Glimpsing Truth and "[Making] it Whole": Art as Personal and Social Unity in Virginia Woolf

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Abstract

Multiplicity and unity echo throughout Virginia Woolf's work, especially as related to art and its function. All three intersect in Woolf's conception of moments of being, which induce a state of heightened perception and cognition, allowing the subject to transcend everyday modes of thinking and being. These moments are integral to art, as they inspire artists to create in order to unify intangible and fleeting experiences. Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* follows painter Lily Briscoe along her journey from experiencing moments of being to exacting her vision on the canvas, focusing particularly on the hegemonic obstacles that interrupt this process. Woolf's later novel *Between the Acts* narrativizes the playwright and director Miss La Trobe, focusing less on her internal process of creating art and more on how her art operates socially and ethically, as it necessarily involves the participation of human beings and nature itself. Through artist characters, both novels show how moments of being, as glimpses of higher unity, inspire works of art which in turn unify on both personal and socio-ethical levels.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, Between the Acts, To the Lighthouse, Moments of Being, unity, artist, modernism

Multiplicity and unity echo throughout Virginia Woolf's work, especially as related to art and its function. All three intersect in Woolf's conception of moments of being, which induce a state of heightened perception and cognition, allowing the subject to transcend everyday modes of thinking and being. These moments are integral to art, as they inspire artists to create in order to unify intangible and fleeting experiences. Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* follows painter Lily Briscoe along her journey from experiencing moments of being to exacting her vision on the canvas, focusing particularly on the hegemonic obstacles that interrupt this process. Woolf's later novel *Between the Acts* narrativizes the playwright and director Miss La Trobe, focusing less on her internal process of creating art and more on how her art operates socially and ethically, as it necessarily involves the participation of human beings and nature itself. The artist characters in both novels enact a common threefold unity: first, they define Woolf's moments of being as glimpses of higher unity which, secondly, inspire works of art as their own instances of unity, which, thirdly, act in the world to unify on both personal and socio-ethical levels.

Multiplicity, unity, and art come into focus particularly in Woolf's later works, which include *To the*

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Lighthouse and *Between the Acts*, as after 1926 she shifts from representing "stream-of-consciousness" to "form, unity, and perspective" in her narratives (Nünning 981). Around the same time, she also becomes interested in the process of and obstacles to creating art, as well as issues of society, gender, class and their influences on creativity. She calls for readers to be "'severe' judges of literary works" (981), viewing the audience as active "co-creators" rather than passive observers. According to Woolf, a work of art is an expression of the artist's vision of human life (988). However, a work's significance extends beyond pure expression alone, as it can evoke a transcendent sense of "'life, 'spirit,' or 'truth'" (989) that is unique to each person interacting with it. In other words, a work of art allows a multiplicity of people to connect with a higher order of unity, each in their own unique and subjective way.

Woolf herself felt as though she glimpsed a higher unity at several points throughout her life, in instances which she calls *moments of being*. She describes them as "sudden violent shock[s]" and "revelation[s]" of a reality existing behind the appearances of everyday life ("A Sketch" 71-72). Where others may describe these experiences in particularly religious or metaphysical terms, as prophetic visions or spiritual communions, Woolf uses the metaphor of art as humanity's great unifier. Only when such a moment is written down or recorded in the physical world, does it become "real" and "whole" (72). For Woolf, art becomes a way of bringing an abstract and transcendent experience into the physical realm, holding it in a space where it can be viewed repeatedly. Her ultimate belief is that "behind the cotton wool [of the everyday] is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. . . . we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock" (72). Not only does Woolf conceive of a higher unity, but she conceptualizes that unity using the metaphor of a work of art, of which every disparate aspect for this world is a part. As such, multiplicity, unity, and art are intrinsically connected in Woolf's account of moments of being.

Indeed, moments of being are made possible by the simultaneous existence of "contradictory and opposing sensations" interacting within a single consciousness (Prudente 45). From this extraordinary cognitive interplay comes "perceptual amplification" (45), an entirely new perspective that is untouched by everyday conventions of thinking, and thus the recognition of a deeper, fundamental truth that exists behind the hegemonic ideals imposed upon everyday life. The human mind can only hold this balance temporarily, and so the transcendent vision culminates in an "explosion" of significance before quickly fading away, signaling a return to the "cotton wool" of regular cognition (47). Coming into contact with a higher unity is necessarily temporary, a "wave-like feeling of connection" that "is followed by separation as the wave withdraws" (Pridmore-Brown 418). The experience of such a jarring and transcendent but fleeting revelation raises the issue of how to process and understand the significances within that moment.

Art becomes a method of replicating the artist's moment of being, giving a physical form to the contrasting elements co-existing temporarily within the artist's mind. The moment of being is made "whole" ("A Sketch" 72) through the "temporary crystallization of the instant in the work of art, in which the contrasting elements are fixed while maintained in an ephemeral and extraordinary stasis" (Prudente 52). Within a work of art, the binding agent is "the force of the [artist's] vision" (Woolf qtd. in Nünning 989). Rather than attempting the impossible feat of reconciling all of life's contradictions and fragmentations, a work of art crystalizes the fleeting glimpse of unity—the artist's "single vision" (Nünning 989)—into a static and a-temporal creation, becoming an instance of unity in itself which simultaneously represents a glimpse of higher unity. The process of translating a moment of being from mind to physical medium is an internal struggle, and although material circumstances can interrupt or complicate this process, creating a work of art is fundamentally an exercise in self-expression.

Lily Briscoe from *To the Lighthouse*, for instance, exemplifies the internal processes of the private artist who is motivated to create by the desire for personal satisfaction and psychological reconciliation. In painting, Lily "[is] not inventing; she [is] only trying to smooth out something she had been given years ago folded up; something she had seen" (*TtL* 199). This "something" can be thought of as a moment of being—through art, she is attempting to make her vision whole. The novel makes it quite clear that Lily does not have an audience in mind for her work; she repeatedly insists that it will be "hung in the attic" (208), rolled up and stored under sofas (179), or perhaps destroyed altogether (208), but she nevertheless continues painting. Lily's art is a personal exercise ending at self-expression, at making her vision "real" and "whole" (Woolf, "A Sketch" 72).

Lily experiences several instances of clarity, transcendence, and heightened awareness throughout the novel, which can be thought of as the moments of being which inspire her to create. For instance, she stands with William Bankes and Mrs. Ramsay, watching Prue play catch in the yard. In that moment, "there was a sense of things having been blown apart, of space, of irresponsibility as the ball soared high, and they followed it and lost it and saw the one star and the draped branches. In the failing light they all looked sharp-edged and ethereal and divided by great distances" (*TtL* 72-73). The scene takes on a greater significance for Lily as her perceptions sharpen and she conceives of it in relation to the vastness of the universe. Each person is united in this scene, but on a grand scale, so

that they are distant from each other. The moment reflects the "problem of space" (171) that Lily has with her painting later in the novel; the elements are there in the scene and on the canvas, but there remains too much distance between them. However, Lily's moment of being continues: "Then, darting backwards over the vast space (for it seemed as if solidity had vanished altogether), Prue ran full tilt into them and caught the ball brilliantly high up in her left hand, and her mother said, 'Haven't they come back yet?' whereupon the spell was broken" (72-73). Lily leaves the moment of being with Mrs. Ramsay's words pulling her back to everyday reality, but she is left with the image of Prue closing vast distances to catch the ball, uniting the scene in her athletic victory. This image is what inspires Lily to rectify the "awkward space" in her painting (84), though it takes her decades to do so successfully.

The canvas allows Lily to grapple personally with the same kind of unity that Woolf herself does in "A Sketch": "the thing itself before it has been made anything" (*TtL* 193). However, Lily finds it impossible to grasp "the thing itself" long enough to conceptualize it, let alone translate it into a painting (193). She can only access multiple momentary glimpses of unity, but not the entirety of unity itself: "[B]eneath the colour there was the shape. She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked: it was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed" (19). Just as everything seems "miraculously fixed," the wind, sky, or position of the boats at sea alter the balance slightly, upsetting the view, the "harmony in her own mind," and her satisfaction with the picture on the canvas (193). Lily is constantly having to "remake" her vision (181), correcting her painting accordingly. Lily's painting becomes a physical extension of her mind onto which she is attempting to represent an innermost vision that does not easily translate from mind to physical surface.

Even without trying to comprehensively represent unity, she cannot achieve the necessary "razor edge of balance" (*TtL* 193) in her painting because her artistic vision is continually impeded. She feels as though "a thousand forces" are trying to take that image away from her, the most important of which is the force of hegemony embodied by Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*. Lily describes Mr. Ramsay's imposing presence as bringing "ruin" and "chaos" to her psyche (148). She attempts to set up her canvas as a barrier to his "exactingness" and "desire for sympathy," but his threatening omnipresence disturbs Lily's artistic capabilities; she can no longer see colours or lines (149), only the "cold" and "uncompromising white stare" of the canvas before her (156). Mr. Ramsay's presence is a constant reminder of the hegemonic role Lily "should" be filling—providing emotional support to a grieving man—embedding her further into the suffocating "cotton wool" of daily life. From this position, she is unable to access her vision and represent it on the canvas, left only to "play at painting, . . . the one thing one did not play at" (149). Impeded by Mr. Ramsay and his expectations, Lily is bound by hegemony and prevented from transcending into the revelatory moments of being that inspire her art.

Only when Mr. Ramsay leaves to sail across the bay to the lighthouse is Lily able to fully access and represent her inner vision. She looks out at the ocean and visualizes a unifying fabric much like the one in Woolf's "A Sketch": "the sea and the sky looked all *one fabric* . . . as if the air were a fine gauze which held things and kept them softly in its mesh, only gently swaying them this way and that" (*TtL* 182; emphasis added). She watches as Mr. Ramsay's boat moves farther away and seems to be "swallowed" up by the silken sea, becoming "part of the nature of things" (188). Here, Lily sees the impeding hegemonic force becoming one small part of the cotton wool of everyday life. Mr. Ramsay no longer holds power over her ability to transcend her social expectations or to create art. His absence allows her to experience one final moment of being which culminates in her returning to her painting with a "sudden intensity" and clarity, completing her vision by quickly drawing a line in the centre of the canvas (208-09). For the first time, she does not struggle to exact her artistic vision; she is impelled by some unseen force to place the mark where she does, and the meaning of it is clear to her in that moment. Thus, the painting becomes a static physical representation of a unified instant of clarity, with contrasting elements held together in this stasis by the final mark. Without Mr. Ramsay clouding her vision, Lily glimpses unity just long enough to momentarily connect with her vision and re-create it on the canvas.

Art not only unifies the artist's own personal experience, but also operates on social and ethical levels when other people are implicated in its creation and/or interpretation. Art that depends on an audience, actors, or both, necessarily has socio-ethical implications. The artist's intentions must be taken into consideration: are they using other people as a means to their own personal unification through the work of art? Or, are they using a work of art to liberate others by making them cognizant of their own role in life's larger unity? The key to answering these questions is to determine whether or not the artist is aiming towards unity or uniformity among the people involved in their art. Uniformity assimilates disparate elements into a homogenous whole, whereas unity holds contrasting elements together without infringing upon their diversity. If aiming for uniformity, the artist wishes to gain control over their audience, manipulating them into interpreting and reacting to the work of art in the same way. If aiming for unity, however, the artist holds people together momentarily for the duration of their work of art but does so in a way which respects their individualities and allows them to disperse once the moment ends. As soon as the artist begins creating their work with other people in mind, their art necessarily takes on social and ethical functions.

Miss La Trobe from *Between the Acts* is, like Lily, a "self-reflexive [artist] character" (Pridmore-Brown 410); however, La Trobe illustrates art's social, rather than personal, function. She is a playwright, and so necessarily creates with an audience in mind and uses actors as her medium. Drama is an art form unconducive to exacting a single artistic vision, as its components are multiple and difficult to control. For instance, the actors continually forget their lines or take too long to get changed, disrupting the flow of the play; the audience members also "slip the noose" of their observational roles by talking amongst themselves and "split[ting] up into orts, scraps, and fragments" (*BtA* 110). Perhaps most of all, nature disrupts the performance, with strong winds blowing away the actor's voices (74), swallows swooping across the stage (164), and a spontaneous rain shower pouring down in the middle of a scene (162). Furthermore, La Trobe's play is much more ephemeral than Lily's painting: the performance exists in the world only as long as it is being performed, and once it is over, it lives in the memory of each individual in attendance and so cannot be comprehensively unified. The creation, execution, interpretation, and remembrance of La Trobe's art depends upon the participation of multiple people, planting it firmly in the social realm.

Though never explicated, it seems as though Miss La Trobe is aware of the larger unity reached through moments of being, which can then be represented by and conveyed through art. Her play is not a mere unity in itself, then, but rather a means to facilitating the audience members' own moments of being. This realization is achieved through a series of deliberate steps, in which La Trobe first attempts to impose uniformity but only as a means to intensify the later epiphany in which the audience realizes their own role within the play. She attempts to turn her audience into a uniform "crowd" or "herd" (Pridmore-Brown 411) that thinks and behaves as one mind. Using the gramophone, she plays music that appeals to her audience's emotions as well as other audio cues that seem to determine their movements. For instance, upon hearing a nursery rhyme, the audience "sink[s] down peacefully" into it, "fold[ing] their hands and compos[ing] their faces" (*BtA* 110). La Trobe essentially becomes a "führer" figure (Pridmore-Brown 413) who forces her audience to have one uniform experience that is entirely under her control. In these moments of manipulation, La Trobe holds the audience together, placing upon them the "intolerable burden of sitting silent, doing nothing, in company" (*BtA* 60). Here, they can feel the tension between uniformity and unity that La Trobe is playing with: "We aren't free, each one of them felt separately, to feel or think separately, nor yet to fall asleep. We're too close; but not close enough. So they fidgeted" (60). In these moments, the audience can feel themselves being held captive in their roles as observers.

After the audience becomes aware of being pulled toward uniformity, La Trobe quickly subverts her role of artist as dictator and instead facilitates individual and "collective" epiphanies (Pridmore-Brown 417) through the play's mirror scene. The audience members are reflected back at themselves from multiple mirrors held by the actors onstage, effectively turning them into parts of the work of art. Being reflected onstage shows the audience that they are co-creators of the play, that this work of art depends upon them and demands their participation. They are no longer mere observers of art; they are "the words," "the music," and "the thing itself" ("A Sketch" 72). As such, this instant of the play becomes a representation of a moment of being, and a work of art in itself. It exists instantaneously: "The hands of the clock had stopped at the present moment. It was now. Ourselves" (Woolf, *BtA* 167). Within this instant, the audience is hit with the revelation that they are a part of the events depicted in the play, that they are active participants in the art itself and the meaning they take from it, and that as autonomous individuals, they necessarily have control over their own actions and so cannot be blamelessly pulled into uniformity by Miss La Trobe.

Outside of this individualized revelation, the mirror scene is a shared experience which connects the audience in a unity-oriented community. Once this moment passes and the play ends, the wave of unity "breaks" (Pridmore-Brown 410) and so the audience necessarily disperses, both from the stage and in their disparate interpretations of and reactions to the play. Some walk away, while others get into cars or onto bicycles (*BtA* 176), and some commend the play while others call it a "cruel" and "utterly unfair" "little game" (165). All the while, the gramophone sings: "Dispersed are we; who have come together. But, . . . let us retain whatever made that harmony," and the audience echoes: "O let us . . . keep together. For there is joy, sweet joy, in company" (176-77). What remains after the momentary unity of the mirror scene is the sustained unity found in community. The audience has shared a glimpse of life's unifying fabric that connects them all beneath everyday appearances. Each person does have a different reaction to or interpretation of the play itself, but those differences are the contradictions and multiplicities which unity—unlike uniformity—holds together in stasis. Hegemony and sameness are not the binding forces here; rather, it is art and the shared experience of it that holds the audience together as a community.

Through her portrayal of artist characters in *To the Lighthouse* and *Between the Acts*, Woolf shows how moments of being, as temporary glimpses of higher unity, inspire personally and socially unifying works of art. Though La Trobe's art functions more socially and less personally than Lily's, both artists recognize the multiplicity and unity inherent in their creations. Lily experiences multiple moments of being and unifies her feelings derived from

those moments into a work of art, each element being held in stasis by the final mark, which represents the "force" of her artistic vision. Miss La Trobe cannot execute a unified artistic vision through her play, but the performance's reliance on individual participation allows those involved to become co-creators of the play and experience their own glimpses of unity through its mirror scene. Thus, her art functions not for itself, but for others, as a means to multiple moments of being as well as unity through the shared experience of co-creation. The unity glimpsed through moments of being is necessarily temporary and fragmentary, with art being the only way for Woolf and Lily to "make [them] whole" and represent them in the physical, temporal world. La Trobe takes her art further into the social realm, using it to inspire in others a connection to each other and the world as a whole. The evolution in Woolf's conceptions of multiplicity and unity is evident in both novels, as she explores the function of art and its capability of transcending hegemony and unifying moments, selves, and communities.

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