Virginia Woolf’s Narrative Strategies: Negotiating Between Public and Private Voices

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When Woolf wrote in her diary on 26 January 1940, “How queer the change is from private writing to public writing” regarding the shift from Between the Acts to Roger Fry, she marked a division which lay deep in her psychology as a writer.¹ The comment highlights Woolf’s clear understanding of the difference between the two realms—and between the kinds of writing appropriate to each—as well as her sense of the difficulty involved in moving from one to the other, even as late in her career as 1940. As Alex Zwerdling writes, “her intense interest in the life of society and its effect on the individual . . . is a rich subject that has not, I think, been adequately addressed. Yet in almost everything she wrote, Woolf demonstrated her concern with the ways in which private and public life are linked.”² When the subject has been addressed, however, it has invariably been dealt with, as by Zwerdling himself, solely in terms of the influence of politics, or public issues, on her writing.

A public/private dialectic was one which informed many aspects of Woolf’s life and writing: it was central to her feminism (a public/private division is crucial to the argument in Three Guineas); her life (in terms of her movements between Sussex and London and what those journeys symbolized); her negotiations concerning the balance of politics and fiction in her writing; and her stylistic strategies. As a stylistic strategy, this public/private dialectic manifests itself in Woolf’s use of narrative voice, more specifically in her extensive use of indirect interior monologue. Most of the work on Woolf and indirect interior monologue was written between 1945 and 1975, a period when her narrative techniques, particularly her use of point of view, were of foremost interest. Consequently, discussions of Woolf’s use of


indirect interior monologue rarely consider the political implications of her most widely used narrative method. It is important that such an integral part of Woolf’s writing as narrative voice is not ignored in favor of her politics, but is seen as essential to that debate. As William R. Handley writes, “her narrative experiments are in their effects and functions discernibly political.” The embedding of Woolf’s politics in her narrative methods will ensure that the argument is specific. By linking content directly to style, the gain will be an attention to detail, a quality often lacking in more recent criticism.

Indirect interior monologue, which Woolf used in eight of her nine novels, occurs when a character’s thoughts are presented in the third person by the narrator. The narrator enters the mind of the character and reports his or her thoughts verbatim, but the first- and second-person pronouns of direct interior monologue are absent. Passages of indirect interior monologue can be pages in length or consist merely of one phrase in a narrated or dialogic context. Indirect interior monologue can be signalled by the narrator with, for example, the usage “she thought,” or the move into the character’s mind can be left to the reader to locate. In either case, the reader has to be alert for signs such as the character’s idiom, components of direct speech such as exclamatory phrases, and signs of internal thought such as free association and fragmented sentence structure. Often the line between reporting and showing what a character is thinking is difficult to discern.

An important component of indirect interior monologue, then, is the distinction between public and private voices. This not only involves the debate concerning Woolf’s most widely used narrative technique, but also re-examines that technique from a new angle: as a public/private dialectic. If Woolf’s narrators may be said to speak with a public voice, then a character’s internal thoughts might be said to constitute a private voice. In the sense that a narrator orders and moves the narrative focus, he or she is a public speaker: one who describes and presents for the benefit of others. In Woolf’s case, even the narrator of Jacob’s Room, who is conscious of her lack of authority, possesses a degree of omniscience and omnipresence. Although Woolf’s narrators have access to the characters’ private thoughts, they do not reveal their own. Woolf’s narrators are public in their anonymity. This is not to say that they are characterless, but they are functionaries in that they are present in the text so as to relate the actions and thoughts of characters other than themselves. In Mrs. Dalloway, for example, the narrator’s voice exists at the opposite end of the spectrum from Clarissa Dalloway; where Clarissa’s voice is internal, the narrator’s is external. Forays into the characters’ consciousness are evidence of the narrators’ public as opposed to private role, in that they have the omniscience to move the narrative while their own private realm remains untouched. A discussion of Woolf’s division of public and private can be extended, then, by an examination of the way in which she balances, combines, or separates her textual voices through indirect interior monologue. Rather than relinquishing either authority or subjectivity, indirect interior monologue allows Woolf to combine and move between the two. It is this conjunction of public and private, her treatment of voices of authority and her use of the private voice, which raises issues of narrative control.

Although it is the contingencies of the work which determine the obtrusiveness and authority

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of the narrator's voice—as well as the depths to which Woolf enters her characters' minds—in general, she avoids either an extreme public or an extreme private voice. About Arnold Bennett's *Hilda Lessways*, Woolf writes, "[W]e cannot hear her mother's voice, or Hilda's voice; we can only hear Mr. Bennett's voice telling us facts about rents and freeholds and copyholds and fines." Advocating instead a sharing of voice, she employs neither the omniscient, omnipresent recounting of external detail for which she criticized Bennett, nor the narrator who is made absent by the characters' internal monologue as in, for example, Molly Bloom's monologue in *Ulysses*. She is concerned, instead, with the movement from public to private—the *relationship* between inner and outer.

With indirect interior monologue, the narrator is always present, but in conjunction with the private voice of the character concerned. Dorrit Cohn describes the technique as "rendering a character's thought in his own idiom while maintaining the third-person reference and the basic tense of narration." The tense and pronouns ensure the continued presence of the narrator and allow a smooth transition out of and into narrative passages. In terms of style, this is the closest Woolf comes to a union of public and private, although importantly, it is not a synthesis or a replacing of one voice by another, but a combination of two separate, distinctive voices.

Since the technique is a conjunction of internal and external, neither completely one nor the other, it is surrounded by ambiguity, which is intensified by the frequent difficulty in locating the exact moment at which shifts in point of view are made. As Cohn notes, "this equivocation in turn creates the characteristic indeterminateness of the narrated monologue's relationship to the language of consciousness, suspending it between the immediacy of quotation and the mediacy of narration." It is precisely this ambiguity which appeals to Woolf, as does the way in which the technique allowed her access to both public and private realms. However, this ambiguity has meant that the critical definitions of the technique have sometimes been confused and contradictory. Bound up with stream of consciousness, because it too is the expression of a character's thoughts, indirect interior monologue has not claimed its own distinctive place amongst work on the stream of consciousness technique. Whether it is subsumed under the general heading, given its own field, or ignored altogether, indirect interior monologue has on the whole been treated as an elusive entity without a firmly established definition.

A crucial point in distinguishing indirect interior monologue from stream of consciousness is that the former was in use much before the latter, in eighteenth-century novels and then more extensively in the nineteenth century, indicating that it is not a radical Modernist technique. What was new was rather the extent to and way in which it came to be used. The technique itself was identified at the beginning of the century in French and German criticism, where it was called *style indirect libre* and *erlebte Rede*, respectively. Dorrit Cohn points out that it has been "virtually ignored" in the Anglo-American tradition and lacks even a stable term, as "free indirect speech," "free indirect discourse," and "reported speech" are often

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6 Cohn, pp. 105–6.
used instead.\textsuperscript{7} As seen especially in relation to Woolf, the term “stream of consciousness” has been taken to denote now a method, now a genre. Woolf’s extensive use of indirect interior monologue has caused some critics to view it almost as an idiosyncrasy or as a special feature of her writing and thereby to develop a unique terminology. This creates confusion through the proliferation of terms and also dissociates Woolf’s use of indirect interior monologue from literary tradition.\textsuperscript{8}

There is also disagreement as to whether the term “stream of consciousness” can be applied to Woolf at all. If one does not agree that indirect interior monologue is a technique for rendering stream of consciousness, then Woolf is not a stream of consciousness writer because apart from rare, isolated phrases of direct interior monologue, Woolf captures private thought through indirect interior monologue. Although this means that the consciousness is transcribed verbatim, the presence of the narrator prevents it from being stream of consciousness. To call it such is to ignore the narrator, or public element of the technique. However direct indirect interior monologue may seem, it is not so; the consciousness is always reported, mediated. Furthermore, to call Woolf an exponent of the stream of consciousness technique is to ignore her dislike of the technique in Joyce. While in the process of conceiving \textit{Jacob’s Room}, Woolf wrote in her diary: “I suppose the danger is the damned egotistical self; which ruins Joyce & [Dorothy] Richardson to my mind: is one pliant & rich enough to provide a wall for the book from oneself without its becoming, as in Joyce and Richardson, narrowing & restricting?”\textsuperscript{9} This suggests that it is not Joyce’s own egotistical self that Woolf is complaining about, but the excessive interiority of the characters, caused by a complete separation between author and characters. \textit{Ulysses} does not use direct interior monologue exclusively, but as Hugh Kenner writes, “Within fifty pages we are so entailed in his [Stephen Dedalus’] subjectivity that nothing much is happening save internal events, alterations of cadence and image, gestures of a mobile ego.”\textsuperscript{10} More important to Woolf is the freedom to move between public relating of events and the privacy of thought: that is, between two modes which, if developed in isolation from each other, would result in narrowness and restriction.

James Hafley is one of the few critics to conclude that Woolf chose not to use the stream of consciousness technique because it was “completely out of accord with her ‘vision.’”\textsuperscript{11} He defines the technique as a “transcription of verbal thought so direct that it seems to bare

\textsuperscript{7} Cohn, p. 108. Two early, seminal definitions are found in Lawrence Bowling’s article, “What Is the Stream of Consciousness Technique” (\textit{PMLA}, LXV [1950]), and Robert Humphrey’s \textit{Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel} (University of California Press, 1954). Bowling defines stream of consciousness as a technique distinct from interior monologue in that the latter covers only the linguistically coherent area of consciousness, while the former reaches deeper, non-verbal areas of image and sensation. Bowling makes no mention of indirect interior monologue. Humphrey, on the other hand, wants stream of consciousness to denote a genre or subject rather than a literary technique. He reminds readers of the term’s origin as a psychological process rather than a literary-critical term. He then suggests four techniques used to convey stream of consciousness, one of which is indirect interior monologue.

\textsuperscript{8} See, for example, Harvena Richter’s \textit{Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage} (Princeton University Press, 1970), in which she divides Woolf’s portrayal of subjectivity into three voices (p.130). Her definitions are vague and often seem to overlap. Although she does not mention indirect interior monologue, her explanations of two of the three voices seem to be inching towards a definition of the technique. Dorrit Cohn also replaces existing terms with her own, albeit well thought out, terminology, but unless the replacements come into currency, the proliferation creates confusion and hinders discussions in the field (pp. 11–14).


a human mind. The reader has the illusion of receiving everything; the author creates the illusion of having selected nothing, rejected nothing, corrected nothing.” Woolf, by contrast, “is always present in her novels.”\textsuperscript{12} Hafley’s overall characterisation of Woolf’s writing is very useful, but his definition of indirect interior monologue has the unfortunate effect of locating it in limbo somewhere between the private and public voice.\textsuperscript{13} In Woolf’s usage, the technique neither unites, nor separates the public and private realms; rather, it places them in a dialectical relation. Also, it is not an approximation of the character’s thoughts; it is those thoughts. Hafley writes, “The narrator speaks directly, but never in the first person; so that although the reader has often a momentary illusion of entering a character’s consciousness, he never ‘actually does so’—he does not share the characters’ thoughts or watch them, but is only told about them.”\textsuperscript{14} In fact, in \textit{Jacob’s Room}, the narrator does speak in the first person. More importantly, Hafley has missed the point of indirect interior monologue in that the reader does share the characters’ thoughts, in the characters’ own words, although they are presented by the voice of the narrator. The reader is not told about them, but shown them. Hafley recognizes Woolf’s resistance to stream of consciousness, but does not recognize how far indirect interior monologue takes her into the private mind.

Ralph Freedman, caught up in his thesis that Woolf works towards a “progressive depersonalization, a \textit{formal} rendering of consciousness,”\textsuperscript{15} misconstrues stream of consciousness and misses the presence of indirect interior monologue. In his discussion of \textit{Mrs. Dalloway}, he calls her technique interior monologue, thereby ignoring the fact that Woolf does not use the first person, and argues that interior monologue “converted association into formal soliloquies, imposing controlled imagery on inner speech.”\textsuperscript{16} He finds her use of stream of consciousness “logical and planned” and thus in accord with his thesis of formalized lyricism.\textsuperscript{17} Stream of consciousness never appears logical and planned, so that Freedman needs to change either his terminology or his reading of the indirect interior monologue in \textit{Mrs. Dalloway}. Also, like so many early Woolf critics, he ignores the narrator’s presence, both in what he erroneously calls interior monologue and also as the producer of “controlled imagery.”\textsuperscript{18}

The confusion surrounding the term “stream of consciousness”—or if not confusion then its rather random usage—is clear from the varying contexts in which it appears in Woolf criticism. It has been claimed both that Woolf never used the technique and that she made it “her own particular method.”\textsuperscript{19} Even with critics who do acknowledge Woolf’s use of indirect interior monologue, discrepancies occur over specific readings. The question of Woolf’s narrative technique needs to be reopened not only to resolve issues of terminology but also because much of this early Woolf criticism, written without the influence of

\textsuperscript{12} Hafley, pp. 73, 74.
\textsuperscript{13} Hafley, p. 91.
\textsuperscript{14} Hafley, p. 74.
\textsuperscript{16} Freedman, p. 218.
\textsuperscript{17} Freedman, p. 218.
\textsuperscript{18} Freedman, p. 218.
\textsuperscript{19} R.L. Chambers, \textit{The Novels of Virginia Woolf} (Oliver & Boyd Ltd., 1947), p. 51.
Postmodernist thinking, reads Woolf’s work as a search for unity, thereby misreading both some of her reasons for using indirect interior monologue so extensively and, in turn, its effect in her novels. Critics lapse into quasi-mysticism as they read Woolf’s multiple voices as “the oneness of the vital impulse beneath diversity.” On the contrary, Woolf’s choice of indirect interior monologue stems from the ability it gave her to represent difference, to give voice to a wide array of major and minor characters. Sudden and frequent shifts in direct interior monologue, would have been jarring, whereas with indirect interior monologue the narrator can move the focus swiftly and smoothly from voice to voice. This shifting of perspective allows Woolf to undercut the dominance of the narrator without replacing it by what she saw as the tyranny of the first-person monologue.

Indirect interior monologue is used most extensively in Mrs. Dalloway, hardly surprising given the interiority of the work. It is significant, however, that Woolf does not use direct interior monologue and that she combines so private a focus as Clarissa Dalloway’s thoughts on a day in June 1923 with the public world of London. Indirect interior monologue allows her to negotiate between the two, as well as to move between the thoughts of a wide cross-section of characters on the London streets. The public scene is always related to the characters as they make their way through London. “Bond Street fascinated her; Bond Street early in the morning in the season; its flags flying; its shops; no splash; no glitter; one roll of tweed in the shop where her father had bought his suits for fifty years” here, the narrator filters his or her descriptions through Mrs Dalloway’s impressions. In another sentence—“Away and away the aeroplane shot, till it was nothing but a bright spark; an aspiration; a concentration; a symbol (so it seemed to Mr Bentley, vigorously rolling his strip of turf at Greenwich)—a public event visible to many people is described through its perception by one of them (pp. 35–6). The public is intimately linked to the private; the external is rendered at the moment when it becomes internal. Recognizing the inevitable subjective representation of public spaces, Woolf portrays London not as a monolithic, fixed realm, but as the meeting of empirical fact and private interpretation and response. There is a continuous dialectic between inner and outer.

Integral to the public aspect of the novel is the issue of authority and Woolf’s representation of those characters who hold positions of public importance. Clarissa is surrounded by those in power in 1923, namely the Conservative Party, and the novel reveals both her marginalization from and her ignorance of the events of the day. The harshest attack, however, falls on a figure of medical authority, Sir William Bradshaw, Septimus Smith’s doctor. Bradshaw’s obsession with proportion and control, along with his simplistic diagnosis and treatment of madness comes under fire ironically and directly, as in, “He swooped; he

20 Haftl, p. 69. Harvena Richter ensures the success of her search for unity by reading multiple voices as aspects of a single being or universal consciousness (p. 127). She then links this being to Woolf herself, thereby erasing any notion of narrative distance (p. 129). This allows her to acknowledge variation and flux while guarding against their disruptive consequences (Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage, Princeton University Press, 1970).

In Mimesis, Erich Auerbach acknowledges the lack of an ultimate vision in Woolf’s work, brought about, he argues, in part by indirect interior monologue, for the narrator in the process relinquishes authority to the characters (p.534). However, for Auerbach, this is symptomatic not of Woolf’s thinking or narrative strategies, but of the decay of civilization (trans. Willard R. Trask, Princeton University Press, 1953, pp. 551–53).

devoured. He shut people up” (p.133).

The most telling scene for its treatment of a public figure of authority is the one in which a motor car, carrying an unidentified dignitary or magisterial figure, winds its way through the center of London. Woolf undoubtedly uses the viceregal cavalcade in the “Wandering Rocks” episode of Joyce’s *Ulysses* as a model for this scene and comparing the two emphasizes the difference in Woolf’s narrative strategies. The section of “Wandering Rocks” dedicated to the journey of the Earl of Dudley through Dublin is narrated through third-person omniscient narration. The narrator describes exactly who is in the car and systematically lists the reactions to the car of the various characters, who have been introduced earlier in the text. “Wandering Rocks” consists of nineteen sections, the first eighteen of which take a single character and trace his or her thoughts and actions. In these sections, Joyce uses a mixture of direct speech, omniscient narration, and direct and indirect interior monologue. However, in the last section, the narrator brings the characters together using solely a public voice and an external view of their various greetings of the car. The narrator’s omniscience gives the reader limited insight into the moods of the onlookers; for example, Miss Kennedy and Miss Douce “admired” the car, but the reader is not allowed any further detail as to their thoughts.

In Joyce’s scene, the prevalence of names and titles, the abundance of signifiers, distinguish the passage. The weight of titles accorded to the Earl of Dudley and his entourage provides the authority which pervades the scene. Names of places as well as people abound, as each conjunction of a character and the cavalcade is given a specific location in Dublin. Initials and acronyms are rife, from “Gerald Ward, A.D.C.” to “M.C.Green, H. Thrift, T.M.Patey, C. Scaife, J.B.Jeffs, G.N.Morphy . . .,” all contributing to the focus on titles and labels. The omniscient narrator follows the same pattern with each onlooker, describing the character, his/her reaction to the car, and His Excellency’s reaction in response. The characters do not interlink; the scene is, in effect, a list of compartmentalized meetings. All of the characters are presented publicly, as they would appear on the street—particularly the viceroy himself—and description of internal thoughts is kept to a minimum. The viceroy is the focus of the scene, the center around whom the characters revolve, and they are described through their relation to him.

In contrast, the extent to which Woolf subverts the authority figure is clear. She achieves this by leaving the identity of the figure in the car unknown. Whereas in *Ulysses*, names are emphasized and crowd the passage, here the signifier is absent, there is an empty center around which the characters can construct their own narratives. The sex of the figure is in dispute and even the chauffeur, “who had been opening something, turning something, shutting something” contributes to the uncertainty (p.19). The irony in the narrator’s voice adds an element of mockery to the scene as well, undercutting the bystanders’ awe for the invisible personage. The figure is of “the very greatest importance,” breathes the “dark breath of veneration” on the onlookers and represents an “immortal presence” (pp. 17, 20, 23). These examples of the narrator’s hyperbole work in order to convey the characters’ overreactions.

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33 Joyce, p. 207.
34 Joyce, pp. 207, 209.
Instead of the tangible, identifiable authority of Joyce’s focal figure, Woolf subverts the power of her authority figure by constructing the scene around a vacant center. Only three people see the face of the figure and only for a few seconds, the narrator tells us: the other bystanders see only “a square of dove grey” (p. 17). Through indirect interior monologue, the characters themselves fill the center. For Septimus, the focus of the car signifies the arrival of some horror which threatens to burst into flames; for Lucrezia, his wife, it is the Queen going shopping; for Clarissa, the Queen is on her way to perform some charitable deed; and for Moll Pratt, the passenger is definitely the Prince of Wales (pp. 18, 19, 21, 23). As the crowd gathers at Buckingham Palace, Sarah Bletchley, Mr. Bowley, and Emily Coates are added to those bystanders given a voice through indirect interior monologue; their private narratives are given in reaction to the public event, and there is no one reaction that assumes priority. Tony E. Jackson describes the subversiveness of this scene: “this entire section consists of what would, in a conventional novel, become subplots. ... But the narrator pointedly provides just enough information to open a vein of narrative anxiety for each one and then leaves the character and never returns ... us to a conclusion.”25 Not only does the narrator provide information through omniscient narration, but the characters speak for themselves through indirect interior monologue.

Whereas the focus in the “Wandering Rocks” scene remains firmly on the Earl of Dudley, in Mrs. Dalloway the emphasis is on the community of characters and on the movement from the crowd to the individual. Woolf uses what I shall call communal indirect interior monologue, internal thoughts which are not attributable to any one character, to create the sense of the crowd’s unity: “Was it the Prince of Wales’s, the Queen’s, the Prime Minister’s? Whose face was it?” (p. 17). Then, however, the narrative breaks away to the preoccupations of one character, creating fluidity and movement in the scene. Clarissa, for example, seeing the “white, magical, circular” disc in the footman’s hand—signifying the vacant center of authority—is reminded of a party at Buckingham Palace, where she was surrounded by “the gentlemen of England” (pp. 21, 22). Clarissa creates her own image of authority. The narrative voice constantly shifts, omniscient narration and communal indirect interior monologue being broken by a cross-section of individual perspectives. Without a voice or name, the figure must stand as an “enduring symbol of the state,” and the onlookers must create their own interpretations and reactions (p. 20). Rather than dominating the characters, in terms either of voice or of position, both the dignitary and the narrator—who also is ignorant of the figure’s identity—leave the characters free to maintain their own voice in the narrative. The public figure is silenced, left without identity or voice. Although there is omniscient narration in the scene, the narrator is not party to any knowledge about the person in the car, thereby allowing the private thoughts of the onlookers equal weight. Had the narrator revealed the person’s identity, putting the reader in a privileged position, the incorrect guesses of certain of the onlookers would emphasize their lack of authority. As it is, their narratives are not ranked; there is no competition for the right answer, because it is nonexistent.

Woolf undercuts the authority figure further by introducing the airplane, which immediately

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takes attention away from the car, but again represents uncertainty, requiring interpretation by the onlookers. The airplane writes seemingly random letters in the sky, quite literally empty signifiers. Transitory and temporary as "they moved and melted and were rubbed out," they can be read as a contrast to the multitude of initials and acronyms in the Ulysses scene which have a very definite signification (p. 25). The letters are, like the car, "on a mission of the greatest importance," but similarly it will "never be revealed," and again even the narrator does not know what the plane is writing (p. 26). New characters are introduced—Maisie Johnson, Mrs Dempster and Mr Bentley—all of whom have their own narratives and reactions, presented through indirect interior monologue.

Woolf, in this scene, undercuts any authoritative or ultimate viewpoint by leaving that center unwritten and letting her characters write their own narratives. In the same way that the person in the car is unidentified and silent, Woolf's narrator is anti-authoritative in that s/he relinquishes the narrative voice to various characters and although omniscient and anonymous, and therefore public, is just as ignorant as the characters regarding the car and the airplane. Indirect interior monologue allows Woolf the flexibility to move smoothly and rapidly from one character to another, as well as negotiating between public and private; public event, public narrator, and private thoughts. She does not desire either the dominating voice of Joyce's omniscient narrator or the intensely private voice of his direct interior monologue; rather she wants a negotiation between public and private.

But a multiplicity of voices does not necessarily mean variety; although women are well represented in Woolf's work and she does cross class boundaries in Mrs. Dalloway, with Crosby in The Years and Mrs. McNab in To The Lighthouse, one still asks how these characters are situated within the narrative and what kind of status their voices are given.

In To The Lighthouse, Mrs. McNab appears in "Time Passes," the second section, to clean the Ramsays' house while it lies empty. Several objections have been made to Woolf's portrayal of McNab. Pamela L. Caughie argues that "it is Woolf's very narrative that cannot accommodate Mrs. McNab except by robbing her of meaning, agency."26 She believes that Woolf wants to harmonize the narrative, rather than acknowledging that while a text can include varied voices, they will not necessarily cohere. Bette London also feels that McNab has been appropriated, that the narrator "domesticates" her and speaks for her.27

Structurally, McNab is marginalized in the narrative as she is essentially given her own section, but rather than being condescension, this seems to be Woolf's acknowledgement that McNab is not part of the family situation. In contrast to Caughie's point, Woolf seems to be representing formally the fact that McNab is an outsider to the Ramsays. Rather than trying to force McNab to unite with the family, the narrative allows her her own space. Within the context of the novel, McNab is a marginal figure, brought into focus through her own section. The problem that Caughie and London have with this issue seems to arise from their failure to distinguish between the narrator and the narrative. With typical Postmodern selfconsciousness, Woolf lets McNab prove the narrator wrong. Through indirect interior monologue, she is given her own voice, at which point the narrator's prescriptive comments

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are subverted.

There is no doubt that the narrator portrays McNab simplistically. According to the narrator, her singing is like “the voice of witlessness,” “robbed of meaning.” She lurches and leers, not even in control of her own movement. The narrator presents her stereotypically, as incapable of insight or change. In section eight of “Time Passes,” however, McNab is represented through indirect interior monologue, and the public voice gives way to a private one. Far from being “witless,” McNab imagines what will happen to the deserted house; she remembers Mrs Ramsay and runs through various scenes in her mind. Her ability to imagine and analyze the past disproves Caughie’s assertion that she is denied “narrative agency, the ability to select and order events into some meaningful sequence.” When McNab speaks for herself, she destroys the narrator’s description. In section eight, the narrator’s comment that “she stood arms akimbo” is bracketed within a passage of indirect interior monologue and does not coincide with the account which McNab gives of herself (p. 184). In section nine, when Mrs. McNab and Mrs. Bast return to ready the house for the Ramsays, the same pattern occurs. The narrator starts off by describing McNab as “a force working; something not highly conscious; something that leered, something that lurched” (p. 189). Then McNab’s indirect interior monologue reveals that she is highly conscious, full of memories of the Ramsays’ parties and also that her staying of “the corruption and the rot” is an achievement in itself, not unlike Lily’s completion of her painting or the trip to the lighthouse (Lighthouse, p. 189).

The narrator’s naive and denigrating view of McNab is shown to be so by McNab herself. The reader is given two different representations which are at odds with each other. Woolf unsettles the notion of the reliable, omniscient narrator by using indirect interior monologue, thereby introducing McNab’s own voice. The narrator is denied the final word, an effect possible only if there are additional voices. Furthermore, in remarking that “Visions of joy there must have been . . .,” the narrator reveals through the word “must” that he/she is imposing his/her reading, is in fact guessing, thereby revealing his/her lack of authority to define her (Lighthouse, p. 178). With indirect interior monologue, Woolf shows the necessity of letting McNab speak for herself, and the danger inherent in an omniscient narrator. She is exploring the problems of incorporating the voices on the margins. Woolf uses the narrator in this case to expose the problems of omniscient narration and the representation of multiple perspectives, but obviously the narrator is an integral part of To The Lighthouse, and this does not mean a completely unreliable, overturned narrator.

In Jacob’s Room, Woolf is even more self-conscious about her narrator. Jacob’s Room is distinctive because indirect interior monologue is deliberately not used extensively in this work. Leon Edel calls Jacob’s Room Woolf’s “first attempt at stream-of-consciousness writing” and Melvin Friedman calls it “her first work relying entirely on stream of consciousness.” If they are referring to indirect interior monologue as stream of consciousness, then they are incorrect, as both The Voyage Out and Night and Day, novels

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28 Virginia Woolf, To The Lighthouse (Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 178. All references in the text are to this edition.

29 Caughie, p. 314.


written before *Jacob’s Room*, make use of the technique; on the other hand, if it is to direct interior monologue to which they refer, *Jacob’s Room* can hardly be said to rely entirely on a technique which it uses approximately four times. Even when indirect interior monologue is used in the novel, it appears only in isolated sentences within narrative description or dialogue rather than in extended passages, as in *Mrs Dalloway* and *To The Lighthouse*.

With *Jacob’s Room*, Woolf sets out to explore the problematicities of the idea of stable identity. She is examining the difficulty in representing identity and the difficulty in summarizing identity while relying only on empirical observation. Passages of indirect interior monologue would allow Jacob to define himself, thereby defeating her purpose. Jacob, like the car in *Mrs Dalloway*, is an unknown center. Instead, the narrator plays a much greater role and has a more distinctive voice than in either *Mrs Dalloway* or *To The Lighthouse*. The female narrator’s tone is more colloquial, but, most importantly, she doubts, questions, and admits her ignorance. Still, critics misread the lack of objectivity as Woolf’s own confusion. For example, Friedman argues that “There is discernible here a certain lack of confidence on the novelist’s part,” hence the “female evasive manner” and her “frequent interventions *in propria persona* as a way of thrusting herself between Jacob and the reader to explain the actions of the former and enlist the sympathy of the latter.”\(^{32}\) Friedman has missed the point of the narrator’s doubt. The narrative intervention is not compensation but an emphasis on the impossibility of defining identity. Woolf is exposing the artificiality of the objective, omniscient narrator, not making up for her inexperience. She probably chose a female narrator not because, as Friedman suggests, women are essentially evasive, but because in realist fiction narrative authority has traditionally been coded as male. Also, Woolf is writing about women’s marginalization, since the narrator is an outsider to the male world of Cambridge. This sense of being outside is paralleled by her inability to get inside his head.

Woolf’s introducing gender issues into the assumption of narratorial access results in her narrator’s having a more distinctive character than the narrator of *Mrs Dalloway*, for example. In *Jacob’s Room*, then, the public/private dialectic shifts since we experience rare moments of insight into the private mind of the narrator. In a few instances she focuses the attention on herself, on her own questions, preferences, and problems. She speaks in the first person in these moments, telling us that she has no wish to be the Queen of England and about her fear of and distance from Jacob.\(^{33}\) Although on the whole the narrator maintains a public voice, Woolf has deliberately altered the public/private dialectic in a few instances by introducing elements of the private into the narrator’s voice, so as to raise questions of identity, representation, and gender. We are allowed a little way into the narrator’s mind because she is speaking directly to us, but external observation of Jacob does not yield the same results.

The narrator makes her lack of omniscience clear with phrases such as “perhaps Jacob only said ‘hum,’ or said nothing at all,” and, unsure of Jacob’s whereabouts, she surmises that he is “Dining in Hall, presumably” (*Jacob’s*, pp. 59, 48). The narrator at some points assumes only the empirical knowledge of an on-the-spot observer. “[W]hether this is the right interpretation of Jacob’s gloom as he sat naked, in the sun, looking at the Land’s End, it is

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\(^{32}\) Friedman, p. 192.

impossible to say; for he never spoke a word” (p. 63). Often, she can glean information only from his words and actions. Indirect interior monologue would clearly undermine this deliberate reliance on empirical observation—not that empirical observation gets one very far. “It is no use,” the narrator asserts, “trying to sum people up” (pp. 37, 214). This comment occurs twice in the novel, the first time after an elderly woman has tried to summarize Jacob, who is sitting opposite her in a train. “Taking note of socks (loose), of tie (shabby),” she starts with externals but comes up only with “youthful, indifferent, unconscious” as character traits (p. 36).

The one instance of direct interior monologue in the novel is used to demonstrate its own limitations. After presenting Jacob’s thoughts, the narrator remarks that “there remains over something which can never be conveyed to a second person save by Jacob himself” (p. 97). Inflections and mood cannot be conveyed through direct interior monologue, and so “the room; the market carts; the hour; the very moment of history,” in other words the contingencies of the moment, are lost (p. 97). “What remains is mostly a matter of guess work” (p. 98). As Woolf writes in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” “You see one thing in character, and I another. You say it means this, and I that. And when it comes to writing, each makes a further selection on principles of his own. Thus Mrs. Brown can be treated in an infinite variety of ways, according to the age, country, and temperament of the writer.” As well as being a testament to Woolf’s awareness of contingency, this passage captures the elusiveness of both identity itself and the process by which it is perceived. Even Jacob, when writing to his mother, “could make no sense himself of his extraordinary excitement, and as for writing it down—” (p. 180). Woolf foregrounds the difficulty in the transcription of experience, particularly the transcription of the internal workings of the mind, which she would go on to attempt in her next two novels. The problematics of representation, a distrust of mimesis and the communicative capacity of language, problems which occupied Woolf throughout her lifetime, are at issue here. Woolf has created a public voice, a voice which can be central and can control the narrative without being dogmatic or authoritarian, a voice aware of its status and of the importance of contingency.

In Between the Acts, Woolf tackles similar issues, but focuses on public as audience, rather than on a single public voice. She represents a community but simultaneously remains aware of the impossibility of summation. In Jacob’s Room, people cannot be “summed up”: here it is the audience of the pageant and the pageant itself that remain open-ended and fragmented. World War II brought Woolf’s concern for her own reading public, as well as for the British public in general, to the fore. Feelings that her readership was declining, that her pacifism put her on the margins, even amongst her friends, made her reconceive the notion of a public and write a novel which explores the diversity within any such group. In opposition to the finality of fascism, Woolf wrote about the intertextuality and therefore endlessness of art as well as about the multiplicity of reactions to that art. The novel is full of fragments, of interruptions, of unforeseen circumstances. Many characters are heard, but only momentarily. Miss LaTrobe wants to hold the audience, unified, in her work of art, just as the audience want to sum up the pageant. Neither is successful. The key word here is “between” since the focus constantly shifts; it is constantly between states, not between only two acts but between many. Focus

moves from public to private, from private thought to public utterance.

The movement from "unity" to "dispersity" is enacted over and over again, and indirect interior monologue facilitates this movement.\(^{35}\) Compared to *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To The Lighthouse*, Woolf uses indirect interior monologue sparingly, instead moving rapidly from omniscient narration, to direct speech, to reported speech, to indirect interior monologue. This creates the continually shifting focus, the refusal to settle, which pervades the work. Characters in the novel oscillate between attitudes, not occupying a midpoint but moving from one to the other. When asked whether there exists a common human identity, Isa replies, "‘Yes.’ . . . ‘No,’ she added. It was Yes, No. Yes, yes, yes, the tide rushed out embracing. No, no, no, it contracted" (*Acts*, p. 193). Earlier in the text, the narrator describes a similar oscillation in Mrs Swithin: "She left the sentence unfinished, as if she were of two minds, and they fluttered to right and to left, like pigeons rising from the grass" (p. 68).

The dispersity and variety created by the intertextuality of the novel, with its many allusions and quotations, is paralleled in the audience. The collective "we" is broken down, leaving only rare moments of unity. "They all looked at the play. . . . Each of course saw something different" (p. 192). In order to represent variety within a collective or public situation, Woolf uses direct interior monologue, but deliberately leaves it unidentified:

> What a jangle and a jingle! Well, with the means at her disposal, you can’t ask too much. What a cackle, in a cacophony! Nothing ended. So abrupt. And corrupt. Such an outrage; such an insult; And not plain. Very up to date, all the same. What is her game? To disrupt? (p. 164)

The voice is definitely not the narrator’s, but although it retains the idioms of direct thought, it cannot be linked to a particular character. It sounds like an individual voice, but its anonymity makes it read as representative of the group. Also the rhyme and rhythmic swing to the passage suggest that it is being crafted by the narrator rather than being the passing thoughts of a character. Its disembodied and poetic quality make it representative of audience reaction in general. This is distinct from passages of indirect interior monologue such as,

> Mrs. Manresa looked at her programme. It would take till midnight unless they skipped. Early Briton; Plantagenets; Tudors; Stuarts—she ticked them off, but probably she had forgotten a reign or two. (p. 75)

This is an unambiguous private reaction to the pageant. Woolf negotiates between these types of interior monologue, intermingling them with direct speech and omniscient narration. Unlike *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To The Lighthouse*, there is more ambiguity here about assigning the indirect interior monologue to particular characters, a practice which augments the sense of multiple voices.

As Woolf deals with the notion of audience or public reaction, she finds herself oscillating more than ever between public and private points of view. The way to keep the audience

heterogeneous is to portray the many individual voices which make up the audience. She includes what those individuals say publicly as well as what they think privately. Yet again, indirect interior monologue allows her layers of perspective, a technique whereby she can create a sense of rapid oscillation. Again, also, we find heterogeneity of perspective, intertextuality, resistance to summation, and linearity. No questions are finally answered. Also, of course, the pageant is the work of an outsider. LaTrobe, modelled on lesbian director and producer Edith Craig, daughter of Ellen Terry, as a lesbian, an actress, a smoker and a drinker is “an outcast” in the village (p. 190).36 Her origins are unknown; she cannot be defined, and her marginalized position gives her power of resistance. As with the Society of Outsiders in Three Guineas, Miss LaTrobe can counter the rigid oppression of fascism by providing a forum which allows multiple perspectives, answers, reactions. As Caughie writes, “we might see a partial vision of social change as a willingness to tolerate the incompatibilities and discontinuities that such collective concepts engender.”37 It is through indirect interior monologue and her combinations of narrative techniques that Woolf allows these voices to be heard, to interrupt one another, and to break down any sense of totalization.

Virginia Blain argues that “Under the conditions of this male-dominated tradition which Virginia Woolf inherited, to adopt the all-knowing voice of omniscient narration was, in effect, to adopt a thoroughly masculine tone.”38 No doubt this association of conventional narration with masculinity was part of the reason behind Woolf’s deliberate use of a female narrator in Jacob’s Room. However, Woolf does not reject the omniscient narrator. Indirect interior monologue is a stylistic analogy for Woolf’s ambivalence towards her Victorian heritage. Woolf never wholly rejects convention, and the extensive third person omniscient narrative description of the early The Voyage Out and Night and Day reappears towards the end of her career in The Years. Woolf does not reject tradition in favor of experiment, but rather tenses one against the other, thus in part undoing the opposition. “Rewriting sustains and disperses, dispels, restores, and interrupts.”39 Woolf writes in 1928: “And what is my own position towards the inner and the outer? I think a kind of ease and dash are good;—yes: I think even externality is good; some combination of them ought to be possible.”40 Indirect interior monologue makes the combination possible.

Indirect interior monologue also allows Woolf flexibility and multiplicity, two other emphases central to her thinking. She gives a voice to many; the narrator is continually surrendering the story to the various characters. The narrator, omniscient because he or she can enter the characters’ minds as well as describe their thoughts, relinquishes his or her authority, often, as in Mrs. Dalloway, making pure narration secondary to the indirect interior monologue. In this way, Woolf’s technique is more innovative than that stream of consciousness writing which uses direct interior monologue, for it looks forward to Postmodernism with its continual shifting and sharing of voice. Woolf displays the artificiality of the omniscient narrator and his or her unproblematic conveying of subjectivity. Her use of

37 Caughie, p. 311.
multiple voices through indirect interior monologue acknowledges the variety, fragmentation, and sense of being situated that are inherent within subjectivity. It cannot be totalized or contained. Through its continual reworking of the relationship between public and private, indirect interior monologue breaks down any notion of a fixed binary opposition. Blain notes, "The enormously creative skill with which she varies, modulates, divides and joins the narrating voices of these fictions, in such a way that each voicing gives utterance not only to itself, and to its subject of discourse, but to a different relation between public and private vision. . . ." ⁴¹

Direct interior monologue is restrictive, in Woolf's view, because it traps the reader within a single subjectivity. Her rejection of definition in general—in terms of female identity, for example—is seen in her avoidance of a single, defining point of view. Woolf's choice of indirect interior monologue as a narrative technique is informed largely by the way in which it allows her to give a literal voice to many characters, particularly in Mrs. Dalloway, To The Lighthouse, and The Years. Ann Marie Herbert writes that "for Woolf, multiplicity was at the heart of her ontological and epistemological explorations, her experiments with form, and her representations of subjectivity." ⁴² Rather than imposing form or unity on this multiplicity, Woolf accepts plurality as such and seeks structures in her writing which will allow ambiguity. Woolf is not afraid to "Tolerate the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure," as she writes in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." ⁴³ It has been suggested that such tolerance was intensified by the threat of fascism. "In Between the Acts, Woolf rejects the modernist beliefs in art as unified and the artist as unifier; such artists and artwork too easily serve the agenda of fascism," ⁴⁴ Marlowe Miller rightly argues, but this rejection can be seen much earlier than Between the Acts. Woolf resisted totalizing narratives and narrators even before she saw their link with fascism.

Mitchell Leaska makes a connection between Woolf's stylistics, her way of thinking, and the need for a criticism which does justice to the flexibility in her work. "That Virginia Woolf should have chosen to use multiple perspectives is indication enough that no interpretation can be arrived at which settles on one aspect at the expense of the other." ⁴⁵ This is why so many of Woolf's earlier critics who search for unity are unwittingly going against her commitment to change, about which she was prophetically unequivocal: "No critic ever gives full weight to the desire of the mind for change." ⁴⁶ Although, she did, at times search for unity, or for the transcendent moment of vision, as Herbert writes, she was "deeply skeptical of its possibility." ⁴⁷ Finally, as Woolf herself wrote in her diary about Lytton Strachey, "'[Gibbon]

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⁴¹ Blain, pp. 134–35.
⁴⁶ Woolf, A Writer's Diary, pp. 194–95.
⁴⁷ Herbert, p. 14.
has a point of view & sticks to it' I said. 'And so do you. I wobble.'

Indirect interior monologue is one manifestation of Woolf's constant negotiations between public and private, as well as one of the stylistic ways in which Woolf's resistance to stasis and definition manifests itself, allowing her movement between public and private realms, between varying points of view. Rather than vague and abstract declarations about Woolf's multivalency, it is important to acknowledge that these traits can and should be anchored in readings of the specifics of her texts and their techniques.

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