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This is a contribution from *Textual Choices in Discourse. A view from cognitive linguistics*.

Edited by Barbara Dancygier, José Sanders and Lieven Vandelanotte.

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# Joint attention, *To the Lighthouse*, and modernist representations of intersubjectivity

Vera Tobin

University of California, Santa Barbara

This paper argues that literary modernism can be productively understood as a reflection on what happens when joint attention is frustrated in its operation. Experimental fictions of the early twentieth century frequently dramatize problems of joint attention that can be traced to the ultimate relation between author, reader, and text. Analysis of these dramatizations demonstrates the importance of this joint attentional trope, and suggests a fresh reading of the famous “phantom table” in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*.

## 1. Introduction

Joint attention — the ability to share attention to some object with another person and mutually recognize that the attention is shared — is a fundamental aspect of social cognition. Although its importance has only been recognized relatively recently in the scientific study of language, representation, and the mind, the phenomenon itself has long been a fertile site for literary creativity, experimentation, and anxiety.

The ultimate focus of this paper is *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf’s influential novel of early twentieth century modernism. I propose a reading of the novel as organized around a special interest in joint attention *avant la lettre*, and argue that a similar interest is reflected in and central to many of the stylistic experiments of the period.

What happens to joint attention when, as often happens in transnational modernity, authors try to coordinate attention with readers who do not share objects or experiences in common? What happens when authors are no longer certain that perceptions can truly be communicated or shared?

The dislocations of modernity generated new and fundamental disruptions to the presumptively unproblematic, invisible operation of the intersubjective triangle underlying language and communication. Literary modernism often reflects on what happens when joint attention (as we might now describe it) is frustrated

in its operation, when the ostensibly smooth circuit of author-reader-text becomes disrupted and confused. Scenes of joint attention between characters then serve as a metaphor for the form of text as a whole, and the newly problematic relationship between authors and readers that underwrites it.

## 2. Joint attention

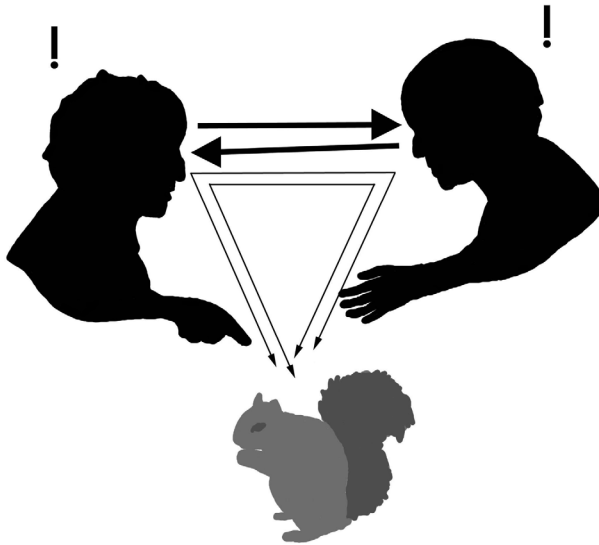
The experience of focusing jointly with another person on some external object is a foundational facet of intersubjectivity. The act of *seeing together* supports our first forays into referential understanding. It frequently serves as the linchpin of our ability to assess what is common ground between ourselves and our interlocutors, and language provides an array of resources for establishing, directing, and refining this intersubjective experience.<sup>1</sup>

Joint attention criterially involves a shared intentional relation to the world. In its simplest form, it is an event in which two (or more) people engage in an interaction that is mediated by some object, while both participants continually monitor one another's attention to both the object and to themselves. Further, the participants must mutually recognize that the attention is shared.

To be able to participate in a joint attentional scene, then, one must be able to understand both oneself and the other participant in some way "from the outside," as intentional agents. This kind of joint engagement, or triangulation of intentional perception, establishes a joint attentional frame (Tomasello 2000) within which communication may take place.

This frame is defined through the participants' shared understanding of the goal-directed activities in which they are jointly engaged. So, for example, if a child is playing with some blocks, she is also perceiving other things in her environment: the rug she is sitting on, her itchy shirt, the window through which sunlight is shining into the room. If an adult comes into the room and joins her in playing with the blocks, the shirt, rug, and window will not be part of the joint attentional frame. If the adult had come into the room and helped the child remove her itchy shirt, the blocks would not be part of the joint attentional frame, and the shirt would — because the shirt is in this case part of what "we" are doing.

Figure 1, adapted from Tomasello (2003:29), shows how joint attention is implicated in the structure of a linguistic symbol. Any person can use a linguistic symbol to intend (bold lines) that her interlocutor follow her attention (thin lines) to some external entity, aspect of an external entity, or conceptual structure; that is, to share attention to it. In this illustration, the person on the left is referring to a nearby squirrel.



**Figure 1.** Joint attention and symbolic communication

The emergence of this particular kind of joint activity around the end of the first year of life is well documented (see, for example, Hay 1979, Bruner 1983), as is the support it provides for infants' first ventures in linguistic communication. As it is illustrated here, and in its earliest and most fundamental forms, this interaction involves reference to an object that is directly mutually perceptible to the participants in the communicative act.

For most of us, the foundational experience of joint attention is specifically and centrally visual. The notion that there is a primary or basic experiential link between intersubjectivity and shared seeing is important to my discussion of literary texts that use scenes of simultaneous seeing as signals of intersubjective experience. It is nonetheless true that joint attention can also take place in the absence of vision. Congenitally blind children, for example, develop joint attention in infancy, though its emergence is delayed (Bigelow 2003).

The difficulties that blind children have in attaining and especially in initiating scenes of joint attention confirm that vision is indeed important for and highly useful in establishing joint attention. But their eventual successes also affirm that vision is not absolutely required, even as a developmental starting point. And once language enters the picture, both blind and sighted people can abstract away from the basic joint attentional triangle with ease. Language frees us from our immediate shared perceptual setting, allowing us to coordinate attention to distal, remembered, imagined, or abstract objects and events.

The emergence of children's earliest skills of joint attention and intention-reading correlates strongly with early language production and comprehension.

The rich context that comes with joint attention can provide children with the extra information they need to associate meanings with signals, and to evaluate and compare individual utterances in the course of drawing the necessary generalizations required to acquire a flexible set of abstract constructions and be able to produce and understand novel utterances. Children as young as 12 months, for example, will spontaneously check where a speaker is looking when she says a word that is new to the child, and link the word with the focus of the speaker's gaze (Baldwin 1993).

All linguistic events, even those which do not conform to the prototypical scenario of face-to-face communication, rest on a ground of joint attention and social cognition. Verhagen (2005:7–8) describes this oft-observed dynamic well:

Even in the absence of an actual speaker, an addressee<sup>2</sup> (for example, the reader of an ancient text) always takes a linguistic utterance as having been intentionally produced as an instrument of communication by another being with the same basic cognitive capacities as the addressee; otherwise it would not be justified to call the material being interpreted a 'linguistic utterance'. Thus the addressee is always engaging in cognitive coordination with *some* subject of conceptualization... who is held responsible for the production of the utterance. Similarly, even in the absence of an actual addressee, a speaker (for example, one making a note in a personal diary) is committed to the assumption that her utterance is in principle interpretable by someone else sharing the knowledge of certain conventions.

The presumption of coordination and shared knowledge between author and reader, and indeed between any two humans, became an increasingly dubious proposition to writers and artists at the beginning of the twentieth century, and all the more so in the wake of the first world war.

This disruption is the problem that Woolf described long before any of the above-cited psychological studies were written, in (among other places) *Mr Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (1924: 5), her fierce attack on Arnold Bennett as a representative of what she termed the "Edwardian" aesthetic. These Edwardians, who also included H. G. Wells and John Galsworthy, are characterized by a failure to appreciate that "all human relations have shifted — those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents, and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature."

Bennett and his cohort, in Woolf's view, fail because they have no sensitivity to the deeper reality behind the facade of the physical world. They substitute the exterior for the interior, "to hypnotize us into the belief that because he has made a house, there must be someone living in it" (16). Insides, however, are forever elusive, and Woolf's own attempt to communicate her internal vision of the interior life of a character demonstrates the difficulty: The original question of how best to depict

characters who are lifelike and individual becomes “the appalling effort of saying what I meant” and the problem of how to impart “that vision to which I cling” (18).

Although they were not theorized in the terms of contemporary cognitive science, problems of what we would now call joint attention are fundamental to the dislocations of language and the “crisis of representation” (Jameson 1984) that motivate Woolf’s criticism and which are at issue in many modernist texts — a prevailing concern with the question of what, if anything, could and should be represented, and a conviction that old means of representation were no longer sufficient to depict new realities.

In Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, for instance (1900), one of the earliest novels of the literary moment now characterized as “modernism,” we see a series of surrogate readers dramatizing a joint attentional difficulty in their fruitless attempts to make sense of the titular Jim’s jump from a sinking ship. They can never come to rest on a shared locus of attention, jointly agreed upon and mutually construed, because, like the Polish Conrad and his English readers, they have no clear object in common to stabilize and guarantee their joint attention. The representational crisis at the heart of the novel arises from the lack of a clear focus of joint attention exactly where the surrogate readers seek it most fervently, and the impossibility of there ever being one.

At the opposite extreme, nearly the entire Faulkner oeuvre is a dramatization of the pathologies that manifest when the shared object of attention is all too clear. It is through joint attention that language becomes a prison binding all of the participants in the representational triangle: both those who are drawn, through culture and language, to participate in the constrained attentional performance, and those who sit at the apex of the triangle, as the object of that attention.

### 3. Two strategies

Two distinctively modernist narrative strategies hinge on manipulations of and thematizations of the joint attentional processes that underlie language use.

First, narrative texts of all kinds rely on readers’ inclination to treat even bare descriptions as representations of the intentional perceptions of another person. Many examples of modernist prose, especially those of so-called “high” modernism (Huyssen 1986), derive much of their characteristically modern, famously difficult structure by presenting versions of this dynamic in which aspects of the subject (rather than the object) of conceptualization<sup>3</sup> are left highly implicit over extended stretches of narration. Both the focalizing character and the circumstances of his or her communicative situation are frequently elided, often by eschewing explicit mental space builders (Fauconnier 1985, 1997), such as verbs of speech, thought,

and attitude, which would profile the communicative situation and might help to orient the reader. The communicative situation is thus construed maximally as the *ground* of the discourse.

Second, these sentence-level patterns of intersubjective construal relate in a non-arbitrary way to thematic preoccupations of high modernism, and are reflected in textual choices at other levels of meaning construction.

The modernist prose in (1), for instance, invites readers to reconstruct an implicit intentional intelligence behind an extremely elliptical chain of referents.

- (1) He looked at the cattle, blurred in silver heat. Silverpowdered olivetrees. Quiet long days: pruning, ripening. Olives are packed in jars, eh? I have a few left from Andrews. Molly spitting them out. Knows the taste of them now.

This passage appears in the “Calypso” chapter of *Ulysses* (Joyce 1922), which introduces the reader to Leopold Bloom, painting a compelling and intimate portrait of Bloom’s internal landscape primarily through his chain of physical attentions and the associations to which they give rise. These passages begin with a moment narrated from outside Bloom’s vantage: “He peeped quickly inside the leather headband” (46); “He crossed to the bright side” (46); “He approached Larry O’Rourke’s” (47); “He creased out the letter at his side” (53); “In the bright light, lightened and cooled in limb, he eyed carefully his black trousers” (57); and so on.

Each of these narrated actions serves as the jumping-off point for a meditation prompted by a shift in Bloom’s attention to some new object. They are followed always by a bare noun phrase mentioning some physical object, which the reader can take to be the current object of Bloom’s attention, often but not always physically present — “Another slice of bread and butter” or “White slip of paper” — that sends Bloom and the reader together through a chain of associations, from an advertisement trumpeting a German company’s plan to plant eucalyptus groves in Palestine to thoughts of oranges, melonfields, and olive trees in Jaffa through memories of Molly’s tasting olives for the first time.

The passage in (2), from Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* (1914), performs much the same trick, suggesting only by distant implication the intentional agent behind the presentation of a sequence of objects of conceptualization.

- (2) MILDRED’S UMBRELLA.  
A cause and no curve, a cause and loud enough, a cause and extra a loud clash and an extra wagon, a sign of extra, a sac a small sac and an established color and cunning, a slender grey and no ribbon, this means a loss a great loss a restitution.

Related modernist experiments undermine the smooth operation of the joint attentional triangle by flouting the requirements of information packaging (Chafe 1974), in which propositional content is structured as a function of the speaker's beliefs or assumptions about her audience's information state.

Of course, expressions that conventionally convey absolutely no information about the communicative situation are very rare indeed. The structures of language encode perspective in a variety of ways, very often through some reference to the communicative situation. For example, deictic terms such as *tomorrow*, *later*, or *upstairs* have long been recognized as incorporating a particular vantage in space or time as an inherent part of their meaning.

Referring expressions are also notoriously sensitive to, and indicative of, components of the communicative situation, particularly the mutual accessibility (Ariel 1990) of the referent in the discourse. Many references cannot be resolved without some knowledge of the discourse participants' current common ground, as when I say "That one was George." Which one? Which George? We must refer to the established discourse situation to decide. The identity of referents for pronouns such as *them* or definite noun phrases such as *the house* are similarly accessed by way of the communicative situation.

One way to disrupt the smooth operation of this intersubjective process, then, is to construct passages in which the speaker or represented conceptualizer conspicuously fails to accommodate the reader's actual communicative situation and information state. In these cases, expressions that do conventionally pertain to aspects of the ground appear in the absence of an actual intersubjective ground that matches the presuppositions of these expressions. Example (3), from *The Sound and the Fury* (Faulkner 1929), is an illustration of this method.

- (3) They took the flag out, and they were hitting. Then they put the flag back and they went to the table, and he hit and the other hit.

This two-sentence passage features no fewer than five unheralded pronouns, as well as four instances of definite reference not licensed by the usual requirements of discourse accessibility. The use of the verb *hit* in a transitive construction, too, is grammatically acceptable but discourse inappropriate. Over and over again, the object of conceptualization is omitted as if it were highly mutually accessible, rendering it just the opposite. The narrator of this passage is Benjy, a 33-year-old man with severe mental disabilities. For Benjy, these patterns of grammatical dis-integration reflect the confusion and dislocation that result from his cognitive limitations.<sup>4</sup> For Faulkner and the reader, they also dramatize and thematize the problematic relationship between linguistic form and the communicative ideal.

These experiments in lexical and grammatical dislocation appear not just for their own sake, but as part of a larger project that influences the structure of



modernist texts at every level. We come now to my central illustrative case, the work of Virginia Woolf, especially her 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse*. Here, Woolf, the theorist of irredeemably internal experience, produces a narrative not just of consciousness, but of interconsciousness, with scenes of joint attending as her platform.

#### 4. Thematizing joint attention

It is tempting, and not incorrect, to characterize modernism in terms of a rejection of the relationship between art and representation. Pericles Lewis (2007:8), for instance, describes the characteristic quality of modernism as a “wholesale challenge” to the realist “ideal of transparent or mimetic language.” It is perhaps more useful, however, to see the relationship between modernism and representation as one of resistance and anxiety than of challenge and rejection. There were certainly periodic, and noteworthy, attempts in the avant-garde to overturn representation altogether. But many of the central figures in Anglo-American modernist letters were very much concerned with the possibility of representing internal experience, and of successfully communicating that representation to others.

Woolf’s critical essays as well as her fiction provide frequent testimony to her abiding interest in what she saw as the desperate and mostly doomed attempt to understand and connect to the minds of others. The crux of Woolf’s critique of her predecessors is not that Edwardians attempt to represent life, while the modernists do not. Woolf argues that the Edwardians fail to recognize that the primary difficulty is not in creating a believable character, but in having any hope of transmitting that creation to a reader. A major thread of literary modernism is this competition between the suspicion that true mutual understanding can never be achieved and the attempt to approach it as nearly as possible.

##### 4.1 Joint attention in *To the Lighthouse*

*To the Lighthouse*, Woolf’s fifth novel, is critically structured around the way that visual attention serves as a key physical manifestation of characters’ mental states. Sharing attention to objects in the outside world is critical for Woolf’s characters as an opportunity — even if a frequently fraught or thwarted opportunity — for closeness and sympathy. Characters repeatedly find themselves looking at the same object and experiencing a frisson of connection; they find themselves wondering about the degree to which they are transparent, or to which they can inhabit the thoughts of another.

There is nothing new in the observation that *To the Lighthouse* evinces a pervasive interest in seeing, modes of seeing, and the relationship between knowledge and perception. The central character, Lily Briscoe, is a painter, and the novel is patently very much concerned with painting and art as crucibles for individual subjective experience. But it is the novel's connection of perception of external objects to the potential for intersubjective experience that dramatically underlines the connection between these two tropes, seeing and connections with other minds.

Taking up the importance of shared seeing as a vehicle of communication in the novel also reveals that the memorable exhortation to "think of" and "see" a "kitchen table when you're not there" (23) has the same structure as a Zen kōan or child's riddle, one whose answer, I will argue, depends not only on Ramsey's philosophical debate over the relationship between existence and perception, but also on the crucial importance of shared experience. What does it mean to see something if no one is there to see it with you, or something that no one else can?

In *To the Lighthouse*, the possibility of joint attention is also a source of anxiety, as when Lily tries to avoid looking at her painting while Mr. Ramsey is watching: "But so long as he kept like that, waving, shouting, she was safe; he would not stand still and look at her picture. And that was what Lily Briscoe could not have endured" (17). One interpretation of this moment is that she simply does not want Ramsey to see her painting and what the painting itself exposes of her self, and that she feels that that his having seen it will somehow change or ruin her idea of what the painting is. But importantly, Lily especially does not want to *see* Ramsey see the painting, lest she be forced to acknowledge or experience the force of his thoughts.

This scene has a counterpart in the third part of the book, after Mrs. Ramsey's death. Mr. Ramsey and Lily Briscoe still bridle at the thought of being forced, through the confluence of their gaze, into a confluence of the minds (151). An "awful pause" follows Lily's resistance to making any expression of sympathy (though she is all too aware, and correctly, that this is what he wants). Both look at the sea. "Why," thinks Mr. Ramsey resentfully, "should she look at the sea when I am here?" He wants her to understand his thoughts and desires; he does not want to be impinged upon by hers. Lily, in her turn, has already been thus imposed upon. His "enormous flood of grief" and "insatiable hunger for sympathy" are all too palpable.

It is the thought of just such a moment of uncomfortable communion, made worse and more personal by the idea that her painting would be at the apex, that the younger Lily fears the most. To be confronted with Mr. Ramsey in such a way is the most alarming prospect, but the prospect of this kind of intimacy with almost anyone is too much to bear — if "Mr. Tansley, Paul Rayley, Minta Doyle, or practically anybody else" should come up behind her and look at it, she thinks, she would have to turn the canvas face-down on the grass rather than suffer through

such a charged and intimate experience. But when William Bankes, the one member of the house party with whom she feels real sympathy, walks up, she lets it be; and thus the simple sentence “William Bankes stood beside her” (17) conveys a quiet and touching empathy.

Indeed, most of the moments in which people do successfully understand one another in the novel can be found in these scenes of joint visual attention between Lily Briscoe and William Bankes. Some are described so that we know for certain that these moments of shared seeing are also moments of real mutual understanding, as when they walk to look together at the sea. “They both felt a common hilarity, excited by the moving waves; and then by the swift cutting race of a sailing boat... and then, with a natural instinct to complete the picture, after this swift movement, both of them looked at the dunes far away, and instead of merriment felt come over them some sadness” (20). And because this novel is populated with modernist subjects, Lily and William’s natural shared inclination to look at the dunes after the boat is a manifestation of their individual and unusual degree of natural commonality.

Other times the understanding that results from these occasions of joint attending is not explained, and the shared attention is instead simply presented as a signifier of a fleeting but real connection between two minds. These moments often appear in places of poetic emphasis, so that they are lent added weight. For example, chapter four of the first section ends with a breathless 153-word sentence that conveys something of Mr. Ramsey’s hectic but frozen response to having been discovered in a moment when he thought we was alone.

After over a hundred words, the hiatus ends: “— he turned abruptly, slammed his private door on them; and, Lily Briscoe and Mr. Bankes, looking uneasily up into the sky, observed that the flock of starlings which Jasper had routed with his gun had settled on the tops of the elm trees” (25). The result is that we come to rest on this shared seeing; it stands against the vast and unsympathetic distance in their encounter with Mr. Ramsey. Its shared nature is uncontroversial — we are simply told that the two observe together. Note also that the success of this act of joint attending is in no way the result of any active or deliberate attempt to penetrate a distant consciousness.

#### 4.2 The reader’s eye

While Woolf’s characters pay conscious attention to the attentions of their fellow characters, and strive to gain some understanding of one another’s inner thoughts thereby, the success of these endeavors for the characters themselves is limited at best. Instead, it is the reader alone who can appreciate the full sequence of ideas prompted or released by the external events that the characters see.

The asymmetry of this relationship both underlines and breaks open the loneliness at the heart of the novel, and these experiments in form are Woolf's attempt to solve the problem she described in *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown* (1924) of how to impart "that vision to which I cling" and "the appalling effort of saying what I meant". The successful depiction of these characters' loneliness and the failures of their attempts to share with one another the visions to which they cling, then, is in some sense a liberation, because it achieves a connection with what seems to be a real, or at least a convincing, other mind. It is also a defeat, in that there is no true mutual understanding to be had.

*To the Lighthouse* is divided into three sections. Part one, "The Window," takes place over a period of seven days during which the Ramsays — a philosopher, his wife, and their children — are playing host to a number of friends and colleagues at their summer home in the Hebrides.

The events of the week are small, the narrative focused more on introspective experience than external incident. James, the youngest Ramsay, hopes to visit the nearby lighthouse. While Mrs. Ramsay assures him that the weather will clear in time, Mr. Ramsay dashes his hopes. Lily is beset with worries about her own work, exacerbated by Tansley's claims that women can neither paint nor write. Paul proposes to Minta; Lily begins a painting. Andrew Ramsay attempts to explain his father's metaphysics by advising Lily to "think of a kitchen table... when you're not there." The section ends with a dinner party, important to the participants but otherwise unremarkable.

Part two, "Time Passes," spans ten years. The summer house stands largely empty as the dramatic events of life unfold elsewhere. The majority of the chapter describes the quiet, empty house falling into disrepair, while the family's tragedies are reported briefly and in square brackets. Finally, in the third section, "The Lighthouse," Mr. Ramsay persuades the now grown James and his sister Cam to make the long-deferred trip to the lighthouse. As they go, Lily remains by the house and finishes her painting.

The disparity between the reader's ability to close the intersubjective triangle and that of Woolf's characters is illustrated at length in the dinner party near the end of "The Window," in which Mrs. Ramsey devotes her considerable artistic talents for social choreography to all the members of her family and house guests at once, in a single gathering. In this sequence, the characters are simultaneously coordinated collaborators in the single achievement of a social event — "they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island" (97) — and absorbed in their own disjunct individual projects. Lily, for example, devotes herself both to salvaging social disharmonies on Mrs. Ramsey's behalf and to thoughts of her own half-finished painting. Mr. Tansley dedicates himself to the project of

bolstering his own sense of importance and distance from the Ramseys, in defiance of his own sense of social inferiority.

Mrs. Ramsey, meanwhile, takes a keen interest in where the people around her are looking, and makes a number of hypotheses about their states of mind based on these observations. “There was Rose gazing at her father,” she notes, “there was Roger gazing at his father; both would be off in spasms of laughter in another second, she knew...” (96). She similarly observes her daughter Prue’s attention to Minta: “She kept looking at Minta, shyly, yet curiously, so that Mrs. Ramsey looked from one to the other and said, speaking to Prue in her own mind, You will be as happy as she is one of these days” (109). But these insights are unconfirmed and partial or fleeting. Soon enough, Mrs. Ramsey is wondering what “joke of their own” her children might be harboring: “What was it, she wondered, sadly rather, for it seemed to her that they would laugh when she was not there. There was all that hoarded behind those rather set, still, mask-like faces...” (109).

Between these moments, Mrs. Ramsey notices that Augustus Carmichael and she have both been looking at the plate of fruit that Rose has arranged. Again she feels that the confluence of visual attention brings the lookers closer together:

...to her pleasure (for it brought them into sympathy momentarily) she saw that Augustus too feasted his eyes on the same plate of fruit, plunged in, broke off a bloom there, a tassel here, and returned, after feasting, to his hive. That was his way of looking, different from hers. But looking together united them. (97)

But are they truly united, when he is clearly oblivious to her sympathetic feelings? Or is Lily more nearly right when she thinks, of Mr. Bankes: “She would never know him. He would never know her. Human relations were all like that...” (92)?

Gaze and its coordination is the organizing structure throughout. The thread of the narrative is the shifting attention of the characters as their gaze settles on this or that element of their surroundings.

In this way, in addition to the characters’ attention to the attentions of one another, the narrative traces their mutual and solitary movements of attention with respect to objects in the room. When characters’ attention drifts away from the conversation, their thoughts still remain grounded in the visual apprehension of their physical surroundings. The focus of the text still follows the focus of their drifting gaze. “So they argued about politics, and Lily looked at the leaf on the tablecloth” (94) — thinking, again, as she and the reader alone know, of her painting. Mrs. Ramsey “looked at the window in which the candle flames burnt brighter now that the panes were black, and looking at that outside the voices came to her very strangely... for she did not listen to the words” (110).

The appearance of a single object can also kick off a sequence of associations that crosses from one character to another, as when the maid brings in a “huge

brown pot” of boeuf en daube. The sight of it leads Mrs. Ramsey to think of the three days the cook had spent making the dish; of how she must be careful to choose a particularly nice piece for William Bankes; of how such a lovely dish will “celebrate the occasion,” prompting “a curious sense” to arise within her,

at once freakish and tender, of celebrating a festival, as if two emotions were called up in her, one profound — for what could be more serious than the love of man for woman, what more commanding, more impressive, bearing in its bosom the seeds of death; at the same time these lovers, these people entering into illusion glittering eyed, must be danced round with mockery, decorated with garlands. (99–100)

Meanwhile, for some uncertain majority of the diners, the candles serve as a distraction from Mr. Ramsey’s irritation over Augustus Carmichael’s second plate of soup; the candles draw attention to the plate of fruit, to the reflections in the window, and to the faces around the table. Mrs. Ramsey looks at the bowl of fruit and notices Augustus; Augustus looks at the fruit and notices something to eat. The same fruit prompts Mrs. Ramsey to embark upon a more extended chain of associations: “of a trophy fetched from the bottom of the sea, of Neptune’s banquet, of the bunch that hangs with vine leaves over the shoulder of Bacchus (in some picture), among the leopard skins and the torches lolloping red and gold...” (97).

As in the Calypso passages in *Ulysses*, the objects of characters’ attention here serve as a key to their internal chains of associations. This sets up one kind of referential triangle: that of the focalizing characters, the objects that command their attention, and the reader who encounters those objects and interprets them as indices of the characters’ interior states. Woolf, however, further embeds this reading experience into scenes where the characters themselves are engaged in similar, if often doomed, attempts to share and make sense of their fellow characters’ visual attention.

*To the Lighthouse* is thus populated by a host of characters attempting to solve puzzles of joint attention. Even Mr. Ramsey, who often seems to have little interest in deciphering the thoughts of those around him, is implicated in the project by way of Lily’s interpretation of his philosophical program.

#### 4.3 Think of a kitchen table

Early in the novel, Andrew Ramsey tries to explain his father’s work on “subject, object, and the nature of reality” to Lily Briscoe: ““Think of a kitchen table then,’ he told her, ‘when you’re not there’” (23). Mr. Ramsey is a philosopher whose lofty intellectual thoughts prove of little use to him in appreciating the human events in the house around him; but Lily, who is much more sensitive both to all the other minds around her and to the degree to which they are all isolated from one

another, seizes on this image. It haunts her; it becomes a source for her art; in sum, it becomes something much more rich and compelling, in the framework of the novel, than Mr. Ramsey would ever know.

The standard reading of this image focuses on absence and domesticity. Mary Jacobus (1986), for example, ties these together in a feminist psychoanalytic framework, linking Melanie Klein's revision of the Freudian notion of "object loss" with a post-Oedipal narrative of gender relations. The kitchen table works in part as a figure of the things that are "not there," which echo poignantly through the book. First the lighthouse and then, after her death, Mrs. Ramsey, haunt the thoughts of every character, each one invested with all the more significance the less accessible it becomes. More immediately, in Andrew's phrase Mr. Ramsey's insistently masculine philosophy, in contrast to which "the folly of women's minds enraged him" (31), is translated and transformed into something domestic, quotidian, and feminine. Kitchen tables are the domain of the Mrs. Ramseys of this world, not the philosophers.

I would go a step further to argue that the kitchen table presents a transformation of the Ramseyan philosophy into something new and different, constructed out of the mechanisms of joint attention, in which experiences gain meaning in being shared. The work of Ramsey's that Andrew is trying to describe to Lily with this phrase appears to be an entry in the epistemological and ontological debate over the role of perception and the importance of the observer for the nature of both knowledge and reality.

Woolf's contemporaries G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell were hard at work on these very questions at the time *To the Lighthouse* was being written. Moore and Russell were largely working in response to the Idealist philosophy of George Berkeley, articulated in his 1710 *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*. In Berkeley's formulation, all qualities of objects are no more and no less than sensory data, existing only so long as a sensate being perceives them. Color exists only through being seen, heaviness only through being hefted, and so on. The new Realist philosophy espoused by Moore and Russell shifted the emphasis to perceptibility, rather than perceiving; that which exists is amenable to perception. The objects of knowledge then become neither sensations nor sensible objects, but logical constructions built out of them.

Woolf herself was aware of and interested in these arguments. As Leonard Woolf wrote, "Through us and through *Principia Ethica* the four others, Vanessa and Virginia, Clive and Duncan, were deeply affected by the astringent influence of [G. E.] Moore.... The colour of our minds and thought had been given to us by the climate of Cambridge and Moore's philosophy" (1964: 26). Russell too was a friend and influence, mentioned often in Woolf's diaries and letters.



There is little doubt that this philosophy affected Woolf's writing, though there is some debate over precisely how and to what degree. Andrew McNeillie (2000), for example, argues that while Moore may have been important to the Bloomsbury group in general, he is far too prosaic to be considered a real influence on Woolf's work. Ann Banfield (2000: 47), meanwhile, has argued that Woolf's fiction manifests a merger of the old and the new ontologies, adopting, as she puts it, "the new philosophical realism inoculated with Berkeley's Idealism." Woolf, like Russell, is concerned with the gap between what can be directly perceived and what can be known. Mr. Ramsey's table, Banfield postulates, lives in both this gap and the space between different kinds of knowing, "interposed between Woolf's woman-artist and the philosopher, placing the problem of knowledge at the center of Woolf's art" (49).

I suggest that what is most important for Woolf's aesthetic is not so much any one of the metaphysical positions under debate in the Cambridge philosophical milieu as the elements around which the debate centers, and particularly the idea that there is a problem, a puzzle or enigma, surrounding the relationship between what is, what can be known, and what is perceived. This puzzle is more important than any of its solutions.

Further, now that we are armed with an understanding of the significance of triangulated attention and its implications for intersubjective thought, a close reading of Lily's "kitchen table" suggests a whole new set of associations in which it does not stand for the role of perception in being, but instead raises the possibility of a radical claim for the role of interpersonal perception and understanding for epistemological concerns. As is manifestly demonstrated by the many scenes above in which Woolf clearly hangs the elusive possibility of communication between our separate mental worlds on acts of mutually manifest shared attention to objects in the world, in *To the Lighthouse*, to see an object is also crucially to raise the possibility of genuine connection with another person. Not to see it is to remain alone.

And so it should be unsurprising, in light of this reading, that Lily "sees" the table not when she is trying to apprehend the nature of knowledge or existence, but through and because of her attempt to appreciate and sympathize with what she imagines Mr. Ramsey's very different mental life must be like:

...now she always saw, when she thought of Mr. Ramsey's work, a scrubbed kitchen table. It lodged now in the fork of a pear tree, for they had reached the orchard. And with a painful effort of concentration, she focused her mind, not upon the silver-bossed bark of the tree, or upon its fish-shaped leaves, but upon a phantom kitchen table, one of those scrubbed board tables, grained and knotted, whose virtue seems to have been laid bare by years of muscular integrity, which stuck there, its four legs in air. Naturally, if one's days were passed in *this seeing* of angular



essences, this reducing of lovely evenings, with all their flamingo clouds and blue and silver to a white deal four-legged table (and it was a mark of the finest minds to do so), naturally one could not be judged like an ordinary person. (23, italics added)

There are several things worth noticing about this passage. First, Lily has completely abandoned — if she ever possessed — any thought of the original philosophical puzzle for which this kitchen table putatively stands. This means on the one hand that her attempt at understanding Ramsey is necessarily doomed from the start; on the other, it opens up the possibility that Andrew's expression of the puzzle may serve to raise a new and perhaps superior, or at least more interesting, line of philosophical thought. Finally, despite this fundamental departure from Ramsey's starting point, Lily is indeed attempting to construct a moment of sympathy with another person, and again this is figured as an attempt to *see* the same thing as that person.

This time the attempt to gain understanding via a shared object of visual attention is an even more ambitious task, as the potential shared object of attention is abstracted away from being an easily accessible shared basis for common ground between Lily and Ramsey in a number of ways. The kitchen table is imaginary, not real. The phrase itself is Andrew's, not Ramsey's. Lily should know (if she thinks about it) that Ramsey is probably not really thinking of a kitchen table when he thinks about his work; his work is not about any kitchen table, much less a particular one.

And yet the more intently she tries to capture for herself some sense of what it is like to think like him, the more vividly she imagines her phantom table. She elides, perhaps accidentally, perhaps involuntarily, perhaps just metaphorically, the original notion of imagining the general tenor of Ramsey's thoughts with the particulars of "this seeing" — this "reducing of lovely evenings, with all their flamingo clouds and blue and silver to a white deal four-legged table," which is, in fact, a product only of her own vivid visual imagination, and in its every detail a sign, moreover, of the kind of thinker that she is and that Ramsey is not. Indeed, there is no reduction of an evening to a table; for Ramsey, such a thorough and thoughtful contemplation of the table itself is not possible, and for Lily it is impossible to forget or ignore the beauty of the evening and its "flamingo clouds."

What we have in the image of the table is thus an impressive condensation of the double bind surrounding the communicability of internal consciousness that stands at the heart of the Woolf project as I see it. The intersubjective triangle of joint attention serves throughout the novel as a means by which characters can, however briefly, have real insight into one another's mental lives. But more often, characters who can see that potential are disappointed in practice; they fail to maintain a real

understanding, or they find that when the intentions and desires of another person do become obvious, it is as much an imposition as an insight. Yet the novel itself and its methods turn to the same mechanisms in a still-hopeful attempt to make the same connections work for the reader, if not for the characters being read about.

The table is both a signifier of this intense drive to seek connection and a signal example of its failure. At the same time, it provides a signal success in the vivid portrayal of Lily's consciousness that it provides for the reader. And once again, the mechanism in play is (an attempt at) triangulated visual attention. What's more, the vigor and vividness with which Lily makes her attempt is salutary in itself — it does her good and speaks well of her that she should think this way. Thus, Lily's encounter with the kitchen table serves to transform the Russell-Moore-Ramsey question of the relationship between existence and abstractly defined perception into an assertion about the relationship between shared perception and shared existence, a crucial distinction that would be less visible without an understanding of joint attention.

## Notes

1. For reviews of the many studies that support these claims, see Carpenter, Nagell, and Tomasello 1998 and Tomasello 2000.
2. This is perhaps not the ideal term, as the reader of an ancient text is not precisely the addressee of that text. I would substitute something like "audience."
3. Following Langacker (2008:261n2): "The subject and object of conception must not be confused with subject and object as specifically grammatical notions. The speaker and hearer are the principal subjects of conception, even when implicit, whereas grammatical subjects and objects are overt nominal expressions that generally refer to other entities."
4. For an extended analysis of how this deployment of transitivity, circumlocutions, personal pronouns, and deixis reflects Benjy's limited and non-standard worldview, see Roger Fowler's *Linguistic Criticism* (1996:168–9).

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### *Author's address*

Vera Tobin  
University of California, Santa Barbara  
English Department  
Santa Barbara, CA 93106-3170  
vera.tobin@gmail.com