

Reading Virginia Woolf through Søren Kierkegaard's *Concept of Irony*

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Abstract

In this paper, I take Virginia Woolf's preoccupation with the formation of subject as a premise, and draw on Søren Kierkegaard's exposition of irony, especially its subjective factors, to make possible a new understanding of Woolf's insight into "Subject and Object and the nature of reality." Although aiming at an outer, objective truth, Woolf continuously probes deeper into the personal, the subjective consciousness, seeking that essential pattern which she believes is hidden behind the cotton wool of everyday life. Woolf is always suspicious of the adequacy of words, and yet must work with them. In her attempt to diminish the treacherous nature of logos, Woolf can be seen as an absolute ironist who, not wanting to be caught by the fallacy of logos and human reasoning, entertains all possibilities, excluding none. Woolf is always seeking a deeper knowledge of the self by means of dialectic questioning. She places a high value on the subjective and yet is well aware of the deception of the senses and illusory present. Her narrative attempts to present what is unrepresentable in words -- being as it is -- achieves what Kierkegaard calls irony.

... but what doubt is to science, irony is to personal life. Just as scientists maintain that there is no true science without doubt, so it may be maintained with the same right that no genuinely human life is possible without irony.

Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*

where there is life, there is contradiction, and
wherever there is contradiction, the comic is present

Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

On reading Virginia Woolf, one is often bewildered as well as intrigued by a sense of playful incertitude, of deliberate indeterminacy, a fluctuating suspension, a tone that is often a "compound of severity and humour," taunting the readers, challenging their ideology (TL 29).¹ As soon as one fancies that one has finally stumbled upon some intended meanings that Woolf has contrived one might find oneself being mocked by the narrator's very own skepticism at the very next moment. Not only is the narrator constantly shifting and questioning, unable to settle, but the narrative itself is comprised of multifarious properties and meaning, capable of transforming like a kaleidoscope according to the change of perceptual light, as if the narrative *subject* (referring to both the subject characters as well as the subject matter), though framed by the finalized text, is still *becoming*. Within its constant movement, *the subject* resists any definite closure.

This action of constantly arriving at, but never arrived, is what Søren Kierkegaard has distinguished as a fundamental characteristic of an ironist. Kierkegaard proceeds further to suggest that the perpetual failure of attaining the ultimate goal of Truth is in itself the very manifestation of the truth that the narrative is striving toward. Such is the wisdom and the characteristic that Kierkegaard has recognized in Socrates whom perhaps is the very antecedent of a postmodern deconstructionist. Therefore, it is not surprising to find Jacques Derrida referring to Socrates to unravel the intricate nature of "the pharmako-logos [that] harbour within itself that complicity of contrary values" ("Plato" 128). Socrates' dialectic pursuit of truth is a series of questions. Through dialectical questioning, Socrates aims at diminishing the misuse of "pharmako-logos" by human reasoning which is constantly at fault.

¹ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); hereafter abbreviated TL

Fearing the inadequacy of language and the limitation of human rationality, even if there is a truth, the truth, being impalpable, unrepresentational, and bright enough to blind human sight, cannot be revealed directly but insinuated as in a poem. And it is in this roundabout way that what is truth is not compromised by the default and partiality of the symbolic system. As absolute ironists, both Socrates and Woolf are careful not to be trapped easily in a rational fallacy of any sophist's rhetoric or, in any temporal social framework; they are even sceptical of their own preliminary judgement. To maintain their flexibility in order to protect truth from compromises, they hide his/her "jest in earnestness, earnestness in jest"; "[battling] for the new and [striving] to destroy what for [him/her] is a vanishing actuality" (CI 256; 260).²

Absolute certitude, in extant reality, is an ontological as well as epistemological impossibility, while every actuality has its temporal-spatial condition. It is for this very reason that Socrates, as the absolute ironist whose "passage across actuality is floating and ethereal," "is continually just touching the ground" (CI 128). Absolute knowledge and *alētheia* (which literally means disclosure and is used to refer to truth) is simply too bright and any direct confrontation will simply blaze one out of existence. Therefore, *alētheia* can only be achieved in the death of the body.³ With his ultimate goal in sight, Socrates takes a detour by means of a dialectic reasoning. By proclaiming he knows nothing, Socrates is esteemed as the most wise. Such an impossibility of ever attaining a definitive core, an ideal metric, an Absolute knowing grants the *subject* all its freedom and possibilities, and, as suggested by Kierkegaard, its very subjectivity. For now, without a written law or creed to follow, he has to decide for himself and make up his own mind. He must create an ongoing dialectical discourse of reasoning with others, forever doubting himself, forever self-examining. Therefore, irony should not be simply taken "as a deliberate evasion of responsibility," instead it is with full awareness of the weight of any judgement that the ironist continues to search, to strive for the answers yet to come (Hutcheon 224).

To be all encompassing, or even simply to attain one "self", one must constantly negate whatever that seeks to frame, to name, to designate, but not every mortal man can bear to remain as an *object*, as termed by Julia Kristeva, situated outside the social symbolic order without social and symbolic determination. This is why, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa is envious of Septimus Smith's death which defies the erosion of everyday actuality but she is also glad that she has escaped death and continue living. Septimus has both won and lost himself by withstanding the authority of Holmes and Bradshaw. In death, he has maintained his own unity by not conforming. On the other hand, Clarissa sees herself and her life being constantly shackled by public opinion and convention, continually losing whatever is precious to herself. This idea is underscored by Martin Heidegger: "the ultimate failure, the breakdown of the entire structure of meaning is the innermost possibility of *Dasein*," and yet *Dasein* is always covertly present beneath the social surface (Žižek 306). Wrenching out of the socio-cultural contextualized meaning allows the subjectivity's being-in-itself; however, without the anchor, without even a means to substantiate the self, the subject is lost in its own unformed possibilities.

Such an irony, of a life continually searching and deferring from the core that defines oneself, is the fundamental mental strife of all humans and the *leitmotif* that runs through most of Woolf's writings. For example, Rachel Vinrace, Woolf's very first female protagonist in *The Voyage Out*, dwindles away before she can resign herself to the contemporary view of a woman's life in relation to men and the world. Bernard, the novelist-to-be in *The Waves*, is such a "dangling wire, a broken bell-pull, always twangling" who can only tell the meaning of his life by retracing the entire story of himself (W 13).⁴ But even in so many words, the truth still escapes. As if echoing Søren Kierkegaard's profound statement that "Truth is Subjectivity," Bernard apprehends the impossibility of communicating his personal perception that "something adheres for a moment, has roundness, weight, depth, is completed. This for the moment, seems to be my life" (W 199). As a reaction to the demand of reason, proportion and scientific objectivity, a legacy of the enlightenment, Woolf, in alignment with the Romantic spirit of Kierkegaard, acknowledges through *Mrs. Dalloway* the importance of subjective experience to make oneself real. In life, "A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter.

² Consult Søren Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) 235-6. Hereafter abbreviated CI.

³ See Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," *Dissemination* (London: Continuum, 2004).

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Hereafter abbreviated W.

This he [Septimus] had preserved” (*MD* 156).⁵ However, how to reconcile this internal truth with the external facts and actuality? The hard truth might be as incorporeal and abstract as a mathematical equation and the perceived realities simply a matter of sensory deceptions. Instead of philosophers and scientists, Woolf avails herself of the experience of an artist. The frustration of not being able to render her vision of which Miss La Trobe in *Between the Acts* (along with various other artist-protagonists of Woolf’s) is increasingly conscious, continues to reflect the quintessence of Woolf’s preoccupation with “subject and object and the nature of reality.”⁶

It is well-acknowledged that “One of the metaphysical implications of the culmination of irony in spatial form is the perpetuation of dualism: mind vs. body, subject vs. object, Word vs. World” (Bové, “Kierkegaardian” 738). The fundamental duality of Western scientific philosophy “with material on the one hand and on the other hand mind” is called, by Alfred North Whitehead, “the Achilles heel of the whole system” (71). The subjective qualia remain as a territory where objective science blunders. In dealing with her own illness as well as her genius, Woolf constantly asks what is the connection between the mind and the body? Woolf’s narrative, its form, its *subject* and *subject formation* is obsessed with both the integral as well as dispersive nature of the ‘I’ and its portraiture of an existence as “a nothing devoid of reality” (*TL* 22; *CI* 270). Conscious life itself already bears the seed of dissimulation upon which irony is premised. Based on such an observation, I propose here that by applying Søren Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Irony*, which emphasizes the subjective nexus of all judgements, a more integral view of Woolf’s aesthetics could be achieved and fully appreciated.

Doubting the Hegelian objective totality, Kierkegaard famously pronounced that “Truth is subjectivity” and brings the “human” perspective, the subjective *I* (through which all human perception and understanding of the world is filtered) back into focus. To attend to objectivity is not to deny the private *I* (eye), but instead, it is by recognizing, consolidating, confronting and even mocking one’s egotistic tendency that objectivity can be achieved. This is the position Socrates takes. It is only in this way that a certain level of objective abstraction and a deeper understanding of life can be achieved. It is this un-relievable human *I* that is neglected and rejected in the modern scientific or systematic pursuit of Truth, of the Beautiful, of Good. And it is to this human limitation that Socrates ceaselessly attested. Woolf comments satirically on the self-conceit of modern male writers and university élites who, in their praise of logical reasoning and objectivity, are constantly perceiving and relating to the world through their pompous ego: “Not but what this ‘I’ was a most respectable ‘I’; honest and logical; as hard as a nut, and polished for centuries by good teaching and good feeding...the dominance of the letter ‘I’ and the aridity, which, like the giant beech tree, it casts within its shade. Nothing will grow there” (*ARO* 130-1).⁷

In *To the Lighthouse*, Mr. Ramsay, begins to reflect on “an obvious distinction between two classes of men: on the one hand the steady goers of superhuman strength who, plodding and persevering, repeat the whole alphabet in order ... on the other the gifted, the inspired who, miraculously, lump all the letters together in one flash – the way of genius” (*TL* 31). Mr. Ramsay, who knows he is not a genius himself, is the rational steady-goer, a believer in science and facts. And yet, it is out of this egotistic confidence in human objectivity and the vanity over his egotistic self-worth and self-satisfaction that Mr. Ramsay can only arrive at R, at himself, and never beyond. The *I* colored lens through which the world is perceived and logic conducted is seldom addressed or ever carefully examined in scientific reasoning as if it is already logical and transparent. It is “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness” according to Whitehead (72). This is the fallacy that Socrates has wisely avoided by his infinite negativity that posits nothing, that negates even himself, by his recognition of subjective consciousness and the intrinsic irony of the subject who is forever trapped within its limited subjective realm while dreaming that it has reached beyond itself towards some logical absolute. The ancient Greek wisdom, compressed in the aphorism of *know thyself*, forewarns of hubris and human conceit in his own reasoning capacity.

It is Socrates’ position as a pure ironist to which Kierkegaard aspires, forever opposing, forever shuffling and never settling, because human perceptions are treacherous and human reasoning is often at fault, according to Socrates: “In irony, the subject is negatively free, since the actuality that is supposed to give the subject content is not there” (*CI* 262). The very subjectivity of Socrates, through its irony, achieves a supreme freedom.

⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Hereafter abbreviated *MD*.

⁶ See *TL* 22.

⁷ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Hereafter abbreviated *ARO*.

Kierkegaard, to free himself from socio-cultural conditions, follows Socrates' ironic stance and ingeniously creates for himself a poetic persona. With a fictional and ahistorical *I*, Kierkegaard at once provides himself with a social position without the fear of restraints. It is a self-imposed negativity that ironically provided him a fictional, though nevertheless substantial, subjective image. And this is what Woolf has been continually building through her narrative, her tribute to life: a poetic gesture that arrests time, provides substantial, though fictional, meaning while retaining all *subject* potentials and unknowable properties in an all-encompassing fluidity. The poetic gesture that seems to solidify but in essence frees the subject by dramatizing its own fictionality is in fact the very embodiment of the ironic subjectivity in practice. As Kierkegaard said, "Everything established in the given actuality has nothing but poetic validity for the ironist, for he, after all, is living poetically" (*CI* 282). Thus, Clarissa poses herself at the top of a staircase as the perfect hostess. Framed within 'The Window' is Mrs. Ramsay and all her abstractness. The dispersal of life is set *Between the Acts* and the orts, "scraps and fragments" of real life are compressed by the classical unities of time, place, and action into a theatrical novel (*BA* 169).⁸ The time-traversing *Orlando* is finally fixed "at the twelfth stroke of midnight, Thursday, the eleventh of October, Nineteen hundred and Twenty Eight" (314). And in apprehension of another outbreak of her illness and of life falling into no-account, Woolf stopped her own life, leaving the world all its pity and fear. In the words of Georg Lukács, "form is the only way of expressing the absolute in life; a gesture is the only thing which is perfect within itself, the only reality which is more than possibility. The gesture alone expresses life" (5).

Woolf, like the prophetic ironist, is preoccupied with the poetic moments and her vision that the present actuality gradually loses its validity entirely under her burning gaze.⁹ The struggle and strife confronting the dissolution of a naïve belief in the actuality of this social world and this present corporeal being is profoundly dramatized by the sanity and insanity of Clarissa and Septimus. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, one perceives how many endeared possibilities of her life Clarissa presses close to her heart. She still sees herself moved by Peter's passion and contemplates the adventurous life with Peter, though all the while congratulates herself that she has chosen Richard and withdrawn herself from a more intense being with Sally Seton and Peter Walsh. Clarissa has assumed a detached, almost nun-like living to brace herself against the cruel reality. Knowing Peter is again in love and being envious of others' ongoing social life, Clarissa thinks impulsively, wishing Peter had taken her along on his adventure, "and then, next moment, it was as if the five acts of a play that had been very exciting and moving were now over and she had lived a lifetime in them and ... it was now over" (*MD* 40). Instead of real engagement, Clarissa takes a non-involved stance of spectatorship. It is through this kind of withdrawal from life that Clarissa could finally arrive at the calmness suggested by the elegy from *Cymbeline*: "Fear no more the heat o' the sun,/ Nor the furious winter's rages" (*Cym.* 4.2. 258-9). Although she declares in earnest time after time how she enjoys and loves life, her parties are only tributes to life, retreats from real living. The refrain from *Cymbeline* implicitly points toward Clarissa's self-induced apathy, a living death state. Clarissa thus enjoys a "negative freedom" (*CI* 263).

Clarissa's tendency to "[slice] like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on" and her perpetual sense of herself that "as she watched the taxicabs, of being out, out, far out to the sea and alone" forms a twentieth century echo of Kierkegaard's account that "in order for the ironic formation to be perfectly developed, it is required that the subject also become conscious of his irony, feel negatively free as he passes judgment on the given actuality, and enjoy this negative freedom" (*MD* 7; *CI* 263). Clarissa does reflect Kierkegaard's description of an ironist who, having "stepped out of line with his age, has turned around and faced it" (*CI* 261). Although agonized against her negativity, she comes to enjoy all that life offers in a detached sense. Clarissa might be admiring Septimus who has "flung [life] away" while "they went on living," holding his treasure intact (*MD* 156). Still, she would assemble, still she would return to the life which she endeavours to create out of nothingness. In her own words: "As we are a doomed race, chained to a sinking ship, as the whole thing is a bad joke, let us, at any rate, do our part; mitigate the sufferings of our fellow-prisoners; decorate the dungeon with flowers and air-cushions; be as decent as we possibly can" (*MD* 66). All the while Clarissa is the more skeptical one, repeating reassuring self-consolations: "That is all," "Fear no more;" "How she loves life; London; this moment of June." Clarissa lures herself into believing this moment, this life, this reality (*MD* 9; 8; 4).

⁸ Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Hereafter abbreviated *BA*.

⁹ *CI* 261: The ironist, however, has stepped out of line with his age, has turned around and faced it. That which is coming is hidden from him, lies behind his back, but the actuality he so antagonistically confronts is what he must destroy; upon this he focuses his burning gaze.

When nothingness is essentially the reality of being, it is important to apply a little magic, to bring people together, to create memory and life, to believe even if it is an illusion. Clarissa is devoted to making life out of nothing.

In contrast to Clarissa, Septimus has been deprived of such power to believe anymore. The Great War with all its terror has shattered Septimus's perception and belief in reality. He remains suspicious and unable to locate and relate. Septimus is trapped half way towards achieving the position of an ironist. While an ironist is capable of adopting a second-level of reflection and celebrating its own volatilization as a subjective freedom, Septimus loses all capacity to consolidate. No orienting model of value can be re-established. He cannot pass through the shattered vision and take the nothingness and vanity of the present world as it is: "The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames" (*MD* 13). Like an ironist, the gaze of Septimus is also fixed beyond the present reality on something dimly hidden behind. But, in contrast to an ironist, who would consciously "preserve [himself] in negative independence of everything," Septimus is compelled to retreat from the actuality and "talking every phenomenon out of its reality" (*CI* 257). Septimus is passively driven to see reality as fictionalized. As irony is an affirmation of subjectivity and subjective freedom, Septimus, in fact, has lost his subjectivity, his self, through continuous authoritative denial, first as a soldier then as a mental patient. Although "the whole given actuality had entirely lost its validity," for Septimus, he lacks the second level of conscious reflection to go beyond the social convention and muse over his disparateness and the nonsense of the social material world (*CI* 261).

Septimus is the very victim of a modern society that prizes impersonal, apathetic, systematic organization over individual subjectivity, based upon senses and sensibilities. In Woolf's writings, the constant dramatization of the contrasting feature of external material actuality with an intrinsic, profound and unpronounceable inner reality, details the irony of subjective Being. Contrasting with the male characters who stand more for the apprentices of the Platonic tradition, it was the female characters such as Mrs. Hilbery, Clarissa, Mrs. Ramsay, Eleanor, Lady Lasswade, and Mrs. Swithin, though often with a slight shade of pessimism, who share more similarity with Socrates' negativity and are more pertinent to the Kierkegaardian ironist. It is they who seemingly conspire with the present social code and historical context though nevertheless seeing that "every particular historical actuality is continually but an element in the actualization of the idea, it carries within itself the seeds of its own downfall" (*CI* 262).¹⁰ It is they who fight courageously against the sorrow that "would reduce all joy to sadness, all longing to privation, every hope to recollection" and will to believe and be happy (*CI* 327). These women characters are the ones who disclaim their knowing and vision, flaunt their ignorance, all the while seeing past the seriousness, the dogmatic, the calculus of masculine logic and modern science that is eternally trapped in a paradox that its very claim has engendered. Clarissa reflects "how she had got through life on the few twigs of knowledge Fräulein Daniels gave them ... She knew nothing; no language, no history ... and she would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that" (*MD* 7). Clarissa's restraint from applying definitive conclusions, however, makes her more perceptive of the appearance as well as the reality of life and more receptive of individual subjectivity.

Modernity, as shown by the Romantics, is accompanied by an aggravated internal subjective split where an inner experience of an inexpressible void cannot be explained away by the positivism of science. Since "the modern age is defined by naturalistic science, by positivism, and by causal history," psychological and supernatural phenomena are often dismissed as 'non-sense' (Bové, "Kierkegaardian" 729). In the place of the original faith in God, in Religion, in a higher Good, is a new faith in "progress" (Bové, "Kierkegaardian" 729). As observed by Kierkegaard, "Our age is not an age of doubt, but nevertheless many manifestations of doubt still survive" (*CI* 247). In reaction to the scientific belief, a romantic fascination with the supernatural phenomena becomes predominant. Following the seventeenth century advancement in theoretical science and the success of the industrial revolution, science has become too assertive of its own power. While science begins with, and is based upon doubts, science has ceased to doubt itself and the human capacity to employ scientific method to understand humanity. Therefore, with his inflexible insistence upon facts (which is, to Mrs. Ramsay, so unfeeling), Mr. Ramsay can never achieve Z, "which is scarcely visible to mortal eyes, but glimmers red in the distance" (*TL* 30).

¹⁰ Kierkegaard also quoted Hegel: "All dialectic allows as valid that which is to be valid as if it were valid, allows the inner destruction to develop in it – the universal irony of the world" (*CI* 262).

Taking notice of such fact, Kierkegaard, subsequently, takes a step further to discredit the absolute knowledge that modern science seems to promise (CI 247).¹¹ The absolute objectivity that science professes that omits all the subjectivity of the observer is almost a self-deluding fantasy. Moreover, how is it possible for science, in advocating objectivism, to deal with the mind, the spirit, or “the semi-transparent envelope, or luminous halo, surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end (MN 33)?¹² With all the progress of modern science, Woolf relentlessly points out how little scientists and physicians know about the human mind and the correlation between mind and body – the essential mystery of intelligent *life*.¹³ The incongruity between what science claims to be capable of and the invalidity of its claim in reality is often referred to by Woolf. It is to this fundamental doubt of the *zeitgeist* of the modern age, the self-belief of the male dominated scientific profession, that Woolf cannot refrain from saying “but” and proceed to finish the sentence somehow.¹⁴

The impasse of modern empirical science to make sense of the confusion of life and to tackle the ultimate mystery of life, consciousness, can be glimpsed in Hegel’s own confusing alteration of what was to be “Science of the Experience of Consciousness” into *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807).¹⁵ The very title, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (*Phänomenologie des Geistes*), of Hegel’s establishment of his system of idea and his most influential work, does in every way come to support Kierkegaard’s criticism of Hegel and Hegel’s all-encompassing historical outlook as the true heir of Socrates. Whether Kierkegaard has grasped the ingenuity of Hegel or not should be left to future consideration. Here, the only purpose is to illustrate the difficulty to place *life* and in this sense, the *subjective life*, under the scrutiny and examination of systematic science. Can life be possibly approached by means of abstract dialectic explanation? For, to sum up Kierkegaard’s argument, the emergence of speculative thoughts and therefore empirical science requires first and foremost a reflexive consciousness which is also the constituent of subjectivity. In the words of Kierkegaard: “in order for thought, subjectivity, to acquire fullness and truth, it must let itself be born ... it must let the waves of the substantial sea close over it, just as in the moment of inspiration the subject almost disappears from himself, abandons himself to that which inspires him, and yet feels a slight shudder” (CI 274).

The internal conflict of the modern *subject* becomes full blown in High Modernism which features a self-reflexive psychological struggle strained by a modern scientific belief in tangible steadfast fact. The ironic, subjective, basis of Being is further intensified. The subject “oscillates between consciousness and world, between will and desire, on the one hand, and resistance and absence on the other” (Bové, “Review” 246). There is an objective belief in the progress and all the while a strong subjective awareness of the frailty of modern civilization and establishment. Woolf’s narrative effects such a Romantic double consciousness as the narrative enacts the stratum of consciousness by means of a nonetheless subjective narrator who serves as the objective medium that brings together as well as enfolds each separate subjective consciousness of the characters. Since the medium (through and by which each character is established) is first and foremost a subjective sphere, the objectivity of its narrated scenes and events is therefore questionable.

The narrative, by conjoining a series of multifarious subjective perspectives that shift from character to character, seeks to attain a semi-objective outlook which in turn is only an illusion, reminding one of the distinction between doubt and irony speculated by Kierkegaard: “In doubt, the subject continually wants to enter into the object, and his unhappiness is that the object continually eludes him. In irony, the subject continually wants to get outside the object, and he achieves this by realizing at every moment that the object has no reality” (CI 257). Woolf with her doubts certainly has taken a step further into irony. She is not in a pursuit of knowledge only, but she is questioning the very structure of science and the possibility of knowledge. In an example of Lily Briscoe’s revelation at the end, here she has ceased to yearn for the knowledge of Mrs.

¹¹ CI 327: “In our age, scientific scholarship has come into possession of such prodigious achievements that there must be something wrong somewhere; knowledge not only about the secrets of the human race but even about the secrets of God is offered for sale at such a bargain price today that it all looks very dubious.”

¹² Virginia Woolf, “Modern Novels” *The Essays of Virginia Woolf* vol. 3 (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988) 30-37.

¹³ See also Virginia Woolf, *The Years* (London: Penguin, 1998) 282: “Doctors know very little about the body; absolutely nothing about the mind.”

¹⁴ See ARO, p. 131.

¹⁵ See Robert B. Pippin, “You Can’t Get There from Here: Transition Problems in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*.” *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993).

Ramsay or to rationally analyze Mr. Ramsay. A reconciliation is achieved, for now she has surpassed the urge to know. No longer is she troubled by the knowledge that she cannot possibly possess or by the frustration that what she sees cannot be transformed onto the canvas. Vision and actuality are brought together, for both have a temporal factuality and meaning, while none holds the full reality. The final act is almost a poetic gesture which holds all meanings in a silence. It is a point of termination, but not a definitive conclusion. As the narrative maps out different levels of consciousness, irony inserts itself. Though allowing a seemingly independent observance, the narrative self-undermines the very validity that it undertakes to sustain. The narrative attains irony, for “it posited something, it knew it had the authority to annul it, knew it at the very moment it posited it” (CI 276).

Irony is “essentially the modern attitude of mind, the ‘vision’ of the twentieth century’s industrial world,” according to Alan Wilde (Bové, “Review” 246). One could say that modernists, situated on the brink of human exaltation and destruction, within the Platonic Ideal of definitive order which sustains the entire Western philosophical tradition, are continuously challenged by unforeseen disruptions and irresolution. With the introduction of Quantum Mechanics, often taken as the apex of speculative reason, classical physics and the traditional linear and definitive historical conception lose their preeminent claims. With Quantum Mechanics, the dynamic of “reality” in relation to the position of the “subjective observer” is more than ever asserted. Just as Lily Briscoe’s is unable to translate what she has seen onto her canvas, reality fails the modernist ideal by its disarray.¹⁶ In accordance with Kierkegaard, no given actuality is affirmative, but subjectivity ventures forward to actualize a reality that it knows it is within his power to annul and by thus asserts its own subjectivity. To say “irony is a qualification of subjectivity” is to recognize the fundamental conflict of being (CI 262). Epitomized by W. B. Yeats’ “The Second Coming,” high modernism figures a vision of the world in which “Things fall apart,” for “the centre cannot hold.” And “Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world” (Yeats, “The Second Coming” 3-4). What has been taken as reality might have been a matter of partial learning, or perceptive delusion. Even the law of Newtonian physics is contradicted under specific conditions. The impossibility of measuring, simultaneously, the position and the momentum of the particles as described by the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, brings a civilization that advocates accuracy and is founded upon objective, material facts, to a new crisis. The battle between the objective and subjective truth has now turned heated.

I argue that it is only by means of understanding the irony that the immanent antithesis or protean nature of Woolfian narrators and *subjects* be fully understood. It is in time that ‘Being’ takes place. However, in time the meaning of ‘Being’ is constantly disrupted, betrayed, and deferred. Only through some kind of meta-narrative which seemingly defeats the corrosion and dwindling of time can a certain, but ultimately partial, definitive be anticipated. And therefore, pre-empting a postmodernist, on questioning the foundation, Woolf still needs to resort to some kind of foundation, such as art and poetry to instantiate her ideas. Being is a constant toil in and against time and history. Throughout her writing career, Woolf endeavours to formulate a form capable of “expressing the absolute in life” in order to “forge realities from the insubstantial possibilities of the soul, through the meetings and partings of souls” (Lukács 5). Apart from arresting time by a poetic gesture, there seems to be no reconciliation between the desire to live and feel and the yearning for certitude and stability; no hope in arriving at any meaning from “the chaotic multiplicity of life” (Lukács 6). It is also through such irony embedded within conscious life, which is also the main locus of the entire Western philosophical discourse, that Woolf could possibly bring forth real characters that truly live in time.

For both Kierkegaard and Woolf, it is the lack, the negativity at the centre of being that liberates the subject and thereby makes possible *subjective freedom* which in turns establishes *the subject*. For what is an autonomous subject if it is not self-made. However, to emphasize once again, “as the subjectivity asserts itself, irony emerges” (CI 263). And as often as not, such conflict is greatly intensified by love – an essential subjective feeling; the desire for merging with the other as well as for the other’s recognition of the self, which is contradictory in its own sense. This is the very reason why Clarissa disapproves of the love of Peter Walsh and Miss Kilman that tries to convert others, disregarding and destroying “the privacy of the soul” (MD 107).

¹⁶ *To the Lighthouse* 19: Then beneath the colour there was the shape. She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked: it was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed. It was in that moment’s flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child.

Kierkegaard's entire philosophy, as commented by Lukács, is based upon the eternal irony perceived through this subjective struggle of and for love. To realize love in its fullest state, Kierkegaard abstained from fulfilling his love in the social institute of marriage. In loving Regine Olsen out of wedlock, Regine becomes the "unattainable ideal" for Kierkegaard — the ultimate subject that preserves the void (the lack) at the centre and in return asserts both the subject autonomous and the objective ideal with its inexhaustibility.¹⁷ By making his own life into poetry, Kierkegaard leaves his love, his being, in a dead silence, a total annulment as well as a full fulfilment — "a nothing that nevertheless is just as full of content as the silence of the night is full of sounds for someone who has ears to hear" (CI 258). Love is by nature ironic. For, love begins with the desire of the self, but love is also a total embrace with the other that threatens one's selfhood.

Could it be possible to become one fully with the other and attain a knowledge which is essentially foreign to oneself? Doesn't the acquisition of knowledge require that one self-consciously knows or senses? Being a (female) painter, Lily is locked *de facto* in a seesaw struggle to bridge objective perception and subjective judgement, not to mention her painter position between the two conventional contrasting figures of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. Situated in-between, Lily, the artist, becomes the intermediate, the translator who is deeply troubled by the infeasibility to be truthful to the totality of all the possibilities of what she sees and to actualize it on the canvas: "She saw the colour burning on a framework of steel; the light of a butterfly's wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral. Of all that only a few random marks scrawled upon the canvas remained" (TL 42). In actualizing, one inevitably disrupts the totality. But it is also through this act of actualization, that subjectivity is manifested.

For Kierkegaard, as specified by Lukács, "a man who wants to be 'honest' must force life to yield up its single meaning, must grasp that ever-changing Proteus, so firmly that, once he has revealed the magic words, he can no longer move" (Lukács 6). How likely could it be to fully achieve and actualize oneself without relinquishing any probable "I" of which, *je ne sais quoi*, one is still unconscious? In the opinion of Lukács, such is the paradox which Kierkegaard tries to resolve through poetic gesture, "the point at which reality and possibility intersect, matter and air, the finite and the infinite, life and form" (Lukács 6).¹⁸ In brief, subjective freedom depends not only upon self-knowledge but more importantly upon an internal strength to actualize a decision and still be able to retain whatever part of the self or unity that is lost through such actualization. This is why Socrates' subjectivity is established upon a continual alteration between self-affirmation and self-negation and also why Mrs. Ramsay claims, as she dwells deeper into herself, that with this "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" (TL 53). "Know thyself" sums up the greatest possible of human wisdom as Socrates has suggested. The maxim itself already supposes an irony of the possibility of an all subjective measurer attempting an objective measuring of what constitutes him or herself.

Liberated from the historical actuality and therefore causal definition, the subject remaining always at the *beginning* retains infinite possibility. Though retaining all its potentials, the ironic subject, suspended beyond the historical actuality, actually possesses none. In the words of Lukács, it is like "build[ing] a crystal palace out of air" (5). The ironic subject feels intensely "the two sense of that vastness and this tininess flowering" constantly within one, reducing one and "the lives of all the people in the world" almost to nothingness (TL 63). And that in life there is "No guide, no shelter, but all was miracle, and leaping from the pinnacle of a tower into the air" (TL 147). Thus, Mrs. Ramsay still needs the steady long stroke light coming from the lighthouse to anchor herself. As her eyes meet the third stroke, "it seemed to her like her own eyes meeting her own eyes, searching as she alone could search into her mind and her heart, purifying out of existence that lie, any lie" (TL 53). In that moment, she is, paradoxically, fully herself, but also selflessly objective, mirroring the effect of *Time Passes*. From here one could almost be sure of Mrs. Ramsay's eventual dispersal into nothingness and perhaps that of Socrates, the essential ironist, himself. The death in a bracket, so inconsequential, immortalizes the *subject* through worldly negation. So are Socrates and Mrs. Ramsay.

¹⁷ In "The Foundering of Form against Life: Søren Kierkegaard and Regine Olsen," Georg Lukács writes: "In the woman-glorifying poetry of the Provençal troubadours, great faithlessness was the basis for great faithfulness; a woman had to belong to another in order to become the ideal, in order to be loved with real love. But Kierkegaard's faithfulness was even greater than the troubadour's, and for that very reason even more faithless: even the deeply beloved woman was only a means, only a way towards the great, the only absolute love, the love of God" (13).

¹⁸ See CI 163

The fear of the incomplete and the resentment towards the unfulfilled makes one agonize over any engagement with historicity and every materialization of vision. Reality is always too strong and the vision too ephemeral while illusions founded on phenomena of the material world continue to fail one. But, what agony it is to live without affirmation. Some kind of actualization must exist, even for an ironist, only that it must retain the possibility. For living, without an axis and in conviction that “nothing exists outside us except a state of mind,” dissolution and insanity easily ensues (*MD* 48). Actualization substantiates one as a historical subject in existence. To actualize but still remain at the beginning, an ironist, in detachment, takes an all-inclusive poetic stance. By creating for himself a poetic persona, a poetic gesture, the ironist fits himself into a definite context, though “this context...has no validity” as far as he is concerned (*CI* 283). Moreover, the ironist “poetically composes not only himself but he poetically composes his environment also” (*CI* 283). This is the strategy of the ironist to live continually in time while not being confined by any temporal-spatial actuality. He wills his own actualization while knowing all along such actualization is only of an ephemeral mundane reality.

With the passing of time, the narrative of life, as it spins, closes down, but an ironist contrives like Penelope. Every spinning is only an act in itself leading towards further unfurling, not closure. Woolf’s characters, echoing the narrative that brings them into being, are aware of the pliant, illusory and to a certain extent non-conclusive nature of material reality. And, in trying to resist nothingness and meaninglessness, these characters are forever building things up, making and inventing themselves “just as one makes up the better part of life,” bringing people together, bestowing life a self-given or social-given meaning through shared experience (*MD* 46). Resembling the Kierkegaardian ironist, Woolfian characters realize that only by taking up the position of a creator and self-invented self with non-conclusive poetic gestures, can one possibly preserve one’s full autonomy and keep one’s position always flexible, holding all potential outcomes.

Ever since her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, Woolf has anchored her novelist enterprise in an ironic pursuit of subject formation. Rachel Vinrace is the developing female subject who, in the end, flees the socially designated identity of a wife and mother by no other means but death itself. Rachel is demonstrative of a subject who finds it impossible to realize herself within the given historical actuality. Woolf’s very first novel is already an enactment of the irony of subjective being which is simultaneously so concrete and definite yet abstract and fluctuant in the process of becoming. Rachel’s tragic end to her emancipatory tour is inevitable, because of the mental strain one has to endure when realizing all the possibilities which are nevertheless lost to oneself. For Rachel, the gradually emancipated daughter of the Victorian age, there is no other alternative to avoid the predestined role of angel in the house than a thorough evasion in death or a semi-death by assuming a self-negating position of irony.

The Voyage Out, in the name itself, already professes a “novel” ontological enterprise of modernist writers, which is to highlight “the way one’s seen the thing, felt about it, made it stand in relation to other things” as expressed by the character Hewet, the experimental novelist in the story, who aspires to write a novel about silence (*VO* 249). “Irony [is] infinitely silent,” according to Kierkegaard (qtd. in Schleifer 45). For “Kierkegaard’s irony ... is not a means of communication, but a means of negating communication; it questions and problematizes the very disparity dichotomy between speech and meaning;” between the phenomenon and essence (Schleifer 45). Although Lukács criticizes the modernist work, with its distinct split between the external material reality and the internal spiritual truth, which then loses its root and becomes insubstantialized, it is through the very display of such a split that Woolf achieves an ironic effect to cleave the external data to the internal qualia; the objective with the subjective, and thereby to communicate the non-communicable. By means of a grotesque mixture of the magical fantasies of the mind and the down-to-earth everyday actuality of the body, Woolf unfolds the negative and ironic nature of a subjective consciousness of being-in-the-world (*TL* 29).

The mind that soars endlessly high up “to get outside the body, beyond the house, by means of thought, Einstein, speculation, mathematics, the Mendelian theory” is all too aware of itself being confined surely to the coarse material ground (*MD* 24). All the more, the actuality of the body, being positioned in time and temporal flux, instead of providing a substantial and static ground for the mind denies the mind the nexus it longs for. A twofold paradox is enacted by the very fact that the subject is first and foremost a temporal material being. In time, it is both confounded and made possible; it is both dynamic as well as restricted. However, what the subject aspires to is a fully rounded final certitude of complete Absolute which is a-temporal and pre-historical. Either with the death of Septimus or through the elongated life of Orlando, both show that *the subject*, pertaining somewhat to a Sartrean existentialism, is primarily situated upon an absence that simultaneously enables as well as undermines its subject reality.

Essentially a romantic heir, Woolfian paradox ventures forward to highlight the primal polemic between logical speculative idealism and the observational, experimental modern science in relation to the subjective apprehension and objective understanding. Such a granite and rainbow paradox of phenomena and reality within Woolf has often been addressed and commented on and justified by Woolf's familiarity with the Cambridge school of Epistemology. However, the intricate correlation between classical idealism and modern science, though still irresolvable, is harmonized through the immanent textual irony of Woolf. Focusing upon the treatment of the narrative subject and the subjective narrative, I argue that Woolf's experimental writing is an attempt at "convey[ing] this incessant varying spirit with whatever stress or sudden deviation it may display, and as little admixture of the alien and the external as possible" and has, in various ways, illustrated the concept of irony as set forth by Kierkegaard for whom "irony establishes the principle of the interdependence and connection of all human truth" (MN 33; Handwerk 8).

With fictional narratives, Woolf contrives wilfully an infinite negation in order to free herself from patriarchal censorship. As in her two most famous essays, *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, Woolf always, with almost pretentious humbleness, presupposes a failure of her own ignorance, always dismissing whatever that is to be said as merely an attempt, a process of thought, a woman's opinion. Like Socrates, Woolf likewise claims her own ignorance of which she is both earnest and not earnest and by which she manifests the vanity of the scientific knowledge and political power professed by the masculine *I*. As a twentieth century echo of Socrates, Woolf self-imposes her negation, coating her most vehement and subversive attacks with seemingly innocent, innocuous questions. Though declaring her knowing of nothing, she clearly pinpoints the cause of many social and political problems, the issues and controversies of modern subjects. She enlightens but provides no easy answers. For just like Socrates, Woolf sees the future, and she recognizes even more her own historical limitation – she is nevertheless an educated man's daughter of the late Victorian and early twentieth century period.

Woolf herself can easily be understood as the poet, which Kierkegaard has characterized at the very opening of *Either/Or*, who transforms the anguish and the torment of her soul in response to the inconsequence of life. She transforms the discord between her vision and objective reality into enchanting songs. These songs become the very embodiment of the insubstantial spirit that continues to grow and transform, seeking to break free from the present but not knowing where to turn. By means of her writing, Woolf's ultimate purpose is to capture in so many words that pattern which is hidden "behind the cotton wool" of everyday life and through which all human beings are connected (SP 85).¹⁹ In her narrative space, where intensified subjective consciousness manifests itself in response to the world in which it is situated, the essential irony of *Being* and human intelligence (which, although based upon the bodily sensory input seeks to negate the body) become all the more salient. Near the end of her writing career, Woolf is aligned with a Socratic self-conscious ironic position in order to stand beyond the present moment, where she hopes for a more panoramic, reflexive view of the present.

However, the self can never completely escape the present, except by what Woolf has characterized as moments of being that allow one an occasional glimpse beyond the self and the present, while remaining all the time fully oneself and fully within the present. Woolf wants to crystallize these moments of being, as they are reflected out of the moments of non-being, into a work of poetic art capable of standing by itself. After a lifetime trying to attest to the reality of life through words, Woolf, by means of Mrs. Swithin, affirms: "We haven't the words – we haven't the words ... Behind the eyes; not on the lips" (BA 50). No human words and no human employment of words can possibly be definitive and arrive at truth in its totality. For, "we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself" (SP 85). Throbbing life itself is the poetry, the beauty, that Woolf hopes to enshrine.

¹⁹ "Sketch of the Past" *Moments of Being* (London: Pimlico, 1976). Abbreviated as *SP*

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