and reconciles with her unrealistic desire, substituting a more modest goal—knowing "one thing or another thing." (Woolf, 51) Nussbaum believes that there is wisdom in Lily's shift from the grandiose demand for possession to the more modest demand to know "one thing or another thing" about those sealed hives that murmur and buzz as we hover greedily around them: "At the very least, Lily's new question involves a more adequate conception of herself—as not a superhuman but a human being, finite in both body and mind, partial and incomplete, separate from other humans of necessity and always." (Nussbaum, 743)

Finally, we turn to Rebecca Saunders' critical essay on the relationship of Virginia Woolf's style in *To the Lighthouse* to concepts of the self. There are certain passages in the novel that cannot be designated as the consciousness of any single character with certainty, which Saunders refers to as "unclaimed consciousness." These passages are a function of point of view rather than voice, though *To the Lighthouse*, which is told almost entirely from the point of view of the characters ... "might seem to be a kind of direct enactment of consciousness or pure mimesis." (Saunders, 195) The covert narrator of the novel usurps the discourse from the characters, speaking as the envoy of their consciousness. The word "usurp" connotes an ethics of power relations. It implies that the discourse rightly belonged to someone in the first place. Then Saunders asks, "Who has the right to speak for whom?" (Saunders, 196) Looking more closely at this usurpation of voice, we turn to Lily: "What does it mean then, what can it all mean? ... for she could not, this first morning with the Ramsays, contract her feelings, could only make a phrase resound to cover the blankness of her mind until these vapours had shrunk. 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” (Woolf, 137) Here, the narrator expresses what Lily is unable to—s/he establishes the possibility of communication. While the whole novel is the product of one voice which at times assumes the role of a given character and approximates his patterns of thought, the point of view is not only constantly shifting, but is often indeterminate. Some critics like Mitchel Leaska have said that the major problem of the multiple-point of view novel is determining the consciousness presenting the material at any given moment. He thinks that one must pay close attention to “verbal signals” (Leaska, 14) in the text and that failure to do so will result in “numerous misjudgments of character and misinterpretations of thematic material.” (Leaska, 14) On the contrary, that very indeterminacy is what is beautiful about novels like *To the Lighthouse*—it is in this fuzzy ambiguity where one can imagine, hypothesize, and traverse the inner landscape of characters’ minds.

First, it is crucial to recognize that even in the case of such indeterminacy of phrases and passages, there is, grammatically speaking, an implied subject. However, while these implied subjects exist, it is impossible to definitively associate the grammatical subject with a corresponding character: “Not only then has consciousness been severed from voice, but consciousness has been severed from the very self Woolf’s style then ... theorizes something like an absolute subject, a self emptied of objective phenomena, the self not of “I think therefore I am” but “I am that I am”—a self in which phenomena are only loosely tied to being, and not by any means definitive to it.” (Saunders, 200) Second, the passages of “unclaimed consciousness” that do not seem to be owned by any one character suggest “a dissolution of the boundaries of the ego, or an ability to coalesce both with the consciousness of others and with the external world.” (Saunders, 200) It is a phenomenon that allows characters to think the same thoughts without needing to speak to one another, as Lily and Mr. Bankes both feel a “common hilarity, excited by moving waves”, or as Cam and James know tacitly on the way to the Lighthouse that their father “[will] never be content until they were flying along.” (Woolf, 152) This breakdown of ego boundaries seems to result in a kind of communal ownership of consciousness. In such passages, unitary selves exist, but identity seems to exist only as a kind of atmosphere of consciousness that characters “inhale and exhale, only provisionally laying claim to a particular part of it as their and theirs alone.” (Saunders, 202) This communal reservoir of consciousness seems to serve as a backdrop to individualized identity.

One of the most repeated devices in the novel is the use of the pronoun “one,” which, while constructing a single symbolic subject grammatically, does not do so semantically. “One” can mean anything from everyone to this particular one, to no one in particular. Mrs. Ramsay eloquently portrays this when she is alone:

“Not as oneself did one find rest ever, in her experience...but a wedge of darkness. Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir... One could not help attaching oneself to one thing especially for the things one saw...It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to things, inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself.” (Woolf, 62)

The “one” of this passage seems, of course, to be Mrs. Ramsay herself, her own experience of the self: she could not help attaching herself to one thing. Here, she is referring to herself as “one,” and has “expanded the boundaries of the self to include a reinforcing companionship.” (Saunders, 208) She has defined this hypothetical community in terms of her own consciousness, formed a community out of the

material of herself. Mrs. Ramsay is drawn closer to an essential self which she feels can only be defined negatively, as a vast dark realm which everyone has in common, apart from their external personality. Further, she has replaced the concept of her determinate self with indeterminacy, a recurring theme in the novel. Ironically, Mrs. Ramsay, thinking of herself as “one,” has set up a kind of “distancing mechanism from the self, an other that, while not the self, is a close enough representation of it to facilitate self-reflection.” (Saunders, 208)

It is significant that this self-interrogating self is indeterminate, that the characters take themselves outside of the symbolic order to contemplate things like life and the human race. Lily Briscoe often refers to herself as “one:” “She would have snatched her picture off the easel, but she said to herself, One must. She braced herself to stand the awful trial of someone looking at her picture. One must, she said, one must.” (Woolf, 52) In this instance, obviously, Lily is the one who must allow someone to see her painting, but by referring to herself as “one,” she seems to be “trading in” herself in hopes that the “one” she gets in return will have greater strength than she, isolated in a unitary self.

In other instances, the pronoun “one” seems to refer to a specific person rather than replacing the thinking subject: “One seemed to hear doors slamming and voices calling ... “what does one send to the Lighthouse?” as if she were forcing herself to do what she despaired of ever being able to do...What does one send to the Lighthouse? —opened doors in one’s mind that went banging and swinging to and fro and made one keep asking, in a stupefied gape, What does one send? What does one do? Why is one sitting here after all?” (Woolf, 146) Lily’s question, “What does one send to the Lighthouse?” seems not to be asking what anyone would send, but what Mrs. Ramsay, the pervasive absence in the second half of the novel, would have sent. Saunders remarks, “This permutation of Mrs. Ramsay into an indeterminate pronoun seems simultaneously to evade the painful presupposition of the question—that Mrs. Ramsay is dead—and to reaffirm that a vacancy has been left in the community that no specific “one” dare try and fill.” (Saunders, 210) This indeterminate pronoun seems to describe the very essence of her being in the final section of the novel, “a presence that is both nowhere and everywhere, of the nature, perhaps, of the self of miraculous predication.” (Saunders, 210)

Woolf’s fictional world is almost dizzyingly fluid. The external world is recorded as an ongoing montage, incapable of lending any kind of steady orientation. Once such a reality is suggested, the question of why an individual sees things in the particular way that he does arises. Woolf’s characters in *To the Lighthouse* take shape primarily in the ever shifting and unreliable memory of other characters. Because of this volatility, it becomes difficult for us as well as the characters to say which aspect constitutes their “real” self. “Real” seems to be whatever what one feels at a given moment. As a result, it is impossible for Woolf’s characters to relate their emotional highs and lows or to gain any insight to the totality of their being—a true sense of wholeness can therefore never be attained. It is the constant vacillation between things and the desire to be whole that makes the novel the gracefully intricate work of art that it is.

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