

(In)sane Dissolution of Illusion: Trauma, Boundary, and Recovery  
in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway

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## I. “More close to the fact”

Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway, which lacks any battle scenes, trenches, or even a single shot of gunfire, is perhaps a surprise contender for the distinction of “the finest ‘war novel’ that World War I produced” (Poole 79). Roger Poole, however, has correctly recognized the importance of Woolf’s fourth novel in postwar society. The depiction of the former soldier Septimus Warren Smith, paired with that of the titular character, Clarissa Dalloway, an upperclass housewife, combines both the civilian and military perspectives of London five years after the Armistice to produce a “voice that would illuminate both the reality of civilian isolation from the war and the illusion of immunity this isolation engendered” (Levenback, in Hussey 41). The War’s distance produced the misconception that civilians were unsusceptible to the horrifying events. Applying Freudian psychoanalysis and trauma theory to Woolf’s text, one may elucidate the significance of the simultaneous blurring and juxtaposition of Septimus and Clarissa in order to explore what Woolf began as a “study of insanity & suicide” (Diary 2: 207), a collective testament to the egregious error of presumed immunity.

Woolf’s novel is set in London on a single day of June, 1923. Five years following the Armistice, the book details Mrs. Dalloway’s preparations for a dinner party she is giving for her undistinguished politician husband, Richard: buying flowers, mending her dress, writing last-minute invitations. As the fifty-two year-old Clarissa traverses London, she returns to her past, remembering the summer of her eighteenth year spent with Sally Seton, Peter Walsh, Hugh Whitbread, and Richard. The perspective of the narration floats from Clarissa to Peter, who has just returned to England from India, to the war veteran Septimus Smith and his Italian wife, Lucrezia<sup>1</sup> (as well as to other less notable characters). Each of these characters also returns to his or her past; Peter to the moment when Clarissa refused his marriage proposal, and the shell-

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<sup>1</sup> In order to avoid future confusion, in the novel Lucrezia is also called by her nickname, Rezia.

shock victim Septimus to the past which he experiences as the present, plagued by hallucinations of his dead friend and superior, Evans. Throughout the day, Clarissa reflects on her life—her choice of husband, her daughter Elizabeth and the inappropriately attached tutor Miss Kilman—while Septimus and Lucrezia meet with the incompetent Drs. Bradshaw and Holmes until the hour of Clarissa’s party. During the party Clarissa’s old friends arrive: the once wild Sally now Lady Rosseter, the mother of “five enormous boys;”<sup>2</sup> Peter engaged to a woman half his age; Hugh dim and fat (189). Finally, Clarissa learns of Septimus’ suicide and is affected by the news far more than any other person; she retreats from the party and watches an old woman go to bed, contemplating Septimus’ death, feeling “somehow very like him” (186).

Published in May of 1925, Mrs. Dalloway was the result of several years of work and a series of narrative models. The concept began as a couple of short stories, but by October of 1922 had “branched into a book” which Woolf proposed as a “study of insanity & suicide: the world seen by the sane & the insane side by side—something like that” (Diary 2: 207). Woolf continued her thoughts on her project: “Septimus Smith?—is that a good name?—& to be more close to the fact than Jacob” (Diary 2: 207-208). The allusion to her previous novel, Jacob’s Room, in which the reader discovers on the last page that the protagonist has been killed in the war, indicates Woolf clearly envisioned an insanity that was specifically the kind resulting from war, and that Mrs. Dalloway was to tackle issue of war more directly through Septimus.

Woolf’s genius was not only to produce an accurate portrayal of a shell-shock victim, but also to find a way of sharing Septimus with the rest of the world, especially noncombatants. In order for society to recover from the trauma of the War, it must acknowledge postwar figures such as Septimus. Only after recovering the reality of trauma—i.e., shattering the illusion of

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<sup>2</sup> Woolf, Virginia. Mrs. Dalloway. (New York: Harcourt, 1981), p. 171. All subsequent citations from the novel refer to this edition.

immunity—does one recover from the traumatic event.<sup>3</sup> Woolf provides for the possibility of recovery by constructing Septimus as Clarissa's double. In an introduction to the 1928 edition, Woolf disclosed that in "the first version Septimus, who later is intended to be her double, had no existence; and that Mrs. Dalloway was originally to kill herself, or perhaps merely to die at the end of the party" (vi). Septimus' death allows for Clarissa's salvation. Similarly, through Clarissa Septimus shares himself and recovers from his trauma; unified, Clarissa-Septimus performs a "multiple transcendence of social boundaries—between the genders and classes as well as between soldiers and civilians" (Darrohn 101). By removing the latter distinction, Mrs. Dalloway operates as a text of recovery through its very emphasis on recapturing trauma.

Clearly, there is a disparity between what a woman living in London could have experienced and what actual soldiers went through at the front. Clarissa does not need to cope with visions of comrades' bodies strewn across battlefields nor remember the long waiting in the trenches undergoing bombardment. The dichotomization of experience, however, does not mean civilian encounters with the War were insignificant. Moreover, active indifference to the War does not negate the reality of its effects. Levenback argues that Woolf keenly felt the distinction between military personnel and civilians to be unnecessary: "What the war had taught [Woolf], and what she would demonstrate in her postwar writings, was that no illusion of immunity served in a world where a distancing ironic vision of war was seen to be its reality" (in Hussey 56).

In spite of a reputation for avoiding politics,<sup>4</sup> Woolf was a relatively aware noncombatant who almost obsessively read the newspapers during the War. Woolf recognized this reportage as "preposterous masculine fiction" (qtd. in Levenback 13), and went on to review many of the poet-soldiers from the Great War (Schaefer 134). Woolf's diary provides insight into her

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<sup>3</sup> Recovery *from* trauma, then, is a process which involves recovering the initial, repressed trauma.

<sup>4</sup> Woolf's husband Leonard called her the "least political animal" (qtd. in Levenback 1), an opinion perpetuated by Quentin Bell despite such overtly anti-war works as 1938's The Three Guineas.

personal experience of war as a civilian and her struggle to find an appropriate means of representing its trauma, one of which would be Mrs. Dalloway. Although Woolf does not mention the War on a daily or even a weekly basis in her diaries, the conflict has an undeniable presence. For instance, her first entry includes her mistaken assumption that the New Year's bells of 1915 were victory bells (Diary 1: 4). The pervasiveness of war in the subconscious of civilians was certainly augmented by the air raids on London. After one such raid Woolf confessed to her diary, "the guns were so near that I didn't like to fetch a pair of shoes left in the bathroom" (Diary 1: 116). In her depiction of this particular raid Woolf characteristically inserted elements of ordinary life, beginning the next day's entry in mid-thought, "the after effects of the raid were swept aside by Barbara,"<sup>5</sup> i.e., news of Barbara's intention to wed in three days. Woolf was acutely attuned to the contrast between life<sup>6</sup> and death in this moment, and in her diary she proceeded to capture the exchange in dialogue, as if narrating a novel (Diary 1: 116). Woolf's habit of discussing the war alongside quotidian life in England would also extend to Mrs. Dalloway, albeit applied more methodically.

With events like the air raids, war was made more conspicuous for civilians like Woolf. The War intruded more palpably with the loss of several young men close to Woolf, namely Rupert Brooke, a childhood friend who died in April of 1918, and her brother-in-law, Cecil. Another of Leonard's brothers, Philip, was wounded in action. Intriguingly, these events, which Levenback suggests moved "the war into the real world for Virginia Woolf" (Levenback 13), were described only limitedly if at all in her diary. This poor record keeping, Levenback argues, is indicative of "illusion based on myth and avoiding acknowledgement of the ultimate reality of

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara Hiles was a friend and painter. She married Nick Bagenal, who was seriously wounded in the War and was hospitalized that year (1918).

<sup>6</sup> The approaching marriage also suggests a potential for rebirth.

war death” (Levenback 20). What Woolf effaces in her diary<sup>7</sup> is written in her novels, however muted or veiled by her sensitivity to her own limited civilian perspective. In the last-minute death of the talented Jacob Flanders in Jacob’s Room, Andrew Ramsay’s death from an exploding shell in To the Lighthouse, and of course, Septimus’ suicide in Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf explores the implications of the War and the generation it claimed. Thus, although “deaths in war would leave Woolf in a state of denial” (Levenback, in Hussey 45), through narrative Woolf faced the realities of death at her own pace. Moreover, in Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf directly addressed the problem of apparent immunity with Septimus’ association with Clarissa—who, like much of the world, would otherwise merely view the war as “over” (5).

Woolf recognized that the War did not simply end in 1918. That year she wrote in her diary: “The more one sees of the effects on young men who should be happy the more one detests the whole thing” (Diary 1: 123). The “effects,” Woolf understood, were far more permanent than politicians were willing to admit. Three years after the official termination of the Great War, Woolf provided a delayed “historical disquisition on the return of peace” (Diary 3: 92), noting not only mundane changes such as the increase in retail sales and the price of eggs, but also describing injured, returned soldiers, “abroad in blue, though stiff legs, single legs, sticks shod with rubber, & empty sleeves are common enough” (Diary 3: 92). Like the characters in the fictionalized 1923 London of Mrs. Dalloway, in peacetime Woolf has not forgotten, and continued to be affected by the War.

Woolf was in a unique position to provide an account of the war due to her civilian awareness of the men returning from the war. Levenback explains that this privileged perspective afforded her novels a particular sympathy for the men who served: “It may have been Philip’s

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<sup>7</sup> The effacement of war is not limited to dismissal of the subject but extends to Woolf’s consistent practice of failing to designate the war as such, i.e., instead of ‘war’ Woolf defines the conflict in ambiguous terms (e.g., “the fact” in her reference to Jacob’s Room; “whole thing” in the following diary entry).

survival on the front, which Woolf could only know as an outsider, that augmented her sensitivity to what he and other returning soldiers were experiencing in postwar London” (Levenback 34-35). In addition to Woolf’s interactions with others affected more directly, her personal experiences with mental illness arguably contributed to the unusual empathy towards Septimus in her novel. Woolf’s first episode of mental illness occurred as early as age thirteen, following her mother’s death in 1895 (Scott xli). Young Virginia Stephen then proceeded to lose her half-sister and then surrogate mother Stella, her father, and finally, her brother Thoby (Bazin & Lauter 14-15). Breakdowns often occurred after the death of a loved one and were accompanied by symptoms remarkably similar to shell-shock. For instance, akin to Septimus “feeling very little and very reasonably” (87) upon Evans’ death, Woolf initially was also unable to show outward signs of grief when her mother died (Bazin & Lauter 17). Eric Leed has noted that these kinds of congruencies were common: “The symptoms of shell-shock were precisely the same as those of the most common hysterical disorders of peacetime...what had been predominately a disease of women before the war became a disease of men in combat” (Leed 163). As an individual whose mental breakdowns were contemporaneous with her experiences of death, Woolf’s condition was even more closely linked to Septimus’ trauma over the death of Evans. Ultimately Woolf would share her fictional character’s fate, when, relieved that “At last all the guns have stopped firing” (Briggs 402), she walked into the waters of the River Ouse on March 28, 1941.

In Mrs. Dalloway Woolf establishes the connections between the civilians and the sole soldier (now returned to civilian life) through her particular style of narration, which incorporates repetition linguistically and structurally to create memories and represent trauma. All characters are united by their perpetual reliving of the past in the present. What separates Septimus is his

inability to recognize his past as precisely that—as past: to him it entirely consumes his present, in perpetual repetition. So while other, non-traumatized characters may obsess over memories or past decisions, Septimus’ madness stems from a temporal disjunction which eliminates all distinction between past and present and leaves him with hallucinations of Evans. Nevertheless, the shared potential for shifting time allows characters to be incorporated into a web of interconnectivity. J. Hillis Miller observes that the primary function of Mrs. Dalloway is to facilitate these connections: “The novel is especially fitted to investigate not so much the depths of individual minds as the nuances of relationship between mind and mind” (177). In this approach the apposition of Clarissa and Septimus, coming to fruition upon his death, necessitates Clarissa’s confrontation of reality. Mrs. Dalloway, with its tendency to highlight difference only to then eliminate it, shows how Septimus is part of all of us at all times—soldiers, civilians, and veterans, alive and dead.

## II. Repetition vs. Recollection: the Repetition-Compulsion of Shell-Shock

Woolf’s careful construction of veteran Septimus Smith as a mad victim of war neurosis—a man who can neither feel nor taste (86-87)—likely drew from multiple sources, but the profound concurrence with much of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytical theories suggests Woolf was familiar with his work. We know that the Woolf’s Hogarth Press published his writing, and that it influenced other members of the Bloomsbury group. It seems likely that Freud’s concern for war neurosis may have played a role in the shaping of her characters. At the very least, critical of the 1922 *Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry into Shell-Shock*,<sup>8</sup> Woolf would have agreed with Freud that “the terrible war that is just over has been responsible

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<sup>8</sup> Sue Thomas argues Woolf would have been familiar with the *Report* and suggests that Mrs. Dalloway is a kind of reaction to society’s inhumanity towards veterans—especially the ineffectuality of physicians and their rest cures, to which she had been subjected.



for an immense number of such maladies and at least has put an end to the inclination to explain them on the basis of organic injury to the nervous system due to the operation of mechanical force” (8). Freud’s attempt to understand the motivations behind human behavior, especially abnormal behaviors such as Septimus’, resulted in numerous scientific hypotheses. Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1922) proposes a psychophysical system in which there is an effort to “keep the quantity of excitation present as low as possible, or at least constant” (Freud 3). Repression occurs when instincts contradict the ego and “fight” to surface, and is understood as the source of all neurotic pain (Freud 6). Freud explains the ‘repetition-compulsion,’ which serves as a hallmark sign of neurotics: “He is obliged rather to *repeat* as a current experience what is repressed, instead of, as the physician would prefer to see him do, *recollecting* it as a fragment of the past” (18). Thus, according to Freud, the best way of treating the neurosis is to force “into memory as much as possible, and to leave as little as possible to repetition” (18).

In Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf figures Septimus struggling with repetition-compulsion; throughout the novel he repeatedly experiences hallucinations of his lost comrade. The first vision is in Regent’s Park: “There was his hand; there the dead. White things were assembling behind the railings opposite. But he dared not look. Evans was behind the railings!” (25) This repetition of the past is itself repeated with a second vision, a disturbed view of Peter Walsh: “A man in grey was actually walking towards them. It was Evans! But no mud was on him; no wounds; he was not changed” (70). Notably, like Septimus himself, the narrator (and thus the reader) is not privy to the initial traumatic event; it is only experienced through repetition. Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth explains that the absence of the traumatic event *per se* is typical: “Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather

in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it is precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4).

Anticipating Freud, Kierkegaard understands repetition and recollection as the “same movement, only in opposite directions; for what is recollected has been, is repeated backwards, whereas repetition property so called is recollected forwards” (3-4), and argues that “recollection has the great advantage that it begins with the loss, hence it is secure, for it has nothing to lose” (12). Indeed, the firm placement of memory in the past disables the potential for trauma, and such placement differentiates Clarissa and Peter’s obsession with the past from Septimus’ traumatic reliving of it.

Trauma is also connected to one’s understanding of the boundary between life and death—a boundary Woolf both obfuscates and reveals in Mrs. Dalloway. Freud proposed a death instinct, an opposing drive to the life instinct that propels an organism to return to its “original” state of nothingness. As an instinct—i.e., a tendency to return to a former condition (Freud 44)—this paradigm is founded on repetition. Caruth also views traumatic experience in terms of life and death:

What one returns to in the flashback is not the incomprehensibility of one’s near death, but the very incomprehensibility of one’s own survival. Repetition...is not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died but, more fundamentally and enigmatically, the very attempt *to claim one’s own survival*. (64)

From this perspective, Septimus’ suicide may be read as a final repetition which itself cannot be repeated without another rebirth, the embrace of death terminating the trauma. The infusion of life Septimus brings Clarissa is a possibility of rebirth, however, that extends the possibility of

trauma to another being. The method of sharing the trauma allows Septimus to eradicate the illusion of immunity and to move closer to recovering from the trauma of the war.

The disregard for boundaries is especially pertinent to World War I shell-shock victims. Septimus had volunteered to fight in a war which “was more ironic than any [war] before or since” (Fussell 8), a devastating modern reality created in large part by technological advances in artillery. Over the course of four years the world lost an unprecedented eight million men to the War, the last years spent chiefly in the “infamous trench system” (Fussell 8). In its initial year the war had already been pegged a “war of ‘attrition’ ” (qtd. in Fussell 9), one which produced a generation of young men plagued by the liminality of the war, a kind of personal and pervasive No Man’s Land. These were men, who “having been sent beyond the outer boundaries of social life” were “placed between the known and the unknown, the familiar and the uncanny” (Leed 15). This confusion is at the core of Mrs. Dalloway; Septimus, unable to “know” his primal experience, must simply exist reliving the unknown, neither civilian nor soldier, dead nor truly alive. Leed notes that traumatized soldiers who survived the war often felt they were not fully alive: “In war the experience of death was given not just to those who appeared in the mortality statistics but also to those who were forced to remain in the expanding moment between the extinction of all choice and the extinction of life” (Leed 23).

At the same time, however, the War equipped soldiers with a “disjunctive” knowledge which created boundaries between combatants and civilians:

What men learned in the war set them irrevocably apart from those others who stood outside of it. The war experience established the boundaries within the larger “generation,” between those who fought and those who were ‘too old or too young’ to fight in the Great War. (74)

Other members of society who also did not fight—namely women—also became part of the societal division. This divide allowed for the “illusion of immunity” (Levenback, in Hussey 41) which worked to prohibit recovery from the trauma of war. Recovery from the war cannot occur if returning soldiers remain in liminal positions in society, nor if certain polarizations and distinctions which exacerbate the traumatic effect remain in place. For while the knowledge of the War is “irreversible” (Leed 75), “segment[ing] the lives of combatants into a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ ” (Leed 74), it was the soldier’s tendency to attempt to make the War reversible by reenacting it. The inability to cope with the experience of war—especially its fragmentation—resulted in the compulsion to relive it. Freud theorized that the particularity of self-fragmentation in war neurotics stemmed from the incompatibility of two egos defined by the event of war:

The conflict takes place between the old ego of peace time and the new war-ego of the soldier, and it becomes acute as soon as the peace-ego is faced with the danger of being killed through the risky undertakings of his newly formed parasitical double. Or one might put it, the old ego protects itself from the danger to life by flight into the traumatic neurosis in defending itself against the new ego which it recognizes as threatening its life. (Ferenczi 2-3)

Mrs. Dalloway, through the novel’s manipulation of time and expression of repetition, works towards eliding both liminality and polarizing identifications. Septimus is both differentiated from and enveloped by the other characters, ultimately contained within Clarissa.

### **III. Dissolution/(Dis)illusion & Delusion**

As a war veteran, Septimus is a liminal figure who experiences life interposed between extremes. Woolf represents his trauma by confusing the boundaries between self and other, life

and death, and past and present. Indeed, Septimus' trauma is a "wound of the mind—the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world...not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (Caruth 4).

While in Regent's Park, Septimus demonstrates his inability to conceive of himself as distinct from the outside world: "But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement" (22). What is so striking is the physicality and palpability of his delusion; before succumbing to this madness only Rezia's "tremendous weight on his knee" keeps him "weighted down, transfixed" (22). Despite his preliminary recognition that his madness is about to descend upon him, only the outside pressure from Rezia keeps Septimus from losing his individuality. Septimus not only believes, but also experiences the physical connection to the tree, such that his body is no longer self-defined but becomes, as well, part of the tree's movement. Septimus' break with himself is also evident from Lucrezia's repeated lamentation that her husband is "not even Septimus now" (23).

That the War has changed Septimus is obvious: he "sees" a dog transform into a man (68); he hears birds signing in Greek. These abnormal behaviors extend even to Septimus' conception of himself as a living being: "I went under the sea. I have been dead, and yet am now alive, but let me rest still; he begged...and as, before waking... the sleeper feels himself drawing to the shores of life, so he felt himself drawing towards life..." (69). It should be impossible for Septimus to be currently alive if he were ever dead, and yet this is precisely what Septimus

asserts.<sup>9</sup> The language at this moment is rare in that the narrator suspends his involvement slightly longer than is typical in order to hear Septimus' thoughts, unadulterated, as he would think them. Unlike other sections in which personal thoughts are communicated as if from a single person's perspective, while containing the relics of the narrator's necessary "he thought" or "she thought," here Septimus is afforded the pronoun "I" for a brief moment. This adds another layer of complexity to the already troubled statements. The "I" demands that Septimus' direct declaration is his own, so that the words themselves are incongruent because they derive from one who has (miraculously) been dead.

As in this example of Septimus' confusion of vitality, in which time is alternatively figured (i.e., a past death despite a present survival), Woolf astutely presents Septimus' trauma through his experience of time. Septimus' repeated visual and auditory delusions of Evans serve as major loci for understanding his experience of time as an elastic function. After the initial appearance of Evans in Regent's Park, Evans' voice returns to Septimus: "A voice spoke from behind the screen. Evans was speaking. The dead were with him" (93). Here the past—the dead—have come to Septimus' present; he does not remember the past but actually relives it. This temporal confusion, characteristic of trauma patients, is inherent in Woolf's narrative structure. With the narrator typically placing the present of the narrative in the recent past, the narrative becomes a landscape of interchanging chronologies, the past's intrusion on the present represented in the past tense. Thus, what is understood as the present is always (at least linguistically) marked by the past.

Septimus' death offers a situation in which Woolf manifests her understanding of time as essential to traumatic experience. Upon Septimus' rash decision to escape Dr. Holmes by

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<sup>9</sup> Septimus' attempt at forming a logical statement (perhaps to fulfill his mantra, "one must be scientific, above all scientific" (22)) with rhetorical use of hypotaxis (i.e., "yet," "but") indicates he recognizes the incompatibility of his words.

throwing himself out of the window, Rezia understands, and says simply, “He is dead” (150). This is one of the relatively few times the text is in the present tense. While the statement, by virtue of being in quotation marks, is likely to be in the present tense, the notations also effectively distinguish and set it apart from the rest of the text. The suicide has rendered, for a moment, the past unnecessary. Critically, Septimus’ former thought, “I have been dead” (69) is transformed into “He is dead.” Shifting tense and switching referent pronouns, Woolf indicates Septimus’ last act of repetition, the recapitulation of his “death” brought about by war.

Septimus experiences his past in the present because for him, time has dissolved. Freud observed his subjects’ tendency to mentally manipulate time: “We have found by experience that unconscious mental processes are in themselves ‘timeless’” (32). By dissolving time, melding life and death, and conflating the self with other (itself bifurcated in time<sup>10</sup>), Woolf expresses Septimus’ struggle from its underpinnings. By capturing Septimus’ disillusion, Woolf is able to battle the ostensible immunity noncombatants embraced during the War.

#### **IV. Outside Septimus: Connecting the Caves**

In contrast to Septimus’ neurotic reliving of the past in the present, the other primary characters in Mrs. Dalloway experience the past through memory. According to LaCapra, what differentiates trauma from its non-symptomatic counterpart, mourning, is that the latter is “a relation to the past which involves recognizing its difference from the present” (70). Woolf’s novel is remarkable in the way that other characters maintain this critical difference from Septimus, while verging as closely as possible to entering his world of insanity. Through the

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<sup>10</sup> Part of Septimus’ difficulty is the temporal disjunction of self; as Leed explains, “The knowledge and ‘self’ acquired in war could only with difficulty be integrated into a continuous self” (75).

similar treatment of time, where the past may enter the present briefly, but always retain its difference, Woolf allows Septimus to share his traumatic experience.

Much of Woolf's ability to create intratextual connections between her characters stems from her unique technique of narration. By August 30<sup>th</sup>, 1923, deep into writing the novel, Woolf noted in her diary:

I should say a good deal about The Hours,<sup>11</sup> & my discovery; how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humor, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect, & each comes to daylight at the present moment—Dinner!" (Diary 2: 263)

The first page of Mrs. Dalloway offers a good example of Woolf's method of narration and the continual depiction of memory which characterizes the novel.<sup>12</sup> The narrator shuttles seamlessly between characters and through verb tenses to describe the past, present, and future to produce four-dimensional characters that experience life as a composite of all their temporalities. The opening sentence, "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself" (3), effectively defines the present as sometime between when Mrs. Dalloway has spoken (presumably just prior to this sentence) and the future prospect of purchasing the flowers. Mrs. Dalloway's very name signifies her present status as the wife to a man named Dalloway, but the complete elision of her maiden name and even her first, is also paradoxically suggestive of her past. After all, she *must* have (at some indeterminable point), been something other than Mrs. Dalloway. Indeed, through her present experience of the fresh morning, Clarissa Dalloway plunges into the past and enters the memory of her adolescence at Bourton: "What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst

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<sup>11</sup> For a long while this was the working title of what would become Mrs. Dalloway.

<sup>12</sup> J. Hillis Miller explores this essential idea in his essay on Mrs. Dalloway, "Repetition as the Raising of the Dead," pp. 185-186.



open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air” (3). The memory is not just relegated to the past, but is integrated into her present experience; she can “hear now” the squeak. However, it is important to realize that while Clarissa participates in her past, even “hearing” a squeak of hinge in the present, Clarissa knows this is not a reality. Clarissa, unlike Septimus, who has little control over his madness, can move back and forth at her will, recalling past events, returning to them as her mind processes stimuli. Nevertheless, the nudge of the past into the present here with Clarissa, with its potential confusion of time, suggests that Septimus is not really all that different from Clarissa or Peter.

Like Septimus’ difficulty in discerning self, Mrs. Dalloway also experiences a kind of identity crisis. In the process of re-imagining her life, Clarissa remarks that her body and being are effectively erased:

[Her 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. (10-11)

Fortunately, through memory Clarissa is able to escape from this feeling. Mrs. Dalloway, then, is not just Mrs. Dalloway, but through the plasticity of her mind never too far removed from her previous selves. And so she may be Clarissa with Peter or Clarissa with Sally for a moment.

Significantly, the collectivity of London contributes to Clarissa’s temporary loss of self. Although Clarissa and Septimus are unified by their connection, and the experience of time between all characters provides a network of shared experience, there are moments in which the

generalization works against recovery because one denies oneself the privileged position to mourn. For instance, Sir William downplays Septimus' condition suggesting "We all have our moments of depression" (97). Rezia, too, views the scale of the War as a mitigating factor: "But such things happen to every one. Every one has friends who were killed in the War" (66). Importantly, in opposition to Septimus' experience of interconnectivity with the trees, Rezia senses solitariness and exposure, "surrounded by the enormous trees, vast clouds of an indifferent world" (65). What Rezia cannot handle is her separation from the rest of the world: "I am alone; I am alone! she cried, by the fountain in Regent's Park...as perhaps at midnight, when all boundaries are lost, the country reverts to its ancient shape...such was her darkness" (24). Given that so many individuals were traumatized by the war, Rezia's fear of being alone is logically unfounded. Nevertheless, the separation Rezia feels from the rest of society is real because of the perpetuated myth of immunity.

Standing in front of the window, Clarissa's feeling that "something awful was about to happen" (3) further obfuscates time. The use of the past tense suggests the "something awful" is a relic of the past, something she felt when she was eighteen. However, the feeling is remarkably prescient of Septimus' suicide. The flowers, too, which are so prominent in Clarissa's memories, here "looking at the flowers" (3), but especially her moment with Sally, "passing a stone urn with flowers in it" (35), and which also recur later in the narrative's "future," when Richard, unable to tell her he loves her, buys her roses, serve to link the multiple temporalities together. The motif of flowers and Clarissa's presently unacknowledged foreboding of "something awful" operate to create "continuity between past and present" (Wyatt 440). This continuity is clear even from the remarkable first sentence; the coupling of Mrs. Dalloway's name—emblematic of

both her past and present—with the flowers—which will appear at the end with the dinner party—encapsulates, without eclipsing, the entire novel.

## V. Anastomosis & Big Ben's Imposition of Temporal Structure

Along with this conception of continuity of time connecting characters, the imposing structure produced by Big Ben, which serves as a physical connection between individuals, is a reminder that they do indeed “dwell in one world” (Miller 180). The famous clock constantly updates the definition of the present, which force characters into being conscious of time; this temporal imposition serves as an important foil to the kind of repetition Septimus experiences with his hallucinations of Evans. Clarissa's relationship to time as something “irrevocable” and yet also as a portal for thinking about the past suggests the difference between her and the traumatized Septimus, who cannot experience time as such. The narrative, then, becomes a tapestry of defined and yet mutable temporality, highlighting and obscuring difference.

Mrs. Dalloway, with its characteristically modern, stream-of-consciousness narrative style, and a plot framework limited to a single day in London, is often viewed as Virginia Woolf's response to James Joyce's Ulysses (1922), a book in her view egotistical to the point of ruin (Briggs 132). The focused structure suggests an important significance to the concept of time, and paradoxically invites an essential fluidity to time as characters recall past events, memories intertwined in moments of the present with the potential to influence the future, her self-proclaimed “tunneling process, by which I tell the past by installments” (Diary 2: 272). Although the novel is limited to a single day—and is largely centered on the titular character—Woolf expands the scope to include lifetimes and many lives. For instance, the “invincible thread of sound” bubbling up of the ancient song in Regent's Park (82-83), which several characters

experience, goes far back in time: “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).<sup>13</sup> The breadth allows for a network, or to borrow Miller’s term, an anastomosis<sup>14</sup> of conjoining and overlapping threads. Wyatt argues that the internal repetition of Shakespeare—especially the quotations from *Othello* and *Cymbeline*, and of course, the Greek—are part of a temporal connection: “By pervading present events with echoes of the entire span of western culture...allusion and mythopoeic image reinforce the novel’s underlying theme: continuity between past and present” (440). Indeed, Clarissa links the line from *Othello*, “if it were now to die ‘twere now to be most happy” from her remembrance of Sally to Septimus’ death. Perhaps more importantly, the anastomosis extends to strangers and the unknown. Doubly layered, the narrator relates Clarissa’s theory filtered through Peter<sup>15</sup> just after Septimus’ suicide but before Clarissa’s exchange with the former soldier:

Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to, some woman in the street, some man behind a counter—even trees, or barns. It ended in a transcendental theory, which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe...that since 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... (153)

Emblematic of the entire novel, Clarissa’s old theory is remarkably relevant for her present: soon she will bond with Septimus, a man she never meets in reality. The passage also recalls

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<sup>13</sup> This is a very rich moment of the book which I will not develop further for sake of clarity and focus.

<sup>14</sup> I am appropriating Miller’s term from his book *Ariadne’s Thread* for my own purposes. Note all other references to Miller refer to his book *Fiction and Repetition*.

<sup>15</sup> Peter’s introjection of Clarissa here reflects the narrative’s texture of anastomosis which comes to a fore in Clarissa’s experience of Septimus during the party.

Septimus' merging with the tree earlier in the novel (but of course, subsequent to the initial relation of the theory), which was a nearly literal experience of anastomosis<sup>16</sup>. Finally, Clarissa suggests the possibility of recovery through the interpersonal connection, however ghostlike it may be.

An important part of creating the anastomosis is Woolf's use of one of London's (and England's) most identifiable landmarks to impose order on (while disordering) the narrative: Big Ben.<sup>17</sup> Throughout Mrs. Dalloway the sound of Big Ben's chiming across London serves as an auditory geopolitical link between the sundry characters of the novel which elucidates the nature of trauma they have/are experienced/experiencing.<sup>18</sup>

The method of structuring time with Big Ben is significant because of its physicality, grounding temporality in a concrete object which produces nearly tangible auditory effects.<sup>19</sup> Simply by hearing the bell, the characters must perforce be physically located near one another. The close physical proximity however, doesn't require characters to be within seeing distance, so that there can be distance between characters—most importantly Clarissa and Septimus, who never actually meet, yet are inextricably bound to one another in the narrative. Secondly, sound is unique in that it travels slowly enough to be distorted but is able to effectively communicate the time for all those within auditory range. This property introduces a small time lag which

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<sup>16</sup> The *OED* defines anastomosis as “Intercommunication between two vessels, channels, or distinct branches of any kind, by a connecting cross branch” and adds the term was “applied originally to the cross communications between the arteries and veins, or other canals in the animal body; whence to similar cross connexions in the sap-vessels of plants, and between rivers or their branches; and now to cross connexions between the separate lines of any branching system, as the branches of trees, the veins of leaves, or the wings of insects.”

<sup>17</sup> For post-World War II readers (of course significant to the discussion of the Great War, as the war that would necessitate the need to add numerals), Woolf's use of Big Ben suggests a remarkable (perhaps ironic) prescience: the clock was surprisingly tenacious and accurate during the Blitz (1940-41).

<sup>18</sup> The use of two tenses is critical to my argument about time and understanding trauma as something which cannot reconcile time, but rather a constant reliving of the past in the present.

<sup>19</sup> Woolf goes so far to describe sound in scientific terms as waves of vibrating particles with the mantra, “leaden circles dissolved in the air.” The point is that sound is something which is literal and can be experienced physically.

Woolf exploits in her transitioning between characters (and often, distances) and inflects within the time a certain element of plasticity.

Tied to this notion of physicality (in its location) is the idea of Big Ben as politically symbolic. Positioned on the corner of the Houses of Parliament, Big Ben signifies the British government (including its colonial prowess), and is connected to smaller parliamentary issues such as the Bill alluded to by Richard during Clarissa's party concerning war veterans (183). Woolf, then, links the government—the same force responsible for Britain's military activities—to the object dictating time, drawing Septimus closer (and yet farther) to his war experience with the uniting thread of time.

Big Ben is also significant in that it is an auditory experience which is repeated, both as hours pass (i.e., repetition with difference) and within a precise moment when Woolf switches between characters. Indeed, the sounding of bells often signals the shift in focus of characters and their intimate thoughts, such as Peter Walsh's hasty departure from Clarissa concomitant with the loud tolling of Big Ben. In particular, the transition from Clarissa to Miss Kilman occurs within the sounding of the late clock, two minutes after Big Ben (128). Clarissa hears the sounding, "with its lap full of odds and ends" just as Woolf repeats this phrase to describe the physical encroachment of time on the tutor: "the last relics of this lap full of odds and ends seemed to break, like the spray of an exhausted wave, upon the body of Miss Kilman standing still in the street for a moment to mutter "It is the flesh." ' (128). Although in reality there is simply a single chime (or series of chimes) to denote the particular hour, Woolf takes advantage of the substance of the chiming itself as well as the amount of time it takes sounds to travel, effectively narrating it twice. The repetitive narration produces a conflict with the inherent transitory nature of time.

The first intrusion of Big Ben upon the narrative precedes its actual chime:

For having lived in Westminster—how many years now? over twenty, —one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes. (4)

Clarissa's relationship to Big Ben is founded on the intimacy with her home, and importantly, is tied to her past. Thus, the present, always being redefined by the chimes, is a paradoxically a source to the past—a habitual constant which nevertheless is preempted with “suspense,” a visceral reaction not to the chime but to the prospect of the future chime. When the bell does sound, the auditory dimension of the ring is soon supplanted with a visual image: “There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air” (4). The synesthetic transformation of the acoustic into a (rather molecular) vision (to be repeated throughout the novel) is akin to Septimus' experience in Regent's Park.

Big Ben's declaration also marks Woolf's first mention of the Great War in Mrs. Dalloway;<sup>20</sup> Clarissa reflects on her love of “life; London; this moment of June” (4), this latter thought extending in a new paragraph to the realization that the War had concluded: “For it was the middle of June. The War was over...” (5). This early, potentially emphatic statement, however, is quickly qualified to include examples of those who knew young men killed in the war. In an attempt to confirm the reality of its former conclusion, the statement is repeated. The majority of this largely optimistic opening section is ostensibly focused on the present, with its insistence on living by “creating it every moment afresh” (4). And yet, the nature of time is such that the present may only be defined by what it is not: the past, and accordingly, the present will always be informed by the past. When Clarissa says the War is over she is also introducing the

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<sup>20</sup> Tolling bells nevertheless generally signify peace with Woolf, as in her mistaken “victory bells” (Diary 1: 4); however, just as the present is defined by the past, peace is defined by war so there is a conflation of these two “binaries” within the figure of the clock.

intrinsic fact that it is not, and never truly will be, “over.” For Clarissa, hours are “irrevocable,” the past accessible through one’s imagination but not in one’s physical being. Even at this early point in the novel, Clarissa introduces the fundamental problem afflicting Septimus: his impotent reliving of the War. Unlike Clarissa, Septimus unconsciously and ineluctably translates the mental retrieval into a physical re-enactment of the past.

We hear Big Ben again at eleven, “the sound fading up there among the gulls” (21) as the aeroplane advertising toffee flies overhead Septimus and Lucrezia in Regent’s Park. Big Ben then returns in another half hour during Peter Walsh’s visit to Clarissa, just as he is being introduced to Elizabeth: “The sound of Big Ben striking the half-hour stuck out between them with extraordinary vigour, as if it were a young man, strong, indifferent, inconsiderate were swinging dumb-bells this way and that” (48). The vitality and strength depicted here—and reinforced with the parenthetical description of “tremors of the great booming voice shook the air around him” (49)—is appropriate for Peter, who has just confronted the incarnate reality of his failure with Clarissa, Elizabeth. The bells, marking the present, emphasize the lost past and the divide between Peter and Clarissa’s present and future, as represented by her daughter. Notably, other than Peter’s swift departure, he is not outwardly opposed to Elizabeth. Instead, Peter laments Clarissa’s “insincere” introduction (49) and uses Elizabeth’s youth as an entry point for reflection on Clarissa’s youth—of which he was a part, and which he can neither fully recapture nor escape—telling her “everything, as usual, as usual” but left “hollowed out, utterly empty within” pondering Clarissa’s old refusal just as “silence falls on London” (49).

For Peter, and later others, Big Ben is linked with the persistent intrusion of memory, the act of remembering and narrating one’s own history. The linkage of time and memory becomes most apparent following Clarissa’s attempt to communicate over the sound of the bells:



“Remember my party, remember my party, said Peter Walsh as he stepped down the street, speaking to himself rhythmically, in time with the flow of the sound, the direct downright sound of Big Ben striking the half-hour” (48). The indication itself is interesting in that it combines the future with the active process of remembrance. Peter’s precise repetition (an appropriation) of Clarissa’s phrase within the construct of time is suggestive of his inability to grapple with the tensions between the past, present, and future, which he proceeds to confound in his thoughts on Big Ben’s female “counterpart,” St. Margaret. Peter envelops within St. Margaret (the church adjacent to Big Ben) his concept of Clarissa, “the hostess...reluctant to inflict its individuality” (49). This sparks a memory of Clarissa, an “extraordinarily clear, yet puzzling, recollection of her, as if this bell had come into the room years ago, where they sat at some moment of great intimacy, and had gone from one another and had left, like a bee with honey, laden with the moment” (50). Peter, however, cannot remember fully:

But what room? What moment? And why had he been so profoundly happy when the clock was striking? Then, as the sound of St. Margaret’s languished, he thought, She has been ill, and the sound expressed languor and suffering. It was her heart, he remembered; and the sudden loudness of the final stroke tolled for death that surprised in the midst of life, Clarissa falling where she stood, in her drawing-room. No! No! he cried. She is not dead! I am not old, he cried, and marched up Whitehall, as if there rolled down to him, vigorous, unending, his future. (50)

In this moment of chiming Peter temporarily loses control of the present moment, imagining things which did not happen and forcing himself out of his thoughts. In contrast to Clarissa—and even Peter—a traumatized war veteran like Septimus experiences time differently. Although Peter returns to the past in his mind and dwells on it, he is not confused by it;

“Clarissa refused me” (49) is firmly in the past. Abel explains that “the dominant narrative of Clarissa Dalloway’s past is a strategically revised courtship narrative, dissolved into a retrospective oscillation between two alluring possibilities as the 52-year-old Clarissa continues to replay the choice she made 30 years before” (Abel 30). Although Clarissa replays the choice she understands that she has indeed chosen. Septimus’ time has been fractured and divided by the event of the war into before and after (Leed 74), but his continually revisiting of the “during” occupies his “after”: “I will tell you the time,” said Septimus, very slowly, very drowsily, smiling mysteriously. As he sat smiling at the dead man in the grey suit the quarter struck—the quarter to twelve” (70). In this passage Big Ben imposes the present time, of which Septimus is ostensibly aware, but there is the problematic figure of the dead man. The dead man is from his past, and Septimus’ statement that he *will* tell the time compacts the future into the past using the dead man as a vehicle for this information. Further, since “the historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all” (Caruth 17), Septimus is able to connect it to this moment in June, in Regent’s Park, five years after the Treaty of Versailles.

## **VI. “Communication is health”**

Woolf’s effort to create a network of characters who share trauma depends upon communication. Septimus’ failure to communicate recurs throughout Mrs. Dalloway until his suicide, when he is able to make a connection with Clarissa. Significantly, only from the narrator (or Rezia through the narrator), and not Septimus, does one learn any normative or concrete details about his military service or about Evans. Language, for Septimus, is an inadequate

means of expressing his trauma, which by its very definition is involved in nonproductive repetition. Accordingly, it is not surprising for Septimus to respond to an auditory hallucination of Evans with his own audible repetition of the cry, “Evans, Evans!” (93). Septimus is both incapable of coherent expression and of understanding others; during Sir William’s examination he cannot respond to his question, simply repeating “the word “war” interrogatively” (96), later, stammering, “I—I—” (98). The linguistic aspect of Septimus’ trauma, as LaCapra explains, is typical: “Words may be uttered but seem to repeat what was said then and function as speech acts wherein speech itself is possessed or haunted by the past and acts as a reenactment or an acting out” (90). Following the difficulty of discerning the aeroplane’s toffee advertisement,<sup>21</sup> Septimus’ is able momentarily to act out his trauma; stretching with the branch in Regent’s Park, he mirrors the tree’s “statement” (22). This ‘communication,’ however, is not primarily his own, and is not understood by anyone.

During a vision of Evans, although Septimus recognizes the importance of effective communication to his mental well-being, he is ultimately unable to perform cogently: “So there was a man outside; Evans presumably; and the roses, which Rezia said were half dead, had been picked by him in the fields of Greece. ‘Communication is health; communication is happiness, communication—’ he muttered” (93). The muttering is lost on his wife, who consistently fails to understand him. Not only does Rezia ask Septimus, “What are you saying?” (25, 93), but he believes she is to him she constantly interrupting him (25). Notably, like the necessary reliving of his past, Rezia repeats her direction for Septimus to “Look” (25) five times. The inability to share with others is not limited to Septimus alone. As a foreigner and veteran’s wife, Rezia is similarly prevented from any activity of shared discourse: “She could tell nobody, not even

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<sup>21</sup> The plane, which “bored ominously into the ears of the crowd” (20), represents a former instrument of war now appropriated for commercial use. Accordingly, that fact that the plane’s message is not immediately perceptible suggests an inherent problem of articulation associated with the War.

Septimus now” (23). Sitting in Regent’s Park with her wedding ring slipping, Rezia feels acute alienation as she recalls her homeland: “ ‘For you should see the Milan gardens,’ she said aloud. But to whom? There was nobody. Her words faded” (23). Unlike the persistent chiming of Big Ben which is heard across London, Rezia’s words are swallowed by physical space, dissipating into the air without a single listener.

As Susan Henke observes, despite Septimus’ attempts to share his thoughts, only through his death is he successful: “Tragically, Septimus Smith is trapped in a private, autistic language that denies him the possibility of direct communication with his fellow men and women. His death is the final symbolic and “artistic” act by which he attempts to express the ineffable” (22). The death itself can be seen as a product of Septimus’ impotent articulation: “Septimus’s death is the result of his inability to communicate his experiences to others and thereby give those experiences meaning and purpose” (DeMeester 649).

## **VII. Mrs. Dalloway and Mr. Smith: No Man’s Land Enters the Party**

Although Septimus and Clarissa never meet, and “Septimus never enters her life to challenge her preconceptions” (Guth 41) until his death, their relationship serves as the crux of the novel. The essential bond between the two unlikely characters allows for the dissolution of boundary which is so important for recovery. Froula notes that despite their disparate fates, they are very similar characters: “In Clarissa, life triumphs; in Septimus, death; but in their redoubled reflection, death-in-life mirrors life-in-death. She, like him, battles despair; he, like her, basks—moments before he leaps—in sanity, happiness, hope” (137).

Clarissa’s immediate reaction to the news of Septimus’ suicide matches the selfish surprise typical of someone of her station: “Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party,

here's death, she thought" (183). Clarissa's "here's death" indicates her physical and temporal confrontation with death; death is located specifically within the space Clarissa has carved out for her party, and the framing of her statement between the narrator's redundant interjections of "thought" works to emphasize further the reality of death in the present. Yet Clarissa goes beyond the simple shock expected from a woman of her class to internalize and imagine his death:

Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt. He had thrown himself from a window. Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then suffocation of blackness. (184)

Clarissa's recognition of this unknown soldier's suicide includes the important questions of how and then why Septimus killed himself. Clarissa's answer to "how" becomes a more developed, visceral version than Septimus' original action of "fl[inging] himself vigorously, violently down on to Mrs. Filmer's area railings" (149). While the former account provides the absurd detail concerning ownership of the railing which impales Septimus, Clarissa envisions the spikes breaking up his flesh and the pounding in his head before he loses consciousness. Clarissa's reenactment of the death in such physical terms indicates how Clarissa appropriates him. As the "privileged...mourner of Septimus's death" (Froula 130) Clarissa binds him to her, exchanging his death for her vivacity. Woolf's blending of life and death recapitulates Septimus' confusion over Evan's death. Caruth suggests that "it is the inextricability of the story of one's life from the story of a death, an impossible and necessary double telling, that constitutes their historical witness" (8).

Previously Septimus' survival was tied to Evan's death; now Clarissa's life is defined by Septimus' death, her witness concluding the painful cycle. LaCapra argues that "undecidability and unregulated *différance*" threaten to "disarticulate relations" and "confuse self and other" (21). The "collapse" of distinctions is an integral component of trauma and "in post-traumatic acting out in which one is haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes..." (21). Now, the *différance* between the former Septimus-Evans relation and the present Septimus-Clarissa relation allows paradoxically for recovery.

In Septimus' death Clarissa experiences a revelatory moment in which she clarifies the association between death/meaning and its transmission (or lack thereof):

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)

In this moment all of the boundaries the novel has presented and attempted to eliminate are laid bare. Septimus is finally able to share with noncombatants his experience of the war because the fundamental dichotomy between life and death has simultaneously crumbled and augmented. The division has strengthened because Septimus is no longer hovering between the two states; as Rezia says, "He is dead" (150). However, Clarissa complicates the ostensibly categorical event of death because for her his death preserves, and in turn Clarissa experiences a rejuvenation of life: "He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun" (186).

The association of Clarissa with Septimus, both the physical mapping of his death onto her visceral, re-interpretative imagination, and the communicative connection, accompanies and contributes to the disruption of the normative life-death polarity. After all, only now, when one individual has passed and one remains living does successful communication occur. Miller understands these opposing “but similar movements,” i.e., “Septimus’s plunge into death and Clarissa’s resurrection from the dead,” as requisite for the novel’s “structural completeness”: “Mrs. Dalloway is both of these at once: the entry into the realm of communication in death and the revelation of that realm in words which may be read by the living” (183).

Death is one solution to the problem of reaching “the centre,”<sup>22</sup> a struggle in which closeness paradoxically draws people apart. Paradoxically, as well, death resolves the great fear of Rezia’s and many traumatized veterans of being alone with its embrace. Returning to the concept of anastomosis, Sager views Septimus’ death as a connective act promoting a network of vitality: “Death is transformed from the ultimate separation into the ultimate union, the most complete form of embrace. It is seen as a stretching-out rather than a termination and completes rather than disrupts a life that has consisted in projecting the self out of the body” (Sager 27).

Tempering death’s communicable epiphany, however, are the antagonist elements of “corruption, lies, [and] chatter” (184). Chatter, is a counterproductive (and often repetitive) expression that primarily obfuscates meaning, albeit less deliberately than either corruption or

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<sup>22</sup> Woolf’s notion of “the centre” recurs in the final scene of To the Lighthouse in which Lily Briscoe completes her painting and Mr. Ramsay arrives at the lighthouse. Like death’s “attempt to communicate,” Lily’s painting, “with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across,” is an “attempt at something” (*TLH* 208). If Septimus’ death is defiance, so is Lily’s effort in “taking up her brush again” (*TLH* 208), the blurred binaries of Mrs. Dalloway like Lily’s blurry canvas which for a moment she views with clarity: “she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in *the centre*. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision” (*TLH* 208-209, my emphasis). Lily also experiences a connection with Mr. Ramsay in a similar vein to what I have previously described as anastomosis: “They had not needed to speak. They had been thinking the same things and he had answered her without her asking him anything. He stood there as if he were spreading his hands over all the weakness and suffering of mankind” (*TLH* 208). This same kind of successful nonverbal communication as Septimus’ death is striking and suggests Woolf’s sensitivity to its power.

lies. Collectively these terms conceal truth and prevent understanding of what actually ‘matters.’ The antipodal forces, however, like the rest of Mrs. Dalloway’s binaries, are dependent on one another to function. Woolf indicates the inextricability of these tensions by rhyming “mattered” with “chatter.” The interpolation of the second “the thing” between what mattered and the disfiguring potential of chatter again suggests an indeterminate consequence of death. The intermediary positioning of “the thing,” its physical space protectively marked by punctuation, is of particular interest because space is reconfigured yet again with the “wreath[ing] about with chatter”: the defacing force is wrapped around, repeatedly encircling “the thing.” Clarissa’s formulation conveys the intense resistance death encounters in its meaningful embrace. The difficulty achieving the embrace, however, does not detract from its fulfilling consummation. As Darrohn recognizes, the joining of the two juxtaposed figures “emphasizes free will, resistance, and communication” and “distinguishes it from the Great War’s industrialized slaughter” (102).

### **VIII. Spilling the “well of tears”**

Mrs. Dalloway is a powerful novel in its effective capacity to blur “lines between peace and war; civilians and combatants; survivors and victims; and, most basically, life and death” (Levenback 27). Through the ultimate elimination of boundaries, Woolf’s novel attempts to merge the gap between those who went to war and those who were left at home, removing the false perception that civilians were immune to the War’s effects. Indeed, as Paul Fussell observes, Woolf’s position as a noncombatant arguably enabled her ability to recover the war, and as a result, promoted recovery from the atrocity itself: “It was left to lesser literary talents—always more traditional and technically prudent—to recall in literary form a war they had actually experienced” (314). Woolf effectively conveys Septimus’ trauma through his liminal



topography of time, life, and self-containment. Septimus' symptomatic reliving of the past, coupled with Clarissa and Peter's similar yet differentiated preoccupation with the past, and culminating with Septimus' sacrificial death, functions to open the text to recover the trauma of the war. Contrary to classical deconstructionist theory, in which the text's own foundations are undermined, Woolf's text resists its own deconstruction while deconstructing the foundational binary oppositions assumed present in postwar society. Woolf has already rendered distinctions permeable in her depiction of the binaries operating to effect trauma. In Mrs. Dalloway the "experience of war is kept reverberating within a society which is presented as having all too rapidly shrugged off its memory" (Knox 105). In this manner, Woolf implicitly acknowledges the ubiquity of trauma through its repetitive, inevitable assertion. In one more overt moment, Clarissa poses the question, "What was she trying to recover?" (9), to herself through the narrator, concluding the "late age of the world's experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears" (9). This well of tears, Woolf suggests, must be spilled. By resisting the proclivity to deny the traumatic effects of War—i.e., believing the War was a discrete and resolved entity—society is enabled to recover through a collective participation in the experience of war and its traumatic aftermath.

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