

Urban Spaces, Fragmented Consciousness, and Indecipherable Meaning in *Mrs Dalloway*

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* begins with the image of opening doors, immediately connecting the spatial with the temporal, as the middle-aged Clarissa's voyage out into the streets of Westminster on a bright morning in mid-June 1923 invokes the parallel time-frame in which her eighteen-year-old self opened the French windows at Bourton on a similar June day in 1889, plunging into the fresh country air. Inside her house, the rooms are being prepared for her evening party, with the doors taken off their hinges, while outside she walks the city streets to Mulberry's florist shop, where she will buy flowers to round off the preparations. The vivid spatial image of swinging hinges, and of thresholds crossed, is inseparable from the temporal process of remembering; in fact, the process of crossing and re-crossing thresholds works on both levels, as Clarissa crosses Victoria Street, walking through St James's Park into Piccadilly and along Bond Street, moving between scenes of urban bustle with a brief rural interlude, just as she anticipates Peter Walsh's imminent arrival at her party by recalling certain hurtful phrases he had uttered at Bourton. Her mind moves with her body from a feeling of satisfied elation at the early summer morning to the sombre remembrance of past experience and its associated feelings of dissatisfaction, and back to the present moment, as she pushes through the swing doors of the florist shop.

These opening pages seem to offer a condensed instance of Woolf's experimental style and interest in memory, consciousness and the fluid formation of individual identity. Clarissa's walk to buy the flowers draws together reflections on all the main characters in the novel (Peter Walsh, Sally Seton, Hugh Whitbread, Doris Kilman, Clarissa's husband Richard, and her daughter Elizabeth); its undulating

spatial and temporal perspectives, “like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave”,¹ provide an early key to what Susan Dick terms its “radial form”.² Critics invariably cite Woolf’s own spatial images for her method of characterization in the novel: she referred in her diary to the “caves” she dug behind her characters, which would “connect” in the “present moment”,³ and the “tunnelling process, by which I tell the past by instalments, as I have need of it”.⁴ Clarissa’s imaginative expansions and contractions operate like the widening leaden circles of sound emitted by Big Ben, radiating out from a monolithic but unreal named centre and dissolving in the air. The intense moments and fragmentary phrases which return to haunt her like the half-hourly chimes of the clock lend structure to the novel and to our sense of “Mrs. Dalloway ... Mrs. Richard Dalloway” (11).

In recent years, however, the interconnections between the spatial and the temporal in Woolf’s work have received renewed attention, addressing an overbalance of interest in Woolf’s feminism, modernist aesthetics and writing practise with an appreciation of several important social and historical contexts to her works.⁵ This new research is producing fresh insights into Woolf’s relation to (for instance) technology.⁶ Unfortunately, in discussing the author’s engagement with urban spaces, there is still a noticeable tendency in critics to re-inscribe her feminist concerns onto the cityscape, viewing its inhibiting structures as mere patriarchal impositions, easily subverted by an intuitive and sympathetic feminine counter-culture. For example, in her reading of *Mrs Dalloway*, Youngjoo Son (drawing on an earlier essay by Masami Usui) uses the symbolism of the chimes of St Margaret’s shadowing those of Big Ben to describe an anti-authoritarian utopian undercurrent in the novel.⁷ Likewise, in her recent study of *Women, Privacy and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century British Writing*, Wendy Gan has argued that “the public space of the city” in this period could

offer middle-class women “a refuge of public privacy away from the oppressiveness of home”, with its “enforced solitude” and “fixity of identity”.⁸ Applying this insight in a brief reading of *Mrs Dalloway*, Gan argues that Clarissa Dalloway displays “a deep self-involvement when walking in the city”, and she views this self-involvement as a liberating form of privacy, allowing Clarissa to remain both “insular and undisturbed”. For Gan, the “urban mantle of privacy ... allows Clarissa to be herself”,⁹ or at least to experience “the multiplication and fragmentation of selves”, while home is a place of “solidity and banality”.¹⁰

The essentially feminist arguments of both Son and Gan draw on Woolf’s later, 1927 essay entitled ‘Street Haunting: A London Adventure’, where the city is described as providing a release for women from the fixed identities of home.¹¹ However, in reading Clarissa’s experience of streets and domestic spaces through the later insights of her creator, they overlook the many critical hints which effectively distance Woolf from her bourgeois protagonist. Thus, while Gan identifies in Peter Walsh’s rude awakening from his fantasies about the beautiful female stranger in the street a critical engagement with the figure of the flâneur, or a parody of “the romance of the *passante*”,¹² she views Clarissa’s ruminative interiority not as a source of potential error in need of an external check, but of a subtle, fragmentary subjective freedom and self-realization.

It is possible, however, to embrace Gan’s broader point about the forms of privacy afforded women in the modern metropolis while also recognizing that the potential it offered for momentary self-realization entailed for both genders a deceptive blurring of the boundaries between private fantasies and social realities, or rather the subjective self and the social power structures within which that self operates. Applying this lens to the novel, we might see it not as a celebration of

female self-realization on the city streets, but as an exploration of those external structures which underpin the new urban subjectivism, nurturing yet also checking our utopian flights of imagination.

In this essay I want to dwell on those moments when the ornate radial structure of *Mrs Dalloway* gives way to instances of disruption: when the deliberately constructed caves and tunnels are intersected by reminders of a troubling social reality, or a darkness which lies outside the light shed by the “luminous halo” of consciousness.¹³ By focusing on the anti-utopian elements in the novel, I hope to show that it consistently offsets its visionary moments through its concentration on the modern city’s mysterious power structures. Instances of subjective connection are thrown into question by the novel’s engagement with dominant spatial tropes of division and hierarchy.

The first significant moment of disruption in the novel occurs shortly after Clarissa enters the florist shop, as she chooses flowers with the assistant, Miss Pym, still bothered by her reflections on Doris Kilman:

As she began to go with Miss Pym from jar to jar, choosing, nonsense, nonsense, she said to herself, more and more gently, as if this beauty, this scent, this colour, and Miss Pym liking her, trusting her, were a wave which she let flow over her and surmount that hatred, that monster, surmount it all; and it lifted her up and up when – oh! A pistol shot in the street outside! (14)

Clarissa’s dreamy crescendo is suddenly halted by the noise of a backfiring car in the street. In a symphonic instant, the eyes of all the people in the street turn to the vehicle, as voices speculate on the identity of its important passenger: “Was it the

Prince of Wales's, the Queen's, the Prime Minister's?" (15). They cannot grasp the identity of the person within because a blind has been drawn in the car window. The pistol shot is the first of many motifs connecting Clarissa's situation to that of Septimus Warren Smith, the traumatized young war veteran struggling to come to terms with the death of his officer-friend, Evans.

This interruptive moment in the novel leads to a shift of focus from Clarissa to Septimus, as he struggles to cross the street. We are suddenly made aware of a dominant source of power in the city, embodied in the gliding of the car through Piccadilly, or the movement of the aeroplane in the sky over Buckingham Palace, its smoke-stream spelling out the name of some consumer product, equally mysterious to the amassed onlookers (perhaps "Glaxo", "Kreemo", or "toffee"). The disturbing image of monarchic or parliamentary prerogative, or of the powers of commerce and advertising, "[boring] ominously into the ears of the crowd" (21) makes us aware of something outside the range of Clarissa's thoughts, but which underpins her dreaminess. Through the disruptive motorized intermediary of the car and the plane, we are reminded of the structure of the government her husband serves, and the disturbing momentum of a society which sent Septimus to the Western Front. Early in the novel there is a telling reference to "discreet old dowagers ... shooting out in their motor cars on errands of mystery" (5). Sir William Bradshaw, the Harley Street doctor who comes to embody the coercive power of the British Establishment, is later identified through the motor car parked outside his house: "low, powerful, grey with plain initials interlocked on the panel". The car allows Bradshaw to travel "sixty miles or more down into the country" (103), visiting the patients at his nursing home in Surrey: an image of stealth in mobility which the novel sinisterly connects to British missionary zeal in "the heat and sands of India, the mud and swamp of Africa" (109).

According to Anna Snaith, Woolf's multi-perspectival treatment of the backfiring car playfully subverts the symbol of power by stripping it of a name and dispersing it among various subjective observers. Snaith argues that the scene is constructed "around a vacant centre": "The voice of authority is silenced, left without identity".¹⁴ We might doubt, however, whether the force of this deconstructive gesture really manages to undermine the objective but mysterious structures of power in the novel. The inhabitant of the car *deliberately* obscures his or her identity by drawing the blind, and the subjective responses of the onlookers arguably reveal not a subversive irreverence toward the car but a sinister kind of enthrallment. The car's timely reminder of the innate but compelling power structures in English society and the wider British Empire relativizes Clarissa's solemn and exhilarating feeling of being "invisible; unseen; unknown" among the crowds of people in Bond Street (11). If Clarissa is condemned to be "Mrs. Richard Dalloway", throwing parties for her husband's wealthy and influential friends, then how much worse to be "Mrs. Septimus Warren Smith", transplanted from Milan to London and witnessing the mental collapse of her shell-shocked husband, subjected to the stifling attentions of Holmes and Bradshaw; or to be born "Doris Kiehlman" and to have to change one's name, being turned away from teaching jobs because of the anti-German feelings in war-time and the war's immediate aftermath?

Another of the disruptive moments occurs when Clarissa returns home to find a note on the telephone pad in which Lady Bruton invites Richard Dalloway to lunch later that day. The note, which subtly contravenes unwritten social codes in its exclusion of Richard's wife, makes Clarissa aware of her age, and it leads her to reflect with a brooding obsessiveness on the ebbing away of life's glamour and passion: "the shock of Lady Bruton asking Richard to lunch without her made the

moment in which she had stood shiver, as a plant on the river-bed feels the shock of a passing oar and shivers: so she rocked: so she shivered” (32). The mood informs her perception of her surroundings:

Like a nun withdrawing, or a child exploring a tower, she went, upstairs, paused at the window, came to the bathroom. There was the green linoleum and a tap dripping.

There was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room. Women must put off their rich apparel. At midday they must disrobe. She pierced the pincushion and laid her feathered yellow hat on the bed. The sheets were clean, tight stretched in a broad white band from side to side. Narrower and narrower would her bed be. (33-4)

The mobile imagery of the passage follows her movements as she walks up the stairs, passing the window and the bathroom before arriving at the bedroom. Her eye pounces on the detail of the dripping tap as if hungry for depressive symbols. The idea of bathing generates the metaphor of disrobing, shedding richness and glamour, while she perceives her bed as tight and narrow (a prelude to reflections on her earlier attraction to Sally Seton, and her sexless marriage to Richard). The episode ends with her insight that what she lacks is not beauty or intelligence, but “something central which permeated; something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman, or of women together” (34). Although she can only “dimly perceive” this truth, it receives some support from Peter Walsh’s later reflection that “[t]here was always something cold in Clarissa” (53).

It is not a question of Clarissa being solipsistic; indeed, her mind frequently seems full of the words of others, chastising her for perceived weaknesses. Rather, her mind is only conscious of a small social round, and the novel is able to indicate the

extent of her ignorance through its shifts of emphasis. An ironic light is later shed on Clarissa's depressive response to her exclusion from Lady Bruton's invitation to lunch, since Lady Bruton's invitation turns out to be motivated not by a simple social instinct at all, but by a desire to advance her own political schemes. She invites Richard and Hugh Whitbread to lunch in order that they might advise her and help her to write a letter to the *Times* in support of her "project for emigrating young people of both sexes born of respectable parents and setting them up with a fair prospect of doing well in Canada" (119). Like Sir William Bradshaw, Lady Millicent Bruton is one of those privileged few who aim to "propagate their views" (109). Once again, the drift of Clarissa's thoughts is set against a powerful and disturbing political structure which she inhabits, but whose significance she cannot grasp.

The novel is structurally preoccupied with the mind's powerlessness when confronted by changing social habits and historical circumstances: it is concerned with the mind's attempts to accommodate or counteract them. We might think here of Peter Walsh's detailed reflection on the liberalizing changes to English society during the five years when he was away in India, 1918-1923 (78-9), and his readiness to embrace the change in sexual attitudes, or of Septimus and his continual recourse to his pre-war attachment to his literature tutor, Miss Isabel Pole, and his lost friendship with Evans. While Peter, who rather likes "great motor-cars" and has a "turn for mechanics" (53), seems able, in spite of his continued mourning for Clarissa, to adapt to change, both Septimus and Clarissa invest their identities in places or periods from which they are separated by decisive events (the Great War and marriage), and they respond to the unreality of the present time by inhabiting powerful imaginative worlds. So, while Peter responds to his tearful meeting with Clarissa by giving in to his feeling of displacement and following a woman "across Trafalgar Square in the

direction of the Haymarket”, surrendering “only of course for an hour or so” to a youthful longing for excitement (57), Septimus and Clarissa seem intent on counteracting the changed conditions around them. Septimus’s hallucinations show his writerly imagination running riot, throwing together vivid scenes, poetic phrases and prophet insights in a pathetic attempt to find pattern and meaning in things. The extent of Septimus’s mental alienation from the pre-war world is realized in a suggestive image of his altered reading habits: in the first flush of his love for literature, Shakespeare had proved a source of “intoxication”, whereas in the present time his appreciation has “shrivelled” and he now detects “the message hidden in the beauty of the words”, feeling that Shakespeare “loathed humanity – the putting on of clothes, the getting of children, the sordidity of the mouth and the belly!” (97). An uncritical immersion in literature gives way to a paranoid projection of his inner chaos.

Clarissa’s privileged social position in the novel belies her similar emotional attachment to the past, and her commitment to a dreamy escapism. The 1890s time-frame represents for Clarissa a passionate, if conflictual, existence before the “catastrophe” of marriage and her move to the city. The cataclysmic change is again realized through a description of the changes in her reading habits. At Bourton, she and Sally Seton had read Plato, Morris and Shelley, flirting with the forbidden fruit of socialist thought, while in the present Clarissa reads Baron Marbot’s *Memoirs*, detailing the retreat of Napoleon’s armies from Russia (a fitting symbol of her own retreat into the past, away from the implications of her current life and up to her isolated attic room). She is forced to reflect that “she scarcely read a book now” (9); the drift of her life seems to be reflected in the title of one of the books she views in Hatchards’ bookshop in Piccadilly (“Jorrocks’ *Jaunts and Jollities*” [10]), or in the

copies of *Tatler* strewn around White's Club in St James's Street. The motor car, aeroplane and telephone which at different times disturb Clarissa's chains of thought in the novel, bringing mystification or unwarranted depression, suggest the extent of her mental displacement from the knowable and secure world of her late Victorian youth to the Georgian world of her middle age. Not only have manners and morals changed dramatically over that period of three decades and more, but the sense of space has decreased as modern means of travel and communication have led to an acceleration in the pace of life. In Bourton, Richard Dalloway rode a bicycle, daily life was structured by "letters, scenes, telegrams" (70), and the most important social interactions happened in secret in the vegetable garden or by the fountain; by contrast, London in June 1923 is characterized by "the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging ... the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead" (4). We might add to this list the green trumpet gramophone which even the Warren Smiths can afford to own (155) and the motorized ambulance, which Peter Walsh considers "one of the triumphs of civilization" (165). In what the text terms "this late age of the world's experience" (10), Clarissa "never wrote a letter" and Peter Walsh only writes letters which are "dry sticks" (7).

The paradigmatic modern experience is one of immersion in the moment: "to her it was absolutely absorbing; all this; the cabs passing ... what she loved was this, here, now, in front of her; the fat lady in the cab" (9). The polyphonic white noise of the capital serves to obscure its power networks and communicative structures: a fact encapsulated in jarring juxtapositions of the private and the public ("The mothers of Pimlico gave suck to their young. Messages were passing from the Fleet to the Admiralty" [7]). Although Clarissa experiences a feeling of elation and freedom

through her immersion in the city streets, the price of this elation is precisely the loss of the more knowable and graspable social world of her youth. Sally Seton's acts of transgression – walking naked across a corridor to fetch a sponge; smoking cigars in her bedroom; raising the spectre of pre-marital pregnancy over dinner – only have meaning and allure in a world where everyone knows the unwritten codes (like Ellie Henderson's sense that skirts should not be tight, nor fall “well above the ankles” [186]). Sally's passionate defence of women's rights in the face of the chauvinistic Hugh Whitbread is briskly contextualized by Peter Walsh, who remembers “an argument one Sunday morning at Bourton about women's rights (that antediluvian topic)” (80). Clarissa's psychological adherence to anachronistic codes is subtly revealed in the intensity of her response to Lady Bruton's telephone message: she is emotionally bound to earlier forms of behaviour, even while she enjoys the superficial freedoms of the modern metropolis.

The novel continually emphasizes this historical fragmentation in Clarissa's consciousness, and her fundamental inability to grasp her modern social world, or to respond to it in an appropriate fashion. The historical chasm separating youth from middle age, or Bourton from Westminster, is realized spatially in the figure of those London parks which the characters cross in the course of their travels through the city. Parks operate in the novel like tunnels: they are liminal spaces connecting characters to each other, and connecting individuals to their past experiences. As Peter Walsh enters Regent's Park, he immediately has recourse to his childhood: “odd, he thought, how the thought of childhood keeps coming back to me” (60). He falls asleep on a bench, only to awake with a start and recall in extraordinary detail “Bourton that summer, early in the 'nineties, when he was so passionately in love with Clarissa” (64). The extent of his temporal displacement is emphasized by his amazement at the

long summer evening (177): although Daylight Saving Time had first been implemented in Britain on 21 May 1916, since Peter left for India after the war, this is the first time he has witnessed its effects on civilian life in England. When Clarissa enters St James's Park at the start of the novel, she particularly notes the special feeling on crossing this spatial threshold: "But how strange, on entering the Park, the silence; the mist; the hum" (5). An oasis of rural continuity in a city riven by change, the park acts on Clarissa's senses just as Proust's madeleine had acted on the narrator of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, conjuring up "scene after scene at Bourton" (7).

Parks are potentially classless spaces in the novel, offering the opportunity for chance meetings between characters from different social constellations. Yet the novel offers a powerful spatial embodiment of the "separate spheres" ethos. Clarissa happily speaks with Hugh Whitbread shortly after she enters St James's Park, but she registers no other presence; on the other hand, Peter Walsh, who must approach Hugh or Richard Dalloway to secure a position, sees Septimus and Rezia, but does not talk to them. For a character like Elizabeth Dalloway, who was born into the wealthy and powerful Westminster set, but is starting to question its limits, the map of London signifies different permissible and proscribed zones. Westminster, her home, is associated with public service and "of course, there was in the Dalloway family the tradition of public service". By contrast, the Strand and Fleet Street, into which she rebelliously ventures on the omnibus, stand for business and private enterprise. She enters this space with some trepidation:

She looked up Fleet Street. She walked just a little way towards St. Paul's, shyly, like some one penetrating on tiptoe, exploring a strange house by night with a candle, on edge lest the owner should suddenly fling wide his bedroom door and ask her

business, nor did she dare wander off into queer alleys, tempting by-streets, any more than in a strange house open doors which might be bedroom doors, or sitting-room doors, or lead straight to the larder. For no Dalloways came down the Strand daily; she was a pioneer, a stray, venturing, trusting. (150-1)

The imagery of the excerpt reveals how Elizabeth perceives her trespass into this part of London as slightly indecent. She is “penetrating on tiptoe”: tentatively experimenting with a male role by considering a career as “either a farmer or a doctor” (150).¹⁵ These careers carry with them, of course, a disreputable association with lower bodily functions, and with bedroom visits.¹⁶ By straying upstairs to the bedroom or downstairs to the larder she will be traversing those binding codes which keep servants out of the sitting room and masters out of the pantry. In her tightly circumscribed approach to social rebellion she reveals just how much she has internalized her mother’s values: as Lady Sally Rosseter, née Seton, notes, “Clarissa was a snob at heart – one had to admit it, a snob” (208).

If the parks act as regulated contact zones in the novel, then the rigid vertical organization of English society is realized in the depiction of staircases, which also facilitate connections, but only in reference to hierarchical structures. E. M. Forster exploits the symbolic value of staircases when he refers in Chapter Six of *Howards End* to the “narrow rich staircase” of Wickham Place, which represents the upwardly-mobile cultural life inhabited by the Schlegels and their circle, excluding Leonard Bast and the clerk class: “They had all passed up that narrow, rich staircase at Wickham Place, to some ample room, whither he would never follow them, not if he read for ten hours a day”.¹⁷ In *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa is described through Peter Walsh’s critical focalization as occupying the same elevated promontory: “How he

scolded her! How they argued! She would marry a Prime Minister and stand at the top of a staircase” (7-8). The symbolism of high and low places operates throughout the novel. In parallel scenes, Clarissa shouts over the banisters and down the staircase to the retreating figures of Peter Walsh, and Elizabeth with Doris Kilman. Both Walsh and Kilman symbolically occupy lower social positions in the novel. However, while Clarissa acts on impulse to remind Peter of “my party to-night!” (52), she asks Elizabeth to recall “our party to-night” (138), her altered pronoun deliberately excluding “the odious Kilman” (139). Peter Walsh may be a somewhat disreputable outsider, but he still commands the respect of his fellow guests in the dining room of his London hotel, with “his way of looking at the menu, of pointing his forefinger to a particular wine, of hitching himself up to the table, of addressing himself seriously, not gluttonously to dinner” (175). By contrast, in Regent’s Park, Peter thinks of Septimus Warren Smith as merely “the young man in the overcoat” (77). In the climactic scene at the Bloomsbury lodging house of the Warren Smiths, Dr Holmes brushes Rezia aside and climbs the stairs, while Septimus throws himself out of the window and down onto his landlady’s railings. While Clarissa twice connects with a lady who looks across at her from an adjacent house, Septimus is stared at by a man “coming down the staircase” (164).

The novel’s use of hierarchical spatial tropes should cause us to question the nature and significance of Clarissa’s final feeling of “connection” with Septimus after she hears news of his suicide through Lady Bradshaw: “She felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself” (204). If Clarissa and Septimus are aesthetically and thematically drawn together through the juxtaposition of their separate plotlines and similar meditations on the problems of sex and marriage, they are also separated by a less conscious, but equally structural, emphasis on the

inequities of class and deep-seated social divisions. In one of Clarissa's flashbacks, she recalls riding on the top of an omnibus with Peter Walsh, reflecting on her dissatisfaction at her ignorance of the lives of the strangers walking below: "It was unsatisfactory, they agreed, how little one knew people ... Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to, some women in the street, some man behind a counter – even trees, or barns" (167). The progression in her thinking from street women to a shopkeeper to inanimate objects says much about the extent of Clarissa's imaginative connection with the working people around her. The affinities she dimly senses here seem odd in more ways than one. We might recall Clarissa's dismissive focalized reference early in the novel to "the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps (drink their downfall)" (4), or remember the fact that her daughter "had never thought about the poor" (143). Anna Snaith refers to *Mrs Dalloway* as "anti-authoritarian because all narratives are valid. There is no hierarchy of meaning",¹⁸ but it is difficult to see how the perspectives of Edgar J. Watkiss (with his loud and humorous reference to "The Proime Minister's kyar" [15]) or "Moll Pratt with her flowers on the pavement" (20), or the anonymous "men without occupation" (21) outside Buckingham Palace, can have any serious claim on our sympathy or attention.

While we recognize the gravity of Clarissa's epiphanic imaginative connection with Septimus at her party, then, we should also realize how this moment cuts against the powerful tropes of separation in the text. Reading through the complex, and in places obscure, train of Clarissa's solitary thoughts in the little room "where the Prime Minister had gone with Lady Bruton" (201), we need to balance her perceptive insights against the background of her earlier insensitivity. Clarissa can "see" Septimus's fall from the window, "with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a

suffocation of blackness” (202), and she can intuit his plight at the hands of Sir William Bradshaw, but to what extent should we believe in her ability to understand his situation and interpret his actions?¹⁹ How should we interpret the announcement that “She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living” (204)?

These questions lead us to the central issue we must confront in assessing the political implications of *Mrs Dalloway*. How are we to understand the character of Clarissa Dalloway? If we accept Clarissa’s inability to “see life steadily and see it whole”,²⁰ to what degree can she command our sympathies in the novel? Critics have puzzled over this question since the novel’s publication in 1925,²¹ and the ambiguity of Clarissa’s presentation has been reflected in different ways in much of the subsequent criticism. Some uncertainty in the text’s treatment of its main character is suggested by comments made by Woolf herself shortly after its composition. She claimed to find Clarissa “in some way tinselly”, and declared “some distaste” for her.²² At one point we are directly informed, in a sentence which seems to merge focalization and authorial verdict, that her eighteen-year-old self “knew nothing about sex – nothing about social problems” (36). The statement seems just as applicable to Clarissa at the age of fifty one. She cannot decide whether her husband, in his committee, is debating the condition of Armenians or Albanians,²³ but the novel alerts us to the importance of that distinction by showing us the edges of her perceptions. As Trudi Tate has suggested, Clarissa’s ignorance of political (and other) matters should trouble feminist readers, since her portrayal in the text is clearly ambivalent: Woolf is “simultaneously sympathetic and satiric”: “The text constructs [Clarissa Dalloway] quite explicitly as someone with whom we identify *and* whom we are forced to judge.

If we fail to address both aspects of her function, then we miss much of the text's political force".²⁴

In conclusion, it may be worthwhile thinking of Clarissa Dalloway as akin to Tiresias, the blind seer in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, who "although a mere spectator ... is yet the most important personage ... uniting all the rest".²⁵ Like Tiresias, Clarissa "[throbs] between two lives"²⁶ in her weary marital frigidity and her idealistic yearning for the young Sally Seton; she brings all the characters together at the party, and she unites the two plots through her identification with Septimus. Clarissa is a blind seer in a more significance sense, too, since the novel is at pains to identify not only her moments of insight, but also the moments of snobbishness or insensitivity, and instances when her vision is obscured, or when the meaning of something eludes her. Clarissa is not, of course, alone in seeing the world partially, or projecting her own fantasies onto the world around her, but as the novel's central consciousness, and the sympathetic representative of a waning conservative elite,²⁷ we are liable to afford her thoughts and utterances an authority which none of the other characters can claim. The novel's political content cannot be separated from the ambiguous nature of its central character and her mediating consciousness. Indeed, her relativizing potential might be said to redeem the novel's problematic formal insistence on the "doubling" of Clarissa and Septimus,²⁸ emphasizing the conflict between aesthetic cohesion and social division played out in its pages. To reduce the novel to a demonstration of subversive feminist utopianism is to overlook its troubling, and unresolved, engagement with both sympathy and complacency, insight and ignorance, rebellion and conservatism.

¹ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* [1925] (London: Penguin, 1992), 3. Further references to *Mrs Dalloway* will be to this edition; they will be indicated in parentheses in the main text of the essay.

² Susan Dick, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), 38.

³ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. II: 1920-1924*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell, assisted by Andrew McNeillie (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978), 263.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁵ See, in particular, the essays in Anna Snaith and Michael H. Whitworth, ed. *Locating Woolf: The Politics of Space and Place* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007).

⁶ See, for example, Leena Kore Schröder's 'Reflections in a Motor Car': Virginia Woolf's Phenomenological Relations of Time and Space', and Jane Lewty's 'Virginia Woolf and the Synapses of Radio', in *Locating Woolf*, 131-47 and 148-63 respectively, and Pamela L. Caughie, ed. *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2000).

⁷ See Youngjoo Son, *Here and Now: The Politics of Social Space in D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 183-5, and Masami Usui, 'The Female Victims of the War in *Mrs Dalloway*', in Mark Hussey, ed. *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality and Myth* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 151-63.

⁸ Wendy Gan, *Women, Privacy and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century British Writing* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), 17.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 58-9.

¹¹ Virginia Woolf, 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure', in *Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol. IV: 1925-28*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: The Hogarth Press, 1994), 480-91.

¹² Wendy Gan, *Women, Privacy and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century British Writing*, 54.

¹³ The phrase is used by Woolf in the essay 'Modern Fiction'. *Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol. IV: 1925-28*, 160.

¹⁴ Anna Snaith, *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), 73-4.

¹⁵ We might compare Elizabeth's suggestive language here to that of her mother, when she tries to imagine "what men felt" for women: "It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores!" (34-5).

¹⁶ Cf. D. H. Lawrence's *The Lost Girl* (1920), in which Alvina Houghton's decision to train as a maternity nurse induces outrage in her father: "I can't understand that any young girl of any—any upbringing, any upbringing whatever, should want to choose such a—such an—occupation. I can't understand it". *The Lost Girl*, ed. John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 30.

¹⁷ E. M. Forster, *Howards End* [1910] (London: Edward Arnold, 1960), 58.

¹⁸ Anna Snaith, *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations*, 76.

¹⁹ At least one contemporary reviewer of the novel, P. C. Kennedy in the *New Statesman*, 6 June 1925, found Clarissa's imaginative connection with Septimus at the party unconvincing: "the artificial link is purely redundant, purely improbable, purely

pointless”. Robin Majumdar and Allen McLaurin, ed. *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 165.

²⁰ E. M. Forster, *Howards End*, 58.

²¹ Lytton Strachey was among the first readers of the novel to note a “discrepancy” in Woolf’s handling of Clarissa Dalloway. In her journal entry for 18 June 1925, Woolf reports his response: “he thinks she is disagreeable & limited, but that I alternately laugh at her, & cover her, very remarkably, with myself”. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. III: 1925-1930*, ed. Nigel Nicolson, assisted by Joanne Trautmann (London: The Hogarth Press, 1980), 32.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ See Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 131.

²⁴ Trudi Tate, ‘Mrs Dalloway and the Armenian Question’, *Textual Practice*, 8.3 (1994), 470, 479.

²⁵ This is Eliot’s own description of Tiresias in his ‘Notes on *The Waste Land*’. See T. S. Eliot, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 70.

²⁶ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, line 218 (in ‘III. The Fire Sermon’). See *ibid.*, 59.

²⁷ In his groundbreaking study of the historical contexts to Woolf’s fiction, Alex Zwerdling argues that *Mrs Dalloway* criticizes a dying old order in England in the post-War years, and the decline of political conservatism; the novel strategically employs Clarissa as its central consciousness, since she inhabits that stymied culture (to her detriment), while also seeing its limitations and flaws. Zwerdling suggests that Clarissa is a divided character, combining the unsympathetic core values of old order figures like Hugh Whitbread or Millicent Bruton with the empathetic qualities of outsiders like Sally Seton and Peter Walsh. See Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (London: University of California Press, 1986), 120-43.

²⁸ Woolf described Septimus as Clarissa’s “double” in her introduction to the 1928 American Modern Library edition of *Mrs Dalloway*. Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (New York: The Modern Library, 1928), vi.

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