



Towards a Vision of the Self: Knowing One's Self and Others in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

Anass Mayou^{[a],*}

^[a] Studies in Literary and Cultural Encounters, Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Beni Mellal, Morocco.

* Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* tackles venerable philosophical issues. The novel depicts the characters' incessant search for knowledge of themselves and others. Knowledge of one's self and others is a goal that eludes characters. Lily Briscoe, Mr., and Mrs. Ramsay all fail in their quest for each other and become confronted with their epistemological deficiencies for one another. This article draws on Emmanuel Levinas' perceptions of the relationship between the Self and the Other to examine the question of knowing one's self and others in *To the Lighthouse*. This article seeks to illustrate how the self is burdened by the impossibility of knowing the other. This study also seeks to illuminate how Virginia Woolf's authorial image of the vision functions as a moment of self-knowledge for both Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe.

Key words: The self; Knowing others; Self-knowledge; Virginia Woolf; Emmanuel Levinas

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"Mon Dieu! How the time passes!" Nothing could have been more commonplace than this remark; but its utterance coincided for me with a moment of vision. It's extraordinary how we go through life with eyes half shut, with dull ears, with dormant thoughts...Nevertheless, there can be but few of us who had never known one of these rare moments of awakening when we

see, hear, understand ever so much—everything—in a flash.

—Joseph Conrad¹

INTRODUCTION

In *Lord Jim*, by Joseph Conrad—an author whom Virginia Woolf admired and wrote about at length²—Marlow, the narrator, speaks of "a moment of vision" and "moments of awaking" that transform life and transmute consciousness, allowing the self to garner precious knowledge of itself and others. Like Conrad, Thomas Hardy³, and other British novelists, Virginia Woolf also makes use of those moments of vision that characters often experience in their pursuit of self-knowledge. The vision that Woolf incorporates in her novels is particularly polymorphous in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). It is a prodigious, and sometimes even elusive epiphany that the self undergoes in its quest to understand itself, the world, and the other.

Knowledge of one's self, self-examination, and introspection of the self should always precede knowledge and judgment of others: our incessant longing to know and judge the other often occludes a vision of ourselves. *To the Lighthouse* tackles a venerable philosophical issue. Virginia Woolf constructs an examination of the complex relationship between the self and the Other, an examination that explores the dynamics of the human soul within a non-linear state of temporality. Woolf considers the epistemological yearning for others and fundamentally for one's self. Lily Briscoe, Mrs. Ramsay, James, Cam, and Mr. Ramsay are all characters that exude an epistemological deficiency toward each other. The reader of *To the Lighthouse* is confronted with these characters' unrelenting flow of thoughts, little of which is grasped by

¹ Conrad, Joseph. *Lord Jim* (104). New York: Oxford UP, 2008.

² See: Woolf, Virginia. *Collected Essays Vol. 1* (302-309) (The Hogarth Press Ltd 1924).

³ See Also: Hardy, Thomas. *Moments of Vision and Miscellaneous Verses*. (MacMillan and Co., Limited 1929)

or even communicated to others. Hence, in constructing a narrative wherein a linear temporal perception of the self and the other is decidedly blurred, Woolf portrays a world in which knowledge of one's self comes as an illuminating vision while knowledge of others remains invariably out of reach.

THE WINDOW: TIME AND KNOWING OTHERS

The first part of *To the Lighthouse* is entitled: "The Window". This part describes the events of a single day, juxtaposed with the interruptions of characters' psychological inner ruminations. Lily Briscoe looks through the window at Mrs. Ramsay sitting with James, and Mrs. Ramsay insists that windows should be open and doors shut. Woolf's image of the window, as Martha Nussbaum concedes, suggests that people are not completely impenetrable to each other: There is an opening, one can see through or see in, even if one cannot enter (1995, p. 743). The window indicates the presence of an object, an alterity, or an Other that the self gazes at. The existence of this other is interspersed with the presence of a discursive time. In discussing the issue of knowing others in *To the Lighthouse*, it is important to remark on the significance of time in the novel. In his seminal book *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (1983), Johannes Fabian explores the concept of time and the temporal relationship with the Other: "Time, much like language or money, is a carrier of significance, a form through which we define the content of the relationship between the Self and the Other." (1983, p. XXXV). Fabian sees time as a bearer of significance and meaning.

For Levinas, time itself refers to the "situation of the face-to-face with the Other" (1987, p. 79). Time, for Levinas, is an indispensable feature in the encounter and relationship with the other. He asseverates that a reciprocal relationship with the other is unobtainable. At the heart of this relationship that characterizes social life, alterity, as Levinas argues, appears as a decidedly nonreciprocal relationship (1987, p. 83). This relationship is impossible simply because the self is unable to grasp the other in its totality. *To the Lighthouse* can be seen in the light of Levinas's and Fabian's perceptions of time and the other.

Time is as much a concern for Woolf as it is for Fabian and Levinas. Time looms large in the lives of the Ramsays and Lily Briscoe, just like the Lighthouse's strokes of light hover on Mrs. Ramsay's vision throughout the first part of the novel. The novel exemplifies this unattainability of the other that Levinas speaks about. The lighthouse itself is a symbol of time⁴ and a reminder of the other's

dazzling yet sometimes murky presence. The lighthouse stands at the locus of Ramsays' life, the successive light and shadow of its beam point us to their epistemological quest for one another, a quest that swings between contingency and impossibility, tension and reconciliation. It is first seen by Mrs. Ramsay as part of "the view ... that her husband loved" (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 2004, p. 11). She exclaims after seeing the lighthouse: "Oh, how beautiful!" For the great plateful of blue water was before her; the hoary Lighthouse, distant, austere, in the midst; and on the right, as far as the eye could see, fading and falling, in which always seemed to be running away into some moon country" (pp. 11-12). Mrs. Ramsay is aware of the 'distant' and 'austere' nature of the other that the lighthouse symbolizes. For her, the lighthouse seems to be distant and aloof in some "moon country". It fades and falls, just like the quest for the elusive other, which frequently falls asunder.

The journey to the lighthouse that James longs for at the beginning of the first part can be then construed as a journey to oneself, and a quest for reconciliation between this self and the other, between James and his father. The voyage to the Lighthouse becomes then an activity of consciousness (the self) that reaches out toward the light (Stewart, 1997, p. 388). This activity stems from a longing for the light, it seeks to reconcile an inherent tension and aims at an integration between the self and others. This light takes the form of an illuminating vision. This vision, whether Mrs. Ramsay's or Lily Briscoe's, is a variable illuminating knowledge of oneself and sometimes of others.

The first section of the novel, as Norman Friedman points out, deals chiefly with the relation of the self to others (1955, p. 64). Lily Briscoe seeks knowledge of the other: she seeks to know Mr. Ramsay's personality through knowing the nature of his works. She directs a question to Andrew about the content of his father's books, to which he replies: "Subject and object and the nature of reality" (p. 21). Even though Lily has grasped a fundamental trait of Mr. Ramsay, she nonetheless remains incapable of knowing what kind of person he is. It becomes obvious that no single trait or characteristic of a person can be grasped and cherished as a way of "knowing" him or her (Norman, 1955, p. 64). Lily then broods over how it is difficult to judge others, let alone know them: "How then did it work out, all this? How did one judge people, think of them? How did one add up this and that and conclude that it was liking one felt, or disliking? And to those words, what meaning attached, after all?" (p. 22).

Lily is burdened by her inability to not only form a judgment of Mr. Ramsay and Mr. Banks but also to think of them as intelligibly as possible: "Standing now, apparently transfixed, by the pear tree, impressions poured in upon her of those two men, and to follow her thought

⁴ Kohler, Dayton. "Time in the Modern Novel," Coll. Eng., X (1948), 15-24

was like following a voice which speaks too quickly to be taken down by one's pencil... (p. 23). She is encumbered by her incapacity to seize upon or take down the dictation of her own thoughts. This relationship between Lily (the self) and Mr. Ramsay, Mr. Bankes, and other characters is, in Levinas's perception, one of mystery, principally because the self has accosted the other in everyday life where the other's fundamental remoteness and alterity are already obscured by decency for one another (1987, p. 82).

Lily's reflections on the difficulty of knowing the other do not stop here. Instead, her flow of thoughts continues to unravel the mystery that this relationship with the other entails. As she tries to finish her painting, Lily seeks to know Mrs. Ramsay not through apartness but through oneness of being. This oneness with the other that Lily seeks is made obvious in her questions about Mrs. Ramsay: "Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one?". Lily's quest for the other, Mrs. Ramsay in this case, is not just one of knowledge but also one of unity. "she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge, she had thought, leaning her head on Mrs. Ramsay's knee." (p. 47). Lily's psychological reflections on the mystery of the relationship with the other are further manifested in more explicit passages. She questions one's ability to truly know others:

Nothing happened. Nothing! Nothing! as she leant her head against Mrs. Ramsay's knee. And yet, she knew knowledge and wisdom were stored up in Mrs., Ramsay's heart. 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. (p. 48)

Lily's attempt to know Mrs. Ramsay is, as we notice, already doomed to failure. Others, Mrs. Ramsay included, are sealed hives full of mystery. This mystery attracts the self just like a hive of bees often lures us. Unraveling this mystery remains a profound human wish. Ostensibly, this project of knowing the other, as Lily conceives it, is a quest where nothing happens according to one's wish. Though she seeks to know Mrs. Ramsay as *other*, Lily's wish remains unattainable as she recognizes the absence of a firm basis, one that can allow the self to garner a glimpse of others sealed as they were. She wonders how she can enter "the chambers of the mind and heart" (p. 47) of Mrs. Ramsay and gaze at the "scared inscriptions" of her personality. These inscriptions, as she comes to know, "would never be offered openly, never made public" (p. 47). The other's soul, as Lily sees it, is tangled in a 'golden mesh', a mesh through which one can see, but this sight remains opaque.

Virginia Woolf suggests that knowledge of the other is an art that eludes characters just like it does with Lily Briscoe. Yet, they continue to long for this art and pursue it, sometimes even obsessively. Wondering whether this knowledge of others is perhaps achieved by virtue of some dispensation, Lily asks herself: "What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed 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 it, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intricate passages of the brain? or the heart?" (p. 47). She attempts to comprehend this evasive art, yet it continues to elude her: She recognizes that her quest to know Mrs. Ramsay has decidedly failed, and that this art remains beyond her grasp. Lily becomes cognizant of the epistemological deficiency that she, Mrs. Ramsay, and Mr. Ramsay exude toward one another.

This epistemological deficiency is particularly conspicuous in Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay's relationship. Their relationship is not so much steeped in profound reciprocity, but it is rather saturated in extreme familiarity. Their search for knowledge of each other is invariably tantalizing, except in a few cases. The drama of their life is a drama of internal thoughts, sentiments, and emotions. As this drama progresses, the question arises: Do Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay know one another as much as readers know them? The answer that the novel seems to give is an emphatic 'no': "She would never know him. He would never know her. Human relations were all like that, she thought, and the worst (if it had not been for Mr. Bankes) were between men and women. Inevitably these were extremely insincere." (p. 86). Their epistemological deficiency and uncertainty toward each other remain intact principally because the other, as Levinas stresses, always retains its alterity and incomprehensibility⁵.

Encumbered by this epistemological insufficiency, Mr. Ramsay demands sympathy from his wife and others. He perceives it as a way whereby others can recognize him and assure him of his intellect and personality: He wanted sympathy.... It was- sympathy he wanted, to be assured of his genius. He must be assured that he too lived in the heart of life; was needed; not here only, but all over the world." (2004, pp. 34-35). It is through this sympathy, Levinas argues, that the other is known as another "(my) self, as an alter ego". (1987, p. 83). The other requires sympathy to be liberated from the bonds of totality.⁶ Mr. Ramsay demands sympathy hoping to be recognized, known, and ultimately liberated from the smothering failure of his social life. His longing for sympathy constitutes a yearning for the other, an *other* that can liberate the self from the fettering bonds of totality.

When Mr. Ramsay's attempts to know Mrs. Ramsay

⁵ (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 1988)

⁶ (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, 1969, p. 22)

and be understood by others end in failure, he is left with nothing but to demand sympathy from them. Here we arrive at a subtle point that the novel seems to suggest. That is, when one's quest for knowledge of others remains out of reach, and when one's attempts to enter the secret chambers of the mind and heart of the other fall asunder, one's only choice and recourse is to demand sympathy from others, hoping to be accompanied or at least recognized by them. If Lily Briscoe, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay fail in their quest for knowledge of one another, their failure is then an unspoken statement that admits the prodigious difficulty and even the impossibility of knowing the other in *To the Lighthouse*. This failure however does not deny the possibility of knowing oneself, for even if all of them fail to know each other, Lily and Mrs. Ramsay still attain a precious measure of yet another vision; they triumph in experiencing an illuminating vision of themselves.

TOWARDS A VISION OF THE SELF: KNOWING ONESELF

Just like Mrs. Ramsay has her vision at the dinner party in the first part of the novel, Lily Briscoe also has her vision at the end of the last part. Throughout the narrative of the 'Window', Mrs. Ramsay witnesses long strokes of light that the lighthouse projects when it is lit: "She saw the light again. With some irony in her interrogation... she looked at the steady light, the pitiless, the remorseless, which was so much her, yet so little her...but for all that she thought, watching it with fascination, hypnotised, as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain" (p. 60). In this case, light expands into the symbolic terrain of knowing one's self. The lighthouse beam is then a symbol that corresponds to knowledge and introspection of the self. Mrs. Ramsay's interrogation of the light is an interrogation attempt of her own self. Seeking to know and hold onto this light, Mrs. Ramsay interrogates it hoping to unravel some "sealed vessel in her brain" that might disclose something fundamental about herself. To know this Light, she must descend into the "wedge-shaped core of darkness" (p. 58) that is her inner and deepest self (Stewart, 1997, p. 382).

The long steady stroke of light that Mrs. Ramsay witnesses, "which was her stroke", (p. 58) builds to her vision at the dinner party as much as light does to Lily's vision near the end of the novel: "a reddish light seemed to burn in her mind" (p. 167). Woolf's authorial image of vision is by no means employed haphazardly. Both Lily's and Mrs. Ramsay's visions are commensurate with moments of awakening that yield knowledge of oneself, a precious measure of knowledge that is apprehended in an illuminating instant⁷. Their visions are best described

as a sudden "image with semblance of serving and divine promptitude" that "comes readily to hand bringing the night to order and making the world reflect the compass of the soul" (p. 122). While characters invariably fail in their epistemological pursuit of one another, Lily and Mrs. Ramsay nonetheless manage to enter the secret chambers of their minds and their hearts. Their visions are "sudden lightning flashes of significance" (Woolf, *The Common Reader*, 1953, p. 155) that reflect their deepest and innermost selves.

Woolf's image of vision is polymorphous in *To the Lighthouse*. Whereas Lily's vision is more explicit and writ large, Mrs. Ramsay's is more implicit and evanescent. Nevertheless, both visions correspond with a knowledge of oneself. Evanescent as it is, Mrs. Ramsay's vision is an illuminating instant of moments that allows her to witness a fading light yet hold onto a permanent and fundamental perception of herself: "in this profound stillness...Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that remains for ever after. This would remain." (p. 97). This epiphanic vision that yields a permanent perception of the self is corroborated moments before Lily's vision: "Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent) — this was of the nature of a revelation." (p. 154).

This vision that both Lily and Mrs. Ramsay experience is akin to a revelation. Mrs. Ramsay recognizes the sanctity and importance of such moments of revelation as they appear to be heralds of the self's fulfillment of being:

it was so important what one said, and what one did... For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of — to think; well not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others. Although she continued to knit, and sat upright, it was thus that she felt herself; and this self having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures. (pp. 75-58).

Mrs. Ramsay refrains from thinking about others. Instead, she is content with thinking about herself and eminently preoccupied with "being oneself". The moment of vision she experiences is solemn but fleeting. Mrs. Ramsay is described as being "something invisible to others" but not to herself, as she experiences a vision yielding a precious measure of self-knowledge. It is through these moments that life and time stand still, and one bears witness to a flickering vision of transcendental unity with one's self (Henke, 1999, p. 275), and one's existence.

Thinking about the meaning of her life, Lily muses on the nature of revelation and the meaning of such visions: "What is the meaning of life?... The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations,

⁷ (Maltby, 2002, p. 1)

matches struck unexpectedly in the dark.” (pp. 153-154). This vision, as Lily muses, takes the form of existential illuminations as it appears to be too crude to express what is most personal and what is deepest in the individual consciousness. Such illuminating visions foment extraordinary insights into the human condition and one's experience. These illuminations are instances wherein an inner meaning concerning one's existence, being and self becomes revealed. Lily is finally able to identify the “human apparatus for painting or for feeling” (p.184) after she declares that she has had her vision. This is principally because she experiences, just like Mrs. Ramsay does before her, a moment of being oneself. “Life has changed completely” (p.166), thinks Lily Briscoe, in a sudden flash of significance, and fundamentally, in a triumphant moment of self-knowledge.

CONCLUSION

Virginia Woolf dramatizes with great fullness the process whereby characters seek knowledge of others and themselves. Knowledge of one another is an endeavor that draws all characters in *To the Lighthouse*. Knowing others eludes Lily Briscoe just like it eludes other characters. Yet, they continue to long for this goal, and cannot bear to let this endeavor of knowing the other fall asunder. Like Levinas, Woolf suggests that the project of knowing the other remains invariably out of reach. Our epistemological deficiency for one another remains dazzling because the other always retains its alterity and incomprehensibility.

Lily laments “the extreme obscurity of human relationships” as she questions the possibility of ever knowing others: “Who knows what we are, what we feel? Who knows even at the moment of intimacy, This is knowledge?” (p. 163). Knowledge of other minds remains a prodigious difficulty. “One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with”, thinks Lily, but even fifty pairs of eyes, she discovers, are “not enough to get round that one woman” (p. 188). Woolf's authorial image of vision comes then as a sudden vestige of illumination, a revelation that characters such as Lily and Mrs. Ramsay experience in

their quest for self-knowledge. While Lily's painting symbolizes her interminable attempt to capture the essence of the other, both her and Mrs. Ramsay's visions constitute an incandescent moment of self-knowledge and an integrative fulfillment of being.

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