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Language in the Silent Space: Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse

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During a pivotal scene in Virginia Woolf’s novel To the Lighthouse, the protagonist of the story and her husband encounter the constant and dramatic human struggle with language: what is the role of words in our relationships? Mrs. Ramsay enters the study and immediately feels an ambiguity, knowing “she wanted something more, though she did not know, could not think what it was that she wanted” (117). She can tell just by looking at Mr. Ramsay as he reads that he does not want to be bothered, yet she thinks “if only he would speak!” (118). She is desperate for an unnamable connection between herself and her husband, something she cannot exactly define, but she knows it is only accomplished through his words. Mr. Ramsay’s poetic recitation from earlier that night “began washing from side to side of her mind rhythmically, and as
they washed, words, like little shaded lights, one red, one blue, one yellow, lit up the dark of her mind" (119). The reader then may think that words alone will rekindle the intimacy of this relationship. Still, “they had nothing to say, but something seemed, nevertheless, to go from him to her. It was the life, the power of it, it was the tremendous humor, she knew . . . Don’t interrupt me, he seemed to be saying, don’t say anything” (119). Later, after he finally breaks his silence and speaks to her, it is his turn to be desperate for words from her; he “wanted her to tell him that she loved him” (123). For her part, however, Mrs. Ramsay does not say anything but instead looks at him. “And 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...she had not said it; yet he knew” (124).

This fabulous scene ends the book’s first part and signals Mrs. Ramsay’s final appearance in the novel. It is in this scene of loving silence that the reader feels the disjointed intimacy that binds this wife and husband. Both characters sense what the other is thinking, most of the time just by looking at each other, but both are also desperate for words, whether of encouragement or disapproval, and their power of reconnection. At first glance, it is the words that make all the difference - yet do they really? Though an intimate connection is established by Mr. Ramsay’s words, Mrs. Ramsay’s silence also serves to communicate. Is it through words alone that we are able to communicate what is important, what is thought, what is
present in our consciousness? Can language itself bring about a change, transfer intimacy, or create a connection? Can even the most deeply considered and honest words establish lasting bonds of love? The characters in To the Lighthouse deal with these issues, confronting the inadequacy of language as a means for encompassing what they think and feel. Words oftentimes seem inadequate to convey what the characters desire whereas a silent dialogue between characters who understand each other seems to illuminate the most vital truths.

The language that Woolf herself uses to create To the Lighthouse gives the reader a sense of the disconnectedness that her characters are experiencing. Woolf writes in lengthily streaming sentences that embody a poetic, often non-linear, flow of consciousness. She leaves questions unanswered. Which character is speaking here? To whom does this pronoun refer? How can Mrs. Ramsay say this on one page and then this on the next? What exactly is this “something” that Lily yearns for? Moreover, what does Woolf want us to think at any given moment? By using an indirect way of showing us a character’s wandering interior monologue, Woolf is able to share the subjectivity of the characters but guarantee that they are never totally understood. As is Woolf’s intent, the readers are constantly a step away from the story and cannot find a way to wrap their minds around the characters. Thus, the author’s own style offers evidence that words are not always enough to help the reader comprehend the full form of a particular
character or moment.

Nevertheless, language is important not only to the author but also to the story’s characters. They appreciate the written word, as evident by the references to Shakespeare, Sir Walter Scott, George Eliot, Jane Austen, and Tolstoy. Books offer solace, as shown by Mrs. Ramsay’s dramatic encounter with a sonnet which causes her to feel tremendously satisfied. Yet books also offer evidence of the uncertainties of life since “who could tell what was going to last – in literature or indeed in anything else?” (107). The characters themselves are not able to tell. They are not able to see into the future to understand how their words affect their children and visitors; they are not able to foresee the deaths in the family and the eventual trip to the lighthouse.

Without this foreknowledge, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay doubt the longevity and value of their words. Mrs. Ramsay reads her children bedtime stories and soothes them with happy fairy tales from her heart but still wonders, “What have I done with my life?” (82) Mr. Ramsay has written a book but is always reading someone else’s words and quoting someone else’s poetry aloud. The words themselves are strong, no doubt; the poems at the dinner table “sounded as if they were floating like flowers on water out there, cut off from them all, as if no one had said them, but they had come into existence of themselves” (110). The reader can see that there is nothing personal in these words since they are removed from Mr. Ramsay’s own soul and lips.
Besides, Mrs. Ramsay does not often understand what these passages mean. She hears that “all the lives we ever lived and all the lives to be are full of trees and changing leaves” and she senses some desire to connect with it, but she does not process what she wants to connect to or what it means. Early on in the novel, Mrs. Ramsay hears her husband quoting poetry in the yard and she desires that same connection but cannot comprehend his words. “Someone has blundered,” Mr. Ramsay repeats. Mrs. Ramsay thinks “But what had happened? Some one had blundered. But she could not for the life of her think what” (30). Mr. Ramsay appears unable to express himself emotionally without using the words of another, thus creating a gulf between him and the other characters. Teenager Cam feels most rewarded when she is in the study with the old gentleman; she thinks that “one could let whatever one thought expand here like a leaf in water;” getting a greater satisfaction from observing her father’s work and intelligence in relation to her than from reading a stranger’s words on a page (190). As James thinks and as Mrs. Ramsay’s initial situation affirms, all it would take is an actual honest word from Mr. Ramsay to make things better, not an assertion that “someone has blundered” or “perished, each alone.” James and Cam watch their father as he reads a book on the boat, just as Mrs. Ramsay watched him read a book in the study, each waiting for him to say aloud what they want to hear. When he finally praises James on a job well done, the entire atmosphere changes from being tense and desperate to optimistic and fulfilling.
Thus, the reader can see the power of a direct and gratifying word and its ability to bring characters together.

The main reason why the characters have trouble sharing an honest word is that there is a great disconnect-edness between what the characters think and what they actually choose to say. From the very start, the reader is able to hear the innermost thoughts of the characters and is then aware of what the characters choose to share vocally with one another. Even if they are “filled with words,” they often say nothing when they wish to say something; and when they speak, they often say everything but what they are thinking (38). Even though Mrs. Ramsay wants to speak, “not for the world would she have spoken” (30); 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” (65). Time and again, despite the deep, overflowing thoughts accessible to the reader, the character chooses not to share them. In the end, many things are left frustratingly unsaid.

One reason why much is thought and little is spoken is because the characters believe that words do not do their thoughts justice. Another reason is that their thoughts and desires are so vague or contradictory that they often do not even know what they are trying to put into words. Many times in To the Lighthouse a character will want to diagnose a feeling or share an emotion but he or she “could not say what it was” (131). Lily is, for example, unable to grasp, with thoughts, words, or paint, what has happened:
“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” (193). At the book’s finale, Woolf keeps the reader wondering exactly what is being communicated among the family members about the completion of the trip to the lighthouse. It is revealed only that Mr. Ramsay “sat and looked at the island and he might be thinking, we perished, each alone, or he might be thinking, I have reached it. I have found it; but he said nothing” (207). This moment, though somewhat difficult for an impatient reader, is one that unites the father and his children in the silence. What is happening is that “they all looked. They looked at the island” together, their point of vision focusing on the same object (166). It was “looking together [that] united them” (97).

As noted earlier, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay do understand each other quite well, using small, silent connections during which “one need not speak at all” (192). Some of the most personal, sincere moments of family union occur when nothing has been vocalized. At the dinner table, when the characters are all “looking” at the same thing, “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” (97). When they are conscious of the moment and aware of their silent bond, they are united together. Yet there is a moment in the same
scene when each character manages to be interrelated, but no one is aware of it:

Lily was listening; Mrs. Ramsay was listening; they were all listening. But already bored, Lily felt that something was lacking; Mr. Bankes felt that something was lacking. Pulling her shawl round her, Mrs. Ramsay felt that something was lacking. All of them bending themselves to listen thought, ‘Pray heaven that the inside of my mind may not be exposed,’ for each thought, ‘The others are feeling this. They are outraged and indignant with the government about the fishermen. Whereas, I feel nothing at all.’

During the final scenes of the book, Cam and Lily are also connected, though the distance between the shore and sea shifts their perspectives. To Lily, looking out at the ship on the water, she sees that “it was so calm; it was so quiet” out there, while she fights with how to finish her painting (188). To Cam, looking back at the house, she thinks that “they have no suffering there,” while she fights with how to finish the journey with her father (170). Each believes that he or she is the only one who is troubled, empty, struggling, hoping, dreaming, learning, mourning; but if they only became aware that their gazes impacted the same objects, then they would all feel more closely united to each other.

Mr. Carmichael, the strange and silent visitor, sums up quite well Woolf’s messages on the duality of language
and the struggle to understand completely its role. According to Lily, Mr. Carmichael believes that "'you' and 'I' and 'she' pass and vanish; nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint," thus taking a strong stance in the disagreement on whether or not words have a lasting effect (179). Although the man believes it is words which remain, in the end it is he who makes a connection, though he "had not needed to speak" to Lily. "They had been thinking the same things and he had answered her without her asking him anything" (208). This scene creates a finality and intimacy between the two characters, one which would never have been accomplished through words, no matter how changing or unchanging they may be.

Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* itself can be considered a testament to the power of words and to the power of language in the silent space. The rich, complex relationships between the characters only highlight the need for closeness. The awareness of commonalities between spouses and strangers allows the characters also to bond closely in the silence. 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" (51). In this regard, Virginia Woolf creates a small moment that captures the final significance of the soul’s place in this compelling intimacy, contrasting the strength of the human soul with the spoken and written word. A few of the adult characters sit out on the beach on a very
windy day. Lily gazes at Mrs. Ramsay and reflects that though there is energy in paint and words, "What a power was in the human soul!" (160). To Lily, and similarly to Woolf, the human soul, the essence of life which creates and secures the voiceless understandings of intimacy, possesses the most extraordinary influence of all. Meanwhile, Mrs. Ramsay is composing a letter, symbolically putting the supremacy of words and language to the test. As Lily continues to ponder the complexities of the soul, the wind carries Mrs. Ramsay's letter into the ocean where it is practically destroyed by the ferocity of the vast waters. In this scene, it is Woolf who shows the readers that ultimately the human soul will survive, the power of life will endure, and the written word will only be rescued sopping wet from an ocean of subjectivity and transience.
Works Cited