“An Embrace in Death”

Psychic Resistance of the Symbolic Order as Freedom in *Mrs. Dalloway*

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As Virginia Woolf’s 1925 novel weaves toward its climax at Clarissa Dalloway’s party, it moves through the minds of its many characters, forming a shifting web of connections between their psyches. In the hours leading up to the gathering, Clarissa’s past lover, Peter Walsh, reminisces on his relationship with Clarissa, remembering her fluid, abounding personality and transcendental theories about the world. He hears her words echoing in his mind: “our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death…perhaps—perhaps” (153). Clarissa’s conceptualization of the world as a young woman consummately depicts her multilayered character within the novel. She occupies the figure of the upper class wife, society woman, and hostess, while simultaneously experiencing her identity as stretching far beyond these confines to brush against and inhabit other beings and spaces. As suggested in Peter’s memory of her words, the connections she inhabits are not logical or organized, but rather are enacted by the energies and drives of her body existing and interacting freely with the world around her. The novel crafts Clarissa’s character through the course of one day, portraying the events that lead up to the party she hosts that evening. As the novel dips into other character’s subjectivities, it threads into its fabric the story of Septimus, a war veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, whose shifting existence mirrors Clarissa’s as it expands out of social delineations. Through these interwoven plot lines, Mrs. Dalloway explores the interactions between the social order and the spaces that exist outside of it, specifically attending to how these forces shape the character’s conceptions of themselves in relationship to the world. The novel creates tension between the Symbolic organization of time, space, and bodies into a violently regimented order, and the
semiotic drives that disrupt these hierarchies, allowing for possibilities of freedom, interpersonal connections, and erotic experiences.

During Clarissa’s morning visit to Miss Pym’s flower shop in preparation for her party, a sound resembling a gunshot brings the city to a standstill. Shocked and curious, the inhabitants of downtown London peer through shop windows and gather on street corners to glimpse the motorcar responsible for the explosion. As the text traces the car’s path through the streets, the narration dives in and out of the consciousnesses of the groups and individuals it passes. Each character believes the car carries some member of royalty, yet this figure symbolizes something drastically different to each person according to their position within society. Clarissa thinks the car must be carrying the Queen, and as it drives past her, “she wore a look of extreme dignity” and “stiffened a little; so she would stand at the top of the stairs” (17). She envisions the Queen is “going to some hospital” or “opening some bazaar” (17), imagining her as a grand hostess, the woman responsible for unifying the country through charitable social events. In response, Clarissa’s own role as a socialite and hostess within England’s governing classes are reflected back to her, and she embodies this identity through her physical change in expression and posture. As the car continues, it passes “Tall men, men of robust physique, well-dressed men with their tail-coats and their white slips and their hair raked back” (18), and “At once they stood even straighter, and removed their hands, and seemed ready to attend their Sovereign, if need be, to the cannon’s mouth, as their ancestors had done before them” (18). To these upper class men, the car symbolizes their duty to their country, their government, and their ancestry. Their identity as military men is physically manifested in the change in their posture, which establishes them as defenders of their country.
“Shawled Moll Pratt,” on the other hand, “an old Irishwoman,” was sure it was the Prince of Wales in the car and “wished the dear boy well.” For Moll, the car symbolizes her loyalty to her nation, which she wishes to display by throwing flowers, but is stopped by the sight of the constable (18-19). She is positioned as proud but marginalized in her Irish nationality, illustrating the imperialistic politics of the British empire and her location within them. The crowd of poor people outside the gates of the palace are similarly placed within a particular political and social location. For them, the car induces thoughts of the “heavenly life divinely bestowed on kings” (19). Their distant reverence for royalty constitutes their subjectivities as lower class citizens, for whom the governing class exists only as a far off fantasy. As the motor car progresses through the streets of London, it serves as an example of the Lacanian Symbolic: it signifies something particular to the social position of each individual it encounters, reaffirming their identity in relationship to the rest of society.

By depicting the thoughts of various characters and passersby in this way throughout the course of the novel, *Mrs. Dalloway* demonstrates the process through which characters form their subjectivities within the novel’s social structure. Ben Wang uses the term “symbolic network of power” to refer to the symbols and signifiers that carry meaning about social position and work to organize society throughout the novel. In his essay “I on the Run: Crisis of Identity in *Mrs. Dalloway,*” Wang draws on Lacan’s definition of the Symbolic order, which he explains “consists of images, symbols icons, representations, myths, and discourse that envelope the conscious as well as unconscious life of the individual, and on which the individual depends for structuration of the psyche and constitution of her subjectivity” (Wang, 178).¹ Lacan

¹ Throughout this paper, the term Symbolic order will be used as according to Lacan’s definition. Lacan ascribes to the post-structuralist understanding of the signifier as being defined by exclusion and distinction. Thus, the signifier is assigned to the signified by society, but the object itself that it signifies cannot be captured in language. Further, Lacan believes children are born into the Symbolic order and define themselves as individuals through it. It is an
understands the Symbolic order as a network of signifiers with socially ascribed meaning through which people come to identify as individuals and social beings. In recognizing their relationship to a symbol, an individual is placed in a certain position relative to the rest of the social order, establishing their identity as a member of society. In their daily experiences, their position in is constantly re-established through the network of symbols they interact with, constituting them as a member of the social order and a distinct self.

The motorcar exemplifies this process, constituting those it passes in their particular subjectivity within the organization of society and in relationship to the state. It also unites all individuals in their shared nationality. As the car drives away:

something had happened. Something so trifling in single instances that no mathematical instrument, though capable of transmitting shocks in China, could register the vibration; yet in its fulness rather formidable and in its common appeal emotional; for in all the hat shops and tailors’ shops strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of the Empire. (18)

The car here signifies the nation, constructing citizenship within the Symbolic order in all those who recognize it. Upon seeing the car, each person is reminded of their loyalty to their empire and united to those around them in militaristic nationalism. The grief and loss harbored in England’s inhabitants following World War I is also brought to the surface, which constitutes each person not only in their individual social positions, but also in their shared relationship to the state. In revealing this connection, the passage also displays a transcendent emotional drive that extends beyond the grasp of the Symbolic. In spite of the extensive tools and instruments that society has created to organize the natural world into symbolically marked units that can be understood in relationship to the social order, there is no signifier able to encapsulate the feeling silently communicated between strangers after the passing of the car. In refusing to be defined organization of relations that exists before them, and as they come to inhabit it they learn to define themselves as distinct from the world around them.
within the organizational structure of society, this moment of interpersonal connection signals a realm of experience that exists outside the limitations of the social order.

Woolf’s novel works throughout to draw out the tension between the organization of the social structure and such moments in which it is disrupted. Spaces in which the boundaries of linear time and space are broken, allowing characters to form their subjectivities outside the Symbolic order, can be understood through Julia Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic. Kristeva’s essay “Revolution in Poetic Language” defines the semiotic as “not only the facilitation and the structuring disposition of drives, but also the so-called primary processes which displace and condense both energies and their inscription” (93). She explains that drives “are ‘energy’ charges as well as ‘psychical’ marks,” which she likens “only to vocal or kinetic rhythm” (94). Kristeva terms the combination of these drives the “chora,” and she establishes that the chora “can never be definitely positioned,” “precedes the and underlies figuration and speculation,” and is “not yet unified in an ordered whole” (94). Because the subject in the semiotic evades constitution within the Symbolic, the boundaries of physical shape, spatial location, and social position are not delineated. When the subject is constituted in the Symbolic order through the introduction of language, it enters “a realm of position,” during which the subject gains “spatial intuition” (99-101). Spatial intuition refers to gaining an understanding of the self in relationship to world as a separate being. The Symbolic creates distance and erects boundaries between the body and the surrounding world that define its physical location and position. Wang adds that the process of subject formation occurs continually through interactions between the

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2 Kristeva believes that the drives of the semiotic “connect and orient the body to the mother” before the entrance of the father, who brings with him the symbolic structure of language, through which the baby is constituted as a subject (95). Kristeva’s semiotic is comparable to Lacan’s space of the ‘imaginary’ or the ‘mirror phase’ that exists prior to the entrance of the father. Like Kristeva, Lacan believes that with the entrance of father the imaginary is pushed into the unconscious, and that the conscious becomes the realm of the Symbolic.

3 Kristeva believes that this occurs when the infant is separated from the mother’s body by the entrance of the father and the Symbolic order. She sees language as the structure that organizes the child into the Symbolic order.
Symbolic and semiotic. He recognizes that though the Symbolic order constantly strives to establish subjectivity, no character is “foreclosed in the structure of language and constituted once and for all” (178), adding that the process of subject formation is “a dynamic and unstable process involving both the imaginary and the symbolic, the unconscious and the conscious” (178). Thus, the subject is constantly being formed and reformed through both the symbolic and the semiotic processes. The subject is not stable, but in a constant state of flux.

Kristeva argues that language carries the Symbolic order in its connotations and references. Though the semiotic exists around and beneath it, it is generally obscured. However, “when poetic language…transgresses grammatical rules, the positioning of the symbolic…finds itself subverted” which allows this type of language to “dissolve not only the denotive function but also the specifically thetic function of the positioning of the subject” (109). Kristeva contends that when grammatical structure is broken, the Symbolic order fails to be upheld, interfering in the process of constituting the subject through its position. In doing so, the grammatical breaks “prevent the imposition of the thetic from hiding the semiotic processes that produce it” (110), allowing the drives of energy to be expressed, unordered by the divisions of the Symbolic. Drawing on Kristeva’s work is extremely useful in understanding the way Mrs. Dalloway oscillates between moments in which the world is organized symbolically, and those in which temporal and spatial organizations disappear. In these spaces, the disruption of linguistic order allows the semiotic to be revealed, creating moments in which the world and the subjectivities of its inhabitants can be conceived of outside the Symbolic structure.

As Peter Walsh strolls through London, his experience of the city is interrupted by a moment of the semiotic. After calling on Clarissa, he encounters an old woman outside of the
train station singing for money. Her song dislodges the Symbolic organization of the city and its inhabitants, creating a displaced and fluid understanding of the metropolitan space:

A sound interrupted him; a frail quivering sound, a voice bubbling up without direction, vigour, beginning or end, running weakly and shirlly and with an absence of all human meaning into ee um fah um so / foo swee too eem oo--/ the voice of no age or sex, the voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth; which issues, just opposite Regent’s Park Tube station from a tall quivering shape, like a funnel, like a rusty pump. (80-81)

This song exists in the semiotic, allowing the unordered drives of time, space, bodies, and the earth to flow into one another. The singer’s voice defies categorization, escaping social demarcations of linearity, gender, and age that the Symbolic divides individuals into. She cannot be fit into social conceptions of temporality: “Through all ages—when the pavement was grass, when it was swamp, through the age of tusk and mammoth, through the age of silent sunrise, the battered woman…stood singing of love” (81). The singer and her existence are removed from the linear constructs of time, abolishing the segmentation of time into past and present. The depiction of her body as an ancient spring removes the physical boundary between body and earth, which mels her flesh into an extension of the ground that carries her voice upwards. Unlike those constituted by the symbol of the motor car, her identity is not fixed, divided, or organized by society; rather, it is created by the floating drives of the semiotic. Her song becomes a physical expression of these drives, described as “soaking through the knotted roots of infinite ages, and skeletons and treasure, streamed away in rivulets over the pavement… fertilizing, leaving a damp stain” (81). Barriers of tangibility are broken down, as the sound bubbles and runs, gaining physical shape, movement, and a material impact. Further, the woman is said to be singing of love, giving significance to her mode of expression, though it is sung in words that are unintelligible to human meaning. The nonlinguistic syllables of her song contain a collection of energy, expressing emotion without being organized by the Symbolic structure of
language. Through her song, the semiotic rushes through and over the Symbolic, obliterating its organizations and boundaries, and allowing meaning to be made outside of its order.

Her song creates a space in which socially constructed hierarchies do not exist, exempting the singer from the rigid identity the social order would confine her to. A woman who would be constituted as impoverished, ragged, and decrepit, slave to her song through which she begs for money, is freed from this position and able to exist as a timeless part of the earth, beautiful in her boundless and enduring expression of love. She gains the power to spill into the thoughts of Peter Walsh, momentarily extracting him from the organization of London in which he is constituted as a subject through the male gaze. By dissolving the boundaries of the Symbolic order, the semiotic makes the subject-object hierarchy impossible, which destroys the dominance Peter holds over his space and the women around him. The Symbolic power structure momentarily collapses, disturbing the stability of the novel’s social order.

One of the mechanisms of the Symbolic order against which the semiotic creates tension throughout the novel is the linear conception of time. Time serves as a governing force that violently restricts characters to their positions within the social structure. Each hour, upon hearing the chiming of the clock, individuals gain intuition of their orientation within the temporal framework of the social structure. Like the motor car, the striking of the clock has different meanings for each individual. It reminds of them of their social duties, thus reflecting their identities within the Symbolic order in its tolling. After learning of Septimus’ death in the midst of her party, Clarissa’s spatial intuitions dissipate as she experiences a semiotic moment of embodied connection with this stranger. The clock, however, interrupts her thoughts, reinstating her into the social order: “The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun. But she must go back. She must assemble”
The sound of the clock reminds Clarissa of her social duties, signifying that she must gather her extended existence and fit it into her demarcated social identity as a hostess. Time slices into the beauty and the fun of her transcendent subjectivity, reestablishing her into the rigid boundaries of the Symbolic.

In constraining characters to the Symbolic order, the clocks take on a violent and oppressive role: “Shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing the clocks of Harley Street nibbled at the June day, counselled submission, upheld authority, and pointed out in chorus the supreme advantages of a sense of proportion,” (102). The clocks uphold the social order by erecting boundaries that destructively split and shorten time, reflecting the divisive nature they demonstrate in separating Clarissa from her embodied connection to Septimus. The clocks are explicitly depicted as reinforcers of the social order, as they demand the relinquishing of power to succumb to authority.\(^4\) In requiring proportion, the clocks become extensions of the violent actions of Doctor Holmes and Sir Bradshaw, mental health physicians who forcibly instill social norms in their patients through punishment and isolation. The location of the clocks in this specific passage position them on the street where physicians’ offices have historically existed, physically marking them as reinforcers of the hostility and violence of the Symbolic. The clocks thus cause both personal and social harm, severing individual existences into pieces in accordance with the power structure, which in turn upholds the oppressive social order by reinstating its inhabitants.

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\(^4\) Shannon Forbes speaks to the authoritative figure of time in her piece “Equating Performance with Identity.” She describes Big Ben as “a dominating presence in each character’s life, a demand to adhere to one’s schedule, a reminder that life is progressing in an orderly, measurable fashion” (41). Forbes also argues that Clarissa feels comforted by the patriarchal structure because it offers her a stable source of identity. She believes that the sound of the clock “reminds Clarissa, because the dominating, powerful strikes—symbolic of London’s strength and ability to provide for its inhabitants—will always protect one who abides by its male patriarchal values” (42). She contends that Clarissa attempts to fit into an identity within the social order so that she can maintain this stability.
The Symbolic organization of time not only constrains inhabitants to the social order, but also quantifies the characters’ progression towards death. When Clarissa is excluded from Lady Bruton’s lunch, her reflections on Lady Bruton remind her of something even more unsettling than her lack of an invitation: “she feared time itself, and read on Lady Bruton’s face, as if it had been a dial cut in impasive stone, the dwindling of life; how year by year her share was sliced…” (30). Time is characterized as the hand of death, fissuring life into segments until nothing is left. It is powerful in its destruction, capable of cutting into stone, dissecting life into smaller and smaller pieces, and it looms menacingly over Clarissa as something that will inevitably overtake her. Septimus experiences a similar race with time, for the progressing day brings him closer to the moment in which he will be institutionalized and formally reinstated into the constricting bounds of the social order. The race finishes when he plunges to his death, not out of desire to end his life, but in desperation to escape the force of proportion. Time and proportion work together: just as the clocks of Harley Street require submission to the Symbolic order, time functions violently to contain human existence within the social order.

By failing to respond to the Symbolic order’s delineations of time, however, Septimus constitutes his identity outside of proportion. He does not recognize time as a signifier of his role in society, like Clarissa does, but instead establishes his subjectivity in alignment to shifting and non-linear conceptions of time:

The word “time” split its husk; poured its riches over him; and from his lips fell like shells, like shavings from a plane, without his making them, hard, white imperishable words, and flew to attach themselves to their places in an ode to Time; an immortal ode to Time. He sang. Evans answered from behind the tree. (70)

In Septimus’ experience of time, a distance is created between the word “time” and Time with a capital T, the signified of this word. When the word “split its husks,” the seams of the signifier open up and allow the signified referents to fall out of their shell. The ode, then, is made up of
these signifiers that refer to the larger concept, one that is imperishable and immortal, unbound from the Symbolic structures that slice it up and divide it into organizable pieces. The sentences fall out of their proper structure, becoming a string of phrases and words loosely connected through flowing commas. Joining words and phrases outside of proper grammatical structure permits an expression of the semiotic, for meaning is expressed free from the Symbolic order.

This passage emulates an explosion, describing Time as violent and uncontrollable. The military metaphors and presence of Evans collapse linear temporality between Septimus’ past experience in World War I and the present, which disrupts the Symbolic organization of London and crosses spatial and temporal lines. Septimus is thus provided an intimacy with the dead that would be impossible within the framework of linear time. By failing to respond to the Symbolic definition of time, Septimus erupts through the boundaries of organized temporality, fostering a connection that would be forbidden to him within the Symbolic order.

This passage demonstrates what Wang would term “psychic resistance.” Septimus refuses to be established as a subject of society by failing to recognize time as a signifier of his social duties or linear orientation within the world. Wang argues that the novel is “an exploration of the ways in which the individual tries or fails to establish his or her identity as the subject of the state” (179). According to Wang, the objects Septimus and Clarissa consciously or unconsciously interact with, “are characterized by a hazy obscurity and mysticism, far removed from logical distinctions and status, and hence are least susceptible to linguistic definition and conventionally accepted unity of meaning” (187). He argues that interacting with objects that are not generally ascribed social meaning can lead to “identity, character, and personality” being “dissolved” (188). Reading Wang’s theory in conjunction with Kristeva’s illuminates that in aligning themselves with non-symbolic objects and spaces, Clarissa and Septimus exist within
the realm of semiotic drives and energies. The semiotic and the Symbolic are in constant tension, pushing back against one another, and Wang’s theory posits Clarissa and Septimus’ characters as being formed in these moments of tension. While Clarissa shifts between constituting her subjectivity within the Symbolic and engaging in psychic resistance, Septimus exists mainly in the realm of the semiotic, constantly partaking in such resistance. Their expanding identities allow them to experience the world in boundless ways, offering them connections, knowledge, and means of existence unavailable to them in the social order, while simultaneously creating split and shifting identities that destabilize them.

The shifting identity Clarissa experiences emerges in the severance between her identity within the Symbolic order and her fluid experiences outside of it. When she encounters signifiers of her social position throughout the day, they resonate with her, reflecting her place within the larger social structure. Upon arriving home from Miss Pym’s, she observes the elements of her home life and feels her identity is mirrored back in them:

Mrs. Dalloway raised her hand to her eyes, and, as the maid shut the door to, and she heard the swish of Lucy’s skirts, she felt like a nun who has left the world and feels fold round her the familiar veils and the response to old devotions. The cook whistled in the kitchen. She heard the click of the typewriter. It was her life, and bending her head over the hall table, she bowed beneath the influence, felt blessed and purified. (29)

By introducing Clarissa as “Mrs. Dalloway,” she is signified through her relationship to her husband. The sounds she hears in the passage, from the “swish” of her maid’s skirt, to the cook whistling in the kitchen, position her within the domestic sphere as a homemaker. She sees her life reflected back through these sounds, which in this moment function as part of the Symbolic order, reaffirming her identity as a wife and upper class hostess. Though Clarissa feels “blessed” and “purified,” signaling a contentment with this identity, the imagery pervading this passage also illuminates her social role as a source of confinement. The same veils that surround her and
make her feel certain in her position also serve to wrap and bind her into a constricted space, depriving her of intimate connections. Her identity orients her in social relation to certain people, limiting her from relationships with others. She is a wife who lacks love and sex; a socialite without close friends. By constituting her identity in this social role, her subjectivity is established in her relationships to her husband, her home, and her maids, erecting confining boundaries around the edges of her identity.

These boundaries are reconstructed every time she identifies herself as “Mrs. Dalloway.” By naming herself with the combination of her husband’s name and the symbol of her relationship to him, she establishes her subjectivity through this relationship, which then organizes her physical and spatial existence in society:

But often now this body she wore (she stopped to look at a Dutch picture), this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing—nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible, unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway. (11)

This passage separates Clarissa’s body from her self by referring to it as something she wears; a part of her identity she inhabits, as opposed to something that stems from within her. She becomes physically delineated by the social role of a wife, obscuring her identity as an individual. When the social duties associated with these roles are completed, her physical presence in the space of society diminishes accordingly. Her whole self cannot be fit within this social signifier, making the rest of herself invisible. Mrs. Richard Dalloway, then, blends into the “solemn progress with the rest of them,” becoming part of a mass as a socially positioned and unseen person.
In identifying herself with these social symbols, Clarissa experiences confinement and limitations. She lacks real connection or love with anyone in her life, and she is limited in where she can go, who she can interact with, and what activities she can partake in. There are parts of herself that cannot be fit into the identity of Mrs. Dalloway. In opposition to the moments in which she is constituted in the Symbolic order, at other times, she conceptualizes herself as constantly shifting and flowing through space and time. Moments before she feels “unseen; unknown,” she experiences a much more fluid sense of her identity:

but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself. (9)

The semiotic expression within this passage breaks through the Symbolic structure of language, allowing Clarissa to become detached from her identity as a wife and hostess and shift freely between various bodies and locations. The short phrases, loosely strung together by commas, allow phrases to flow into one another without being grammatically connected. Sharper, more forceful connections are made by semicolons, which disrupts the flow of the text, prohibiting it from making Symbolic meaning. Significance is instead created through the drives and currents of the semiotic which break forth in the spaces between the phrases. This language enables Clarissa to take on a shifting, flowing form, blurring the boundaries of time and space that separate her from these bodies, objects, and locations in the Symbolic order.

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5 Lacan discusses how inhabiting the realm of the Symbolic creates emptiness and desire. Because signifiers create meaning through differentiation, they create a world constructed only of symbols, absent of any real presences. Lacan believes this leads the individual to constantly long for something they are not experiencing, as well as to inhabit an identity that is split between the conscious self, present in the Symbolic, and the unconscious, the space where the imaginary was pushed when the person became constituted in the Symbolic order (Eagleton 145).
These moments of conceptualizing herself outside of the social order provide Clarissa the relationships she desires. Her marriage constrains her from intimate interactions with anyone except for her husband, limiting her experience of physical or emotional connection. She feels her life is missing “something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman, or of women together.” However, she feels she could “dimly perceive” a relationship between women, and “she could not resist sometimes yielding to the charm of a woman” (32). She describes feeling “what men felt” in response to a woman, which she imagines as:

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! (32)

The semiotic allows Clarissa to break social boundaries and experience an orgasmic experience with a woman. This is a moment of psychic resistance, as Clarissa breaks away from both her Symbolic subjectivity and her husband, who is considered the only proper object of her intimacy. In doing so, she experiences time and space in open and freeing ways, and is liberated to experience a moment of extreme pleasure, connection, and intensity. The language of this passage mirrors the semiotic bursting open through the Symbolic, and the imagery itself demonstrates the experience of intense pleasure and visceral emotion.

Despite the freedoms that the semiotic provides, these moments also decenter Clarissa’s physical understanding of herself, leading to an unstable relationship with her body and location in space. When she is thinking about Miss Kilman, Clarissa’s feelings of hate overwhelm her, becoming a detached force that overtakes her body:

It rasped her, though, to have stirring about in her this brutal monster! to hear twigs cracking and feel hooves planted down in the depths of that leaf-encumbered forest, the soul; never to be content quite, or quite secure, for at any moment the brute would be
stirring, this hatred, which, especially since her illness, had power to make her feel scraped, hurt in her spine, gave her physical pain, and made all pleasure in beauty, in friendship, in being well, in being loved and making her home delightful rock, quiver, and bend as if indeed there were a monster grubbing at the roots. (12)

The boundaries between Clarissa’s body and the natural world disappear, as twigs and leaves sprout within her body, and her soul expands into the earth. Her feelings of hatred become physically dislocated from her, represented as a creature that independently inhabits and acts on her body. Her emotions are embodied as a force she has no control over, but have the power to cause her pain, which reveals a misalignment between herself and her emotions. Clarissa’s physical and spatial displacement in this passage creates a stark contrast to the comfort and familiarity she feels when she aligns herself with the network of symbols that defines her social role. The creature within her has the power to make her life “rock, quiver and bend,” demonstrating the threatening destabilization the drives of the semiotic can cause her to feel when ungoverned by the Symbolic order. This instability can be understood through Kristeva’s mobilization of the Lacanian concept of jouissance. Jouissance refers to the intense feelings of pleasure and pain that occur when the semiotic drives “disrupt the signifier and shift the metonymy of desire, which acts within the place of the Other, on to a jouissance that divests the object and turns back towards the auto-erotic body” (Kristeva, 102-103). Clarissa experiences these opposing feelings in her experience of the semiotic. Though the disruption of the Symbolic offers her intimacy and emotional heights she cannot attain within her identity as “Mrs. Dalloway,” it can also cause her to feel unsafe or insecure in her existence.

Further, Clarissa’s destabilized identity can lead to loneliness and isolation in the way she experiences space and time:

She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, far to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day. (8)
Clarissa’s identity extends beyond the boundaries of linear temporality. She exists outside of the classification of age, existing in multiple states of time at once. The use of the word “unspeakably” links to the semiotic nature of this experience: her existence in time cannot be described in words, as it breaks the organization of the Symbolic order. The use of the phrase “sliced like a knife” alludes to the violence embedded in her transcendence of physical boundaries, as well as her lack of linear positioning, for she exists both outside and within everything at once. Though she is on the street with the taxicabs, in the center of the city and the social order, her experience in the semiotic collapses this physical orientation. She stretches across space and time, which distances her from her physical position in the Symbolic order. This disembodied experience feels dangerous to Clarissa, reflecting the uncertainty and instability that stems from this constantly shifting understanding of her relationship to the world. Her identity is fragmented as the semiotic breaks the Symbolic order that tugs her into place, flowing through and over its boundaries and distancing her from her position within it.  

While Septimus also experiences a fluid identity, it is not the site of the same tensions, as he does not align his identity with the Symbolic. His failure to recognize his location within society causes him to imagine himself at the center of his experiences, as opposed to a part of a larger institution. When the royal motor car passes through the streets of London and the rest of the city sees their relationship to the empire reflected in it, Septimus believes himself to be the object of their gazes: “It is I who am blocking the way, he thought. Was he not being looked at and pointed at; was he not weighted there, rooted to the pavement, for a purpose? But for what

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6 Alex Zwerdling sees an alternate but related possibility for Clarissa’s split identity. He argues that she experienced a loss of possibility between the period of rebellion in her youth to the present moment, as her role in society became more defined and limited. Clarissa abides by the ideal of being a good hostess, leading her to contain her inner emotions, yet she longs for the parts of herself that she lost in this role. Thus, her identity is split into a public and private self. Zwerdling believes, “her soul is not dead, it has only gone underground” (80).
purpose?" (15). Instead of recognizing the car as a symbol of the state, Septimus views himself as the force behind the entire interaction. He is disconnected from his body, and feels it is driven by a larger purpose he cannot identify. This dislocation from the body mirrors Clarissa’s experience in the semiotic, illuminating the lack of grounding that accompanies fluid conceptions of identity. This moment of psychic resistance exemplifies the way Septimus functions in society throughout the novel, for he does not align himself with the Symbolic order, but instead understands his identity as unrooted from any relationship to society.

Within the Symbolic order, Septimus would hold the social duties of a husband and a member of the working class. As he and Rezia walk through the city, there are moments in which they are described by their social signifiers: “they crossed, Mr. and Mrs. Septimus Warren Smith” (83). This title positions Septimus in relationship to his wife, joining them in matrimony in a way that limits the intimate connections he can experience with other individuals. His name, too, labels him as a member of society: “London has swallowed up many millions of young men called Smith; thought nothing of fantastic Christian names like Septimus with which their parents have thought to distinguish them” (84). Through this signifier, Septimus is rendered a subject of a social order that views him as average, mediocre, and an indistinguishable from the masses. His name makes invisible his unique knowledge and experiences, obscuring his individuality, just as Clarissa’s whole self is made invisible by the signifier of “Mrs. Dalloway.” Unlike Clarissa, however, Septimus does not recognize himself in either of these signifiers: he thinks more about his dead friend than his wife, and he believes himself to be a messiah, destined to enlighten the world. By understanding his identity in such a way, he rejects the Symbolic order’s attempt to constitute him as a subject.
Instead, Septimus experiences his identity as expansive and shifting within the semiotic. When he is in the park with Rezia, reclining on a chair, he conceptualizes his location entirely differently:

The earth thrilled beneath him. Red flowers grew through his flesh; their stiff leaves rustled by his head. Music began clanging against the rocks up here. It is a motor horn down in the street, he muttered; but up here it cannoned from rock to rock, divided, met in shocks of sound which rose in smooth columns (that music should be visible was a discovery) and became an anthem (68)

Septimus is dissociated from the visceral flesh of his body, imagining at once that he is both above the earth and that the earth makes up the material of his body. He experiences sounds visually and spatially, watching them move between rocks, split into pieces, and form shapes, demonstrating a fluidity and lack of separation between the senses. Signifiers from the social structure that attempt to orient Septimus in space—the sounds of traffic and a motor horn—have social significance and weave through Septimus’ mind, attempting to define his location within the city. He rejects them as signs that would fix him in the social structure, however, instead incorporating them into the unorganized drives that move through and around him. The edges of Septimus’ physical existence are lost, and he becomes one with the fluid and unordered world. He comprehends his perceptions as if “the flesh was melted off the world”: in this semiotic state of being, the membranes between beings become nonexistent, allowing everything to meld together. He feels “His body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left. It was spread like a veil upon an open rock” (68). He experiences his body as if it has no organization; it has become slippery mush without structure, the only part left intact being his ability to sense and feel. His nerves are described like the unordered drives in Kristeva’s view or the semiotic, expressing chaotic and unbounded feelings. His body no longer has shape or fleshy substance, it becomes translucent and far reaching, able to exist anywhere and everywhere.
In constituting his identity in this way, Septimus is able to interact with the world in ways that free him from his social position. A few moments later, he sees Evans appear “among the orchids” in the park, pulling him away from his wife and uniting him with his dead friend. Orchids often symbolize virility, alluding to the erotic nature of this connection. The blurring of temporal and spatial boundaries in the semiotic allow Septimus to experience an intimate relationship that would be impossible within the Symbolic, mirroring Clarissa’s erotic experiences outside the Symbolic structure that constrains her to her relationship with her husband. Septimus’ fluid conceptions of the world also allow him to see through and beneath the social structure: “This was now revealed to Septimus; the message hidden in the beauty of words. The secret signal which one generation passes, under disguise, to the next is loathing, hatred, despair” (88). Septimus exists so far outside of the social structure that he no longer recognizes its organization and process of constant reestablishment as natural. The connections made visible to him outside of it alter the way he views the world: “The supreme secret must be told to the Cabinet; first that trees are alive; next there is no crime; next love, universal love, he muttered, gasping, trembling painfully drawing out these profound truths which needed, so deep were they, so difficult, an immense effort to speak out” (67). He sees life and boundless connection in new places, and he can no longer conceptualize of socially constructed boundaries, thus eliminating the possibility of transgressing them in crime. The messages he speaks are buried far beneath the layers of society, and the difficulty he has in expressing them demonstrates the insufficiency of language’s structure to transmit and communicate them. Such remarkable revelations would not appear to him were he locked in the position of the ordinary, lower class clerk within the social order. His ability to transcend the boundaries of the social order also enables his conceptualization of himself as a leader, sent to
enlighten the rest of the world: “he, Septimus, was alone, called forth in advance of the mass of men to hear the truth, to learn the meaning” (67). While the Symbolic order positions him as a husband and an average member of the working class, the semiotic allows him to expand beyond these signifiers and experience great knowledge and personal importance.

This experience comes at a cost, however. His existence with the semiotic also bring him closer to the trauma he experienced in World War I. Through blurring temporal and spatial boundaries, the semiotic brings the war into the present, infusing it into the space of the city. When he lays in Regent’s Park and imagines himself floating high above the world, images of the war resound in his experience of the present. The red flowers that grow within his body allude to poppies, which are commonly known to be a symbol for World War I (Blakemore), bringing the war physically into his body and inserting it into the midst of the city. The sounds of the city morph into an anthem and then an elegy within his mind, alluding to a song recognizing or honoring the dead. His urban surroundings blur into physical and sonic representations of the war, infusing his experience of the present moment with viscerally haunting moments of past trauma. Like Clarissa, this leads him to experience jouissance, manifesting in both extreme joy and instability. Though his identity provides him with freedom, he constantly feels on the brink of the world exploding: “and this gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him” (15). The patterns on the curtains of the passing motor car parallel the many disjointed pieces of his experience of the world, threatening to join into one entity and combust. This moment reveals the instability and danger that lies beneath the freedom and boundlessness of his constantly shifting identity. With nowhere to ground himself, danger seems imminent at every moment. His experiences of the semiotic is infused with
embodied flashbacks and moments of panic, offering an understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder as stemming from a dislocation in time and space. The novel thus troubles our conceptions of PTSD, for Septimus’ fluid and ungrounded conceptions of the world both flood his body with these experiences of violence, and simultaneously provide him with beautiful and prophetic revelations.

Septimus’ psychic resistance also puts him at the mercy of those who violently enforce the social order. His failure to align his identity with the Symbolic order threatens society’s ability to uphold itself, which professionals try to remedy by reinstating him as a subject. In the name of health, Sir William insists upon extracting him from society:

> Health we must have; and health is proportion; so that when a man comes into your room and says he is Christ (a common delusion), and has a message, as they mostly have, and threatens, as they often do, to kill himself, you invoke proportion; order rest in bed; rest in solitude; silence and rest; rest without friends, without books, without messages; six months’ rest. (99)

The use of the word “proportion” connotes a privileging of balance and control; in Septimus’ case, it points to his failure to compose his identity in the correct relationship to the symbolic web of objects delineated by the social structure. Sir William equates standards of proportion with physical and mental health, defining one’s wellness by their ability to fit into a social standard. By using the word “delusion,” he links having a misaligned identity to insanity—that which is unfounded in reality or truth—suggesting that the norms of the social structure are undisputed reality. According to Bradshaw, individuals must be returned to proportion through a complete removal and isolation from society. Thus, confinement becomes narrativized as a cure that will help regain “health.”

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7 S.B. Smith links Clarissa’s ordered bed rest to institutionalization. She examines the rest cure as a confinement for those who breached the social order, arguing Clarissa’s required rest after lunch functions this way. She also believes Clarissa’s treatment as an invalid following her illness, specifically in her forced rest, brings her closer to death, causing her to inhabit the world as only partially alive.
In the moment of loss and instability following World War I, Bradshaw attempts to stabilize England by confining and constraining its inhabitants. But instead of creating security, his actions lead to a society constructed on repression. Sir William is described to have “made England prosperous, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalized despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion” (99-100). His violent actions evoke images of prisons and psychiatric wards, as his practices confine both body and mind. He shows the most violent, sinister aspects of the Symbolic order, illuminating the power it holds to govern by force if necessary. Bradshaw is the punitive consequence of psychic resistance. If someone fails to constitute their identity properly within the Symbolic structure, Sir Bradshaw will intervene, forcing them back into place. Alex Zwerdling refers to characters whose emotions overflow social boundaries as “outsiders in a society dedicated to covering up the stains and ignoring the major and minor tremors that threaten its existence” (72). Understanding both Clarissa and Septimus in this way casts them as threats. In participating in psychic resistance, both characters are able to evade the process through which the social order establishes and upholds its power. Zwerdling explains that Woolf’s portrayal of Bradshaw “makes us realize that the complacency of the governing class is not a natural state but must be constantly defended by the strenuous activity of people like Sir William” (73). This cycle of reestablishment can also be observed through the use of signs and symbols throughout the course of the novel. The semiotic, then, can be seen as the tremors in the social structure Zwerdling points to; moments in which the Symbolic fails to uphold itself and new organizations and possibilities are able to emerge into the characters’ imaginations. Because their very existence

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8 Wang relates Bradshaw’s “homes” to Foucault’s concept of the “Hospital General,” which compares psychiatric wards as part of the state as prison-like institutions. According to Foucault, their establishment by the King and use of tactics of coercion to control inhabitants make such homes a “third order of repression” to be used to exile and punish people in addition to the “police and courts” (185).
becomes a threat to the social order, bursting out of its seams, Clarissa and Septimus experience the Symbolic as violent and confining in the way it attempts to establish power over them.

Despite the coercion it depicts, the description of Bradshaw is dripping with irony. His suppression is praised: he “made England prosper,” framing the pain he inflicts as a social victory. Woolf portrays Bradshaw as a point of mockery, drawing out the violence of his role in upholding the social order, while simultaneously refusing to take him or his work seriously. This depiction also calls into question conceptions of health, specifically in regard to the mind. By linking rationality to strict adherence to the social order, the novel troubles the concept of insanity. When proper mental health becomes conflated with violence and suppression, delusions become a space of freedom. Though dangerous and unstable, psychic resistance creates subversive and radical spaces of imagination outside the bounds of proportion, allowing insanity to be viewed as a source of escape from violent coercion of “health.”

Death is the only way Septimus can maintain the sense of freedom he experiences in the semiotic. He does not wish to harm himself by jumping to his death, but prefers this to the confinement of the social order. Clarissa recognizes his death as a form of freedom:

A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death. (184)

Clarissa feels that assimilating to society can destroy a valuable and important part of life. She cannot name what is lost in conforming; it is something that cannot exist within the social structure and thus cannot be expressed in the linguistic signifiers of the Symbolic. She realizes Septimus has “preserved” this unnamable thing in defying the rules of the social structure, and she views his death as an “attempt to communicate,” signaling he could express something in his
death that was incommunicable within the social order. Clarissa’s experience of Septimus’ death frames it as a casualty of the Symbolic order’s violence, rather than the result of depression or insanity. Septimus’ death is radical not only for him, but for Clarissa as well, which affirms the revolutionary potential of spaces of the semiotic. The embodied connection Clarissa experiences to Septimus transcends class disparities, allowing her to inhabit his body through a moment of psychic resistance. This intimate and visceral connection provides Clarissa with the same sense of freedom Septimus gains in his death, reaffirming her own psychic resistance as a form of survival within the divisive social structure.

_Mrs. Dalloway_ demonstrates the constant tensions between the formation of subjectivity within the Symbolic and the spaces of freedom located in psychic resistance. Both Clarissa and Septimus experience split and shifting identities that lead them to feel isolation, fear, and uncertainty, while simultaneously providing them with ways of existing that could not be conceived of within the social structure. These spaces of psychic resistance allow them to experience intimacy, emotional intensity, and new conceptualizations of the world that are otherwise denied to them. The novel illuminates the violent nature of the Symbolic order in slicing and dividing the world into distinct pieces, confining its inhabitants, and punishing those whose identities spill over the edges of their social boundaries. The novel also demonstrates that when subjectivities are formed within the Symbolic, the violence of the social order is upheld and reinstated. The moments of psychic resistance Clarissa and Septimus engage in are not only subversive, but they also provide freedom from this repeated cycle of violence. In permitting a reemergence of the unconscious drives that abounded before being repressed by the Symbolic order, psychic resistance leads to moments of sheer freedom and transcendence. The novel thus challenges our conceptions of insanity, locating liberation from the perpetual cycle of the social
order in thought patterns that are generally pathologized and deemed delusional. Minds that are labeled by society as insane become beautiful in the intense emotions and intimate connections they experience by crossing temporal and spatial boundaries.

Works Cited


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