

A babel of tongues –  
the dialectic of  
communication and  
solitude in virginia  
wool...



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Virginia Woolf's answer to Mr. Ramsay's philosophical pursuits in *To the Lighthouse* is a reconciliation of both worlds – subjective perception and interpretation, and external objectivity. The first chapter of the novel is entitled “The Window,” and serves to represent the point of contact between subjective and objective states. This, Woolf believes to be our reality. External facts are arbitrary and meaningless until they are apprehended by a subjective state which gives them form; on a social level, communicating as a participant in society exposes the individual to an incoherent tumult of impressions that have to be reorganized into a coherent whole in solitude. Only then can one achieve peace. The individual is hence continually in search of an equilibrium in the dialectic of communication and solitude.

Peter Walsh summarizes this concept in Mrs. Dalloway:

However, to re-enter society as a participant entails at least a partial suspension of one's subjectively constructed reality. Creative organisation is forfeited, and the “infinite richness” of life that Peter experienced a moment ago gives way to anxiety and a sense that events are spiraling out of one's control. The city appears to be “floating off in a carnival,” and the febrile party of life – “the flare and the glare” – becomes lurid and chaotic. The coherent whole fragments and becomes meaningless isolated elements of reality that wash past Peter in an incomprehensible manner: “the cold stream of visual impressions failed him now as if the eye were a cup that overflowed and let the rest run down its china walls unrecorded.”

The consequence of this is that “ the brain must wake now...the soul must brave itself to endure.” Previously, as an invisible flâneur amidst the bustling city, Peter could relax his mind to appreciate the myriad impressions of London life. To join the party would entail shedding invisibility and arresting these mental excursions in order to function socially. He takes out his pocketknife again, as he did when he first went to see Clarissa in the morning. T. E Apter suggests that the pocketknife is “ a tool with which to pare down his perceptions, to preen his identity, and to defend himself against others’ views.” This is observed in Peter Walsh’s proleptic defense constructed in his thoughts against society’s voice, including Clarissa’s. He defends himself against the labels “ Socialist” and “ failure,” asserting that the future of civilization lies in the “ hands of young men like[himself],” and diminishes Clarissa’s negative opinions of him by suggesting that she is superficial and snobbish.

While Apter feels that Peter Walsh’s pocketknife is not a “ worn-out masculine symbol,” Peter’s self-defensive maneuvers are undeniably offensive. Watching Peter handle his pocketknife, Clarissa imaginatively formulates his self-defense as revealed in his interior monologue – that she was “ frivolous; empty minded; a mere chatterbox.” His self-defense invariably becomes an attack – interaction and communication hence turn into a battleground. Clarissa retaliates “ like a Queen whose guards have fallen sleep and left her unprotected,” and “ summoned to her help the things she did; the things she liked; her husband; Elizabeth; her self, in short...to come about her and beat off the enemy (my italics).” Her self, violated by misrepresentation, seeks to validate itself and emerges as the “

indomitable egotism” that safeguards her vanity by overriding Peter’s claims. As a result, both Peter and Clarissa “ challenge each other” as in a “ battle.”

Clarissa validates her identity through external indicators – “ the things she did; the things she liked; her husband; Elizabeth.” This is because a pattern of symbolic interpretation preexists the objects she names. Husband, daughter and hobbies can therefore be used as symbols representing success and felicity to vindicate Clarissa’s choices in life and challenge Peter’s position. However, these external indicators often make reductive summaries of their characters that they would not accept so easily in solitude. Clarissa chooses to define herself in these terms insofar as they offer her protection against Peter’s accusations; they cannot, however, fully represent her essential being, which explains “ the feeling...of dissatisfaction” she often experiences of “ not knowing people; not being known.” On the other hand, using social language to “ preen one’s identity” does scale down the task of defending oneself against the whole of society into manageable proportions. One tactic Peter employs is in reproducing the external indicators imposed upon him in a dismissive tone (hence “ preening his identity”), as he does later during the party. This subverts the significance of the criticisms and places him in a more enviable light than the term “ failure” would normally allow. This is done without necessitating a head-on battle against society’s rather ill-founded impositions and labels – a task which would only make him appear insecure and, indeed, even more of a “ failure.” Another means of self-defense is to appeal to another set of external indicators, which Peter does in response to Clarissa’s attack. He

draws upon his “praise; his career at Oxford; his marriage” and tackles society’s implicit criticisms with another implicit social argument, and hence simultaneously defends and misrepresents himself.

When one is alone, the self is relieved of the tedious tasks of self-defense and self-validation. The individual is allowed his own subjective understanding of events passing in the world and meets no resistance in his interpretation. Peter, upon leaving Clarissa, can therefore criticize her as having “something cold,” “a sort of timidity which in middle age becomes conventionality,” without facing Clarissa’s offensive self-defense. These criticisms are individual interpretations and are expressed in terms that are more subjective and descriptive, though less peremptory (which reduces their defensive power) than the predetermined arguments implicit in reductive and generalized social indicators. While these interpretations would afford a more meaningful debate, their lack of defensive power causes them to be eschewed on social battlegrounds where the more imperious external indicators are favoured. Only in solitude is Peter able to organize a more meaningful representation of reality based on his own subjective interpretation of the events around him.

Social language can be seen to impose frameworks of identity on characters, denying them the validity of their subjectively construed self-representations. It is this imposition of identity that characters in *The Hours* find unbearable. Cunningham describes his text as a “riff” on Mrs. Dalloway. Faithfully enough, his text is informed by the same theories of identity as a fluid concept as is seen in Woolf, where the self is constantly foiled and

resurrected in an etiology concerning identity shaped by communication and solitude.

Richard feels that the party could go on “ with the idea of [him].” His self identity has been subsumed into facile social categorization, and he is defined as the tragic and sick artist who writes “ weird book[s].” It is for this reason that he feels he “ got a prize for [his] performance...for having AIDS and going nuts and being brave about it.” The external indicators – his sickness and his lengthy book – once again triumph over the true qualities of the self, here partially represented by the actual contents of his work, which nobody seems to understand. Laura Brown likens her anxieties about meeting her husband to the feeling one gets when “ about to go onstage and perform in a play for which [one] is not appropriately dressed, and for which [one] has not adequately rehearsed.” She is acutely aware of the disparity between her self-perceived identity and the identity society has constructed for her, which she has to assume. She finds social identity – “ the inchoate, tumbling thing known as herself, a mother, a driver” – superficial and meaningless, and liberates herself from the constraints of being a wife in a perfect home by escaping into a hotel. She experiences there “ a sensation of deep and buoyant release,” which is the solace of self-reconstruction in solitude. Having “ slipped out of her life” and escaped social imposition, she experiences “ a sensation of unbeing,” for she has just lost social definition. Formerly, the being and the living had been the existence defined by society – the meaningless performance. The dissolution of the social “ I” in solitude allows her self to emerge and conceive how “ it is possible to die,” how death has a “ dreadful beauty.” The “ neutral zone” of the hotel room is void of

socially imposed reality, and it is there, for the first time, that Laura is able to understand the appeal of death. This appeal is Laura's subjective interpretation of the world (and of death in particular), and is an interpretation that has thus far been suppressed by social definition. Her "patriotism" for her husband – her civic responsibility to remain by his side and uphold the social tenets of familial duties – previously made such an idea unthinkable.

A more insidious aspect of social interaction and communication is highlighted in Mrs. Dalloway and is represented by the two "Goddesses" of "Proportion" and "Conversion." These are essentially abstractions of social establishments that enforce definitions regarding moral, political, emotional, or aesthetic realities, and which are given a satirical mythological status. They "smite out of [the] way roughly the dissentient, or dissatisfied" and "bestow...blessing on those who...catch submissively from [their] eyes the light of their own," asserting their blinkered positions to be the only truths. Hugh Whitbread, who kissed Sally Seton to "punish her for saying that women should have votes," could be said to be an agent of "Proportion" and "Conversion." He masquerades under the "venerable name" of "kindness" and does more harm than "the rascals who get hanged for battering the brains of a girl out in a train." Having been converted, he becomes a proponent of the "Goddesses": by embodying outward social perfection without real depth of character, he is empowered, under the aegis of society, to stifle imagination, creativity and understanding, and repudiates Sally's self-conceived reality, which made only the very modest claim that equal voting opportunities are appropriate in a civic moral society.

Michael Cunningham, in *The Hours*, examines Woolf's "Proportion" and "Conversion" in the context of the homosexual identity. By transposing Woolf's diegesis of anomie onto the postmodern constructionistic concepts of identity, Cunningham is able to intensify the paradoxical tensions concerning the need for validation of one's subjective experiences and the longing for social acceptance and integration. Walter Hardy, desiring acceptance, succumbs to "Conversion." He possesses physical health, wealth and happiness – the touchstones of social success – leaving not a trace of the "overweight, desperately friendly" child "able to calibrate the social standing of other ten-year-olds to the millimeter." But by accepting society's criteria for judging success, he affirms its truth. Richard is hence justified in saying that "eternally youthful gay men do more harm to the cause than do men who seduce little boys." At least in seducing little boys, these men are affirming their subjective life experiences (which are their homosexual attractions and emotions), whereas men like Hardy, by their outward subscription to the social norm and passive assimilation of society's ideological truths, allow the cycle of self-invalidation to continue into the next generation, and end up as simulacra of the "boys who tortured them in high school," becoming the very forces that convert other individuals into the "Proportions" of masculinity and success.

Oliver St. Ives is another character that embodies "Proportion." Sally remarks "how much Oliver resembles himself." The Oliver as movie star is almost identical to the Oliver of real life. As a movie star his image on television is defined through popular appeal, through society's ideals. That his private image should correspond so well with society's golden standard



reveals Oliver's lack of true self-identity – “ as if all other brawny, exuberant, unflinching American men were somehow copies of him.” He is the face of the American male. Characteristically, his movie panders to society's “ Proportion”: an action thriller with a guy “ who saves the world, one way or another.” An additional caveat attached reveals that “ this one would have a gay man for a hero.” Unfortunately, saying that “ it's not a big deal. He wouldn't be tortured about his sexuality. He wouldn't have HIV” is once again to deny the homosexual experience, to insist homosexuals had “ never been strange children, never taunted or despised,” and to reinforce the experiences of society's heterosexual norm. As David Bergman points out in “ Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature,” “ the child who will become gay conceives his sexual self in isolation. I cannot think of another minority that is without cultural support in childhood.” This precarious identity developed in solitude is allowed to be stamped by the need for social confirmation, and Oliver becomes the very force of “ Conversion.” Sally's anger with “ every optimistic, dishonest being” who denies their subjectively construed identity in favour of society's brutal misrepresentation is hence vindicated.

Such are the perils immanent in social participation that make a retreat into solitude so appealing. “ Our apparitions, the things you know us by, are simply childish” – here, Mrs. Ramsay recognizes that the self is inevitably distorted by and heavily concealed from society. Human relations are “ flawed,” “ despicable” and “ self-serving at their best,” because people inevitably choose to understand the world in a manner most gratifying to one's vanity. She relishes the solitude wherein “ she needs[s] not think about

anybody,” and needs not continually fight for self-validation. “ Having shed its attachments,” her self is free to wander uninhibited, and “ the range of experience seem limitless.” These “ strangest adventures” are not merely Mrs. Ramsay’s escapist fantasies of traveling to Rome and India; they are life experiences that are reorganized and refashioned by the “ unlimited resources” within one, and which form a subjectively conceived coherence – “ a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability.” Society foists itself on the individual, and it is only through “ losing personality” and escaping social participation – whether as mother, wife or host – that the external world is held back, enabling one to lose “ the fret, the hurry, the stir” and create “ this peace, this rest, this eternity” by and for oneself. In retreating into the “ wedged-shape core of darkness” of her self, subjective experience seemingly overwhelms the external objective world and turns it into a self-referential mirror – “ She (Mrs. Ramsay) became the thing she looked at.” This mirror affords “ peace” because it is the expression of the “ core of darkness,” the *moi splanchnique*. Seeing the self reflected on the face of the world lets it conceive of a harmonious unity, as if the essential truths of reality are indeed within oneself.

Woolf, however, as a lover of parties, maintained that communication with the external world is not only desirable, but also necessary. Septimus’ decline into solipsistic insanity corroborates the idea that “ communication is health; communication is happiness.” Septimus may also be seen as Clarissa’s *doppelgänger*. The tragic force gathers him, the alienated individual, in its nihilist folds and leads him to a premature death just as the comic force in Clarissa repeatedly pulls her back into society’s embrace in an

affirmation of the positive and the social order. Shell-shocked after the war, Septimus appears to repudiate the impositions of the objective world – the social and the external – and constructs a reality based almost exclusively on his thoughts and emotions. His preoccupation with Evans conjures up images of him with hardly any objective stimulus – he hears him sing and speak where there could only possibly be birds singing or people talking.

The objective world is lost to him, and he reveals: “ I went under the sea... but let me rest still.” He has collapsed into himself; his reality implodes. “ Under the sea” he stays immersed in his own self and society’s call for him to emerge is feverish, lurid and cacophonous:

His “ doom” was hence “ to be alone forever.” By the end of the novel he turns away from life and his doctors who are “ forcing (his) soul,” committing suicide to preserve “ the thing...that mattered.” This is the self which is “ wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured...let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter.” “ Closeness draws apart” because social language is inadequate. He cannot survive in this solitude and appealed to death for “ death was an attempt to communicate.” Clarissa does come to intuit his self-identity in the solitude of her “ little room” by imaginative recreation of his death, drawing material from her own experiences and emotions. She feels his “ terror; the overwhelming incapacity,” the “ indescribable outrage” of a “ soul” being “ forc[ed]” and experiences his death vicariously – “ her dress flamed, her body burnt.” She appeals to her own understanding of the world, remembering how she once felt “ if it were now to die, ’twere now to be most happy.” She seeps into Septimus’ consciousness thus by an empathetic

subjective understanding. If Septimus’ death is a triumph against Time’s  
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transience and an offering to the epiphanic moments of life, then Clarissa's quote from "Othello" would be representative. In solitude, through these references to her subjective world she achieves communication with Septimus. Woolf thus presents a paradox of opposites which is developed further in *To the Lighthouse*.

Lily Briscoe, the artist, finds that "distance had an extraordinary power." Distance enables withdrawal from social participation. As she paints, Lily retreats into solitude, going "out and out...further and further, until one [she] seemed to be on a narrow plank, perfectly alone, over the sea," in order to peer into "the chambers of the mind and heart" of Mrs. Ramsay. To understand the "sacred inscriptions" of Mrs. Ramsay's soul, Lily has to rely on her subjective understanding of the people and places which completed her. As Clarissa Dalloway suggests, "to know...anyone, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places." It would hardly be conceivable to accomplish this mammoth task physically. Lily, however, is able to "make up scenes," of which "not a word...was true." While objectively speaking these events had never occurred they are nonetheless completely plausible, extrapolated hypothetically based on one's understanding of other people. Fiction, formed by the creative self, is hence a useful tool for exploring human responses to various situations and elucidating their characters. Lily realizes that "it was what she knew them by all the same," and views and reviews Mrs. Ramsay from the subjective viewpoints of the Rayleys, of Mr. Carmichael, Mr. Bankes and the other Ramsays. She felt she needed "fifty pairs of eyes to see with" in order to achieve reconciliation amongst the kaleidoscopic representations of Mrs.

Ramsay, so that her portrait is not saturated with her limited perspective. Eventually, like Clarissa, she has to experience Mrs. Ramsay's emotional and intellectual experiences vicariously to achieve understanding. "What did the hedge mean to her, what did the garden mean to her, what did it mean to her when a wave broke?" – all these questions Lily strives to answer through imaginative enactment of events. She eventually manages to apprehend the world through Mrs. Ramsay's consciousness and her fear for Mr. Ramsay segues into love and need – "she wanted him." This is probably one aspect of Mrs. Ramsay's emotional response to her husband which Lily has never shared. In this rare instance of human communication, Lily achieves the same unity and peace that Mrs. Ramsay experienced with the lighthouse beam earlier on, for she had become, "like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object [Mrs. Ramsay] one [she] adored." The mirror returns, and she solves Mr. Ramsay's philosophical conundrum – the relationship between subjective and objective worlds – by creating a work of art that affirms the expression of the subjective self using material from the objective world. Her portrait is accurate for the "odd-shaped triangular shadow" corresponds with the "wedge-shaped core of darkness" so essential to Mrs. Ramsay's identity; the finishing stroke scored through the middle of the canvass is also reflective of the severance in human relationships that Mrs. Ramsay has always fought against.

Lily, like Woolf herself, rejects the notion of art as mimesis. "To be on level with ordinary experience" is to experience the phantasmagoric flux of fact and dream, to interweave between objective reality and subjective organization of that reality. Her painting is hence a "razor edge balance

between two opposite forces; Mr. Ramsay and the picture” - the uncompromising facts of objective reality embodied in Mr. Ramsay and Lily’s own subjective understanding of them come together, equipoised, “ clamped together with bolts of iron.” Objectivity in society and subjective latitude in solitude soldered together - this is Woolf’s answer to the dialectic of the comforts of solitude and the asperity of communication in external society.