

The Being that Thinks in Us: Woolf and the Aesthetics of Self-Alarm

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1. **W**oolf investigates throughout her work the strangeness of the self's relation to itself, a strangeness that is by turns awkward and thrilling, painful and alarmingly pleasurable. That consciousness can be its own suddenly disorienting fact opens her narrative practice to some of its most speculatively rich representations of interiority. Early in *Mrs. Dalloway*, after leaving Clarissa's house, Peter Walsh falls into this combination of self-doubt and self-fascination: "the strangeness of standing alone, alive, unknown, at half-past eleven in Trafalgar Square overcame him. What is it? Where am I? And why, after all, does one do it?" (*MD* 52) The I, as ubiquitous as it is unlocatable, is both the most obvious and most perplexing aspect of mental life. In this disorientation, Woolf is concerned with the self's division as subject and object, in which it is always to some degree untranslatable within the terms of its own self-inquiry and shadowed within its own gaze. Standing in Trafalgar Square, Peter feels "as if inside his brain by another hand strings were pulled, shutters moved, and he, having nothing to do with it, yet stood at the opening of endless avenues, down which if he chose he might wander." This sense that consciousness feels its own moving parts from elsewhere, or that it has an interiority within the interiority it knows, is a sign of the limits of self-perception. The self, as pure subject, lies indiscernible within the shadow of its epistemological approach to itself because, as the thing in us that thinks, it cannot be the thing thought. The subject, folded back onto itself, objectifies itself, and knows its own subjectivity only through the categories of what it can cognize as its objects of intuition.
2. These are Kantian terms, and this is a problem at the center of his critique of what we can know.¹ For Kant, the I is merely, and at its most formal purity, the being in us that thinks—the impersonal structural principle of first-personhood in consciousness. The form of the I, insubstantial and abstracted from empirical content, is the I that matters in *Critique of*

1 e.g. I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A402.

Pure Reason because it is the only I that is verifiable in his *a priori*, transcendently ideal philosophical procedure. The form of the I, for Kant, is apodictic, exhausted in its entirety by the elegant, simultaneous logic of the *I think*, so much so that he claims that the *I think* is the very form or essence of any analytic proposition, the kind of tautology that can be known as true without the steps of inference required for synthetic propositions.² Yet it is the subjectivity of the subject thinking that cannot be known as such, in itself, as noumenon, because the first-person can only know itself in the third. We can call this non-coincidence in the relation of the self to itself a kind of discrepancy, irony, or uncanniness, and we can immediately implicate it with experiences of desire, language, and temporality, but today I simply want to call it an alarming strangeness, and to relate it to one way that beauty works in Woolf's writing.

3. To say that there is a strangeness in the self's relation to itself is to elaborate the epistemological problem of the material, external world in Woolf's work, which we've learned about with such precision in recent years, and to speculate that in addition to a phantom table her writing grapples with the phantom of the I that thinks. Such questions about the coherence of the subject are also well known in Woolf scholarship, so that it might be fair to say that philosophical criticism of Woolf has oscillated between voyages out and voyages back in, and that these two voyages are finally inseparable—an inseparability which Mark Hussey discusses in terms of identity's enmeshed "interinvolvement" with the world³ and which Ann Banfield demonstrates in terms of Bertrand Russell's critique of the substantive, metaphysical subject.⁴ But I want to approach the strangeness of the self's relation to itself as an aesthetic resource, rather than primarily an epistemological challenge or metaphysical critique, and to briefly suggest, although without the time to develop this claim, that Woolf's aesthetics of self-alarm signals a surprising political project, one involving recognition. Finally, I'll mention that I have in the back of my mind another possibility, that reading Woolf for the voyage inward toward the phantom of the I that thinks reveals one reason why the intersection between literature and philosophy matters. This is literature's resources for creating a sense of the play of the first-person involved in creating philosophical knowledge. In addition to various bodies of philosophical thought, what Woolf writes about is what it is like to be the first-person of a philosophical inquiry, so that she undertakes a kind of phenomenology of this manner of thinking and awareness—the subject to whom philosophy happens and who seeks to claim it within a tradition.

2 Henry Allison discusses this quality of the *I think*: "this identical *I think*, that is, 'the bare representation I,' can be seen as the form or prototype of the analytic unity that pertains to all general concepts. In fact, it *just is* this analytic unity considered in abstraction from all content. Consequently, the *I think* is itself the thought of what is common to all conceptualization, which is what makes it 'in all consciousness one and the same' (B132). Second, the act of becoming aware of this identical *I think* is the form of the act of reflection, by means of which the mind grasps the identity in difference in the formation of general concepts. Once again, it is nothing more than the "logical act," considered in abstraction from all content. The consciousness of this act, that is, the consciousness of synthesis, is, therefore, the consciousness of the form of thinking" (H. Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Realism*, 172).

3 M. Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, 24.

4 A. Banfield, *The Phantom Table*, 159-212.

4. At its most rudimentary, then, my claim is simply that Woolf helps us notice that consciousness is weird, which it actually is when you start paying attention to it and fall into what Wittgenstein calls the “slight giddiness” of introspection, the kind of feeling, he says, which “occurs when we are performing a piece of logical sleight-of-hand” or when we “think of certain theorems in set theory.”⁵ Wittgenstein wants to reduce this to a matter of language gone on holiday, but I want to show that Woolf does not, that for her this is a giddiness or self-strangeness that matters. The status of first-person experience as a problem is actually ambiguous in the late-night conversation between Maggie and Sara in *The Years*. Berkeley’s little brown book is at hand, but their speculation moves from the uncertain reality of the trees outside their window to the nature of self that thinks about them:

“What’s ‘I’? ... ‘I’ ...” She stopped. She did not know what she meant. She was talking nonsense.

“Yes,” said Sara. “What’s ‘I’?” She held her sister tight by the skirt, whether she wanted to prevent her from going, or whether she wanted to argue the question.

“What’s ‘I’?” she repeated.

But there was a rustling outside the door and their mother came in. (Y 140)

5. We might say one of two things: on the one hand, this question is resolved by returning to ordinary language, by taking the “I” out of scare quotes long enough to remember its practical function, which Emile Benveniste gives as its definition, of simply referring in every instance to the one who is saying it.⁶ On the other hand, Woolf is interested in this as a full-fledged metaphysical problem. But neither of these is my point, exactly. What this exchange accomplishes is to render the difficulty of even asking about the self as something that experiences itself, of finding a question that captures the alarming quality of introspection as a structural possibility of consciousness. Even though Sara’s questions don’t have analytical traction, they do have a function. They are an incipient aesthetic challenge, a question about how and why we might represent our self-alarm, which I’ll discuss at the end in terms of Lily’s aesthetic challenge in *To the Lighthouse*.
6. By starting with introspection’s self-alarm, theory of mind might bracket questions about its substantiality or origin for a question about why finding itself weird, or strange, or quietly alarming should be a part of the way consciousness can operate. This is partly from the epistemological and metaphysical riddles it falls into—what of the self is knowable and real? Why should this self be something rather than nothing?—but this alarm also comes from another quality of subjectivity that barely rises to the level of an intelligible question. It is its sensuous quality, that it feels itself as an experience. Sara’s question about the “I” takes on different shapes elsewhere in *The Years*. One afternoon, much later, while having tea

5 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, I § 412.

6 É. Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, 226.

in Kensington Gardens, Martin wonders what experience would feel like if the experiencing “I” were eliminated, that is, if experience were somehow exterior to the structure of self:

What would the world be, he said to himself—he was still thinking of the fat man brandishing his arm—without “I” in it? He lit the match. He looked at the flame that had become almost invisible in the sun. [...] A primal innocence seemed to brood over the scene. The birds made a fitful sweet chirping in the branches; the roar of London encircled the open space in a ring of distant but complete sound. The pink and white chestnut blossoms rode up and down as the branches moved in the breeze. The sun dappling the leaves gave everything a curious look of insubstantiality as if it were broken into separate points of light. He, too, himself, seemed dispersed. His mind for a moment was a blank. (Y 242)

7. The world takes on an impressionistic richness and lyrical grace as the self seems to dissolve, so that the aesthetic possibilities of introspection shift to a kind of opposite, to the aestheticization of a world devoid of consciousness. This world without mind suggests its independent reality, in the first place, but it is also evidence of the mind’s desire to isolate itself as a distinct element from what it perceives, as if it were a seam that could be traced and unthreaded from the whole. This unstitching of the self from the fabric of reality, whether or not it succeeds, is an exercise in feeling the parameters of consciousness. The idea of a world without a self implies a reckoning with selfhood as a mediating, transcendent form. The question that Woolf animates, then, is: how does consciousness, being a subject of experience, grasp the form of its first-personhood? Put otherwise: what does it feel like to be structured as a subject? Or, put a third way: is one’s own subjectivity or consciousness itself an experience, separate from its contents?

8. I’m not concerned primarily, in these questions, with identity and its coherence or persistence, but with the phenomenology of self as it is always happening: with the way experience *from* a first-person perspective is also in some way an experience *of* that first-person perspective, as such, as an *a priori* form. In the *Paralogisms of Reason*, in his first *Critique*, Kant notes that

the I is, to be sure, in all thoughts; but not the least intuition [that is, perception] is bound up with this representation, which would distinguish it from other objects of intuition. Therefore one can, to be sure, perceive that this representation [of the I] continually recurs with every thought, but not that it is a standing and abiding intuition, in which thoughts [...] would change. (A350)

9. Kant describes the I as unperceivable but a part of every perception, an irreducible quotient of self-experience embedded in every experience of something else, something like Martin’s match-flame indistinguishable from the sunlight that saturates it. There is no sensory faculty for perceiving this I in us that thinks, what Kant earlier in the *Critique* calls the “transcendental subject of thoughts [...] about which, in abstraction, we can never have even the least concept” (A346, B404). Earlier, in the *Transcendental Deduction*, he refers to the I think as a “pure apperception” to be distinguished from an “empirical one” of anything and everything else (B132). Kant, although not explicitly interested in the strangeness of the self’s rela-

tion to its own imperceptible form, implies its vertiginous quality by acknowledging that, because of it, “we therefore turn in a constant circle [...] because the consciousness in itself is not even a representation distinguishing a particular object, but rather a form of representation in general” (*ibid.*). The I, for Kant, is therefore the unrepresentable precondition for one’s attempt to know it at all, and we seem to have an enduring desire to do so. This vertigo, a response to our inability to represent consciousness as pure apperception, is not knowledge, obviously, but it has its uses. In her description of Martin, Woolf actually writes that his match-flame is “almost invisible” in the sun, and this hairs-breadth of difference, this phantasmatic remainder of light, marks, not something we empirically know about the I that thinks, but a way we aestheticize our discrepancy from it. We can read Woolf for her aesthetic response to an empirical limitation and conceptual aporia. I won’t pursue this here, but I believe that this aesthetic response ultimately involves social power and has at stake public recognition of one’s interior life.

10. How do Woolf’s narrative innovations represent our relation to the thing in us that thinks? I want to continue with two images that lend themselves to broadly allegorical readings. At the end of the first chapter of *Jacob’s Room*, as night falls and the weather at the beach turns stormy, and after Mrs. Flanders has settled her children to sleep and herself disappeared from the scene, we are left with the kind of vivid, alive, elemental restiveness that Woolf will elaborate to such powerful effect in the “Time Passes” chapter of *To the Lighthouse*. At this moment in *Jacob’s Room*, when the narration remains ambiguously inhabited even after all the characters have been ushered off the narrative stage, we are faced for a few pages with the question that Ann Banfield, in particular, has taught us to ask about Woolf’s distinctive pitch of dislocated lyricism: where does consciousness take place in this scenario, how has it been distributed? How has something like a mind been refracted, or narratively dispersed, across this textual landscape? In one description, Woolf writes:

The light blazed out across the patch of grass; fell on the child’s green bucket with the gold line round it, and upon the aster which trembled violently beside it. For the wind was tearing across the coast, hurling itself at the hills, and leaping, in sudden gusts, on top of its own back. How it spread over the town in the hollow! How the light seemed to wink and quiver in fury, lights in the harbour, lights in bedroom windows high up! And rolling dark waves before it, it raced over the Atlantic, jerking the stars above the ships this way and that. (*JR* 8)

11. It is in the first place a picture of impersonal forces—light, wind, waves—bearing what we might call a will-to-consciousness, an excess of being or energy on the verge of awareness, and even self-awareness: the wind hurling itself on its own back, the lights quivering and touching things about them with a preternatural knowingness. And this is at the same time a picture of the barely asserted consciousness that reports to us in its diffusion across the night sky, the articulation of an unoccupied perspective. If the wind and light encroach upon the province of mind, then this narrator, in its sheer evanescence and mere potentiality, is barely at its

threshold. Between this emergent subject-position and this attenuated one, consciousness has gone strange. But the image with which the chapter ends a page later makes this strangeness even more complicated, as we descend from the night's vast elemental energies to the crab that Jacob has abandoned in a bucket: "Outside the rain poured down more directly and powerfully as the wind fell in the early hours of the morning. The aster was beaten to the earth. The child's bucket was half-full of rainwater; and the opal-shelled crab slowly circled round the bottom, trying with its weakly legs to climb the steep side; trying again and falling back, and trying again and again" (*JR* 9). I think Woolf continues her exploration of mind here, with this blind and futile scrambling: it works as a metaphor for the mind completely engaged in its struggle to overcome its empirical limitations, a creaturely drive to exceed its sensory and cognitive capacities. But we know this stuck and struggling mind from outside of it, from which we perceive it as a hapless object, and this exteriority is also a part of Woolf's metaphor. It is one's mind seen in the humility of the third person. This empiricist struggle, the subject striving to know, and its objectification, the subject's struggle as it is itself known, fall apart here as an experience of the mind's simultaneous banality and nearly grotesque alterity. "[W]e [...] turn in a constant circle," Kant tells us, and for Woolf this circling of the I that thinks itself, without being able to catch up to itself as it is thinking, provides the resource for an unmistakably modernist aesthetic, that is, an aesthetic in search of its representational impasse or crisis. There is something of itself that the mind cannot narrate, and the first chapter of *Jacob's Room* is about the alarm, or aesthetic fascination, we should feel at this non-narratability.

12. Our next image occurs early in *Orlando*, during the Great Frost. If the stormy night and scrambling crab of *Jacob's Room* suggest an obscure psychic restiveness that cannot be fully narrated, these pages of *Orlando* imagine mental life as illuminated stasis, fully revealed to our contemplative gaze. No bonfire, the narrator tells us, can melt the ice of the Thames, and underneath "[s]hoals of eels lay motionless in a trance, but whether their state was one of death or merely suspended animation which the warmth would revive puzzled the philosophers" (*O* 27). The philosophical question of mind that emerges is about its total self-objectification, about the ability of consciousness to perceive, without mediation, its own purely formal, and even grammatical, structure, outside of empirical contingency. Woolf describes a curiosity of London under the frost:

Near London Bridge, where the river had frozen to a depth of some twenty fathoms, a wrecked wherry boat was plainly visible, lying on the bed of the river where it had sunk last autumn, overladen with apples. The old bumboat woman, who was carrying her fruit to market on the Surrey side, sat there in her plaids and farthingales with her lap full of apples, for all the world as if she were about to serve a customer, though a certain blueness about the lips hinted the truth. 'Twas a sight King James specially liked to look upon, and he would bring a troupe of courtiers to gaze with him. (*O* 27)

13. The King's pleasure at this sight, we might imagine, has to do with the way it brings life in the midst of its action to a perfect standstill, and

has us bear down upon a contingent moment with such close attention that it transforms its contingency into something like art. It is a scene of contingency and form in sudden concatenation, an accident correlating to aesthetic laws, so that the empirical and accidental can be perceived emerging from the *a priori* form of their intelligibility. Frozen, outside of life, the woman becomes her own abstraction, a manifestation of the form of the contingent experience she refers to. It is therefore available, in a further speculation, for an allegorical reading involving the mind's relation to itself. I also like to think of this scene as an allegory for what a fully adequate theory of mind would be like, a theory that bears itself with such sovereignty over the enigma of consciousness that this enigma is immobilized and laid before us as pure object with no remainder, no psychic recess where the I remains an un-objectifiable I for itself alone. The subjectivity of the subject, the transcendent form of the self's contingent content, is fully absorbed into its shimmering objecthood and revealed to all with the kingly leisure to survey it.

14. Woolf knows, as Kant also argues in the Paralogisms, that nothing seduces thought so readily as this reification of that in us which thinks. Kant develops his critique of reason by refuting precisely such reifying, or hypostatizing, claims about the self as substantial, unified, and knowable, just as Woolf puts the self in a sense of dispersal throughout her fiction. In the Paralogisms, Kant describes the illicit exchange of "unity in the synthesis of thoughts" for "a perceived unity in the subject of those thoughts" (A402). He considers this sleight-of-hand to be inherent in human reason, an inevitable blindness on the way to a fully realized critique of reason. This fundamental temptation of the mind to ascribe a substantial unity to itself is perhaps Bernard's most melancholic point in the last episode of *The Waves*, when he spends an evening with a stranger talking about his life. He seems to suffer from a kind of Kantian resignation: "The illusion is upon me that something adheres for a moment, has roundness, weight, depth, is completed. This, for the moment, seems to be my life. If it were possible, I would hand it you entire. I would break it off as one breaks off a bunch of grapes. I would say, "Take it. This is my life" (W 238). He later elaborates: "Let us again pretend that life is a solid substance, shaped like a globe, which we turn about in our fingers" (W 251). The illusion of the substantial I, for Bernard, is neither an object to possess nor a simple mistake to refute but a thing to try to pass on in an act of dispossession, as if in a transaction with another who could take up the credence in it that he lacks. Kant writes that "nothing is more natural and seductive than the illusion of taking the unity in the synthesis of thoughts for a perceived unity in the subject of these thoughts," but Woolf suggests that Kant misses the role of this illusion of self as a part of a transaction, of the way it is realized in an at least momentary binding to another (A402). The dispossession of this illusion in its exchange with another, who can reify one's subjectivity from the third person, is also part of this illusion's strange meaning, that is, the transactional or interpersonal meaning of self-alarm. This might explain Miss La Trobe's anxiety during her pageant: "This is death,

death, death, she noted in the margin of her mind; when illusion fails” (*BA* 180).

15. This is the tragic breakdown at the heart of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Although Clarissa contracts her being, in a well-known image, “into one center, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting-point, a radiancy,” she has no one fitting to pass this illusion of self on to once Septimus is dead (*MD* 37). It is one way to think of their missed rendezvous, as an issue of theory of mind: in their common self-strangeness, they could have entered into the transaction that Bernard imagines, in which one’s inevitable illusions of self are not simply mistakes of knowledge but occasions for acknowledgment between subjects that cannot know themselves. If Kant is right that the mind illicitly exchanges the objecthood of its thoughts for the pure subjectivity of the I that thinks them, Woolf is also right to consider this other exchange, among subjects, as a response to this internal impasse of self. In fact, just before he kills himself, Septimus enjoys such a moment with Rezia. The strangeness of the self’s relation to itself becomes an element of their relation to each other:

She held her hands to her head, waiting for him to say did he like the hat or not, and as she sat there, waiting, looking down, he could feel her mind, like a bird, falling from branch to branch, and always alighting, quite rightly; he could follow her mind, as she sat there in one of those loose lax poses that came to her naturally and, if he should say anything, at once she smiled, like a bird alighting with all its claws firm upon the bough. (*MD* 147)

16. It is safe to say that neither Kant nor his critics made theory of mind a branch of ornithology. Yet Woolf’s contribution in such a passage is to tell us that even if consciousness, as pure apperception, is not an object of knowledge, it is nevertheless a presence wrapped in desire and imagination, a kind of creaturely visitation that has to do with finding company or intimacy. This bird scares more easily that morning, when Peter visits Clarissa: “She looked at Peter Walsh; her look, passing through all that time and that emotion, reached him doubtfully; settled on him tearfully; and rose and fluttered away, as a bird touches a branch and rises and flutters away” (*MD* 43). Theory of mind seeks to understand this fluttering away, to map its flight patterns. Woolf suggests that the subject reckons with its first-personhood in part by transacting with others through such ephemeral figurations, less rigid than the reifications of self that worry Kant, so that the problem of self-relation is also the problem of other minds. We recall that Clarissa and Septimus share bird features (*MD* 10, 14), and that birds appear throughout Woolf’s writing: the rooks settling into and rising from treetops (*JR* 46), Jasper’s frightened flock of starlings (*TL* 30), the interlude birds in *The Waves*, the elegant pigeons that Lucy Swithin watches from her window and the swallows in the barn (*BA* 9, 69), and so on, even unto Orlando waiting for herself by the riverbank: “Wait! Wait! The kingfisher comes; the kingfisher comes not” (*O* 215). Woolf is tracing the mystery of these flight patterns.

17. I want to end with Mrs. Ramsay, whom Lily awaits after many years in front of her canvas. “She stared, frowning. There was the hedge, sure

enough. But one got nothing by soliciting urgently. One got only a glare in the eye from looking at the line in the wall, or from thinking – she wore a gray hat. She was astonishingly beautiful. Let it come, she thought, if it will come. For there are moments when one can neither think nor feel. And if one can neither think nor feel, she thought, where is one?” (TL 210) Woolf tells us that the self we cannot know is in flight to and from another, and that it comes and comes not in the figures we struggle to fashion for that flight. Lily’s struggle with painting is a struggle to negotiate objective principles of geometry with subjective inflections of color, texture, and light, a negotiation which informs the novel’s network of images of granite and rainbow, steel and butterfly wing, shape and color, girder and fabric (TL 23, 54, 115, 172, 186). Ann Banfield has interpreted these in terms of distinctions between primary and secondary physical characteristics.⁷ We might say, following Kant, that the self has its own version of primary and secondary qualities, the thing that thinks as a structure for everything that gets thought, including its images of self. Lily’s painting is about the subject’s strange relation to its own form, to the geometry of its experience, but it can only become such knowledge in an attempt to retrieve Mrs. Ramsay from death. The self emerges as it figures another against this other’s dissolution. Self-alarm is the beginning of company.

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7 A. Banfield, *The Phantom Table*, 148-154.