

‘SILENCE, OR THE THINGS PEOPLE DON’T SAY’: UNDERSTANDING SILENCE IN VOYAGE OUT

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Abstract

Woolf’s first novel *The Voyage Out*, flows from characteristic conversation of objective perceptions to conflicts of muted perspectives eventually subsuming in silence, a silence as powerful as words and a silence which needed the same effort as conversation. In her diaries and letters she struggles with not only how to comprehend the space of novel writing but also how to lucidly portray the silences between conversations, and to her latter seemed more important, as one can see her toying with this idea all throughout her oeuvre. This paper would like to understand what silence meant for Virginia Woolf and why the in-between silences mattered to her and why she constantly projects that in her writing by charting a literary landscape for us with distinguishing spaces and the sounds and silences it envelopes, I would explore this through a discussion of the narrative of her first novel *The Voyage Out*.

Virginia Woolf in one of her early review essays titled, “Literary Geography” written in 1977, reviews two books *The Dickens Country* and *The Thackeray Country* where she highlighted that for the reader, more than following a literal landscape that the writer has detailed in her writing, one should try to unravel the literary landscape that she posits in her writing. She asserts,

A writer’s country is a territory within his own brain; and we run the risk of disillusionment if we try to turn such phantom cities into tangible brick and mortar. We know our way there without signposts or policemen, and we can greet the passers by without need of introduction. No city indeed is so real as this that we make for ourselves and people to our liking; and to insist that it has any counterpart in the cities of the earth is to rob it of half its charm. (Woolf, *Literary Geography*)

From this essay, one can understand the insistence with which Virginia Woolf is urging the reader to participate in the literary landscape of the writer and this process is what she unravels and progresses towards in her own writing. She explores the complexity of language, of writing and of expression by placing us in different literary spaces where characters are constantly exploring their interior worlds more than exterior ones and find it hard to be comprehensible to each other and eventually being stuck in an indescribable loneliness. In her first novel *The Voyage Out* she explores the strains of language and silences alike by contrasting two modes of aesthetic expressions from the onset of the novel, that is of music and writing. While the protagonist of the novel is a music lover and plays music to not entertain others and herself, but rather Woolf makes her use it as a way to escape the mundane falsified reality of conversations, she even goes as far to consider it as a purer form of expression when compared to writing. In the second chapter itself amidst the company of her people, she considers playing piano is far better than masking our feelings or trying to comprehend and express it through words,

It appeared that nobody ever said a thing they meant, or ever talked of a feeling they felt, but that was what music was for. Reality dwelling in what one saw and felt, but did not talk about, one could accept a system in which things went round and round quite satisfactorily to other people, without often troubling to think about it, except as something superficially strange. Absorbed by her music she accepted her lot very complacently, blazing into indignation perhaps once a fortnight, and subsiding as she subsided now. (Woolf 30)

Woolf creates a literary landscape for the reader to follow these sounds and silences, Patricia Ondek Laurence, masterfully details that in her book, she asserts, “Through the use of lexical, syntactic, metaphorical, thematic, and structural silences, including the rhythm of, perhaps, a “feminine sentence,” Woolf creates opportunities to let the reader “into” her sentences, novels, and characters’ consciousnesses in new ways.” (Laurence) Woolf’s critics have tried to give a lot critical voice to this silence that her characters encounter, escape or are enveloped in, by reading it through feminist, Marxist, post-colonial, and even self-censorship and through all these lenses, silence is weighed more importantly than the words on paper. How is language working? How can we understand each other through words? Can we ever express ourselves exactly the way want to? Woolf characters feel this invisible distance and she fills in the gaps by hammering the silence that adumbrates every noise that is created in her writing. Emma Sutton in her essay, “Silences and Cries: The Exotic Soundscape of *The Voyage Out*” succinctly maps all the “diegetic and symbolic” importance of both sound and silences that one should understand in Woolf’s first novel. She writes, “*The Voyage Out* suggests Woolf’s ambivalence about the sonic poles of silence and cries: her own experimental writing attempts to incorporate and evoke these extremes by voicing the unspoken and the non-semantic, yet also suggests the aesthetic and social risks of doing so as writer and characters push at the boundaries of familiar, socially sanctioned writing and self-expression.” (Sutton)

It becomes important to unravel the consistency in the interruptions that happened through conversations in the novel most importantly the effort that is made to create a conversation in a space where there is numbness of silence and to understand the flux that is created through the effort of conversation, how each conversation begins as an interruption and

ends in abruptness, how one is forever conscious and unsure about the effect of the words that the character speaks. How the conversations rather than bringing a consensus of ideas or closeness between two characters, drifts the two apart into further observation of each other, and in the process the reader is not only constantly making an effort to understand through gestures, mood and behavior everything of the person other than the spoken words, but is also conscious of being observed and also of the eventual failure of words to convey exactly what one wants to say. The fixation on the word silence itself showcases Woolf's curiosity with the concept, it surfaces 54 times in the entire novel alongwith the word silent that comes up about 39 times. The novel also shows one of the main characters Terence Hewet who wants to write a novel called 'Silence or The Things People don't say', and he understands that the difficulties of that is "immense". Woolf masters this art of making it available to the reader that how words which flow seemingly easy in conversation are an effort to mask the sound of silence that is hanging in the arid air. The conversation more than being a voyage of exploration into the other person's being proves to be an endless strife to understand and interrogate the self. Woolf writes in one of her letters to Vanessa, "Writing seems to me a queer thing, it does make a difference. I should never talk to you like this. For one thing I don't know what mood you are in, and then- that the subtleties are infinite. The truth is I am always trying to get behind words: and they flop on me suddenly" (Dunn)

The Voyage Out originally entitled "Melymbrosia" was published in 1915. Though the final published work seems like a muted and a tame version of the original drafts of the novel, it does manage to create a voice for Woolf to be explored further in all her future writings. The story follows the life of Rachel Vinrace and her Voyage from London to South America with her father, Willoughby Vinrace and her uncle and aunt, Ridley Ambrose and Helen Ambrose. Twenty-four year old protagonist is a "music fanatic", who is reading and discussing various ideas and meets new people from different sensibilities and ages throughout this journey. The journey not only explores her conversations with these people but the bonds that she creates with them alongside a constant presence of her hallucinatory dreams that she has. The novel continues with this insistence and effort for conversation even after the main protagonist's death as a need to hammer the futility of escape from this silence that needs be materialized in the space of the novel. The ideas that the novel explores range from politics, position of women in society, suffrage movement, colonialism, companionship, love, perspectives on music, writing, relationship between men and women, women and women, women and men, but it is the aesthetic and poetic musings on life, death and the inability of words to express is what makes this 27 chapter long novel a riveting read.

I understand the conversation in the novels as interruptions, because there is a recurrent stress in the novel on human isolation and failure of communication, the ambivalence with which Woolf marks various snippets of conversation or episodes in general, hark back to the idea of different perspectives, the novel begins by a constant description of divided spaces and how people on one end perceive the space of the other. The initial description of the land as seen from the ship and right after that the description of the boat or sea as the people on land perceive, this then is replaced by the descriptions of the hotel to that of the villa.

In fact the introduction of the space of hotel is most fascinating; we are led into from one room to another through the cautious and descriptive narrative from the eyes of Rachel and Helen. We are further told of the closeness of so many different personalities as they stay

together separated by flimsy partition walls of the hotel or on the boat and how everyone is constantly aware of each other's presences through breathing patterns and footsteps, "that at one point they dream of each other, as was natural, considering how thin partitions were between them, and how strangely they had been lifted off earth to sit next to each other in mid-ocean, and see every detail of each other's faces, and hear whatever they chanced to say." (Woolf 45)

Woolf explores the very need for conversation in a philosophical discussion that takes place between Hirst and Hewet, in Chapter IX, where Hewet reflects on the grouping of people into social groups as a way of preventing ourselves, 'from seeing to the bottom of the things.' As Hirst suggested that you can define people by drawing circles around them, to which Hewet asks, 'Are we alone in our circle?' and Hirst replies philosophically, 'Quite alone, you try to get out, but you can't. You only make a mess of things by trying.' (Woolf 99)

While various other instances highlight a perspective where words are not required at all in understanding each other, as in the initial chapters when Woolf explains that Rachel was eleven when her mother passed away, she writes, 'When a name has been dropped out of use, the lightest touch upon it tells.' Thus when Clarissa Dalloway picks up Rachel's reference to her uncle, 'Your mother's brother?' the subtle burden of this slight question that Rachel is unable to express her unhappiness about, but has the feeling that Mrs. Dalloway understood her. And as we progress in the novel the conversations of gossip and chatter gave way to, 'words, which were either too trivial or too large.' Hewet's idea of the novel on 'Silence', takes on new perspectives, after his realization of love with Rachel. In chapter 16, Woolf showcases a discussion between Terence Hewet and Rachel on novel writing and music, "Why do you write novels? You ought to write music. Music, you see...music goes straight for things. It says all there is to say at once. With writing it seems to me there's so much!" (Woolf 199)

The most nuanced details of this interwoven dialectic of conversation and silence is present in the 26 chapter, the chapter after Rachel's death, begins with lines "In this profound silence one sound was only audible, the sound of a slight but continuous breathing which never ceased, although it never rose and never fell." (Woolf 343) And then the other sounds seep in and the conversation move to the discussion of Rachel's death at the hotel and by the luncheon old Mrs. Paley mistakes Rachel for someone else and Susan feels hopeless to correct her mistake.

So one wonders what are these letters and conversations then, what is Woolf suggesting through a narrative which progresses and halts through various social observations and strained conversations. Why an abrupt and ambiguous end to Rachel (the main character) and Hewet's engagement with her (the main and rather the only outcome of the plot)? When we reach the concluding chapters we find, "Mrs. Paley just round the corner had her cards arranged in long ladders before her, with Susan sitting near to sympathise but not to correct, and the merchants and the miscellaneous people who had never been discovered to possess names were stretched in their arm-chairs with their newspapers on their knees. The conversation in these circumstances was very gentle, fragmentary, and intermittent, but the room was full of the indescribable stir of life. Every now and then the moth, which was now grey of wing and shiny of thorax, whizzed over their heads, and hit the lamps with a thud." And how these concluding lines engage or pushes it into an seamless narrative of conversations that can never end, as Evelyn ponders on the meaning of it all and the storm that thundered outside gave way to a 'view to a sky which was once more deep and solemn blue', the chess games continue amidst tea and more

conversations and 'the voices sounded gratefully in Hirst's ears' as the objects passed into their rooms to sleep and dream about each other yet again.

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