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Rethinking Epistemology Via Virginia Woolf's "Turn And Turn About" Method

The manner in which we argue with one another has remained rather constant since the ancient Greeks contemplated rhetoric. For too long human relations have been dominated by the Aristotelian/Classical model of argumentation, which emphasizes persuading one's audience to favor one side over the other. While I concede that the antiquated approach is fitting for certain rhetorical situations, I believe new models should be embraced in order to produce outcomes that are favorable for many parties rather than just one. Such a "winner-loser" standard perpetuates the notion that reality should only be seen in black and white, so to speak, when, in truth, its colors are various; in other words, in order to more constructively seek and spread knowledge, our practice of critical thinking should be guided not by reductive, binary models, but by ones that consider spectrums of perspectives and possibilities.

Virginia Woolf, in much of her nonfiction work, employs her "Turn and turn about" method, in which she puts forth assertions with the purpose then to undermine them, thereby offering a wider range of perspectives than a Classical rhetorician would through the Aristotelian method. Melba Cuddy-Keane describes the strategy: "Woolf's essays usually begin by posing some question or problem, which she then explores in relation to specific literary works, often pursuing different possible approaches in the course of a single essay" (133). Whereas the ancient Greeks' focus is solely on convincing the audience that they are right, Woolf's approach is characterized by equanimity and humility. The writings of philosophers, such as Plato, give the reader the impression that

(their) truth, or Truth, is finite; however, rather than entertain the illusion of a fixed, objective reality, the "Turn and turn about" method leaves us in a state of profound doubt, wherein we perceive reality as multiplicitous. Plato's dialectic is outdated in that it serves more so as a monologue with himself than a dialogue with others—similarly, patriarchal voices sustain monologues, which are, in turn, oppressive to marginalized groups as they are deterred from joining the conversation. In sum, I believe it is more constructive to work towards keeping conversations open, instead of attempting to close them down with narrow-minded, illusorily conclusive notions of "truth."

Before I delve into my analyses of different variations of Woolf's "Turn and turn about" method, I will briefly compare her strategy to those of other literary theorists. For instance, Woolf's practice can be likened to Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin's "Invitational Rhetoric." Aristotle, in his greatly influential work *Rhetoric,* defines rhetoric as "The capacity to understand the available means of persuasion in any given situation"; Foss and Griffin, however, propose that we shift our focus from persuasion and argumentation to understanding and negotiation. In their essay "Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal For An Invitational Rhetoric," they assert, "Primary among the feminist principles on which our proposed rhetoric is based is a commitment to the creation of relationships of equality and to the elimination of the dominance and elitism that characterize most human relationships" (4). Like Woolf, their aim is to "expand the array of communicative options" (5). Even if a rhetorician may disagree with certain points of view, Foss and Griffin—and Woolf, I would presume—hold that it is far more constructive to make concessions than to completely shut down opposing arguments.

Earlier I stated that I concede that the Classical mode of argumentation is appropriate in certain situations. For example, if an authoritative ideological party is committing genocide against a particular group of people, the exigence calls for immediate action; in other words, in this rhetorical situation, attempting to understand all possible points of view via peaceable discourse with someone or some group that wants to eradicate another group's existence may not be a plausible plan of action. But here arises an issue of cause and effect. It can be said that the genocide is a result of Classical argumentation, as one party has dominated the other. If humans are to forever conduct their relations solely through Classical argumentation, there will be no alleviation from the vicious cycle of reactionary rhetoric. Instead of waiting for something horrible to happen only to then clean up the mess, Foss and Griffin's "Invitational Rhetoric" and Woolf's "Turn and turn about" method attempt to get at the root of the matter and rethink how we, not necessarily argue, but converse and negotiate with one another.

In her book-length essay *Three Guineas,* Woolf responds to a man who has asked her to donate to a fund whose purpose is to prevent war. Foss and Griffin make the claim that the Classical mode of argumentation is inherently patriarchal; similarly, Woolf asserts that war is a product of male-dominated discourse. To illustrate women's transition from the private to the public sphere, Woolf uses the metaphor of a bridge:

> We are here on the bridge, to ask ourselves certain questions . . . The questions that we have to ask and to answer about that procession during this moment of transition are so important that they may well change the lives of all men and women for ever. For we have to ask ourselves, do we wish to join that procession, or don't we? . . . Where is it leading us, the procession of educated men? . . . But,

> you will object, you have no time to think; you have your battles to fight . . . [Women] have thought while they stirred the pot, while they rocked the cradle. It was thus that they won us the right to our brand-new sixpence. It falls us to now go on thinking; how are we to spend that sixpence? Think we must. (62-3)

Woolf's argument is that, by utilizing critical thinking skills, women have won the ability to enter the public sphere; but, now that they have such a freedom, they must contemplate whether or not they wish to join the "procession" that is governed by the precedent of reactionary rhetoric. Instead, Woolf insists, we should think in order to prevent wars from happening in the first place, and, as a result, there will be no battles for us to react to. If political leaders would prioritize understanding and negotiation over argument and confrontation, humanity might not have to subject itself to continual strife.

In her essay "Woolf And The Theory And Pedagogy Of Reading," Cuddy-Keane writes, "To have all people writing and reading would make for fully democratic participation, for a more flexible and hybrid art, and—I think she believed or at least hoped—for a more peaceful world" (117). If we can free ourselves from passive and/or oppressive models of thinking and learning, and moreover, embrace constructive ones, individuals will be more likely to achieve and practice free, independent thought. Similarly, in the chapter "Banking Vs. Problem Posing" of his book *Pedagogy Of The Oppressed,* Paulo Freire argues that educational institutions should discard with the "Banking" model, which stresses mechanical memorization, and, instead, embrace "Problem posing," which suggests we should always view sources of "knowledge" with critical lenses rather than simply accept them as truths. In other words, Freire is advocating for a shift from the lecture-based model of conducting class sessions to one that is based on discussion. He

suggests dismantling the traditional teacher-student hierarchy and replacing it with a model in which teachers and students interact on a level plane; teachers, according to Freire, should act as teacher-student and students as student-teachers so that discourse can be liberating and insightful rather than oppressive and misleading (59).

Moving forward, let us examine how Woolf's "Turn and turn about" method works in practice. In her essay "On Not Knowing Greek," Woolf begins by stating, "For it is vain and foolish to talk of Knowing Greek" (39), and she goes on to discuss the dissimilarities between Greek and English literature and the contexts from which they emerged, and how much is lost in our translations of their original texts; she questions why the English people value Greek literature so highly when its characters' lives and situations are so unrelatable to their own: "There is a cruelty in Greek tragedy which is quite unlike our English brutality" (42). Woolf commences her essay with a standpoint much like that of Freire: stop obsessing over old forms of knowledge and, instead, learn about present times and how to conduct oneself therein. Freire states, "They may perceive through their relations with reality that reality is really a *process,* undergoing constant transformation" (61). While Woolf starts by siding with the argument that knowledge is evolutionary rather than set in stone, she later concedes by providing reasoning for the Greeks' status of timelessness: "In spite of the labour and the difficulty it is this that draws us back and back to the Greeks; the stable, the permanent, the original human is to be found there" (44). When I say that Woolf's approach is characterized by equanimity and humility, what I mean is that she is not afraid to contradict herself. As the aim of her strategy is to illuminate multiple, various perspectives, it would be rather difficult not to contradict oneself. Cuddy-Keane describes

the trajectory of Woolf's argument: "The essay enacts a series of shifts, twists, and reversals that first serve to modify, then to question, and finally to undo the initial ordering" (139). If speakers subscribe wholly to one side and are too prideful or fearful to thoroughly consider any others, the representations of reality that they provide for their audiences will be flawed and misleading. Therefore, the employment of contradiction, such as Woolf exemplifies, is a constructive strategy.

The "Turn and turn about" method can be likened to Plato's dialectic. He structures his work as if the wise Socrates is in conversation with some (vaguely) intellectual other. In his "Allegory Of The Cave," for example, Socrates discusses the nature of knowledge with a character named Glaucon, whose replies to Socrates' insights are short and only serve to affirm the philosopher's wisdom: "Yes"; "True"; "No question"; "That is certain"; "Certainly"; etc (469-70). Plato's usage of the character Glaucon is rather hollow; in this regard, Plato's dialectic, at least in this example, is but a façade of a dialogue. Cuddy-Keane states, "Woolf objects to monologic prose because it forestalls and prohibits . . . negotiation. Literature's essential life, she argues, is curtailed and suppressed when discourse employs an authoritative, impersonal, didactic mode" (133). Although there is a blaring lack of counterclaims in the allegory, there is at least an attempt to demonstrate how knowledge is arrived at through discourse with others; so, while it would be more accurate to classify Plato's work as a monologue, he provides the groundwork for more effective forms of discourse. Woolf, through her imaginings of how different readers might respond to her claims, offers her audience more effective analyses of not one monolithic Truth, but many possible truths.

While Plato's allegory provides a clear conception of the dichotomy between knowledge and ignorance, Woolf questions the reductive quality of how he determines truths from falsities. It seems that Plato tends to write off many factors of life as untrue, or illusions, in favor of what he perceives as Truth. Woolf muses,

> Truth is various; truth comes to us in different disguises; it is not with the intellect alone that we perceive it . . . All this flows over the arguments of Plato—laughter and movement; people getting up and going out; the hour changing; tempers being lost; jokes cracked; the dawn rising . . . Truth is to be pursued with all our faculties. Are we to rule out the amusements, the tendernesses, the frivolities of friendship because we love truth? Will truth be quicker found because we stop our ears to music and drink no wine, and sleep instead of talking through the long winter's night? (51-2)

Who is to say what is true and untrue? By posing many potential realities and leaving her readers in a state of profound doubt, it is easier to accept her humble and human approach than it is to subscribe to a speaker whose position is characterized by imposing, god-like certainty. The nature of truth that Plato speaks of may have pertained to his way of life, but to generalize his "Truth" as a universal that applies to all walks of life is dangerously misleading.

Much of Woolf's work strives to dethrone authoritative entities from their illusory pedestals. Having lived in an oppressively patriarchal society that elevated members of particular gender and class, her writings work towards a leveling of hierarchy so that all voices of society, not just those of the dominant class and gender but also of marginalized peoples, may be included in influential discussions. In her essay "How Should One Read

A Book?" Woolf does not, contrary to what her title may suggest, provide her readers with a definitive answer to the posed question; instead, she encourages her readers not to be persuaded by the interpretations of renowned reviewers and critics—for they, too, are only human beings—but to read with an open mind. She begins her essay as such:

> In the first place, I want to emphasize the note of interrogation at the end of my title. Even if I could answer the question for myself, the answer would apply only to me and not to you. The only advice, indeed, that one person can give about reading is to take no advice, to follow your own instincts, to use your own reason, to come to your own conclusions. (281)

Woolf's style is revolutionary in that it challenges a long tradition of texts telling their readers what and what not to believe or subscribe to. To further illustrate my point, I liken the two approaches to religious ideologies: the Classical mode is much like Orthodox Christianity in that it strongly insists that people follow its teachings, or else they will be considered heathens; whereas the "Turn and turn about" method is like Buddhism, as it humbly asks people to consider its ideas, but encourages them to reject any, or all, that they do not agree with. Woolf's approach is conversational rather than didactic. Cuddy-Keane writes, "Woolf concentrates on the dialogic relation between reader and text, prompting the reader not simply to be receptive to the literary work but to engage in conversation with it" (Cuddy-Keane 132). Where Plato would have turned his questions to Glaucon, or a similar such character, Woolf turns to her readers, and, in so doing, she inserts them into the text. Instead of lecturing her audience, issuing answers at them, she discusses *with* them; she focuses on asking questions rather than providing answers so as to keep the conversation open.

In this "How Should One Read A Book?" the course of the "Turn and turn about" can be traced as such: the title poses its central question, Woolf then urges readers to make up their own minds about what they read, and next Woolf contradicts herself by suggesting how readers should read a book. The full potential experience of reading is often limited by readers' impulse to compare what they read to other texts; instead of reading a work for what it is, readers tend to read it for what it is *like.* To briefly harken back to "On Not Knowing Greek," one major difference that Woolf identifies between Greek and English literature is that the former, being that it had no predecessors to allude to, offers prototypes of human experience, whereas the latter is deeply steeped in intertextuality, or, as Woolf puts it, "the haze of associations" (55). In order to remedy such a hindering practice, Woolf recommends, "We must pass judgment upon these multitudinous impressions; we must make of these fleeting shapes one that is hard and lasting. But not directly. Wait for the dust of reading to settle; for the conflict and the questioning to die down" (291). The reason why Woolf insists that readers should wait and contemplate what they have read before making any hasty judgments is to ensure that those judgments are their own and not just regurgitated views of critics or reviewers. As Woolf values all voices, she wishes for readers to fully consider their interpretations of texts before putting them forth in the public sphere:

> We must remain readers; we shall not put on the further glory that belongs to those rare beings who are also critics. But still we have our responsibilities as readers and even our importance. The standards we raise and the judgments we pass steal into the air and become part of the atmosphere which writers breathe as they work. ("How Should One Read A Book?" 294)

This essay was published in the second series of her *Common Reader.* Her ideal "common reader" would read slowly, professionally, and for the love of books. To expand on Woolf's metaphor of the literary atmosphere, she elevates the status of the common reader by illuminating the fact that the views of readers do not merely dissipate in the ether, but actually affect their cultural climate and thus the writers who draw from that culture to produce their works. In Woolf's vision, critics and reviewers no longer dominate the arena of influence; the hierarchy is flattened. By drawing attention to the common readers' role and their reciprocal relationship with the writer, they may be motivated to be mindful and careful with what they put out into the atmosphere—if they should choose to accept Woolf's advice.

Woolf's call to action was directed mainly towards marginalized peoples, such as women and members of the working class, who would want to affect change in their society so that it would cater to them as well and not just middle and upper-class men; when a certain demographic is favored, everyone else suffers. In her essay "Why?" she questions why all types of human beings should not be included in conversations that greatly impact all of them:

> Why not create a new society founded on poverty and equality? Why not bring together people of all ages and both sexes and all shades of fame and obscurity so that they can talk, without mounting platforms or reading papers or wearing expensive clothes or eating expensive food? Would not such a society be worth, even as a form of education, all the papers on art and literature that have ever been read since the world began? Why not abolish prigs and prophets? Why not invent human intercourse? Why not try? (231)

In order to affect such positive change, Woolf, in *Three Guineas,* asserts that the most effective strategy is to write impersonal, disinterested literature. By "impersonal" she means that writing should not be driven by egotism; and by "disinterested" she did not mean indifferent or apathetic—rather, she advised against writing with a bias, as the product will most often be propagandistic. It may be argued that all writing is propagandistic on the grounds that all works are written from subjective angles and have certain messages to convey; however, an important distinction between propaganda and art must be established: the former attempts to narrow the minds of the audience with the purpose of persuading them to subscribe to their ideology, thereby profiting from their ignorance; whereas the latter works toward opening the minds of the audience to the various realities of the human condition.

Provided this distinction, it is crucial to draw attention to the danger of writing material that is overly subjective in regards to gender. In order to write texts that are characterized by inclusivity rather than exclusivity, it is necessary to offer readers both male and female perspectives so that one gender's values and principles are not prioritized over the other's. In her other, more popular, book-length essay *A Room Of One's Own,* Woolf warns, "It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly" (102). While many might argue that, in order to reform literary canons, it is imperative to include more female perspectives, Woolf's approach is marked by its foresight and levelheadedness. Her equanimity is displayed by her resistance to resort to the impulsive tactic of fighting fire with fire; she is aware that the inclusion of more gendered texts in literary canons would not solve the problem. Woolf concedes, "The blame for all this, if one is anxious to lay blame,

rests no more upon one sex than upon the other. All seducers and reformers are responsible" (102). To more effectively address the issue, she suggests that all writers, whether they are male or female, write in such a manner that they respectfully represent both genders' values rather than favor one or the other. Such a balance is required in order to extinguish the flames of combativeness between the genders and, moreover, to establish a relationship of camaraderie.

To further illustrate the unproductive nature of gendered texts, Woolf, in "An Essay In Criticism," critiques Hemingway's *Men Without Women:*

> It is undoubtedly true, if we are going to persevere in our attempt to reveal the processes of the critic's mind, that any emphasis laid upon sex is dangerous. Tell a man that this is a woman's book or a woman that this is a man's, and you have brought into play sympathies and antipathies which have nothing to do with art. The greatest writers lay no stress upon sex one way or the other. (89-90)

It is not surprising that Woolf chooses Hemingway to demonstrate her point. If one were to read his work, somehow having no background knowledge of his existence in and influence on literature, it would not be difficult to detect the author's gender, as it is awfully transparent provided his rough, terse style. Woolf points out, "It is not only that [male-centric writers] celebrate male virtues, enforce male values and describe the world of men; it is that the emotion with which these books are permeated is to a woman incomprehensible" (100). She notes that gendered texts tend to polarize their audiences; if texts are written by and for men, women will be less likely read them—the same is true if the gender situation were flipped. However, on a personal note, I would like to add that even I, as a male, have my qualms with Hemingway, and other male-centric writers,

because of their insistence on their masculinity. As a reader, I am more drawn to writers whose gender(s) is/are ambiguous. For example, when I was first read Flannery O'Connor's short stories, I could not detect any indication of gender. It was not until I saw a picture of her that I learned that she was a woman. I agree with Woolf when she declares,

> Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine. (97)

While writers like Hemingway, I admit, have produced great work, in order to move forward and constructively evolve the literary canon so that it is not dominated by patriarchal values, it is best that current and future writers do not replicate and perpetuate predominately male, or female, ideals in and through their work, but strive for the androgynous ideal. Marilyn R. Farwell claims, "Androgyny in a writer is defined . . . by the width of perception rather than by a single, universal mode of knowing" (435). Just as readers have a responsibility to provide constructive criticism, writers should publish work that is characterized by open as opposed to narrow-mindedness, offering readers, not a reductive system of binaries, but an expansive spectrum of perspectives, in order to maintain a productive reciprocity and a healthy literary atmosphere.

The central question that *A Room Of One's Own* attempts to answer is, How can women enter the public sphere and have female values and principles better represented in literature? While it is clear that Woolf's aim is the androgynous ideal, her approach is based on practicality in that she points out certain material, cultural, and psychological

impediments that women face in patriarchal societies. Now that Woolf has set out the goal writers should be working towards, the question remains, How do we attain it? The title of the book draws attention to one material aspect that is needed in order for women to support their writing careers and, furthermore, productively influence literature and criticism; the other aspect is money: "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction . . . Intellectual freedom depends on material things" (6, 106). Women were paid significantly less than men, so their chances of becoming successful writers, given Woolf's criteria, were slimmer. Being that most women of Woolf's time were dependent on their husband's income, their ability to create disinterested literature was severely hindered. Woolf's focus on materiality brings to light an unfortunate reality: whoever has the money, has the power. Fortunately, Woolf's income was independent from her husband Leonard's, so she was able to produce a great body of influential texts.

The cultural and psychological impediments women writers face, according to Woolf, are their lack of predecessors and the chauvinistic imposition of male superiority and female inferiority. Since there was little representation of women in history and literature before the 19th century, and because what little representation women had to look back to was distorted by male perception, there was a significant absence of tradition on which to build upon. In the second chapter of *A Room,* Woolf relates a narrative of her experience at a library; she was in search of faithful representations of women, but after perusing book after book after book, she resolved that what she discovered was not what she sought but the unfortunate lack of dependable accounts of women's experience. She reflects, "It seemed a pure waste of time to consult all those gentlemen who specialize in woman and her effect on whatever it may be—politics, children, wages, morality—numerous

and learned as they are. One might as well leave their books unopened" (32). Simply put, we cannot rely on portrayals of women and their experience if they have not been written by them; moreover, we should be wary of such depictions when they are written by men. Woolf notes how many male authors stress women's supposed inferiority in order to (pathetically) inflate their own sense of superiority. She contends, "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man as twice its natural size." (37). In order to escape the bonds of male representation—or, rather, distortion—of women, Woolf encourages women writers to write so as to begin their own tradition and ultimately influence literary canons. Through the use of author Mary Carmichael's example, in which Woolf critiques her many flaws but also praises her attempt to pave the way for other female authors, Woolf advises that it will take much time and effort for a significant women's tradition to develop and produce great literature: "Giver her another hundred years . . . give her a room of her own and five hundred a year, let her speak her mind and leave out half that she now puts in, and she will write a better book one of these days" (93). Through the use of the "Turn and turn about" method, the perception she arrives at of Carmichael is multifaceted and provides a humble and hopeful vision of the future for women writers.

The effectiveness of "Turn and turn about method" is dependent on the speaker's ability to offer readers 1. A multiplicity of perspectives and communicative options; 2. Constructive concessions and contradictions; and 3. A state of profound doubt. It is far more important to work towards changing *how* we think than *what.* It is crucial that we get to the source in order to affect beneficial results for all and not just for some. If we can

recalibrate the manner in which we perceive and analyze various realities and discuss them with various members of society, our thoughts that issue from such constructive discourse will be of a much healthier quality than Classical argumentation could ever produce. As readers and writers, we should utilize Woolf's method to challenge oppressive, authoritative societal structures and practices in order to envision and materialize a freer society based not on hierarchy and exclusivity but inclusivity, humility, and equanimity.

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