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KNOWING AND NOT KNOWING IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S READING OF THE RUSSIANS

In her 1925 essay "Modern Fiction," Virginia Woolf describes the then current vogue of Russian writers: "The most elementary remarks upon modern English fiction can hardly avoid some mention of the Russian influence, and if the Russians are mentioned one runs the risk of feeling that to write of any fiction save theirs is a waste of time."¹ Russian writers occupied an elevated place in Woolf's fictional hierarchy. In her essays and diary entries, Woolf praised the unparalleled achievement of Dostoevsky, claiming that "Out of Shakespeare there is no more exciting reading,"² calling him "the greatest of novelists"³ and "the greatest writer ever born";⁴ she similarly lauded Tolstoy as "the greatest of all novelists,"⁵ a writer who "can sweep the widest horizons" and also "seize upon one old apple-woman and her basket";⁶ and Chekhov was for her a subtle, saintly writer primarily interested in "the soul's relation to goodness."⁷ Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov alternatively served for Woolf as ideals of aesthetic boldness and moral humility, of chaotic energy and chastened form.

Despite Woolf's fears, however, critics have not lost themselves in finding and following the many connective tissues between Russian literature and the

¹ Woolf, "Modern Fiction," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume Four, 1925-1929*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1994), 163.

² Woolf, "The Russian Point of View," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume Four, 1925-1929*, 186.

³ Woolf, "English Prose," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume Three, 1919-1924*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 174.

⁴ Kaye, Peter, *Dostoevsky and English Modernism: 1900-1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 68.

⁵ Woolf, "The Russian Point of View," 187.

⁶ Woolf, "On Re-reading Novels," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume Three, 1919-1924*, 343.

⁷ Woolf, "The Russian Point of View," 185.

modernist novel. In fact, the link between the Russians and Woolf has been almost wholly overlooked. What little work has been done has focused on individual authors, such as Peter Kaye's insightful chapter on Dostoevsky and Woolf in *Dostoevsky and English Modernism*, rather than on a general Russian influence. The work has also been descriptive rather than interpretive, summarizing and finding trends in Woolf's essays on Russian literature without analyzing how these critical readings reflect upon Woolf's own fiction.⁸

In this paper, I will look at Woolf's most compelling piece on Russian literature, her 1925 "The Russian Point of View." I will not consider the validity of Woolf's readings of Russian literature, but rather what these readings can tell us about Woolf's own aesthetic and philosophical concerns. More specifically, I will explore how Woolf's characterization of Russian writers involves a key epistemological question: whether one can ever know what is in another person's mind.

Throughout her fiction, Woolf swung from revelatory confidence to complete dejection in addressing this question, moving from Hewet's description of the ultimate impermeableness of individuals in *The Voyage Out* to the faith of Clarissa Dalloway in merging with other minds in her "transcendental theory." Woolf's readings of Russian literature involved a similar dialectic. The imaginative sympathy of Russian writers hinted at the possibility of interpersonal understanding, but the foreignness of these writers made them ultimately unknowable to British readers; experience with suffering enabled Russians to feel themselves into others, but material comfort prevented the British from similar self-projection. Like her own fiction, Woolf's readings of the Russians prompted both assurance and skepticism in the ability to pierce the souls of others.

⁸ One important exception is Emily Dalgarno's "A British *War and Peace*? Virginia Woolf Reads Tolstoy," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 50.1 (2004): 129-150. Dalgarno practices genetic criticism, looking at different drafts of *The Years* and analyzing how Woolf's revisions synch with her growing interest in Tolstoy's fiction and historiography. Roberta Rubenstein also has an interesting analysis of Woolf's treatment of Russians in *Orlando* in her essay "Orlando: Virginia Woolf's Improvisations on a Russian Theme," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* IX.2 (1973): 166-169.

“*A sharp angle of vision*”: Woolf’s Critical Views on the Russians

“The Russian Point of View” gathers together and expands upon ideas, images, and even whole sentences from previous reviews, including Woolf’s 1917 “More Dostoevsky,” the 1919 “Modern Novels,” and the 1923 “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown.” Woolf’s engagement with Russian literature was longstanding and important for intellectual, aesthetic, and financial reasons. Woolf’s first recorded encounter with Dostoevsky came in 1909 on her honeymoon with Leonard Woolf; she would continue to write about him in diary entries, letters, and reviews until her death.⁹ Woolf’s Hogarth Press published a collection of Chekhov’s letters in 1921. Woolf herself wrote reviews of *The Cherry Orchard* and other Chekhov plays for *TLS* and defended Chekhov’s artistry against the criticism of J.M. Murray in conversations with Leonard and T.S. Eliot.¹⁰ Woolf read Tolstoy for the first time in 1910, an experience she described as “like touching an exposed electric wire.”¹¹ Hogarth Press published Maxim Gorky’s *Reminiscences of Tolstoy* in 1920, Countess Sophie’s *Tolstoy’s Autobiography* in 1922, A.B. Goldenveiser’s *Talks with Tolstoy* in 1923, *The Love Letters of Tolstoy* in 1923, and *On Socialism* in 1936. Woolf also reviewed Tolstoy’s *The Cossacks* in 1917, and immediately compared Joyce’s *Ulysses* to *War and Peace* upon its publication. Many of the themes of these earlier reviews – Tolstoy’s simplicity and empathetic majesty, Dostoevsky’s keen probings into tortured psyches, Chekhov’s strange but affecting displacement of plot and character – are put into their most condensed but considered form in “The Russian Point of View.”

Woolf opens this essay by foregrounding the problem of intercultural knowledge. If a British reader must struggle to understand even a transplanted American writer like Henry James, Woolf asks, then what chance does this same reader have of truly comprehending a Russian novelist? Language is the largest and most obvious obstacle. In reading translation, we read a text that is

⁹ Peter Kaye argues that Woolf grew increasingly disillusioned with Dostoevsky’s apparent artlessness, his lack of form and artistic discipline. Her letters and reviews do show this trend; her own fictional project, however, complicates such a picture. As Molly Hite indicates, for instance, Woolf’s description of the artlessness of Dostoevsky, his reliance upon rambling, decontextualized soliloquies, bears a striking resemblance to the form of *The Waves*. Hite, “Notes to *The Waves*,” in *The Waves* (New York: Harvest Books, 2006), 257.

¹⁰ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume 2, 1920-1924*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 153.

¹¹ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume 5, 1936-1941*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 273.

fundamentally different from the original; we “have judged a whole literature stripped of its style.”¹² For a writer so cognizant of the effects of style – the impact of syntactical choices, the piercing nature of metaphoric language – translation must necessarily involve loss: “The great Russian writers are like men deprived by an earthquake or a railway accident not only of all their clothes, but also of something subtler and more important – their manners, the idiosyncrasies of their characters.” As Woolf notes, “Of all those who feasted upon Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Tchegov during the past twenty years, not more than one or two perhaps have been able to read in Russian.”¹³

For Woolf, however, our difficulty in understanding Russian literature goes beyond these linguistic barriers; it strikes at the very heart of cultural difference. She writes, “A special acuteness and detachment, a sharp angle of vision the foreigner will often achieve; but not that absence of self-consciousness, that ease and fellowship and sense of common values which make for intimacy, and sanity, and the quick give and take of familiar intercourse.”¹⁴ If foreignness always implies a gap in understanding, then the distance between the British and the Russians is particularly daunting. Woolf writes that where the British have trouble identifying with the French, for instance, “we must admit graver doubts whether...the English can understand Russian literature.”¹⁵ In Woolf’s view, Russians do not just differ in language but in nature. In an earlier review of Tolstoy, Woolf wrote that, in reading *The Cossacks*, we inevitably “end by thinking again of the unlikeness between ourselves and the Russians”;¹⁶ in a 1919 review, Woolf writes of the delightful but impossible exercise of imagining Dostoevsky inhabiting “one’s own age, shore, or country village,” how inconceivable it is to place the volatile Russian writer on the “vicarage lawn” of England.¹⁷ It is as if the Russians and the English are distinct species, as if they inhabit different epistemological universes.

¹² “The Russian Point of View,” 182.

¹³ Woolf herself was fascinated by the Russian language, teaching herself so much as to co-translate two chapters from Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed* and three Tolstoy-related books with S.S. Koteliansky. The fact remains, however, that both Woolf and her contemporaries, as she says in “The Russian Point of View,” “had to depend, blindly and implicitly, upon the work of translators” (182).

¹⁴ Woolf, “The Russian Point of View,” 182.

¹⁵ Woolf, “The Russian Point of View,” 181.

¹⁶ Woolf, “Tolstoy’s ‘The Cossacks,’” in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume Two, 1912-1918*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 79.

¹⁷ Woolf, “Dostoevsky in Cranford,” in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume Three, 1919-1924*, 113.

For a writer so familiar with the effortless conversation at Bloomsbury, such a lack of footing was exhilarating. Woolf's essay serves as an interesting take on the relation between the sharp angle of vision enabled by foreignness and modernist art in general. The modernists were largely an exiled group, oftentimes self-imposed: Henry James left the sordid United States for the culture of Europe; Joyce left Dublin for the international flavor of Paris and Zurich; Pound left Pennsylvania for England, Paris, and Italy; the list goes on. The modernists were also a group that concerned themselves with self-consciousness in all its forms: the mind considering itself, language reflecting upon its material nature, art questioning its very assumptions and foundations. For Woolf, reading foreign literatures similarly involves self-consciousness, a new and oblique angle of vision, an unease with basic assumptions about language and culture. Discussing modernism's simultaneous need to clearly represent social reality and obliquely express emotion and subjectivity, Geoff Gilbert analyzes Woolf's views on Dostoevsky: "The social reality of the sign could not have a clearer figuration than in the vision of something which is lost in translation, something which is affective because it cannot be transparently read."¹⁸ The something that is lost in translation, the something that cannot be transparently read, is a wonderful description of the modernist novel. One can see why Woolf and others were so attracted to other literatures and cultures generally and Russians specifically: by definition, in reading these writers they were experiencing an estranged relation to the world and its words.¹⁹

Beyond this disconnect between English and Russian selves, the most fascinating aspect and the defining characteristic of Russian literature for Woolf is its sympathy, its capacity to bridge disconnects between people and imagine the interior lives of others. In "The Russian Point of View," Woolf quotes a short story by Elena Militsina as a general dictum for all Russian literature: "Learn to make yourselves akin to people. I would even like to add: make yourself indispensable to them. But let this sympathy be not with the mind – for it is easy

¹⁸ Gilbert, Geoff. *Before Modernism Was: Modern History and the Constituencies of Writing, 1900-1930* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 10; 11.

¹⁹ As Steven Marks argues, there also appears an intimate connection between the Russian experience of political and social instability and the experience of rupture that characterizes modernism generally: "As sensitive witnesses to the upheaval brought to Russia by the rapidity of its modernizing thrust, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy were far more conscious of a break with the past than were contemporary western Europeans, for whom the process was somewhat more gradual." Marks, *How Russia Shaped the Modern World: From Art to Anti-Semitism, Ballet to Bolshevism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 59.

with the mind – but with the heart.”²⁰ This genius for sympathy hints at a focus upon the soul rather than the body, psychology rather than material reality. Woolf writes, “In reading Tchekhov we find ourselves repeating the word ‘soul’ again and again. It sprinkles his pages...Indeed, it is the soul that is the chief character in Russian fiction.”²¹

In Woolf’s vision, this sympathetic genius, this capacity to imagine oneself into other souls, runs throughout Russian fiction. There is an ability in Chekhov to imagine himself into aristocrats and “old drunkards”; writing in 1917, she similarly says that Tolstoy’s sympathy engages “the educated Russian and the peasant equally”;²² Dostoevsky makes convincing the most highly wrought, chaotic of minds. In an August 16, 1922 diary entry, Woolf compares Joyce’s *Ulysses* with Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*:

And Tom [T.S. Eliot], great Tom, thinks this on par with War & Peace! An illiterate, underbred book it seems to me: the book of a self taught working man, & we all know how distressing they are, how egotistic, insistent, raw, striking, & ultimately nauseating. When you can have the cooked flesh, why have the raw?²³

Where the fiction of the modernist Joyce is solipsistic in its project, the work of the Russians is selfless; where Joyce’s pyrotechnics are crude and overbearing, Tolstoy’s craft is by implication finished and humane.

Interestingly, Woolf’s explanation for why Russians can practice this imaginative, even spiritual virtue largely derives from social and economic realities. Woolf writes, “The simplicity, the absence of effort, the assumption that in a world bursting with misery the chief call upon us is to understand our fellow-suffers...this is the cloud which broods above the whole of Russian literature.”²⁴ Russia is imagined as a world permeated by a kind of idyllic, purifying suffering, where harshness of circumstance leads to delicacy of spirit, where simplified social relations lead to grand emotional capacities. The complexity of English life, Woolf writes, does not allow for such virtues. In England, luxury persists instead of humanizing, “common suffering”; sardonic wit is privileged over “honesty”; and the rigidity of the English class system prevents the spiritual equality present

²⁰ Woolf, “The Russian Point of View,” 183.

²¹ Woolf, “The Russian Point of View,” 185.

²² Woolf, “Tolstoy’s ‘The Cossacks,’” 79.

²³ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume 2, 1920-1924*, 188-189.

²⁴ Woolf, “The Russian Point of View,” 183.

in Russian literature, where everyone, whether “noble or simple, a tramp or a great lady,” is equally possessed of a soul worth exploring.²⁵

This dialectic between alternatively gaining access to and running up against the opacity of another’s consciousness is described as the page-by-page experience of reading Russian writers. Describing the bewilderment involved in reading a short story by Chekhov, Woolf writes, “We have rather the feeling that we have overrun our signals; or it is as if a tune had stopped short without the expected cords to close it.”²⁶ It is only with repeated readings and an extended exposure that we can “hold the parts together,” can “discover where the emphasis in these strange stories rightly comes.” In accounting for Dostoevsky’s fictional world of bubbling passions, Woolf describes how we are abruptly thrust into a hall full of characters: “But where are we? Surely it is the part of a novelist to inform us whether we are in an hotel, a flat, or hired lodging. Nobody thinks of explaining.”²⁷ It is only with continued reading and redoubled efforts that “our confusion slowly settles”; “a rope is flung to us; we catch hold of a soliloquy,” and we begin to comprehend setting, character and their relations. Finally, we “receiv[e] such revelations as we are wont to get only from the press of life at its fullest.”

The shift between clarity and confusion is dizzying in its implications: Woolf cannot initially understand Dostoevsky’s novels but comes to comprehend plot and theme through repeated effort; even after this habituating process, however, she cannot truly experience Dostoevsky’s fiction because of his foreignness, a foreignness that itself enables him to fully imagine and sympathize with his characters. The door to epistemological assurance is opened up only to be closed; vistas towards understanding are glimpsed and then lost.

Knowing Others in Woolf’s Fiction

This engagement with the possibility of knowing others runs not only through “The Russian Point of View” but is also an integral part of Woolf’s own fiction. Lisa Zunshine claims that the attribution of states of mind to others is a key component of both reading fiction and living in a social world.²⁸ Regarding the fictional attribution of states of mind, we can say that there are essentially two epistemological positions in which British modernists locate themselves: either

²⁵ Woolf, “The Russian Point of View,” 183; 185.

²⁶ Woolf, “The Russian Point of View,” 184.

²⁷ Woolf, “The Russian Point of View,” 186. Note how accurate a description this is of *The Wave*. See Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* for a lengthier discussion of Dostoevsky’s polyvocality.

²⁸ Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2006), 6.

they believe that one can know *everything* that is in another mind, or they believe that one can know *nothing* that is in another mind. In her novels, Woolf shuttled between these poles.²⁹

Woolf's very first novel, *The Voyage Out*, explicitly thematizes these issues. Throughout the text, characters approach one another in the hopes of sudden revelation and dramatic understanding, but are consistently frustrated in their efforts. While discussing the nature of happiness, for instance, Hirst declares to Helen that "there is an abyss" between them because women are "infinitely simpler" than men; Richard Dalloway laments to Rachel that they "are solitary icebergs" and can never truly communicate; even Hewet and Hirst, two men with similarly privileged cultural backgrounds, experience the frustrating inability to understand one another, as Hewet emphatically declares, "No two people are in the least the same. Take me and you now."³⁰ Gender, culture, the mere fact of individual consciousness – all appear to make communication and understanding an ungraspable ideal. As Hewet wonders, "Why was it that relations between different people were so unsatisfactory, so fragmentary, so hazardous...."³¹

Interspersed throughout the text, however, there are also moments of complete accord, instances in which characters seem to (temporarily) merge into a transcendental unity. There is a wordless bond between Richard and Clarissa Dalloway ("They both laughed, thinking of the same things, so that there was no need to compare their impressions") and an ease of conversation between Rachel and Hewet ("She realized with a great sense of comfort how easily she could talk to Hewet, those thorns or ragged corners which tear the surface of some relationships being smoothed away").³² As the recently engaged Rachel and Hewet lie drowsily next to each other, Rachel thinks, "Although they sat so close together, they had ceased to be little separate bodies; they had ceased to struggle and desire one another. There seemed to be peace between them."³³ These privileged moments of communion are almost always wordless; it is as if language itself obfuscates interiority, as if it is only once characters have moved beyond

²⁹ In certain moments in Lawrence, during sexual consummation for instance, there appears a complete breaking down of boundaries, a uniting of interior, even subconscious forces; in Ford or Conrad, on the other hand, there is the sense that we can never construct a true narrative because we can never know what is going on in other minds.

³⁰ Woolf, *The Voyage Out* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1948), 207; 75; 107.

³¹ Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 194.

³² Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 50; 212.

³³ Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 315.

words that they can experience empathy, even triumphant interpersonal understanding.

These soaring moments are, of course, soon deflated: despite his bond to Clarissa, Richard looks outside his marriage for sexual passion, and Rachel dies soon after this peaceful mingling of selves. When discussing the ideal of “unity,” of each person and part of society partaking of the others, Rachel thinks:

There was a pause, which did not come on Rachel’s side from any lack of things to say; as usual she could not say them, and was further confused by the fact that the time for talking probably ran short. She was haunted by absurd jumbled ideas – how, if one went back far enough, everything perhaps was intelligible; everything was in common; for the mammoths who pastured in the fields of Richmond High Street had turned into paving stones and boxes full of ribbon, and her aunts.³⁴

There is a vague inkling of unity that is almost immediately rejected as ineffable and perhaps unfounded in reality. Woolf refuses to settle either for harmony or isolation.

All of Woolf’s novels seem to oscillate between this confidence and despair in the capacity to inhabit other minds. *Jacob’s Room* is an attempt, from multiple perspectives, to understand the mind and character of a young man.³⁵ As he sits in the sun with Clara, Bonamy suddenly realizes the love they both share for Jacob: “The virginity of Clara’s soul appeared to him candid; the depths unknown; and he would have brought out Jacob’s name had he not begun to feel positively certain that Clara loved him – and could do nothing whatever.” Depths that were unknown are brought to the surface and fully absorbed in a moment of quiet communion; it is feeling, and not words, that Bonamy can be sure of. At these moments, “the leather curtain of the heart flaps wide” and true essences are revealed.³⁶

³⁴ Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 64; 67. This sense of organic unity reminds one of Bloom’s ruminations in the “Calypso” episode of *Ulysses*, where matter is digested, excreted, and reborn in a process of recirculation that connects the entire universe.

³⁵ Erich Auerbach famously describes Woolf’s characterization of Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*: she tries to “approach her from many sides as closely as human possibilities and expression can succeed in doing” (536). The same statement could be used to describe the multiperspectival treatment of Jacob.

³⁶ Woolf, *Jacob’s Room* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1950), 152; 66.

These instances can palliate but never completely heal the nagging ill at the center of the novel: Jacob's puzzling identity. In one of the most explicit authorial intrusions in Woolf's fiction, she writes, "But how far was he a mere bumpkin? How far was Jacob Flanders at the age of twenty-six a stupid fellow? It is no use trying to sum people up."³⁷ The entire novel is an unsuccessful attempt to bridge the chasm between persons. We are left in the end with Betty Flanders holding up a pair of Jacob's shoes, objects that are unspeaking and inscrutable, Jacob's elusive presence ultimately signified by impenetrable materiality.

Perhaps Woolf's most explicit meditation upon these issues comes in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Daydreaming about a perfect future life with Daisy, Peter Walsh thinks, "He never knew what people thought...He became absorbed; he became busied with his own concerns; now surly, now gay; dependent on women, moody, less and less able (so he thought as he shaved) to understand why Clarissa couldn't simply find him a lodging and be nice to Daisy." As Milly Brush observes Richard Dalloway's physical movements, she wonders, "What was he thinking?" Musing on her husband's concern for international relations, Clarissa posits that there is "a solitude; even between husband and wife a gulf; and that one must respect...."³⁸

As in her other novels, though, these moments of isolation are balanced by moments of unity. Clarissa remembers her past with Peter, how "they always had this queer power of communicating without words." In one of the novel's many explorations of the past, Peter remembers riding on an omnibus with Clarissa as they discuss the problem of knowing other people. They both try "to explain the feeling they had of dissatisfaction; not knowing other people; not being known." Clarissa then hazards a "transcendental theory": "Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to, some woman in the street, some man behind a counter – even trees, or barns." This merging of selves where Clarissa's identity weaves its way into others and only finds itself "completed" in the process is Woolf's most explicit enactment of the sympathy and confidence in knowing others that she so identifies with Russian literature.³⁹

Even this moment, though, is necessarily transient. It is, after all, a remembered theory, an idea that itself is couched within qualifying terms. The theory, Peter thinks, "allowed her to believe, or say that she believed" in interpersonal harmony; he is incapable of determining Clarissa's past sincerity.

³⁷ Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, 154.

³⁸ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1981), 158; 107; 120.

³⁹ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 60; 152; 153. It is no coincidence that Zunshine chooses *Mrs. Dalloway* as a test case for using the principles from Theory of Mind to analyze literature; it is a novel rife with the hazarding of guesses at other's intentions and thoughts.

The passage ends with the thought of some core self “haunting certain places after death...perhaps – perhaps,” the ellipsis and repeated “perhaps” giving a note of uncertainty even to this visionary moment. This youthful fantasy about the world has in fact been largely proven false by mature experience. While Clarissa looks through her window at the elderly lady in the apartment next door, she thinks how this isolation of each person within the walls of their own interiority defines existence: “And the supreme mystery which Kilman might say she had solved, or Peter might say he had solved, but Clarissa didn’t believe either of them had the ghost of an idea of solving, was simply this: here was one room; there another. Did religion solve that, or love?”⁴⁰ For Clarissa, the answer is clear: religion and love, spirituality and erotic experience, cannot bridge the rift that divides us from each other.

“Russian names were impossible”

This implicit connection between Russian literature and the challenge of knowing other people is made explicit in two scenes within Woolf’s fiction that contain direct allusions to Russian fiction. In the dinner scene of “The Window” in *To the Lighthouse*, Mr. Ramsay and Minta discuss how long literary masters can expect to be remembered. Paul Rayley, exhilarated and terrified by his earlier beachside proposal, tries to enter the conversation by mentioning that “he had read some of Tolstoi at school.”⁴¹ He struggles to recall the book’s title. Mrs. Ramsay, ever understanding, explains away this embarrassment by proclaiming that “Russian names were impossible.” Following this apology based upon Russian foreignness, Paul remembers the name Vronsky, and Mrs. Ramsay offers the answer to the riddle: Paul has read *Anna Karenina*. The success is short lived, though: “that did not take them very far; books were not in their line.” What is in their line, however, what concerns both Paul and Mrs. Ramsay more than Russian literature, is the imagining of what *others* are thinking and feeling. Mrs. Ramsay immediately considers what Charles Tansley will think and say next, and the passage ends with another instance of imagining another’s imaginings, with Paul now the subject of Mrs. Ramsay’s consideration: “Now he was thinking, not about himself or about Tolstoi, but whether she was cold, whether she felt a draught, whether she would like a pear.”

Appropriately enough, we are left in a dizzying web of embeddedness. The final sentence appears to represent Paul’s thoughts, but it is more likely a

⁴⁰ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 127.

⁴¹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1989), 108.

representation of Mrs. Ramsay representing Paul's thoughts, what Zunshine calls a "metarepresentation."⁴² We can never be sure whether this is a privileged moment of perception or a fanciful projection, whether Mrs. Ramsay has cut through the finery and fripperies of dinner and pierced into Paul's mind, or whether she has simply imagined Paul into the place of the tender gentleman, recently engaged and still performing in a chivalrous manner.

Similarly, in a scene towards the end of *The Waves*, Bernard discusses the difficulty of pinning a person's character down. Once again, as the ability to know others is questioned, a figure of Russian literature emerges: "The tree alone resisted our eternal flux. For I changed and changed; was Hamlet, was Shelley, was the hero, whose name I now forget, of a novel by Dostoevsky; was for a whole term, incredibly, Napoleon; but was Byron chiefly."⁴³ Again, we see the foreignness of Russian literature highlighted: Bernard can remember English poets, English literary characters, even figures from world history, but cannot remember the name of Dostoevsky's character.

In these short, seemingly insignificant passages, we see the threads of Woolf's thoughts on Russian literature come together: its importance commensurate with that of Shakespeare or Shelley, its strangeness to any English reader, and its intimate but ultimately indecipherable connection to imagining oneself into others. For Woolf, the experience of reading Russian literature approximated the exhilarations and frustrations of imagining others. Woolf's reading of Russian fiction and her own novels teach us that, in human relations, we are inevitably bound both to know and not to know.

⁴² Zunshine, 4.

⁴³ Woolf, *The Waves*, 184.

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