

Directed Studies: Literature DRST 002
Professor David Scott Kastan

On Knowing Oneself: How Odd is Light and Truth?

By Hongyi Shen

“By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. I also give permission for the Writing Center to publish all or part of my essay as an example of good writing in a particular course or discipline, or to provide models of specific writing techniques for use in teaching. This permission applies whether or not I win a prize, and includes publication on the Yale College website or in a booklet prepared for Yale College students or faculty.” – Hongyi Shen

In Chapter 11 of *To The Lighthouse*, Mrs Ramsay is alone. After everyone has left –her children, her guests, her husband– she has a conversation with herself. In that rare moment of solitude, she looks to the lighthouse, and experiences a mix of peace, confusion and exaltation.

What is the meaning of being alone? The following sentence suggests an answer:

It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to 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.

Being alone frees Mrs Ramsay from roles and expectations. In the sentence, the gendered subject “she,” referring to Mrs Ramsay, shifts to the gender-neutral “one,” referring to anyone universally. The sense of being free from (gender) expectations is also mentioned earlier in the chapter as Mrs Ramsay “need not think about anybody,” since her children have gone to bed, and “this self having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures.” The movement from “she” to “one” seems to further cleanse the self’s attachments, to result in one blank canvas of being¹.

¹ I do not explore this analogy further in the paper, but there might be a connection between the “stroke” of light and a brush “stroke,” both usages being present in the text.

This newfound freedom “one” gains strangely enables an intimacy and unity with the world. One blends with seemingly all-encompassing “inanimate things”, which include what is inanimate and also what is (conventionally) animate –“trees, streams, flowers.” It is “felt they became one... they knew one, in a sense were one.” One’s grand (monistic) coalescence culminates in some true understanding, as asserted in “knew one”². Being “alone” seems almost to be becoming “all–one”; one is all, where the totality of one’s personality is subsumed in everything, and all is one, where everything condenses into one. We are told this grand unity thus elicits an irrational “tenderness,” ending in some transcendental love³.

If this tenderness feels inadequate, that is probably right. After all, the sentence begins quite explicitly, “It was odd.” While Mrs Ramsay derives some tenderness from her solitude, the process belies deep anxiety of the self’s effacement. For the large part of the sentence, the self or subject altogether disappears into the background generality. The initial “one” that “leans” is an acting subject, but becomes a mere object and number in the end, “one.”⁴ The subject of “felt... felt...” exists only transcendentially, perhaps in the whitespace of the text, omnipresent –or not at all⁵ ⁶. Where, really, is the detached self? The anxiety of a missing subject seems to have been

² I do not get to unpacking the significance of “thought” “felt... felt” and Mrs Ramsay’s physical movement “leant,” “looked” and what that movement (between external and internal) means.

³ There might be a connection between “tenderness” and “wince,” perhaps about the inadequate treatment of oneself as this paper suggests.

⁴ There is significant blending of the subject and object, especially in diction, with the object form privileged. E.g. “sense” : It was felt “they... in a sense were one.” The word “sense” can be used as a verb, which invokes some subject of action, or as a noun, which identifies an object, usually. Here, two meanings might be collapsed “in a sense,” and the object (noun form) is privileged. E.g. “inanimate” : We can read “inanimate” as an adjective modifying an object, or as “in-animate” which might be a negation of the verb “animate.” Similarly, the object form seems to be privileged. One way to look at this blending of subject and object is perhaps a view on determinism, about how the self loses both identity and agency when completely dissolved.

⁵ There might be a connection between the self/subject that has disappeared and “the being and doing” that has “evaporated.”

⁶ Another reading that will draw similar conclusions of anxiety is the disappearance of the narrator. The narrator’s presence is indicated by “she,” but the sentence ambiguously blends into what may be the thoughts of Mrs Ramsay in “felt... felt...” There might be similar anxiety as the location of the narrator (who perhaps anchor the narrative) is uncertain.

introduced with the examples of “trees, streams, flowers,” which arguably should not be “inanimate”. The plants are alive; the word “streams” itself can be a verb, which moves. In the process of unity, the soul (anima) of all beings are unnaturally stripped off. Solitude unsettles; the self is obscured.

What this blurring of self means is that oneself may not be known. It is telling how the sentence reads “knew one,” but not “knew oneself.” The transcendental unity previously excludes the self, which is not integrated but hidden from view. The knowledge of “one”, then, may lack the knowledge of oneself

On another level, oneself is estranged from others too. The verb “leant” is remarkable, being one letter ‘R’ away from “learnt,” a word associated with knowledge. We have reason to believe ‘R’ might refer specifically to Mrs. Ramsay. A previous instance of “leant” is when Lily wished to know Mrs Ramsay intimately, in vain. Mr Ramsay is also iconic for being unable to reach R, similar to how he is unable to reach Mrs Ramsay later in the chapter. Thus, “leant” might be emblematic of another’s inability to obtain knowledge of and reach oneself (with particular significance to Mrs Ramsay). Being alone thus comprises exactly that condition of being unseen and not being understood by others. This also echoes an earlier line in the passage, where oneself is “a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others.”

Being alone, then, is the longing and search for oneself that is visible to one and others. Woolf’s sentence ends with a tentative reclamation of the self, re-introducing the subject “she” in parentheses and culminating in “oneself,” suggesting “oneself” as the sentence’s final destination. Oneself seems to reside in the “long steady light” Mrs Ramsay looks at; we are previously told the light is what “one could not help attaching oneself to”. Oneself seems to be a specific form of a self that is visible and true. The text mentions seeing the light is “like her eyes meeting her own

eyes,” an expression of self-recognition. The light also illuminates darkness, which makes visible the darkness of oneself who has shed extraneous attachments. Moreover, the light is true. The steadiness of the light is reminiscent of the “stability” of the “wedge of darkness,” which is oneself. Mrs Ramsay is also described to be “purifying out of existence that lie, any lie” in her solitude, an attempt at reaching the truth of oneself. In some way, solitude is to search for light and truth, where the darkness and truth of oneself is somehow illuminated and oneself may be visible to one and others.

How might we know if something is seen or unseen, true or false? Well, what is unseen or untrue seems to be “odd.” Here, “odd” does not just mean strange, but a quality of number (i.e. 1, 3, 5, 7...). Tracking back the passage, the “it” that “was odd” in the sentence can refer to the line “We are in the hands of the Lord,” which follows after Mrs Ramsay’s repetitive pairs “Children don’t forget, children don’t forget... It will end, it will end... It will come, it will come.” The oddness of the line, “We are... Lord,” is precisely that it is odd, as in not even; it is a single line after a list of pairs. It is important that the striving for evenness, or for an escape from oddness into a pair, is reflected even in the sentence structure, where the evenness seems to represent the reconciliation of oneself⁷. The organization of “one”-s in the sentence demonstrates a beautiful movement of return⁸. Before leaning into inanimate things, the “one”-s are in pairs; as the process of depersonalization intensifies, the “one”-s are segregated individually; towards the end, as one yearns and searches for selfness, the “one”-s are in pairs again, before culminating in the decisive arrival of “she” and “oneself.” See below:

⁷ A relation might be drawn here with Mrs Ramsay’s obsession with marrying the girls off.

⁸ The series of inanimate things, “trees, streams, flowers,” also indicate a similar movement of return, where “trees” and “flowers” are of a similar nature, connected by “streams” (which is perhaps some degree of plant-ness denatured). This is probably another instantiation of joining two “masses” with something in between. The arrival at “flowers” might also point to something about beauty.

It was odd, she thought, how if *one* was alone, *one* leant to inanimate things [a pair]; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed *one* [odd]; felt they became *one* [odd]; felt they knew *one*, in a sense were *one* [a pair]; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself.⁹

The oddness and pairings of “one”-s are part of oneself’s visibility. We might turn to an earlier line in the passage, “Beneath it is all dark... but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by.” The repetition of pairs seems to allude to “now and again,” which symbolizes a vision of what emerges from the dark uncontaminated “wedge”. What is repeated (not odd), then, seems to reflect some degree of visibility and, hopefully, truth. The parleying between odd and even groupings of “one”-s in the sentence is also another way of demonstrating the tension between odd “lies” and understanding companionship, and how difficult it is to know oneself.

However, for all the assertions about the light and truth of oneself, it is uncertain if one can reach it. We can read the sentence as a movement from one self, “she,” into another truer self, “oneself,” bridged by a process of destruction and depersonalization; this is the movement of solitude¹⁰. However, it is uncertain if one even gets to be alone in the first place, as Mrs Ramsay prefaced in the sentence, “if.” The ending of the sentence is also unresolved. The syntax of the ending is confusing, and it is uncertain what the concluding “tenderness thus” refers to. It is unclear if the tenderness is a tenderness for the unsettling unity just “as [the tenderness one would have]

⁹ More number theory! It is interesting that this passage on solitude is located in Chapter 11 (a pair of ones) or *Eleven*. Moreover, the total number of “one”-s in the sentence add up to an even number, inclusive of the “one”-s in “alone” and “oneself” or not. Thus, this moment of solitude (oddness) is also odd because it is in a background of evenness, which may represent the aspirational background, or just juxtapose the oddness to make it even odder and lonelier. (It might also be appropriate that Chapter 11 is numerically odd, so the conflict of solitude is reflected even in the chapter number.)

As an aside, if one is invested in the number theory in *To The Lighthouse*, it might also be interesting to explore how odd+odd=even, and other numerical rules in the text. I am unsure if such patterns exist, but these rules are not explored in this paper.

¹⁰ Similarly, “she looked at that long steady light” can also be understood as “she” and the “light” (oneself) bridged by the empty space of “looked.”

for oneself,” which still alienates oneself, or if the tenderness is a tenderness that is “for oneself.” It is also unclear if one really sees oneself when looking at the light, because including the parentheses into the syntax suggests, “(she looked at that long steady light) as [she looked] for oneself,” which implies one is still searching for oneself. The sentence's end seems to reject any resolution for solitude; that is, if you can even be alone in the first place.

Being alone is to recognize the separation of one (currently visible) self and oneself – the former consists of one’s roles and attachments, “all the being and the doing,” and the latter is the darkness and truth that hopes to see light. Being alone is to hope to move from one self to oneself¹¹. Being alone longs for others to recognize us, as we see ourselves. This theme is not unheard of in other DS texts (like *The Bacchae*), but it is remarkable how Woolf places the movement centrally within the internal activity of the characters. In doing so, Woolf seemingly pursues her own illumination of some truth; by elevating the subjective and shining light into that deep darkness of characters, for her readers, she seems to be making someone less alone¹².

¹¹ The movement and distance between the selves might be helpful in understanding the motif of connecting two masses (with something) throughout the text; it might even be appropriate that the abstract interim of solitude is also some degree of depersonalization and destruction, like the war.

¹² This paper was composed in COVID-19, when reading Woolf actually helped me in my own solitude during social isolation.