The Window: Knowledge of Other Minds in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

Martha C. Nussbaum

How, then, she had asked herself, did one know one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were? Sitting close to Mrs. Ramsay, "close as she could get" (78), her arms around Mrs. Ramsay's knees, loving her intensely, Lily Briscoe wonders how to get inside her to see the "sacred inscriptions" in her heart, "which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public" (79). She searches for a technique by which these internal tablets might be read: "What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers?" (79). The art eludes her, and yet she continues to long for it: "How, then, she had asked herself, did one know one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were? Only like a bee, drawn by some sweetness or sharpness in the air intangible to touch or taste, one haunted the dome-shaped hive, ranged the wastes of the air over the countries of the world alone, and then haunted the hives with their murmurs and their stirrings; the hives, which were people" (79-80).

People are sealed hives full of bees that both attract other bees and keep them off. In her complex image Lily Briscoe indicates both that knowledge of the mind of another is a profound human wish--it feels as if to have that knowledge would be to be finally at home, in one's own hive--and, at the same time, that this knowledge is unattainable. The hives are sealed. Their sweetness or sharpness lures us--and then all we can do is to hover round the outside, haunting the hive, listening to the murmurs and stirrings that are the signs of vibrant life within. We can never see whether those murmurs and stirrings really come from other bees like ourselves, rather than, say some engine constructed to make bee-like noises. And even if we assume there are bees inside, we can never fully decode their messages, can never be certain of what they are thinking and feeling. And yet we pursue the goal obsessively. Knowledge is a project that draws us to one another, and we cannot bear to let that project go.

The first part of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* depicts, repeatedly, both our epistemological insufficiency toward one another and our unquenchable epistemological longing. But the first part is also called "The Window." The authorial image of the window stands in tension with Lily's image of the sealed hive, suggesting that Lily is blind to a possibility. And Part I ends with a scene in which, or so it would seem, knowledge of another mind is attained. Mrs. Ramsay stands close to her husband, who looks at her as she looks out of the window. "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. He could not deny it. . . . She had not said it: yet he knew" (185-86).

Virginia Woolf tackles a venerable philosophical problem. I believe that she makes a contribution both to our understanding of the problem and to its resolution (or perhaps its nonresolution). She may well have discussed this issue with philosophers, and she may well have profited from her philosophical reading. It is not these connections, however, that I wish to investigate. I shall focus here on what is philosophical in the novel itself, both in what it says about the problem of other minds and in the way it says it--for I shall argue that the statement of both problem and "resolution" is made not only by overt statements inside the text, but also by the form of the text itself, in its manner of depicting both sealed life and communication.
Woolf's approach to the problem is very different from that of many philosophers who have investigated it: for she suggests that the problem of other minds is not simply an epistemological problem, a problem of evidence and certainty, but, above all, an ethical problem, a problem produced by the motives and desires with which we approach beings who are both separate from us and vital to our projects. Although for many reasons I shall avoid speaking directly of comparisons between Woolf and the thought of Wittgenstein—not least being the knowledge that we would never get started with Woolf if we once tried to get agreement about Wittgenstein on this issue—I shall simply state that her approach can in some respects be fruitfully compared with some interpretations of the later Wittgenstein, particularly that found in Stanley Cavell's *The Claim of Reason*, and with Cavell's own approach to [End Page 732] the problem of skepticism. In other ways, as I shall indicate, her approach is intimately related to the portrait of skepticism and jealousy in Proust's *Recherche*, which certainly must count as one of the profound philosophical contributions on the topic. Woolf makes a distinctive contribution, however, through her depiction of the sheer many-sidedness of the problem of other minds, by her indication that it is not a single problem at all, but many distinct human difficulties that are in complex ways interrelated. She is distinctive, too, in her insistent focus on ethical character and on the virtues of persons that make knowledge possible.

In pursuing these issues, I shall examine, first, the statement of the problem in Part I of the novel: why is it that people are sealed hives to one another? I shall then return to the scene in which Lily Briscoe attempts to know the thoughts and feelings of Mrs. Ramsay, asking how Lily understands the epistemological project and why, so conceived, the project is doomed to failure. I shall then turn to Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, asking how it comes about that these two people, so deeply dissimilar, so lacking in first-hand understanding of one another's goals and aims, should nonetheless claim, at least, to have solved Lily's problem, communicating and receiving the knowledge of one another's love. On what does Mrs. Ramsay base her claim, and what should we make of it?

II

If one were to stage the overt actions and interactions of *To the Lighthouse* as a play, one would have hardly enough action and dialogue to fill half an hour. Most of the novel is set inside the minds of its various characters, and its drama is a drama of thought, emotion, perception, memory. Very little of this thinking and feeling finds expression in language. The reader is thus constantly made aware of the richness of consciousness, and of the tremendous gap between what we are in and to ourselves, and the part of the self that enters the interpersonal world. Only the prose of the novel bridges the gap—and this, we are made to feel, imperfectly and incompletely. Thinking about Mr. Ramsay and Mr. Bankes, Lily finds a host of thoughts and perceptions crowding in on her, a few of which the authorial voice manages to pin down—but then suggests the limits even of its own accuracy: "All of this danced up and down, like a company of gnats, each separate, but all marvelously controlled in an invisible elastic net--danced up and down in Lily's mind, in and about the branches of the pear tree . . . until her thought which had spun quicker and quicker exploded of its own intensity" (40-41). The crowd of gnats in the net become an explosion of uncountable [End Page 733] fragments, and we recognize that even the lengthy summary we have been given--none of which any of the other characters will ever know--is no doubt only a crude pinning down, a linguistic simplification, of processes far more elusive and complex.

In this sense, as the novel shows repeatedly, people really are sealed hives--buzzing centers of intense activity, little of which is communicated to any other hive. The novel begins with a single sentence spoken aloud by Mrs. Ramsay. This sentence is followed by a page and a half representing the thoughts of James Ramsay, which is followed in turn by five words spoken aloud by his father, and then one more page from James's thoughts, eleven words aloud from Mrs. Ramsay--and so on. The ratio of internal action to external communication is frequently more lopsided still than this, rarely less so.

What, then, is the problem of access to the other, as the novel presents it? Why are the insides of the hive not made available for the secure grasp of others? First of all, there is the sheer problem of time. The inner world, like the company of gnats, moves extremely rapidly, has many many small pieces, each
complexly connected to the others. If one were to set oneself to communicate everything, one would never be done with it, and one would certainly not be able to get on with life. (In this sense the stance of the authorial voice presents itself as radically detached from the ordinary activities of life: by determining to burrow into consciousness and to record its small movements in language, the novel is taking on a task strangely unnatural in the detachment from ordinary activity that it requires, and hubristically ambitious in its goal—a task that is hardly fit for a human being, that could be completed, perhaps, only by a god.) Lily thinks of Mr. Bankes and Mr. Ramsay: "Standing now, apparently transfixed, by the pear tree, impressions poured in upon her of those two men, and to follow her thought was like following a voice which speaks too quickly to be taken down by one's pencil" (40). Human beings cannot even take down the dictation of their own thought, so rapidly and complexly does it move. How much more difficult, then, is it to communicate this thought to another; how impossible, it would seem, by following the signs given by another to attain access to the rapid complex inner world that exists inside another body.

But time, rapidity, and complexity are not the only obstacles to communication of the inner world. The novel shows us, as well, that language, the instrument we must use to make ourselves available to one another, is in some ways a very imperfect instrument of understanding. It is, first, a general medium of exchange, its meanings blunt and serviceable. It appears to be too crude to express what is most personal, what is deepest in the individual consciousness. Mrs. Ramsay thinks of [End Page 734] the language of daily social interchange as a crude lingua franca that offers uniformity at the cost of suppressing individuality: "So, when there is a strife of tongues, at some meeting, the chairman, to obtain unity, suggests that every one shall speak in French. Perhaps it is bad French; French may not contain the words that express the speaker's thoughts; nevertheless speaking French imposes some order, some uniformity" (136).

This is not a claim that each person has a language of thought that is in its essence private. The fact that all these thoughts are contained in a novel shows that this is not Woolf's view. The claim is, instead, that the meanings of the common language become inflected with the peculiarities of each person's history and character and taste, in such a way that, although in principle language might express the peculiar character of an individual's thought (if we waive for a moment our reservations about time and density), in fact the shopworn common language of daily social interchange rarely does so. We also have here a self-referential claim on behalf of the language of the literary artist, which is able to render individuality in a way that most of us, speaking, cannot. 3

Because the language of daily life is a blunt imperfect medium, and because each of us has a distinctive history and set of experiences, we find ourselves using the same words in different ways, to mean very different things. If we try to gain knowledge of another person's consciousness by listening to his or her words, and then asking ourselves what meanings these words conjure up in our own consciousness, we will frequently go wrong. Mr. Ramsay thinks about the universe, with a comfortably self-indulgent fatalism:

"Poor little place," he murmured with a sigh.

She heard him. He said the most melancholy things, but she noticed that directly after he had said them he always seemed more cheerful than usual. All this phrase-making was a game, she thought, for if she had said half what he said, she would have blown her brains out by now.

It annoyed her, this phrase-making, and she said to him, in a matter-of-fact way, that it was a perfectly lovely evening. And what was he groaning about, she asked, half laughing, half complaining, for she guessed what he was thinking—he would have written better books if he had not married. (106)

This highly complex passage reminds us that words, in life, are used to convey meanings that are shaped by an individual history. What Mr. Ramsay means by "poor little place" is not what Mrs. Ramsay would mean if she said something like that about the universe. For her, prone as she is to real depression, such a fatalistic utterance would only be chosen as an expression of despair. To keep herself away from the [End Page 735] depression that menaces her, she tries to avoid such phrases. Her husband, by contrast, with his taste for the melodramatic, for "The Charge of the Light Brigade" and other images of courage pitted against disaster, takes a certain delight in characterizing the universe this way. The phrase
expresses his image of himself as a courageous solitary voyager pitted against fate. That image pleases him, restores his sense of pride in himself. As she recognizes, the original thought that prompts the phrase is a serious one—he would have written better books if he had not married—but his choice of the quasi-tragic phrase is his way of avoiding the sadness such thoughts might induce, by portraying himself as a victim of fate, to be commended for his courage in sticking it out in a hostile universe. What would for her be a capitulation to depression is his device for keeping depression at bay.

Language, in short, issues from a personal history. It reports the speaker's meanings, which are often highly idiosyncratic, though in principle nonprivate and tellable in the way and to the extent that a novel is told. In some cases we might need a history of novelistic complexity to get at what those meanings are. Moreover, language also does things to and in that history. The words we use to others are not just reports of the inner world, they are also agents. To understand what Mr. Ramsay is saying here we need to know not only how he uses that phrase and phrases like it on many occasions, what actions and other gestures accompany that phrase; we also need to know or guess why he speaks at all, what he is trying to do with and by the phrase—in this case, to distance himself from real personal loss and guilt by the projection of a beloved image of solitary courage. To understand what he means—if, indeed, Mrs. Ramsay does (and we must always remember that her conjectures are shaped by her own needs and desires and are fallible, as any interpretation is fallible)—she does need to know the pattern of his actions and utterances, his history, but she also needs to know his desires and projects, what he wants, what he is seeking to do to himself and his world. To grasp all this, even in an intimate relationship of long duration, is a formidable challenge. Most people lack such information about themselves.

Suppose that these problems could be overcome—for example, by taking up the supple fine-tuned language of literary art, together with the literary artist's willingness to tell the story of a unique character so that we can get a grip on that character's idiosyncratic meanings and dynamic goals. We do suppose that we know things about the minds of others when we read novels of consciousness, and we suppose this with good reason, given that novels present us with data requisite for adequate interpretation of a human life, data that social interaction frequently denies us. The novel now shows us, however, that these are not the only obstacles to knowledge of another. For so far we have been supposing that people want to make their meanings known to one another. This, for many different reasons, may not be the case.

This novel contains no Iagos, no evil manipulative characters who systematically deceive, saying one thing and thinking another. In fact, it contains very little dissimulation of a morally blameworthy kind. And yet these characters almost always resist being known, speak and act in ways that actively impede the encroaching movements of an alien understanding. Social form is one prominent reason for this resistance. The novel is not just incidentally about middle-class English people, who carry with them cultural habits of reticence so long developed that they have become a part of their very character, making it impossible for them to give direct expression to most sentiments, especially deep emotions, especially any socially discordant thought. As Mrs. Ramsay speaks the polite “French” appropriate to social intercourse, Charles Tansley thinks of the more violent, expressive language he would use with his lower-class friends, “there in a society where one could say what one liked” (136) without worrying about decorum. He “suspected the insincerity” (136) of the social language, and thinks of how he will call it “nonsense.” But this is not simply a point about English social habits. Any social code, the novel suggests, imposes some discipline on the expression of emotion; in order to achieve order and uniformity, it teaches people to have at least some reticence, some reluctance to be known.

But there are other more personal motives for this reluctance. Above all, the novel shows us the strength of shame as a motive for self-concealment. Behind Charles Tansley's anger and his fantasies of denouncing the Ramsays to the people of his class is a profound feeling of embarrassment and inadequacy that he is not like them, does not belong, has nothing appropriate to say. He desperately conceals this insecurity beneath his angry silence. For Mr. Ramsay, the root of shame is not class-linked but personal—the sense of professional failure that underlies all his bluster and his fatalistic assertiveness. As we learn in a passage that is probably set in Lily Briscoe's consciousness (although it follows
seamlessly a passage in which Ramsay himself is contemplating his career), we see him depicted as a man who standardly takes refuge in self-consoling disguises:

But . . . his glory in the phrases he made, in the ardour of youth, in his wife’s beauty, in the tributes that reached him from Swansea, Cardiff, Exeter, Southampton, Kidderminster, Oxford, Cambridge—all had to be deprecated and concealed under the phrase “talking nonsense,” because, in effect, he had not done the thing he might have done. It was a disguise; it was the refuge of a man afraid to own his own feelings, who could not say, This is what I like--this is what I am; and rather pitiable and distasteful to William Bankes and Lily Briscoe, who wondered why such concealments should be necessary. (70)

Out of shame at what he feels to be a gap in his attainment, Mr. Ramsay conceals himself systematically from others. Of course they guess at this--and we are led to think their guesses accurate. But the real emotions are not honestly "owned."

The case of Mr. Ramsay shows us something else about concealment: that it is a way of getting power. Mr. Ramsay is not just attempting to cover his shame. That already has a strategic role: covering one's true weakness and vulnerability is one way people have of trying to exert influence over others. But Mr. Ramsay's strategic use of concealment is more complex: his blusterings and his cheerful fatalisms, which conceal from himself and others what he's really worried about, also have the role of soliciting attention and comfort from others in his circle, especially women. The utterance "poor little place" (106)--which Mrs. Ramsay knows to be a way of distancing himself from the thought of his failure--is also a solicitation, a request that she comfort him. She goes to him, as always, asking "what was he groaning about." After Mrs. Ramsay's death, Lily Briscoe feels continually the now unanswered demand for comfort as something "bearing down on her" (221)--"and she pretended to drink out of her empty coffee cup so as to escape him--to escape his demand on her, to put aside a moment longer that imperious need" (219).

Here we arrive at a subtle point. Mr. Ramsay is not only in some respects a concealer; he is also a self-dramatizer. He makes himself more emotionally transparent, in a certain way, than the other characters do, especially in the third part of the novel--but even this transparency is both statement and demand: "Mr. Ramsay sighed to the full. He waited. Was she not going to say anything? Did she not see what he wanted from her? . . . He sighed profoundly. He sighed significantly. All Lily wished was that this enormous flood of grief, this insatiable hunger for sympathy, this demand that she should surrender herself up to him entirely, and even so he had sorrows enough to keep her supplied for ever, should leave her . . . before it swept her down in its flow" (226). Even the apparently frank statement of grief is not to be taken at face value. Mr. Ramsay does feel grief, but he is also putting on a show to get from Lily the sympathy he wants. It may be impossible for him or for anyone else to say to what extent he exaggerates or changes his grief in the process. Emotions don't stand still to be inspected like so many stones or bricks. The act of bringing them to consciousness frequently changes them; the act of expressing them to another almost always does so. [End Page 738]

In fact, one might even ask how clear it is that there is a fact of the matter about Mr. Ramsay's grief that his external statements either do or do not render correctly. The inner world is fluid and dynamic, complexly linked up with the strategies and the aims of the outer. Indeed, it is frequently also undemarcated and in flux. a buzzing of confused conflicting feelings and impulses, which cannot be reported in definite language without being changed. In short, even when we have what seems most like frankness, we may have something far more complicated and strategic. The very concept of frank depiction of the inner may itself involve an oversimplification.

Shame and power are not the only sources of concealment and misrepresentation in the novel. The sheer desire for liberty and privacy is another. Mrs. Ramsay, who lives so much for and toward others, protects her few moments of solitude, cherishing these as what is most real, what is most herself:
She took a look at life, for she had a clear sense of it there, something real, something private, which she shared neither with her children nor with her husband. . . . [I]t was a relief when they went to bed. For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of—to think; well, not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrank, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others. . . . This core of darkness could go anywhere, for no one saw it. They could not stop it, she thought, exulting. There was freedom, there was peace, there was, most welcome of all, a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability. Not as oneself did one find rest ever, in her experience . . . but as a wedge of darkness. Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity. (91, 95-96)

Mrs. Ramsay protects her private self. But we notice that it is not the same neatly shaped conscious self that she might communicate to others. Her solitude is not formed for or toward the outer world. We reach here an especially deep difficulty in the way of knowing another mind. What we usually think of as "the mind"—that is, its conscious mental acts, acts that could at least putatively be rendered in language and communicated to another—are only, perhaps, a part of the mind, a part bound up with the outer world of "being and doing," a sort of marshaling of the mind preparatory to communication.

Woolf's depiction thus supports a view of consciousness similar to the one advanced by Nietzsche in Gay Science, where he depicts self-consciousness as a relatively late evolutionary arrival, useful only in connection with communication. Most of our mental life, he plausibly [End Page 739] stresses, could be carried on without it, at a level of experience and awareness more like that we are accustomed to attribute to other animals. This account has recently received strong support from research in neuroscience and evolutionary biology. Mrs. Ramsay supports this idea; what she feels like in and of herself is something dark, made up of intuition and free-ranging meditation. The more hard, definite, verbalizable parts of her are the parts she associates with being at the disposal of others, not with the core of her self. This may not be true of the identities of all individuals. For example, Mr. Ramsay is almost certainly more fully identified with his consciousness than his wife is. He feels most fully himself when he forms himself into words and concepts. But if we admit that Mrs. Ramsay's account of herself is a true account of many people much of the time, we have a very tough obstacle in the way of our knowledge of others: for the very presentation of self as a possible object for knowledge may be a kind of self-change—or even, as Mrs. Ramsay thinks, a making of a nonself, an internalized artifact of the public realm from which she flees. ²

Woolf supports this outer-inner distinction: but she also calls it into question. For Mrs. Ramsay's identity for the reader is fundamentally constituted by her care for others, her public doings and actings. When she herself uses the language of the "outer" and the "inner," and associates the core of her selfhood with the wedge-shaped core of darkness, the reader both assents and dissents. We understand this distinction not as a universal metaphysical claim but as a very particular psychological fact about Mrs. Ramsay—namely, that she likes to flee at times from the demands of others and to identify herself with her nonverbal meditations. The point about the significance of the nonlinguistic stands: but it is more complex than Mrs. Ramsay's language initially suggests. For the public realm is a crucial constituent of the self; the meditative realm is both the hidden self and, at the same time, the death of the self. Consider the way the passage goes on: "Not as oneself did one find rest ever, in her experience. . . . Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir." Mrs. Ramsay feels herself at such moments to be very close to, almost identical with, certain inanimate objects, "trees, streams, flowers" (97). But that both is and is not to be Mrs. Ramsay.

III

In the light of all these obstacles in the way of knowledge, it is no accident that the novel is saturated with images of hiddenness and remoteness: the image of a loved child's mind as a well, whose waters are [End Page 740] both receptive and distorting (84); the image of thoughts and feelings hidden as if under
veils (160); Lily's images of the loved person as hive, as secret treasure chamber (79). The novel's very structure shows us this hiddenness, by giving us a miraculous access to thoughts of the characters, an access that they are far from having to one another, though at the same time it is still plainly incomplete--itself too succinct, too strategically plotted, too much a construct of consciousness and language, to constitute in itself a full response to its own challenge.

(As we notice the novel's way of solving a problem human beings seem not to solve so well in life, we should recall that this novel represents Woolf's own personal attempt to know the minds of her own parents--that Mr. Ramsay's anxiety and Mrs. Ramsay's depression are conjectures that fill the hives of Leslie Stephen and her beautiful remote mother with definite sounds, as the bee haunts their outsides and uses the power of art to represent what may [or may not] have been within.)

Responding to the fact of hiddenness, Woolf's characters try to solve the problem of knowledge by attempts to invade the chambers of the other, to possess, to grab hold, even to become one with the other's thoughts and feelings. For possession would be, it seems, the most satisfying solution to their epistemological problem. The most elaborate case of this is Lily Briscoe's attempt to know Mrs. Ramsay, in the passage with which I began. We now need to examine this passage at length:

"Sitting on the floor with her arms round Mrs. Ramsay's knees, close as she could get, smiling to think that Mrs. Ramsay would never know the reason of that pressure, she imagined how in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her, were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public. What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers? What device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored? Could the body achieve, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intricate passages of the brain? or the heart? Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge, she had thought, leaning her head on Mrs. Ramsay's knee.

Nothing happened. Nothing! Nothing! as she leant her head against Mrs. Ramsay's knee. And yet, she knew knowledge and wisdom were stored up in Mrs. Ramsay's heart. How then, she had asked herself, did one know one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were? Only like a bee, drawn by some sweetness or sharpness in the air intangible to touch or taste, one haunted the dome-shaped hives, ranged the wastes of the air over the countries of the world [End Page 741] alone, and then haunted the hives with their murmurs and their stirrings; the hives, which were people. (79-80)

Lily's attempt to know Mrs. Ramsay is, we notice, unilateral: it coexists with her own amused pride in her own self-concealment. This suggests that the project of knowing, as she conceives it, has itself something of the desire for power in it, is just as strategic as the desire to protect herself from knowing. I shall later return to that point.

Lily thinks of the project of knowing as, first, a kind of reading: we go (somehow) inside the room of the other mind and we read the sacred inscriptions that nobody else can see. But reading is not intimate enough, after all. It substitutes an internal object for an external object, but it doesn't really yield the grasp of what it's like to be that person, to have that person's thoughts and feelings. It is this, not just propositional book-knowledge, that Lily desires. She now thinks of the possibility of becoming fused with the person one loves, "like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same." She conceives of this possibility in a frankly sexual way--as a union to be achieved by either the body or the mind, "subtly mingling"--"loving, as people called it." In this way she alludes to the pervasive idea that sexual intercourse achieves not just intimate responsiveness but an actual oneness. She attempts, through the very intensity of her adoring thought, to achieve some simulacrum of this union. The attempt fails--she has no illusion that she has become closer to Mrs. Ramsay's mind than she was before. She then asks herself the question with which I began: given that people cannot be entered and possessed--are, in fact, sealed hives--how in fact can we know one thing or another thing about them? Notice that she abandons
the goal of complete fusion and also the goal of complete unmediated access to the "sacred tablets," and substitutes a more modest goal--knowing "one thing or another thing."

There is, I think, a progress here, both epistemological and moral. The goal of complete transparent access to the "sacred tablets" is not just unattainable, it is morally problematic, since it asks that Mrs. Ramsay surrender her privacy and her boundedness before Lily's curious gaze. We note that Mrs. Ramsay is in fact most unwilling to give up her privacy, which she regards as a central constituent of her selfhood; we also recall that Lily herself wishes to be able to conceal her thoughts from Mrs. Ramsay, even while she dreams of removing from Mrs. Ramsay all possibility of concealment. The move from unmediated reading to fusion deepens the problem: for the wish to be fused with Mrs. Ramsay isn't a wish to know her as other, as Mrs. Ramsay--as Lily quickly recognizes; it is a wish to incorporate her power, to be that powerful envied presence. 

But, as Lily soon discovers, [End Page 742] having the other person's thoughts and feelings as oneself, in one's own body and mind, is neither necessary nor sufficient for knowledge of the other: not sufficient, because that would precisely be not to know the other, the separateness and externality of that life, those feelings; not necessary, because we can conceive of a knowledge that does not entail possession, that acknowledges, in fact, the impossibility of possession as a central fact about the lives of persons. That alternative remains to be discussed--and I think that Woolf in many respects anticipates Cavell's argument. But there appears to be wisdom in Lily's shift from the grandiose demand for possession to the modest demand to know "one thing or another thing" about those sealed hives that murmur and buzz as we hover greedily around them. At the very least, Lily's new question involves a more adequate conception of herself--as not a superhuman but a human being, finite in both body and mind, partial and incomplete, separate from other humans of necessity and always.

IV

Woolf's image of the window suggests that people are not completely sealed to one another. There is an opening, one can see through or see in, even if one cannot enter. Part I of the novel ends with a knowledge-claim: "She had not said it: yet he knew" (186). In not a trivial but a central matter--a wife's love--Mr. Ramsay is said by his wife to have gained knowledge. What is the basis for this claim? And to what extent does this case offer a solution to the problems of knowing raised elsewhere in the novel?

Very clearly, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay do not gain knowledge by any kind of unity or mingling of experience, nor by any violation of one another's solitude and privacy. One of the distinctive features of their relationship is a cautious respect for that which the other wishes to conceal. Mrs. Ramsay senses a good deal about his academic insecurity and his sense of incomplete achievement. But she does not try to get at those insecurities or to show her knowledge of him by dragging them out into the open. Think what it would be for her to demand that he talk about his failures; suppose, in the scene we have examined, she had said to him, "Tell me what's really going on when you say, 'Poor little place'--you aren't worrying about the universe really, are you, you are worrying about your book." We see that such a claim or demand for "knowledge" would be a way of belittling him and asserting ascendancy over him. She shows him respect and love by allowing him his concealment. She doesn't even try to grasp his failure sharply in her own mind--for it would be incompatible with her love to see him as a failure. We might [End Page 743] even say that this respect for hiddenness, and this reluctance to pry even in imagination, are Mrs. Ramsay's ways of knowing her husband's insecurities in the context of his life--of seeing their importance and their role, of behaving in a way that acknowledges their importance and their role. (Notice that this means that knowing is a very individual thing: in another relationship one might be aware that the person was longing to be "seen through," thrived on that particular kind of intimacy.)

On his side Mr. Ramsay, who is accustomed to burst in on the privacy of others, "bearing down" on Lily and the children, is very careful with his wife's solitude.

He turned and saw her. Ah! She was lovely, lovelier now than ever he thought. But he could not speak to her. He could not interrupt her. He wanted urgently to speak to her now that James was gone and she was alone at last. But he resolved, no; he would not interrupt her. She was aloof from him now in her
beauty, in her sadness. He would let her be, and he passed her without a word, though it hurt him that she should look so distant, and he could not reach her, he could do nothing to help her. (100; see also 103)

Mr. Ramsay knows his wife, we might say, in a way in which he knows no other character. What does this mean? It means, I think, that he attends to her more fully as a person separate from himself existing in her own right, rather than as an instrument of consolation for himself. His knowledge of her separate being is expressed in, and perhaps also constituted by, such small episodes of noticing and respecting, of refusing to burst in upon her. He puts her own mind at the center of the stage and subordinates, for once, the imperious demands of his own. All that may be at least part of what it is to know another mind as other.

Nor do Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay know one another by analogy, or by similar and parallel structures of experience. Of course at a very general level they do analogize—they interpret one another as human beings and as sharing with them certain goals and aims characteristic of human life as they know it. But analogy of that sort doesn't go very far, especially in the context of both idiosyncrasy and socially taught gender differences. We know that they are very dissimilar, in thought patterns, in thought content, in patterns of emotional response, in goals and actions, in what they mean by their words. Part of what convinces us that they do have knowledge of one another is the fact that, in case after case, they allow for these differences, they refuse to analogize. He knows that she doesn't want comfort, even though with similar utterances that is exactly what he would be thinking about and wanting. She knows that he is more exhilarated than despairing when he says the words that to her would mean despair.

This doesn't even mean that they can vividly imagine what it would be like to be the other person. Sometimes they can, and sometimes they can't. Mr. Ramsay cannot empathetically conceive of her depressed ruminations, though he can learn to respect them; Mrs. Ramsay thinks his mind is strangely different from her own, while recognizing that she cannot really quite imagine what it is like to be him:

Was it not odd, she reflected? Indeed he seemed to her sometimes made differently from other people, born blind, deaf, and dumb, to the ordinary things, but to the extraordinary things, with an eye like an eagle's. His understanding often astonished her. But did he notice the flowers? No. Did he notice the view? No. Did he even notice his own daughter's beauty, or whether there was pudding on his plate or roast beef? He would sit at table with them like a person in a dream . . . [T]hen, she thought, stooping down to look, a great mind like his must be different in every way from ours. (107-8).

Here we see that in one sense Mrs. Ramsay has only the most rudimentary knowledge of her husband's mind. She has no idea what he thinks about, nor has she any inclination for the sort of abstract thinking she associates with her vague notion of "the great mind." All she can say about it is what it leaves out; and she herself couldn't think in a way that leaves out those daily things.

How, then, do they know each other, insofar as they do? We might say, they know one another as we know them--by reading. Having lived together for a long time, they have gathered a lot of information about patterns of speech, action, reaction. Among other things, they have learned a lot--partly by making mistakes with one another--about the limits of analogizing, about relevant similarities and differences. They have gathered this information, furthermore, not in the manner of a detached scientist, but in the course of interactions to which both ascribe enormous importance. They work hard to "read" the other, to fit the data into a meaningful and predictively accurate pattern, because each loves the other more than anyone else in the world, and it thus matters tremendously that they should get one another right, as far as possible. They spend a good part of their solitude thinking about each other, piecing together what they perceive and think, learning to read not just statements, but also gestures, facial expressions, silences. Each learns the idiosyncratic text of the other in the way that one might learn a foreign language--never having a once-for-all guaranteed translation manual, but holistically piecing it all together, trying to make the best sense, over time, of all the words and phrases.

The novel suggests that their love for and need of one another plays an important role in making them good readers. Because of this love and need, they hover around one another, they allow
signals from the other to pull them out of themselves. When Mr. Ramsay, chuckling at the story of Hume stuck in a bog (which comforts him, on account of its metaphorical relation to his intellectual predicament), notices the way she purses her lips while knitting, he quickly reads a good deal in the expression: "he could not help noting, as he passed, the sternness at the heart of her beauty. It saddened him, and her remoteness pained him, and he felt, as he passed, that he could not protect her, and, when he reached the hedge, he was sad. He could do nothing to help her. He must stand by and watch her. Indeed, the infernal truth was, he made things worse for her. He was irritable—he was touchy. He had lost his temper over the Lighthouse. He looked into the hedge, into its intricacy, its darkness" (98-99). Here love pulls him toward perceptions and reflections that elude him completely in the case of other people. A simple facial expression is read in ways that pull in data from years of knowledge of her sadness—so that he knows, as he passes, not only what she is likely to be feeling, but also what he can and cannot do to help. And this leads him to a more accurate reading of himself, since to himself he is a text just as difficult to read correctly as to any other mind. Later, at the dinner party, with their focused intensity of mutual concern, the two are able to carry on complicated conversations about the proceedings simply by small gestures and expressions: "And why not? Mrs. Ramsay demanded. Surely they could let Augustus have his soup if he wanted it. He hated people wallowing in food, Mr. Ramsay frowned at her. He hated everything dragging on for hours like this. But he had controlled himself, Mr. Ramsay would have her observe, disgusting though the sight was. But why show it so plainly, Mrs. Ramsay demanded (they looked at each other down the long table sending these questions and answers across, each knowing exactly what the other felt)" (144). Once again, both long familiarity and an intensity of focus inspired by love are at work to make their language vastly more efficient than the clumsy "French" of social interaction. Because they have been in similar situations together and talked about them afterwards for many years, each caring what the other feels, the smallest facial sign conveys a history. The theory of truth underlying the knowledge claim is a coherence theory, clearly—they each have no independent unmediated access to the "sacred tablets," either in self or in the other. But there is every reason to feel, here, that the demands of coherence have been well met.

We now need to examine the scene with which "The Window" ends, as it builds up to its final knowledge claim. Mrs. Ramsay watches her husband as he reads a novel of Walter Scott. She reads the meaning of his expressions of pleasure and satisfaction—by combining what she knows of his anxieties about his own work, combined with the likely effect of Charles Tansley's dismissal of Scott at dinner (177). She knows well the persistence and centrality of his worries about whether his books will be read, even though at the same time she doesn't quite know what it is like for him to have those worries. ("It didn't matter, any of it, she thought. A great man, a great book, fame—who could tell? She knew nothing about it!" [177].) She then thinks in a general way about his truthfulness and outspokenness. "If only he would speak! She had complete trust in him" (178).

This is an important moment, since it reminds us that none of the knowledge either has of the other is immune to doubt, based as it all is on reading and interpretation. They get from coherence to knowledge not by any extra step of grasping or possessing, but simply by trusting, by waiving the skeptical questions that could arise even about such a complex and carefully sorted fabric of data. Trust, of course, is itself not blind; she trusts his truthfulness because her experience has shown her that he can be trusted. But experience never really shows this; it never really rules out a refined clever deception. So in allowing her experience of him to have this meaning, to lead all the way to trust, Mrs. Ramsay does add to the evidence an extra ingredient—a willingness, we might say, to be at his disposal, to leave her life open to what he says and does. Roused from her reverie by the sound of her husband slapping his thighs with pleasure, she knows that he is delighted by the fact that Scott's novel holds up and gives delight—and so perhaps his writings have some lasting life in them, and perhaps it doesn't even matter. "Their eyes met for a second; but they did not want to speak to each other. They had nothing to say, but something seemed, nevertheless, to go from him to her" (179).

As she reads a sonnet, she falls into a pleasant trance, and feels the peace of a mind swept clean and clear (181). He looks at her, and she feels what he is thinking. The novel itself now shifts rapidly from one center of consciousness to the other, so that we can hardly tell who is having what thought, so rapidly and accurately do they communicate: "But she was becoming conscious of her husband looking at her. He
was smiling at her, quizzically, as if he were ridiculing her gently for being asleep in broad daylight, but at the same time he was thinking. Go on reading. You don't look sad now, he thought. And he wondered what she was reading, and exaggerated her ignorance, her simplicity, for he liked to think that she was not clever, not book-learned at all. He wondered if she understood what she was reading. Probably not, he thought. She was astonishingly beautiful" (182). If in part the exaggeration of her ignorance is in his mind, it is also, equally, in hers--she knows how he sees her, and perhaps, too, he knows that he exaggerates. (In this odd way, knowledge can be present even when mistakes are clearly being made.) He knows that he finds her beautiful, but she also knows that he finds her beautiful. It is on that account that she puts down her book and responds to his smile. Mrs. Ramsay now mentions the engagement; she wants him to respond, so she tries a joke--"the sort of joke they had together" (183)--another reminder of their long habits of intimate communication.

Mrs. Ramsay now feels the shadow of sadness closing round her. She looks to him, as if to appeal for help, speaking silently. He thinks of Scott and of Balzac, and yet they are responding with ever closer responsiveness and knowledge: "But through the crepuscular walls of their intimacy, for they were drawing together, involuntarily, coming side by side, quite close, she could feel his mind like a raised hand shadowing her mind" (184). The image of the shadowy wall shows us that barriers are never removed--but somehow the walls become more like shadow than like substance, and she can feel the action of his mind as if it stood between her and life, casting protection over her mind. He fidgets, thinking how little he likes her "pessimism." He says, in a sharp tone, "You won't finish that stocking tonight." The words are trivial, but they communicate far more. "That was what she wanted--the asperity in his voice reproving her. If he says it's wrong to be pessimistic probably it is wrong, she thought" (184). Here we are returned to our earlier point about words and actions--but with a difference. For earlier we observed that people use words to conceal vulnerability and to gain power over others. Here, too, the use of words is strategic, but the strategy is one of comfort. His asperity is protection.

Now she senses that his look has changed. "He wanted something--wanted the thing she always found it so difficult to give him; wanted her to tell him that she loved him" (184). She finds it difficult to put her emotions into words. She recognizes their mental difference here--for him verbal articulation of emotion is natural and easy, for her it is not. Instead, she looks for an action through which she can convey the meaning he wants: "Was there no crumb on his coat? Nothing she could do for him?" (185). She stands by the window with the stocking in her hand; he watches her, demanding an expression of love.

Then, knowing that he was watching her, instead of saying anything she turned, holding her stocking, and looked 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. And smiling she looked out of the window and said (thinking to herself, Nothing on earth can equal this happiness)--[End Page 748]

"Yes, you were right. It's going to be wet tomorrow. You won't be able to go." And she looked at him smiling. For she had triumphed again. She had not said it: yet he knew. (185-86)

How is knowledge conveyed? The entire pattern of the marriage is the necessary background. A smile, a trivial sentence--all this would mean nothing without the years of intimacy and of daily life that lead up to the moment. In the moment, she conveys her love simply by turning to him and looking at him, only that. It is only after she feels the happiness of knowing that he knows that she says her indulgent words about the weather, healing the slight quarrel that had erupted in the morning. How does he know that she loves him? Only by his experience of her verbal reluctance, her beauty, her willingness to turn to him with her beauty. None of this is beyond skepticism, clearly; and Mr. Ramsay, demanding words, is at times not immune to doubt and the need for reassurance. But here doubts are put aside and trust, it would seem, enables him to move from interpretation to knowledge. They don't raise doubts not because all grounds for doubt have been extinguished, but because that is the way they are, that is the way their marriage is. Skepticism is an attitude, a way of relating, that is just not their way, at least in the context of this history of long intimacy and loyalty.
How far, then, have the problems of knowledge, as the novel presents them, been answered? As fine readers of one another’s words, gestures, and actions, the Ramsays have clearly gotten beyond the crudeness of everyday speech as a medium of communication, and have also come to a refined understanding of the differences in the personal meanings with which each invests words and gestures. They have not, however, found a magic remedy for the deeper issues with which the novel presents us: problems of shame, of power-seeking, of the sheer need for hiddenness. They surmount these problems, to the extent that they do—and we feel that this is considerable, though not total—simply by making a continual patient effort to be a certain sort of person in relation to one another, to be willing to put aside shame or pride, to be willing to use the power of marriage generously rather than manipulatively, to be willing to allow their privacy to be qualified by the needs of another. If Mrs. Ramsay triumphs in conveying the knowledge of love, the triumph is one of yielding generosity—for she has allowed him to summon her out of herself. If Mr. Ramsay triumphs in extracting the much-desired communication, it is again a triumph made possible only by his being the sort of person who is ready to come to her aid. Knowledge, in short, is a function of character. [End Page 749]

As readers of Woolf’s novel, we may become aware that our own activity is analogous to that of the Ramsays. We read as the characters read one another, going over the presented features carefully and with emotionally rich attention, trying to develop an interpretation on the basis of both familiarity and concern. The role of novel reading is discussed in this very scene, so that we are invited to explore the parallel. Mr. Ramsay responds to the Scott novel as to a beloved and intimate friend. He allows it to delight him and in a sense he trusts it—he doesn’t read it with detachment in the manner of a skeptical theorist of interpretation. We feel that he “knows” Walter Scott not only by virtue of his familiarity with the novels but also by virtue of the vigor, openness, and unsuspiciousness of his response. But in his love of his wife there are also features that novel reading lacks. There is an intense absorption with a particular being who is seen as necessary for one’s own life; there is a willingness to be extremely vulnerable toward her, to put much of his life at risk; there is sexual desire; there is, finally, an intense desire to give protection and love to her. All of these features make personal love in some respects more problematic than novel reading. In the context of these deep needs and vulnerabilities there are ample opportunities for skepticism and jealousy to arise; there are many reasons why one inclined to such love might respond with shame-inspired concealment of self, or with projects of possession and incorporation. We don’t really see what those possibilities would be in the case of our relation to the literary text. All this led Proust to hold that it was only in relation to the literary text and its author that we could really have knowledge of another mind. All our relations with real people in real life are marred by a possessiveness and jealous skepticism that are the more or less inevitable outgrowths of our sense of ourselves as needy and incomplete. Proust is convinced that this response to our own weakness obscures any accurate perception of the other person, since we make ourselves the construct we need. It also prevents any sort of trust in the evidence with which the other person presents us. We never rule out the possibility that the whole fabric is an elaborate ruse concealing something altogether different. With the literary text, by contrast, we are intensely concerned but not personally at risk. The author is not going to hurt us, and in a sense, we don’t really need him. This alone permits us to have what amounts to knowledge of the mind of another living person.

Woolf’s response to these points is not exactly epistemological; it is ethical. One can, of course, be the sort of person Proust describes. It is [End Page 750] not difficult, in fact, to imagine the Ramsay marriage taking a turn in this direction—if, for example, she had come to feel that his whole relation to her was exploitative patriarchal, that he underrated her capacity for autonomy, that he was using love and sex to bring about an unequal and unjust division of domestic labor. There is much truth in all these claims, and in some moods I feel she would have been right to focus on them and to be more skeptical of his love. Women frequently buy a kind of domestic harmony at the price of justice; skepticism in circumstances of inequality is a rational response.
On the other hand, one has to grant that a relationship based on this sort of suspiciousness of the intentions of the other could not be a good marriage, and would yield little of the interpretive knowledge they attain. And I also want to say that the relationship itself, whatever its deficiencies, has excellences—and the Ramsays, as parties to it, have excellences—that can and should be cultivated, whatever else we seek. If they are cultivated sufficiently, Proust's problem can be overcome. The marriage of the Ramsays has yielded a kind of understanding and trust that is admirable as an ethical norm even if we would prefer to see it realized in the context of greater justice—as indeed it could be, given different upbringing and different expectations on the part of the two partners. 

But this means that there simply are possibilities for generosity, for the defeat of shame and anxiety, that Proust has not acknowledged. To develop these possibilities would be the theoretical job of an ethics of character, the practical job of parents and teachers of children, and of friendships of many kinds.

It is no surprise that this account of Woolf's novel should end with broader ethical and social speculations. For it is the distinguished contribution of this novel to show how a problem that philosophy frequently cordon off from the messy stuff of human motivation and social interaction is actually a series of human problems of great complexity, many of them ethical and social, which can't really be adequately described, much less resolved (where resolution is possible) without reflecting about emotions and desires, without describing a variety of possible human loves and friendships in their historical and social setting, without asking, among other things, how love, politics, power, shame, desire, and generosity are all intertwined in the attempt of a single woman and man to live together with understanding.

Wittgenstein saw, if Cavell is right, that the problem of other minds had to be investigated in some such way, as part of the history of our acknowledgment and avoidance of one another. But there is little concrete pursuit of that investigation in Wittgenstein, nothing to compare with the rich detail we find in Woolf. This, it would seem, is because the concrete pursuit of that particular philosophical investigation requires narrative depiction of individual lives and their interplay, and this was simply not a task in which Wittgenstein was engaged as a writer. (I leave to others the question whether the joy and generosity displayed in Woolf's narrative approach, and so important a part of her "solution," would have been compatible with his personal response to life.) A narrative approach to this set of problems is present in Proust, but in a form that denies the resourcefulness of human generosity and universalizes a primitive longing for comfort as all there really is to love, an obsessive peering at one's own mental constructs as all there is to knowing the loved one. Unlike Wittgenstein, Woolf depicts our searches for knowledge in something like their full human complexity and many-sidedness. Unlike Proust, she does so with an optimism about good character that makes the problem of skepticism a sometimes soluble ethical problem. The mysterious grand problem of other minds thus has, here, a mundane humble tentative answer or rather answers, whose meaning can only be fully grasped in the context of a narrative as complex as this novel: by working patiently to defeat shame, selfish anxiety, and the desire for power, it is sometimes possible for some people to get knowledge of one thing or another thing about some other people; and they can sometimes allow one thing or another thing about themselves to be known.

University of Chicago

Martha Nussbaum is Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago. Her most recent books are The Therapy of Desire (1994) and Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination in Public Life (1996).

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Notes


3. Compare Marcel Proust: “Style for the writer, no less than colour for the painter, . . . is the revelation . . . of the qualitative difference, the uniqueness of the fashion in which the world appears to each one of us” (*Remembrance of Things Past*, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin, and Andreas Mayor [New York, 1982], pp. 931-32). Proust, however, focuses here on the unconscious expression of individuality by the artist in the creation of the work as a whole, whereas Woolf draws attention to the power of the artist consciously to represent individuality in the creation of characters, each with a different texture of consciousness.

4. Note, however, that novels frequently do this by making meanings more definite and coherent than they are in real life. To put a meaning into words is already to impose an interpretation on what may have been an undemarcated buzzing.

5. See also: “But he must have more than that. It was sympathy he wanted, to be assured of his genius, first of all, and then to be taken within the circle of life, warmed and soothed, to have his senses restored to him, his barrenness made fertile” (p. 59).


7. We should compare the posing of this problem in Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* (New York, 1958), where the attempt to "say myself" is shown to contain a self-contradiction: putting himself into language, the narrator feels himself becoming a public non-self, a generalized "pupil Mahood"; and yet (as with Mrs. Ramsay here) to cease to use the categories of consciousness is in a significant way to cease to be.

8. Part II takes on the task of depicting reality from the point of view of nonconscious nature--a paradoxical task, given that the novelist's tools must still be words and concepts, but a task that shows us Woolf's sense of the importance of a reality that is alive but nonconscious.


10. See the similar argument in Stanley Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York, 1969), 238-66. See also Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, Part IV. On the way in which a desire for knowledge can generate a desire for incorporation, but then, in turn, the realization that incorporation would precisely not be knowledge, one might fruitfully compare aspects of Hegel's "Master-Slave" dialectic.

11. What this brings out, among other things, is that the common "analogy" solution to the problem of other minds is too crude to be really informative: for what makes all the difference is to say which analogies are helpful and which analogies are not. The novel suggests that there is no single answer to this question--one just has to learn by experience.

12. On all this, see Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, especially the reading of *Othello* at the end.
13. Could hate generate knowledge of another? In some respects, it might: for it could motivate a close intense focusing on the pattern of the other person's sayings and actions that would make the hater a good reader. On the other hand, if the hatred is mutual and known to be such, skepticism about the evidence would always be a reasonable response, and would defeat the epistemological aim. In an asymmetrical hatred--for example, in the relationship of Iago with Othello, perhaps one-way knowledge might be attained--but note that its condition is Othello's open-hearted trust in his "friend," and Iago's consequent trust in the evidence with which Othello presents him.

14. See Nussbaum, "Love's Knowledge."

15. Here I have in mind the discussion of love and justice in Susan Moller Okin, Justice, Gender, and the Family (New York, 1989).