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## "All the Being and the Doing": Time and the Role of the Artist in Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*

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“All the Being and the Doing”: Time and the Role of the Artist in Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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## **Dedication**

For my mom, Sarah Jackson, and my professor, Helena Gibbs, two woman who cultivate meaning in the world.



## Introduction

In 1915, one year after the start of World War I, Sigmund Freud published an essay entitled, "On Transience." He began it with an anecdote, describing a walk "through a smiling countryside in the company of a taciturn friend and of a young but already famous poet." (Freud) The poet reflected with great sadness upon the beauty that surrounded them, taking no pleasure in it because he knew it would not last. He mourned in advance the inevitable decay of what in the moment gave him such pleasure. Freud wrote:

He was disturbed by the thought that all this beauty was fated to extinction, that it would vanish when winter came, like all human beauty and all the beauty and splendor that men have created or may create. All that he would otherwise have loved and admired seemed to him to be shorn of its worth by the transience which was its doom. (Freud)

Freud then investigated why it is that the human being is possessed of this fear of transience, for while what is fleeting affords us unmistakable pleasure it also provokes the anticipation of pain at losing it. The pleasure is heightened by the knowledge that what is beautiful will not last. Perhaps, he argues, "What spoilt their enjoyment of beauty must have been a revolt in their minds against mourning." (Freud). How can we give ourselves over to aesthetic enjoyment when we are certain of its fleeting place in our world? It is akin to death, knowing that beauty will die, and yet one takes pleasure in it anyway. The reminder of death is perhaps strongest at the scene of great beauty. Freud goes further, bringing his thesis to its full

expression within the context of the war. He tells us that this walk with the poet happened the summer before the start of the war:

A year later the war broke out and robbed the world of its beauties. It destroyed not only the beauty of the countryside through which it passed and works of art which it met with on its path but it also shattered our pride in the achievements of our civilization. It robbed us of very much that we had loved, and showed us how ephemeral were many things that we had regarded as changeless. (Freud)

The poet feared the natural progression of the seasons and so deprived himself of taking pleasure in the summer that he knew would not last, but Freud then placed this experience contextually as it occurred upon the precipice of one of the most hideous wars in history. Not only nature, but art, ideas of the mind, and civilization itself were devastated so that in addition to reminding us of how fleeting our place is in this world, the hideous side of the human being was revealed to us suddenly. Preceded by the war, the essay conceives of transience as something quite different than what Freud had understood by it when he walked alongside his poet friend.

Virginia Woolf, born in London in 1882, though 26 years Freud's junior, was also, for a time, his contemporary. Besides having had first hand encounters with many of his texts through their publication by Hogarth Press, Woolf, I believe, continues a conversation that Freud began. I don't mean that she followed in his footsteps, for the two were vastly different thinkers, creating very distinct material.

The impetus for this project is my relationship to Sigmund Freud's work and the overwhelming feeling that a dialogue of sorts might be imagined between the two—if not the texts themselves, then the ideas presented by Woolf and Freud in their respective writings. That being said, the essay which follows is not structured dialectically. I use some of Freud's work in an attempt to illuminate certain aspects of Woolf's two novels, which thereby allows the Freudian texts to be awoken to fresh meaning within their new context.

Virginia Woolf takes up the question of transience through her own examination of our brief encounters with this world. Born as she was near the turn of the century, Woolf lived through both world wars, and the two texts that I analyze, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To The Lighthouse* are both heavily influenced by the effects of World War I. Though I do not dwell on the implications of historical placement in my essay, I believe that it is significant to touch on it here before you begin to read the body of this text. Both Freud and Woolf were greatly influenced by the horrors of a war and each writes about it differently. Perhaps on some level this shared trauma influences the intersection of their respective dialogues around the subject.

To understand transience without the help of Freud is to forget what I believe now in retrospect to be so integral to its function in our lives. For while he does point to our reluctance to mourn, he also argues that the only way to cope with transience is through the process of mourning. Freud writes in the same essay, that once the mourning is complete, "it will be found that our high opinion of the riches of civilization has lost nothing from our discovery of their fragility." (Freud). That is to say, if one can experience loss with openness then the beauty of the thing that has been lost will not be diminished.

In *To The Lighthouse* the question of transience is set at the center. It is here that I begin my project: to consider the further implications of how it is possible to create meaning in a

transient world. Understanding the place of time, and the role of the artist in both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To The Lighthouse*, as it relates to transience, is the emphasis of my project. I begin my query in chapter I, arguing that mourning is made possible through making art. This is brought to light through the character of Lily Briscoe in *To The Lighthouse* and her relationship to Mrs. Ramsay. In Chapter II, the emphasis is placed upon time as it relates to internal and external experience in *Mrs. Dalloway*. In Chapter III, I return to *To The Lighthouse*, to consider the overlaps between the two novels and the ways in which each deals with the making of meaning in distinct ways. In both novels there is a tension present between the pleasure we take in something and the pain of losing it, begging the question of whether the act of making art combats transience, or rather, whether it allows us to take pleasure in what has been made precisely because it will not last.

## Chapter I

### Mourning in *To The Lighthouse*

#### Mourning

It is the power of any art that affords us the possibility of experience re-filtered, captured as it were through that specific medium, held still within time. It is a mimetic process that becomes more real than the thing itself, or at least is what gives value to the thing itself: life. Woolf builds up this question in her work by pointing out the inconsistencies. And in doing so exposes her process. She reveals a sort of aesthetic mooring that is preoccupied with chance but ultimately demonstrates a faith in meaning. Nothing happens by chance in a world shaped by the aesthetic. This is a point of contact between her work and psychoanalytic theory. There is no chance according to psychoanalysis. Rather there only appears to be because one is so largely cut off from the material of the unconscious. The human being encounters their own psyche as the greatest mystery of all, so great in fact that it is often never penetrated. This was one of the great insights given to the world by psychoanalysis, which sought to plumb the weedy waters of man's soul, to go down into those inverted depths of the unknown and there reveal the workings of the unconscious. Woolf's characters, from their dialogue to their private thoughts and experience, demonstrate evidence of that rich and textured psychic space.

### **Time and Mourning**

Virginia Woolf's novel, *To The Lighthouse*, gives evidence of the effects of loss upon the subject. Lily Briscoe, Mr. Ramsay, Cam and James, and the reader all experience the loss of Mrs. Ramsay. When at the end of the novel Lily Briscoe realizes, years after Mrs. Ramsay's death, that she loved her and therefore lost her, she is finally able to mourn the loss.

If we are to consider the effects of loss according to the Freudian framework, it becomes a question of the object of love and how it can be invested with and divested of one's desire. Of the "work which mourning performs", Freud wrote in "Mourning and Melancholia", "The testing of reality, having shown that the loved object no longer exists, requires forthwith that all the libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to this object" (Freud 154). Mourning is, as Freud aptly words it, work of a specific kind that is accomplished by the ego. The mourner experiences the painful loss of the object, and, "when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again." (154)

The effects of time are connected to the process of mourning. One of the ways that Freud makes this clear is by articulating the period of latency that exists between the loss itself and the act of mourning. In this he describes how the experience of losing something often goes unnoticed until the subject experiences the sadness caused by that loss. Only from this moment forward can the subject fully mourn. Just as when the skin hiding an unhealed wound will eventually break again to reveal what needs mending, the subject who resists their grief will eventually realize it through its repetition or, as is the case for Lily Briscoe, through recognizing it and healing.

The object of love that is, according to Freud, cathected by the subject, may take different forms, one of which is the novel and its characters. If both may be considered objects invested with the libido of their reader, it is then a peculiar power wielded by Woolf who decides when and if her reader will mourn the loss of them. Of course, to finish a novel is a loss in itself, but to lose a character within it is a distinct experience. In *To the Lighthouse* we hear of Mrs. Ramsay's death parenthetically: ["Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty"] (Woolf 128). Afterwards, Woolf advances us through the years by way of the slow degradation of the house. Without speaking of Mrs. Ramsay or drawing attention to any process of mourning, we see her presence everywhere: upon the walls of the house and held still in the brief instant that the beam from the lighthouse penetrates a dark corner. Woolf writes the passage of time but excludes her characters from it. The reader on the other hand remains present.

It may be that the reader has already long-mourned Mrs. Ramsay before Lily Briscoe is able to at the end of the book. The house in shambles is what remains of a life, and it is this corporeal world which gives us so much pleasure, painting life and giving meaning to chaos. Mrs. Ramsay cultivated this part of life, the physical space between people and so it is fitting that Woolf should, in eulogizing her, give an account of the slow decay of the physical. The house holds the narrative, each a distinct structure that is deeply cathected with Mrs. Ramsay's presence. Woolf describes:

Once only a board sprang with a roar, with a rapture, as after centuries of quiescence, a rock rends itself from the mountain and hurtles crashing into the valley, one fold of the shawl loosened and swung to and fro. Then again peace

descended; and the shadow wavered; light bent to its own image in adoration on the bedroom wall. (Woolf 130)

The shawl which falls from the wall was Mrs. Ramsay's. It becomes, in the absence of life, a powerful signifier, emphasizing the sentiment of the passage much more than any description of the woman who wore it. The shawl connotes a peaceful place where both shadow and light meet in "adoration." The reader is called in to witness the scene of quiescence, and is, I hope to argue, therefore able to participate in mourning and subsequently to heal from the experience of loss. However, this process that Woolf allows her reader to experience is not only one of quiet healing, it marks the way that time moves and it both disquieting and comforting.

The scenes of decay are met with their opposite within Woolf's narrative. As life unravels, comes to an end, the house begins its slow dissolution and yet there is a faith in what remains. Woolf writes:

Loveliness and stillness clasped hands in the bedroom, iterating and reiterating their questions—"Will you fade? Will you perish?"—scarcely disturbed the peace, the indifference, the air of pure integrity, as if the question they asked scarcely needed that they should answer: we remain. (129)

The question of impermanence haunts the novel, its exploration driven by Mrs. Ramsay who is preoccupied with creating something lasting. It is as if Woolf is at once inquiring and solving her doubt, coaxing us to gaze into a world where meaning is not easily found. At the same time, she articulates through the narrative of *To the Lighthouse* and *Moments of Being*, a structure of faith that invites meaning. Paradoxically this faith stems from the very impermanence that abounds in the novel, begging the question: how is it that while our world falls apart there is also a stability to be found? For Mrs. Ramsay, that which remains is shaped no

doubt between people, finding its form among shared experience. Woolf, however, seems willing to go further, suggesting that even without human presence, there is the possibility of finding meaning and sense. It is a faith in the aesthetic, “loveliness” asking and answering, that it will remain and it is in some way a deeply psychoanalytical insight into the way that unraveling can lead to clarity. Psychoanalysis is an unraveling according to an attempt to find truth.

In Woolf’s fiction, as well as her autobiographical writing, the physical unravels to reveal a pattern of meaning beneath. The shawl one day falls from the wall. Woolf does not describe what is there beneath, but instead shows the motion of falling away. The unveiling of what occurs below the shroud speaks again to the dialogue of psyche and world wherein the subject is searching constantly to discover what is hidden. A similar image can be found in Woolf’s autobiographical writing, corroborating a certain faith in the meaning that can be found below the surface. In a “Sketch of the Past” from *Moments of Being*, she writes:

It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. (72)

Here Woolf writes of the pattern that can be found below the cotton fabric of life. The question is, beating persistently at the edges of her readers’ mind: is there really any sense to life’s chaos? Woolf suggests that there is, it is the *pattern*. Nevertheless she hesitates. *To the Lighthouse*, though deeply melancholic, does offer the possibility, as Woolf does in her private writing, of a faith to be found in meaning but whether it is made by making or found by making is not told. The artist is given a glimpse, whether it is Woolf herself, or Mrs. Ramsay or Lily.

There are glimpses of the pattern for certain characters, and for the reader as well who watches the listless decline of the house, but as Woolf demonstrates, it is not a Manichean world in which there is either certainty or uncertainty. There is only the quiet back and forth between permanence and decomposition.

The dinner scene in *To the Lighthouse*, is narrated both from Lily's and Mrs. Ramsay's perspectives. Among its many beautiful inlets is raised the question of meaning with renewed clarity, how it is made and whether it is lasting, a motif that is linked to the question of impermanence. How can one encounter meaning as time moves constantly forward? Mrs. Ramsay's power as a character can be condensed and glimpsed best in this single scene for it is there that one sees that she is the maker of meaning. At the same time she remains unsure of it, a tension Woolf describes by following the thoughts of Mrs. Ramsay as she presides from the head of the table:

Nothing need be said; nothing could be said. There it was, all around them. It partook, she felt, carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity; as she had already felt about something different once before that afternoon; there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights ) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling that she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures.

(105)

Even in the first sentence, Woolf carves the syntax so that eternity abuts the “tender piece.” The piece of meat served by Mrs. Ramsay partakes of eternity. The metaphor knows no resolution, but rather accrues in strength as it ripples out into the vaster imagery of which Woolf invites her reader to partake of. There is Mrs. Ramsay at the head of the table serving her guest and Woolf paints the picture while simultaneously pulling from her character her most vulnerable musings. The reader is both the witness of the beautiful glittering dinner from its outside while at the same time privy to the inner thoughts of its hostess. And in the moment described—it is a single gesture wherein Mrs. Ramsay chooses out a perfect piece of meat for her guest, Mr. Bankes—Mrs Ramsay sees that she has made meaning, that that moment at least will endure. And it is precisely here that is evident the kind of power Woolf has assigned her, for amidst them all, the poet Mr. Carmicheal and her husband Mr. Ramsay, the philosopher, and Lily the painter, Mrs. Ramsay is the artist who, by her existence, curates meaning for those around her.

## **Section Two—*Moments of Being and To The Lighthouse:* Psychoanalysis and Woolf’s Own Mourning**

In “A Sketch of the Past” from Virginia Woolf’s book, *Moments of Being*, one is given a glimpse of the author herself. Whether it is in the private reconstruction of her memories or the more public domain of fiction, Woolf’s voice is consistent. The overlap between the two worlds is most evident in her relationship to her mother, a figure who it seems transcends the barrier between fiction and reality. Her presence can be located in both novel and diary. In her own words Woolf admits to being haunted by her mother’s memory:

It is perfectly true that she obsessed me, in spite of the fact that she died when I was thirteen, until I was forty-four. Then one day walking round Tavistock Square I made up, as I sometimes make up my books, *To The Lighthouse*; in a great, apparently involuntary, rush. Why then? I have no notion. But I wrote the book very quickly. And when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her. (81)

What Woolf elucidates here is the way that mourning can be achieved through making art. For Woolf, as for her character Lily Briscoe, art is the medium through which one is able to articulate loss and become released from its grasp. Lily paints that process while Virginia Woolf writes through it in the form of a novel.

Woolf addresses the way mourning is made possible for her through writing. She is unsure why it was that suddenly she wrote the novel that allowed her to release herself from the memory of her mother, but believed this experience might be similar to the psychoanalytic cure. It is, however, important to recognize that she does not analyze her experience using psychoanalytic language. Instead she draws a tentative comparison between the effects of psychoanalysis upon its subject and her own process achieved through the act of writing. She writes:

I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients, I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and laid it to rest. But what is the meaning of “explained” it? Why, because I described her and my feeling for her in that book, should my vision of her and my feeling for her become so much dimmer and weaker? (81)

What Woolf elucidates is the mechanism of the talking cure, but instead of talking as the subject does, Woolf writes a novel. Her description of the obsession and its subsequent

disappearance speaks to the strange and wonderful way in which one can understand theory through narrative fiction. The objective of psychoanalysis is, in rather reductive terms, to uncover the repressed material that lies hidden in the unconscious and is the root of our suffering. The fact that Woolf brings psychoanalysis to an understanding of her healing process is perhaps evidence of an unconscious gesture, but it does not diminish the weight of the comparison or the potential for a psychoanalytic reading that she invites to her work. She remains the artist, capable of analyzing her experience, while at the same time resisting any obligation to a clinical approach.

### **Julia Prinsep Duckworth Stephen and Mrs. Ramsay**

Woolf's relationship to the death of her mother, begs to be read through Lily Briscoe's relationship to Mrs. Ramsey's death. This is not only a structural and thematic parallel, for it is arguable that Mrs. Ramsey is a character made in the image of Woolf's mother.

Searching the pages of *To The Lighthouse* for a description of Mrs. Ramsey's physical presence is to encounter it everywhere. Her beauty, her power as the figure of both mother and wife, as the archetypal figure of the feminine, strongly shapes the narrative. Sitting at the dinner table, Lily observes Mrs. Ramsey, thinking to herself, "She put a spell on them all, by wishing, so simply, so directly" (101). It was not only her beauty that cast a spell, though "her face was all lit up—without looking young, she looked radiant" but it was the weight of her loveliness that she wielded with such deft strength:

Mrs. Ramsey, Lily felt, as she talked about the skins of vegetables, exalted that, worshipped that; held her hands over it to warm them, to protect it, and yet,

having brought it all about, somehow laughed, led her victims, Lily felt, to the alter. (101)

Lily is transfixed by the power Mrs. Ramsay exerts from the head of the table. For Lily she is all-powerful, desired by the gaze which she draws to her. Paul Rayley, Lily observes, is also drawn to Mrs. Ramsay: “all of a tremor, yet abstract, absorbed, silent. It came over her too now—the emotion, the vibration, of love. How inconspicuous she felt herself by Paul’s side! He, glowing, burning; she aloof, satirical” (101). Encompassed within this description is the erotic desire that one experiences before an object of desire. In this instance, Lily experiences a certain erotically charged desire for Mrs. Ramsay, and she interprets Paul’s gaze to signify something similar. They are both taken in by her mystique, the way she is lit up. Lily describes Mrs. Ramsay as both “frightening” and “irresistible”.

Woolf’s relationship to her mother can be characterized by the similar elements of fascination to those that Lily experienced for Mrs. Ramsay. Julia was, like Mrs. Ramsay, very beautiful, and as Woolf described her, it seems that she wielded a similar kind of power. Woolf spends a large portion of her memoir reflecting upon and trying to recollect by piecing together the woman, the wife, the mother. Of her “astonishing beauty” Woolf wrote, “I accepted her beauty as the natural quality that a mother—she seemed typical, universal, yet our own in particular—had by virtue of being our mother” (82). She was a figure of great significance in Woolf’s life, occupying “the very center of that great Cathedral space which was childhood” (81). It seems that for Woolf, the woman who lived was eclipsed in elegy. She became the ideal of maternity as well as beauty. In similar fashion, the characters in *To The Lighthouse* are transfixed by Mrs. Ramsay’s great beauty as the archetypal figure of motherhood. It is a captivation that only increases in her absence.

### **Lily Briscoe's Act of Mourning**

In an essay on *To the Lighthouse* called "The Brown Stocking" Eric Auerbach argues that the enigmatic quality of the novel which is preserved throughout is not concluded at its end. However, it seems that it is precisely there that its second half, which is distinguished by a mysterious quality of melancholia, finds its resolution. As Auerbach writes, "The meaning of the relationship between the planned trip to the lighthouse and the actual trip many years later remains unexpressed, enigmatic, only dimly conjectured" (Auerbach 552). Rather, it seems that Lily's "concluding vision" allows for the resolution. It functions as a node where the novel's threads come together and the "enigmatic" trip to the lighthouse becomes much less obscure when considered in light of Lily's final vision.

What is in question is the healing made possible for Lily through the stroke of her brush, that is to say, the creation of art. In the final scene of the novel the reader is taken farther outside of its frame in order to see the whole condensed within a single image. Lily's painting becomes a metaphor for the scene of the novel in such a way that allows for its meaning to be made visible, condensed, and reconfigured as it were through another medium. It does a kind of service or work which is twofold. On the one hand it describes the healing that can be achieved through creating art, while on the other it reveals the work of fiction itself as the medium through which reality encounters its truth. Lily understands her experience when considered through the frame of her canvas. And it is this same thing that occurs at the level of the work of fiction. That is the significance of literature, for to understand reality through its reproduction is perhaps to be brought much closer to it.

The connection between this and psychoanalysis is one of truth and fiction. In both literature and psychoanalysis the story is the medium. Language is in a sense no less a part of the mimetic process, for there is a translation involved in speech.<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf comes to terms with the death of her mother through writing the novel, Lily comes to terms with Mrs. Ramsay's death through painting her, and the patient comes to terms with their process through telling it again and again before the analyst. Each of these acts is one of translation in order to bring oneself closer to what requires telling.

The novel's final vision, belonging to Lily, centers around a painting that she began at the beginning of the story and finishes at its end. It symbolizes not only the importance of Mrs. Ramsay's life and death, but serves as well to mark the passage of time. It depicts Mrs. Ramsay reading to her son James. It is first introduced in a scene between Lily and the character of Mr. Bankes. On the lawn where she paints, he stands behind her to survey the work. "It was Mrs. Ramsay reading to James"(52), Lily explained to Mr. Bankes. (a gesture that will later repeat between Lily and Mrs. Ramsay)<sup>2</sup>. Afterwards she fumbles, "becoming once more under the power of that vision which she had seen clearly once and must now grope for among hedges and houses and mothers and children—her picture" (58). The scene is brief and hedged with her insecurity. The reader is called in to share with her in the difficulty of putting the scene within the novel to paper.

It is a question of translating the vision through paint that frustrates Lily and yet it is a necessary act for the artists just as it is for her to tolerate the gaze of the spectator. Of this she thought, "one must" and "braced herself to withstand the awful trial of someone looking at her

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<sup>1</sup> As Lacan wrote of the unconscious, it is structured like a language.

<sup>2</sup> Later on she will describe the same scene: "She remembered how William Bankes had been shocked by her neglect of the significance of mother and son. Did she not admire their beauty? he said." ( 176).

picture” (52). She must consecrate the moment by committing it to her canvas for something occurs between the seeing and the painting which changes it. “She could not show him what she wished to make of it, could not see it even herself without a brush in her hand” (53). There is an evident conflict in each of these instances. Lily is uncomfortable before Mr. Bankes and she is troubled by how difficult it is to paint what she sees yet somehow through painting her vision she stills life, in much the same way that Mrs. Ramsay does. It is both the act of painting and its having been seen by another that at first vex, and subsequently thrill, Lily Briscoe. Woolf describes her discomfiture, her terror and the bold necessity that drives Lily through the scene of painting. At its close the narrative sweeps farther out, making smooth the rough surface of her character’s experience.

But it had been seen; it had been taken from her. This man had shared with her something profoundly intimate. And, thanking Mr. Ramsay for it and the hour and the place, crediting the world with a power which she had not suspected—that one could walk away down that long gallery not alone any more but arm in arm with somebody—the strangest feeling in the world, and the most exhilarating. (54)

Lily has committed the scene on the lawn to the canvas, thereby preserving it from decay. The “strangest feeling” expresses perhaps the intimacy that she experienced with Mr. Bankes behind her but its power comes from Mrs. Ramsay’s considerable presence. There is, between herself, Mr. Bankes and Mrs. Ramsay, a communion before the image, which though it troubles its maker, affords her the greatest exhilaration.

This vision, which causes Lily to stir, to attempt the creation of it on paper, returns again at the end of the novel and once at its middle when she is at the dinner table. She takes comfort in it during the dinner scene; it is her refuge, to know that she will be able to go back and finish it. “She remembered, all of a sudden as if she had found a treasure, that she had her work. In a

flash she saw her picture, and thought, Yes I shall put the tree further in the middle” (84). The visual anchors the narrative in this instance. There is conversation going on around, and Lily is a part of it, but suddenly Woolf pulls us in closer to the minutia of the visual, reminding us of what is seen rather than heard. There is the scene as created by Woolf and translated by the reader’s imagination, and there is the image that belongs to Lily. She is part of the scene but she also has her own vision that exists in her imagination. Woolf weaves in and out of these multiple perspectives, as though through a network of visions that are at once connected to one another while also maintaining each its own boundary. The image of the dinner table and its many guests depicts the physical surface of experience while that which lies hidden beyond the frame of the scene or the page, which has not even been placed on paper has a kind of vibrancy that outlasts reality. These are the several layers of a work of fiction which mimic reality and which can at times feel more real than the thing itself.

### **Repetition**

The end of the novel marks the third encounter with Lily’s painting. She returns to the Scottish seaside house with Mr. Ramsay, Cam, James, and Mr. Carmichael. Time has passed; the children have grown into teenagers, and Mrs. Ramsay has been dead for ten years. Sitting at the breakfast table in the morning Lily remembers the painting that she never finished. What was forgotten returns:

Suddenly she remembered. When she had sat there last ten years ago there had been a little sprig or leaf pattern on the table-cloth, which she had looked at in a moment of revelation. She had never finished that picture. She would paint that picture now. It had been knocking about in her mind all these years. (147)

Lily recalls both the painting and the thought of it at the dinner table. It was abandoned for ten years as was the house but suddenly it returns and is taken up again. It seems to be by chance that Lily remembers the painting, the untold scene of Mrs. Ramsay reading to James on the porch, but it is in fact due to the nature of the repetition compulsion. One might understand the repetition of the painting as significant and deliberate. It repeats throughout at the level of the text as though by chance. And yet, if we are to consider it in the light of the novel's conclusion, what has repeated will finally be resolved and put to rest when Lily finishes the painting. This is the point at which she is first able to recognize the painful loss that was Mrs. Ramsay's death.

Of the act of repetition and the way that it first presents itself to the subject, Jacques Lacan describes in *The Four fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. "Repetition first appears in a form that is not clear, that is not self-evident, like a reproduction, or a making present, *in act*" (Lacan 50). The gesture that is painting is in the case of Lily the act. She puts paint to paper in reproducing the scene. However, as Woolf makes evident, in each instance of the painting, as it is first described and subsequently recollected, there are several layers of distance between the image itself and its reproduction. The reproduction of the scene might be said to be an attempt to "make present" what has already past. The moment or moments shared between Mrs. Ramsay and James, which Lily sees and then seeks to translate onto the page, are in some sense impossible to recreate. It has already passed and therefore to recall it is merely to repeat.

As the final gesture of the vision unfolds at the end of the novel, Lily is brought to a place of quiet and resolution. It is not a third repetition, but rather, in Lacan's terminology, it becomes a mastering of the painful event. There is a tension between the thing itself and its translation onto paper. The novel addresses this conflict throughout, and Lily's vision is one instance in which it becomes less harsh, less impassable perhaps. She reasons with such tension through her

resolve to paint what she sees, to see the vision to its finish upon her page. The significance of Lily's painting brings us back again to the question of change. Must one contest it? Woolf asks this at every point in the text and plot of *To the Lighthouse*. It is perhaps the novel's gravest point of investigation. It increases in severity towards the end of the novel when Lily stands before her painting:

But what a power was in the human soul! She thought. That woman sitting there writing under the rock resolved everything into simplicity; made these angers, irritations fall off like old rags; she brought together this and that and then this, and so made out of that miserable silliness and spite (she and Charles squabbling, sparring, had been silly and spiteful) something—this scene on the beach for example, this moment of friendship and liking—which survived, after all these years complete, so that she dipped into it to re-fashion her memory of him, and there it stayed in the mind affecting one almost like a work of art. (160)

Throughout the novel Mrs. Ramsay is a character who holds the narrative fabric together. Her considerable power is housed in the fact that she orchestrates meaning. Hers is the world of the intimate, the interpersonal. And yet Lily, for whom Mrs. Ramsay is the most elevated figure, expresses her ambivalence in the face of Mrs. Ramsay's death: "How aimless it was, how chaotic, how unreal it was she thought, looking at her empty coffee cup. Mrs. Ramsay dead; Andrew killed; Prue dead too—repeat it as she might, it roused no feeling in her" (Woolf 146). The facts of the death remain lodged firmly at the level of language in their empty repetition. They do not penetrate our narrator's experience, but sit instead upon the surface of the prose. It demonstrates the fiction that is death, if one is unable to process it. It begs the question, and that is perhaps why it is so difficult to contend with: where is one to find meaning if everything appears to occur quite by chance? Here is displayed the tension between meaning and senselessness. Lily cannot feel the loss of Mrs. Ramsay, and yet when considering her image

through the painting she feels close to her, is made aware of her ability to make meaning in life and in memory. Whether or not Lily has processed the fact of Mrs. Ramsay's death, she has preserved in memory the scene in the painting. It has been kept alive for all those years, not by chance, but by its deliberate dedication to the page.

As Lily realizes, it is Mrs. Ramsay whose work of art is the making of meaning. She too, though without a page, stills time by preserving the moment. It is not one gesture but several through which she achieves this:

“Like a work of art,” she repeated, looking from her canvas to the drawing-room steps and back again. She must rest for a moment. And, resting, looking from one to the other vaguely, the old question which traversed the sky of the soul perpetually, the vast, the general question which was apt to particularize itself at such moments as these, when she released faculties that had been on the strain, stood over her, paused over her, darkened over her. What is the meaning of life? That was all—a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other; herself and Charles Tansely and the breaking wave; Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs. Ramsay saying, “Life stand still here”; Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent—this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said. “Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!” she repeated. She owed it all to her. ( 161)

As Lily paints in the novel's final scenes, something is released. Something falls away from the woman who could not see or perhaps did not want to feel what she had lost and tied together are several threads from the novel's construction. She realizes the power of Mrs. Ramsay who steers the novel along its course, because of the fact that she alone creates meaning.

Woolf places her at the center of the work, and there she presides, just as she does in the literal center of the novel from the head of the table, serving out the Boeuf en Daube. For Mrs. Ramsay, feeding her friends and family the particularly tender pieces, gives them meaning, makes it all make sense. The question then becomes whether or not Mrs. Ramsay herself constructed such meaning through living as she did, or whether she merely uncovered it within her surroundings. Perhaps it matters little which of the two it is. Did she create it or did she find it, or perhaps in finding it she created it, but Mrs. Ramsay is an artist just as Lily is a painter, and Mr. Carmichael a poet, it is simply that what she makes does not linger past its fleeting moment. This every character knows to be true.

The act of painting the scene on her page has given her a voice to cry out. Lily is no longer silenced. Through the reworking of visual aesthetics, Lily experiences the loss that was not felt for so many years. It is an act of repetition. At first she calls Mrs. Ramsay's name out, " 'Mrs. Ramsay!' Lily cried, 'Mrs. Ramsay!' " But nothing happened. The pain increased" (180). Her pain is so great, her experience of sudden suffering, made possible by crying out, that it threatens to consume her, to pull her "into the waters of annihilation" (180). She cries out but the pain is experienced in her body so the words hold no weight. As Woolf writes:

For how could one express in words these emotions of the body? Express that emptiness there? (she was looking at the drawing- room steps; they looked extraordinarily empty. ) It was one's body feeling, not one's mind. The physical sensations that went with the bare look of the steps had become suddenly extremely unpleasant. To want and not to have, sent all up her body a hardness, a hollowness, a strain. And then to want and not to have—to want and want—how that wrung the heart, and wrung it again and again! Oh, Mrs. Ramsay!" (178)

The physical experience of pain comes before its verbal expression. Lily has realized that she loves Mrs. Ramsay whom she has lost. Woolf describes this according to a dialect of desire. “And then to want and not to have—to want and want—how that wrung the heart, and wrung it again and again!” Mrs. Ramsay has been realized finally as the object of love that she has been for Lily. Lily craves her protection, she desires her, has desired her since before her death and then was not able, until this moment to mourn her because she was unable to recognize the desire that laid the foundation of her relationship to Mrs. Ramsay. As Freud writes of the process of mourning, it is only made possible when the object of love can be recognized as such. That is what happens for Lily when she can come to terms with her desire. What marks the concluding vision is Lily’s love for Mrs. Ramsay as it is brought to consciousness.

In a scene much earlier in the novel, Lily, her head upon Mrs. Ramsay’s knee, contemplates her feelings for the woman. Her position mirrors exactly that of the scene that she will later paint: The little boy leaning against his mother’s knee. Woolf writes her internal dialogue:

What device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored? Could the body achieve, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intricate passages of the brain? Or the heart? Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? For it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge, she had thought, leaning her head on Mrs. Ramsay’s knee. ( 51)

Here Mrs. Ramsay is described by Lily as her object of adoration in exactly the same sense that Freud writes of an object of love. She wants to achieve one-ness, and wonders if it is possible, but the question of loving is a mystery. As she posits, intimacy with another cannot be

put into words for it is not of language. It is a certain knowledge, recalling Lily's confusion at the inability to express in language what she will feel at the end of the book: "For how could one express in words these emotions of the body?" (178). The painting can be understood as a means through which Lily is able to describe what she cannot speak. She paints the scene, she is brought face to face with her own desire, which earlier in the novel so clearly defied her speaking its name.

Lily has loved Mrs. Ramsay all along, but love cannot be told in words. This further emphasizes the much broader question raised by the novel: How does one encounter truth through fiction? And Woolf posits through the character of Lily Briscoe, that one can only understand their truth through the mimetic arts. Woolf heals from her mother's death, as she reminds us, through writing *To the Lighthouse* and Lily heals from Mrs. Ramsay's death through painting the scene of mother and son. This mirroring is not accidental. It reveals the power of fiction, of the rendering which allows the thing itself to come into focus. And whether that thing is reality itself, becomes somehow less important than coming to terms with the meaning. The analysant speaks, and in doing so unravels their private fictions: the analyst reads these by listening. The artist paints their vision and it becomes something else on the page. That which comes into being through such a transaction, whether it is telling the story of her life or painting what she sees, is where the meaning comes into focus.

## Chapter II

### Time in *Mrs. Dalloway*

*Mrs. Dalloway*, which takes place over the course of one day, is narrated through time, the dialogue broken by the repeated striking of London's main city clock, Big Ben. Different temporalities are placed in close proximity. The clock strikes to mark the passing of the hours and to punctuate the dialogue of the characters, all of which leads towards Clarissa's party which in ending the novel concludes the day.

There is a gap between the two kinds of time with which Woolf deals, that is, between the external chronological time and internal time of her characters. Paul Ricoeur writes in 'Fictive Experience of Time' from *Time and Narrative* (1984), "Only fiction, precisely, can explore and bring to language this divorce between world-views and their irreconcilable perspectives on time, a divorce that undermines public time" (Ricoeur 107). Woolf demonstrates this "divorce", or rather emphasizes its irreparability through a constant juxtaposition of chronological time and internal time within the narrative. The narrative is measured against clock time while at the same time resisting its structure. But Woolf allows the tension that is created to inform the narrative arc.

*Mrs. Dalloway* begins with Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway out buying flowers on Victoria Street on a beautiful London morning, when she becomes conscious of the passing of the hour. There is a pause, that she experiences as the stilling of life, as time creeps up to meet her present:

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. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. (Woolf 24)

This is the first mention of the phrase that inaugurates the novel's exploration of time: "Leaden circles dissolved in the air." It repeats three times, once at its beginning, in the middle and its end. It is, however, at none of its appearances within the text, part of the characters' dialogue, but seems instead to be inserted by the presence of the narrator. The pause that occurs, the hush that Clarissa experiences as something pleasant, promising the great event, "the hour, irrevocable", is paired in the same breath with the way that time threatens life. It seems to draw Clarissa into the present by marking the hour past, the new one begun, suggesting that it is time that stitches experience in such a way as to give it meaning. In another scene a few hours after this first one, the somewhat insignificant event of a lunch party and Clarissa's dismay at not having been invited to it, becomes the vehicle for describing her fear of time. Woolf writes:

No vulgar jealousy could separate her from Richard. But she feared time itself, and read on Lady Bruton's face, as if it had been a dial cut in impassive stone, the dwindling of life; how year by year her share was sliced; how little the margin that remained was capable any longer of stretching, of absorbing, as in the youthful years, the colors, salts, tones of existence, so that she filled the room she entered, and felt often as she stood hesitating one moment on the threshold of her drawing-room, an exquisite suspense. (Woolf 28)

At the level of syntax Woolf pairs these two contrasting experiences by layering them one upon the other. Both jealousy of her husband's invitation, the lunch party, fear and suspense within time, are condensed into one paragraph. And so it is throughout the novel that the

mundane is placed next to the more probing questions of inner experience that Woolf asks. It is “the art of fiction” which, as Ricoeur puts it, “consists in weaving together the world of action and that of introspection, of mixing together the sense of everydayness and that of the inner self.” (Ricoeur 104). The boundaries between the external affairs of a life, and one’s internal consciousness are unclear, but the job of the novel, or Woolf’s work at least in *Mrs. Dalloway*, is to demonstrate this, to demand this rendering with precision.

### **Septimus and Proportionality**

The narrative structure of the novel is perfectly syncopated, in accordance with the rhythm of the clock. Consciousness in language is repeatedly broken by the reminder of the hour, an occurrence both feared and longed for by the characters whether it is the passing of the day or the passing of a life. Time does not ubiquitously threaten, rather it nudges and coaxes its participants along. However; the character Septimus Smith, is at odds with time, after it begins to symbolize something much greater and more fearsome than the passage of the hours. For Septimus, time becomes unbearable, a physical reminder like, “the leaden circles dissolved in the air” of imposed order: consensus reality.

The reader meets Septimus at the beginning of *Mrs Dalloway*, as he stands part of a crowd that gazes at letters carved in the sky by an airplane. His wife Rezia beckons for him to look, but for him, Woolf writes, “There was nobody. Her words faded. So a rocket fades. Its sparks, having grazed their way into the night, surrender to it, dark descends” (Woolf 23). The world for Septimus is beginning to resemble an unbearable pattern: “the sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern”(22). But, Septimus assures himself, “he would not go mad. He would shut his eyes; he would see no more” (22). One comes

to learn, as the story continues, that Septimus has condemned himself for having committed a great sin against humanity: “so there was no excuse; nothing whatever the matter, except the sin for which human nature had condemned him to death; that he did not feel” ( 89). He watched his captain and great friend killed in battle, but as Woolf writes, he felt nothing for, “the war had taught him. It was sublime. He had gone through the whole show, friendship, European War, death, had won promotion, was still under thirty and was bound to survive” (84). Septimus may have moments of psychosis, but he disputes it with reason, determined that he has committed a crime, a crime for which he deserves to die. He exists then in a no man’s land, outside of time because he has lost its proportions, but inside of it insofar as he employs reason to condemn himself. The psychosis does not erase the self-consciousness that breeds self hatred. in fact it exacerbates it. It becomes a paradox: the sin for which he believes he is guilty, his unfeeling, is what allowed him to survive the war. Woolf demonstrates how the perfect reasoning of a rational individual such as Septimus is at once irrational.

Clarissa Dalloway’s experience sheds light on Septimus’, her fear mirroring his, almost as if they share something in life, though what it is is unclear. Septimus begins to wonder if, “it might be possible that the world is without meaning” (86) and so it does become for him, enough so that he exits it completely. Suicide, however, is not Clarissa’s response to similar doubts about her existence. She is given an anchor somehow in the world, “what she liked was simply life” (118). And yet she doubts its sense, as Woolf writes:

But to go deeper, beneath what people said (and these judgments, how superficial, how fragmentary they are!) in her own mind now, what did it mean to her, this thing she called life? Here was So-and-so in South Kensington; some one up in Bayswater; and somebody else, say, in Mayfair. And she felt quite continuously a sense of their existence; and she

felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. And it was an offering; to combine, to create; but to whom? (119)

Clarissa's dialogue, hedged ever so lightly with doubt, does resolve itself at the offering of creation. She goes below the words that are spoken, the judgments one forms, to consider the things of life and all its nameless bodies to whom she is in some way connected. It begs the question, of how then she might be linked to Septimus, for this passage, while signaling certain resonance between the two characters, also foreshadows in its content and form, what will come in the final scene of the novel: Clarissa will come into full contact with Septimus when she is told of his death at her party. And the very event at which this consummated connection occurs is the "offering" of which she speaks. It is the symbol of bringing people together, of creating something amidst what may be a meaningless world. The concept of this kind of creation, the way that Clarissa creates in the sphere of the social, puts her in the place of the artist. Here recalled is the character, Mrs. Ramsay who, in *To the Lighthouse*, is also an artist in this way. She too wonders at what lies beneath, at the pattern hidden behind the cotton wool that is life. She stills time, creates something lasting of the moment and for all those around her, gives meaning to a world which can at times seem to be entirely meaningless. Clarissa's act of making is, however, much more private, and she, unlike Mrs. Ramsay, is at odds with the external somehow. In this she resembles Septimus. She hobbles through time, pushing up against it, relishing its passage, and yet fearing it.

## Proportionality and Conversion

Woolf employs two terms to explain the symbol that time presents in the novel: Proportionality and Conversion. Both become complex signifiers as they are married within the text. Proportionality is a relationship of two terms. One has a fixed value while the other can shift accordingly. The sliding term is what is said to be in proportion to the fixed term. Woolf uses it to describe having a sense of time. That is, acting proportionally to fixed chronological time. Proportionality is introduced into the narrative by the doctor, Sir William Bradshaw, who Septimus visits for treatment. As Woolf writes, for “Sir William said he never spoke of “madness” he called it not having a sense of proportion” (94). As Woolf seems to hint at, the fixed part of the proportion, in the case of the clock, is an arbitrary marker when held up against psychical time. The two do not converge though our lives are set in pace to the clock. The passage of interior time, that is psychical time, does not chime accordingly with the clock. To say that one does not have a sense of proportion seems then, in this case, to imply that their experience is not in line with that which Time represents.

The kind of time prescribed by Sir William Bradshaw, that of proportionality and conversion is termed “Monumental Time” by Paul Ricoeur who writes, “To this monumental time belong the figures of authority and power that form the counterweight to the living times experienced by Clarissa and Septimus” (Ricoeur 106). Ricoeur notes that chronological time is just as much a symbol of monumental time as it is a system of measurement. Ricoeur writes:

In agreement with it [time] is everything that, in the narrative, evokes monumental history, to use Nietzsche’s expression, and to begin with, the admirable marble décor of the imperial capital (the “real” place, in this fiction, of all the events and their internal reverberations). ( Ricoeur 106)

What Ricoeur has done in signaling time as a much more broad and encompassing symbol, is to open it up as an idea and liberate its signifiers. Time is not simply the clock. Time symbolizes a larger system of measurement, a system that encompasses history, the human being, the order that civilization strives for. In much the same way, *Mrs. Dalloway* investigates time from all of its sides. It is at once the clock chiming the hours, and an instrument symbolizing something beyond time.

Woolf describes Conversion as the “sister” of proportion, that is “less smiling, more formidable” (Woolf 97). Her use of the word proportion, is not necessarily in line with its definition. Of its several definitions, it means to alter someone’s belief of faith and in this light it might be understood in light of Woolf’s vision. It functions in the novel as the counterpart to subjective internal time. That is, if one is to understand proportionality as having a strong sense of external clock-time, conversion is what results from this, implying the human being completely eclipsed by the rigid confines of time. Woolf writes of Conversion:

A Goddess even now engaged—in the heat and sands of India, the mud and swamp of Africa, the purlieus of London—in dashing down shrines, smashing idols, and setting in their place her own stern countenance.” (97).

The concept of conversion is difficult to understand within the novel because the word’s usage is never clear. Woolf uses the figure of a Goddess because the conception of it is quite outside of reality. Conversion and proportionality do not exist in the flesh, but they are promulgated secretly, silently by the order that is demanded at the hands of time. Here one can begin to see that the refrain of “the leaden circles dissolved in the sky” is an image that fits this

more elusive verbal description of time. The Goddess Conversion lies like a leaden weight upon her victims. She feasts on the human will because that is part of the subjective life of the human.

The reality of a world wherein Conversion goes about “dashing down shrines and smashing idols” is not one that Woolf seems to trust. She wrote in her diary while working on the novel, “I substantiate willfully, to some extent, distrusting reality—its cheapness” (D2 249). The Goddess of Conversion lends her smiling visage as a mask for proportion. She represents what it is that Septimus comes to find so hideous about the human being. For Ricoeur, conversion in the novel is synonymous with monumental time. It is all bound up with the clock, hours ringing past perfectly in proportion. In Paul Ricoeur’s analysis, “Clock time, the time of monumental history, the time of authority figures—[is] the same time! Dominated by this monumental time, more complex than simple chronological time, the hours are heard to ring out” (Ricoeur, 106). Ricoeur, in arguing that clock time is dominated by monumental time, enforces the understanding that it is conversion that rules clock time. Proportion is perhaps what it proscribes, but conversion, Woolf writes, is what “...feasts most subtly on the human will” (Woolf 95) and is the dangerous result of this neat quantification. It is what changes the human being. Woolf writes Conversion’s harsh dealings upon the world, not as it impacts the characters, but simply as it cuts up the day with the abrupt ordering of clock hands:

Shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing, the clocks of Harley Street nibbled at the June day, counseled submission, upheld authority, and pointed out in chorus the supreme advantages of a sense of proportion, until the mound of time was so far diminished that a commercial clock, suspended above a shop in Oxford Street, announced, genially and fraternally, as if it were a pleasure to Merrs. Rigby and Lowndes to give the information gratis, that it was half-past one. (100)

Proportion, here mentioned by the third person omniscient narrator, “counseled submission” to time. In its brutality, this description of time mimics the onslaught of the world upon Septimus. He experiences time as something that splits up, breaks up, leaves the human wounded. In this way it is not time itself but that which time represents that does this. It symbolizes the destruction of life, so at odds is it with what he experiences internally. Woolf repeats the language from the previous passage that she uses to describe time in a passage in which Septimus experiences a similar splitting. While there is no witness, apart from the reader, to the splitting of the day described by the narrator, it foreshadows Septimus’ experience. This is one of the many places within the novel where the narrative displays convergent experience. Thoughts are shared by narrator and characters or between characters; life linked according to the rhythm of the clock is also destroyed by it and this Woolf does this through her tightly syncopated prose. There is always the ripple, which sets it in motion, recalling shared experience. At the mention of time, Septimus is set off like an alarm. Woolf writes:

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. ( 68)

Language is related to time in this sense, taking its place as one of the signifiers belonging to it. The word as it appears capitalized is further emphasized, made into a proper noun to be feared as one fears a person capable of inflicting violence. The action described, of splitting, pouring its “riches” upon him, is unrelated to time. Out of time comes words. At first “riches” but then the image shifts. The riches become “hard, white, imperishable. Words.” And

they fly back to the husk from which they came: Time. It is a vicious action that mimics the movement of the novel.

In a scene in Regents Park, the lives of Septimus, Rezia and Peter Walsh cross briefly. There is an old woman who Peter hears singing as he passes by and the song is also heard by Rezia. They are listening at the same time, but Woolf takes us from the dialogue of one to the other linearly; first Peter, then Rezia. The scene also recalls Septimus' immortal ode to Time. The song that the old woman sings belongs to no voice and no time. It is, as Peter Walsh hears it, "the voice of no age or sex" (79). It is perhaps the immortal ode that Septimus loathes, for according to Woolf's narrative of it, the words that flew from time's split husk, seem to return in the old woman's song. She writes:

"A sound interrupted him; a frail quivering sound, a voice bubbling up without direction, vigour, beginning or end, running weakly and shrilly and with an absence of all human meaning into  
ee um fah um so  
foo swee too eem oo. (Woolf 79)

The old woman's song, as heard in this instance by Peter, is without human meaning, having no beginning or end and he pities her and is set on edge by the strange melody. But when Rezia listens she hears a different song, one that comforts for its oddity. The sound she hears is described: "Cheerfully, almost gaily, the invincible thread of sound wound up into the air like the smoke from a cottage chimney" (81). Temporally, Rezia and Peter Walsh have taken part in something together, have crossed into each other's private worlds, through experiencing the old woman's song, but each hears something different. The scene then circles back to Septimus' depiction of time, as though to say that even within time moving forward, there is a return to the

past as a moment is experienced simultaneously. This reminder, ghostly at times, comes as a pulse throughout the novel, almost as though the narrative could be understood as a piece of music to be played by four hands. The clock is present, beating out the hours of the day, but poured over that rhythm are eddies of consciousness that belong to the characters.

### **Septimus' Madness**

The word madness, which is used sparingly in *Mrs. Dalloway* and only with reference to Septimus, signifies both mental illness and the heightened state that it can induce. In the *Oxford English Dictionary* an array of definitions are cited, from mental psychosis to “wild excitement or enthusiasm; ecstasy; exuberance or lack of restraint”<sup>3</sup>(O.E.D). As with any word, its meaning is never singular. In the case of Septimus, who comes undone both physically and emotionally after he has left the war, madness implies something different when used by the doctor than when used by the man himself and Woolf never offers any objective evidence which the reader might use to neatly diagnose or proscribe him. Sickness, illness, insanity are all different states, and in a novel where the narrative is constantly moving between them as it winds amongst the thoughts of its characters, it is difficult to assign any fixed meanings.

Woolf never diagnoses her character though it is evident that part of his suffering is due to his experience at war, providing readers with ample material for a clear case of PTSD. After surviving the war, his symptoms begin to appear years later, evidence of the kind of latency found in victims of war trauma. As Karen DeMeester puts it in her essay, “Postwar Recovery in *Mrs. Dalloway*” from the book, *Virginia Woolf and Trauma: Embodied Texts*, Septimus is, “The

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<sup>3</sup> "madness, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2016. Web. 10 March 2016.

ultimate paradigm of the trauma survivor” (DeMeester 80), and certainly he is just that, but as Woolf makes clear, he is a human being and his character is not meant to typify, but rather to embody the archetypal character of human suffering.

Septimus is at times ecstatic, and at times despairing, full of fear. [“He had, especially in the evening, these sudden thunderclaps of fear” (85)]. His symptoms demonstrate a spectrum of experience too complex to warrant the clinical diagnosis that most critics allot him, and Woolf, it seems was resolved not to write one. In a diary entry from 1922, well before the novel was finished Woolf wrote, “Mrs. Dalloway has branched into a book & I adumbrate here a study of insanity and suicide: the world seen by the sane & the insane side by side” (Woolf 207). Such an equalizing of experience, insanity and sanity placed on the same plane, describes exactly what the novel achieves. Clarissa and Septimus are the most obvious example of this pairing, but also when considered, the novel, as a whole work, achieves this equalizing action by placing its private narratives against one another to achieve what is at times a dissonance and at others a melodious conversation.

Septimus’ thunderclaps of fear are met with Mrs. Dalloway’s own, who upon entering her bedroom in the afternoon experiences herself as “a single figure against the appalling night, “suddenly shriveled, aged, breastless” ( Woolf 30). Clarissa’s thoughts adumbrate, to use Woolf’s word, a state that resembles Septimus’s, and yet here is the society lady presumed sane by the public, and the man presumed insane by his doctors, and their experience, in many ways is similar. This fact, this closeness between two separate characters, by virtue of their human experience, demonstrates Woolf’s unwillingness to classify and categorize. No one character is shown to be one sided, but instead has many faces, those shared and those kept hidden. She does

not diagnose Septimus but demonstrates through the narrative how one can understand the human experience when seen from its different sides.

In the final scene of the novel, at Clarissa's party, Clarissa learns of Septimus' suicide and the different narrative threads are brought together: time, death and consciousness. When placed before Clarissa, Septimus' death becomes a kind of sacrifice which provokes Clarissa to experience her life with renewed pleasure. After she learns of his death, she takes herself off to be alone, and considers:

The clock began striking. The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on. She must go back to them. But what an extraordinary night! She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away. The clock was striking. The leaden circle dissolved in the air. He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun. But she must go back. She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter. And she came in from the little room. (182)

Proportionality comes back in this context as the insane and the sane placed side by side. It becomes a question of a tipping of the scale that is one's life. Add just a bit too much and the balance fails. It is as if to say, look at this man, who could have survived, but the scale tipped every so slightly and he did not. Clarissa too, could have been Septimus. In fact Woolf herself claimed that it was Clarissa whom she originally intended to commit suicide, but decided against it. In the Modern Library edition of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf wrote in the introduction, that, "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" ( Woolf, vi). Perhaps something shifted that caused her to decide upon Septimus' death rather than Clarissa's. It is

nonetheless an uncanny circumstance that the two characters should share so much internally without ever coming into external contact. The doubling that Woolf sought to create is a notable characteristic of the uncanny as it has been understood both within psychoanalysis and literature. For surely there is something sinister in the connection between Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus. Both of them are characters who threaten to leave the world. One of them does ultimately, bringing him in death closer to the woman who in life was unknown to him.

Woolf demonstrates that the human experience is a spectrum, and it is a question of certain factors converging and acting together which might cause one to go over the edge, as it were, to become undone. This concept can be seen according to Freud's writing in *Moses and Monotheism*, in which he posits that pathological disturbance cannot be easily understood, that it is a mystery why some people succumb to it while others do not. His argument is structured around quantitative factors, in much the same way that Woolf writes about proportion, measuring sanity and insanity as part for part. Beginning with the trauma that is the beginning of the mental disturbance, Freud writes:

If we may assume that the experience acquires its traumatic character only as a result of a quantitative factor—that is to say, that in every case it is an excess in demand that is responsible for an experience evoking unusual pathological reactions—then we can easily arrive at the expedient of saying that something acts as a trauma in the case of one constitution but in the case of another would have no such effect. In this way we reach the concept of a sliding 'complemental series' as it is called, in which two factors converge in fulfilling an aetiological requirement. A less of one factor is balanced by a more of the other. ( Freud 73)

Freud has elucidated the aetiological mystery at work in any case of trauma. The “excess in demand” might happen to be enough to tip the scales, as it did for Septimus, whereas it did not for another. “Something acts as a trauma in the case of one constitution” but not in the case of another. And Woolf demonstrates this by her unwillingness to pathologize her characters. Septimus slips into his sickness as the novel progresses, but he is never fully gone, he is made to be understood by the reader; she as author does not dehumanize him in his suffering, does not place him in a neat clinical box with a diagnosis to close the case. Here proportion returns to account for Septimus’s sickness and death. He can no longer face converting himself to the structure of proportion and so he loses the drive to live.

**‘Indeed, we shall not fall out of this world. We are in it once and for all.’**

What merit is there in a name? Woolf begs us to consider this question. Does a name, a proper noun, tie up a life the way the clock holds time? Woolf plays with this question by pointing out the elasticity of meaning. Not surprisingly she had intended originally for the title of the novel to be *The Hours*, a fitting title for a story so closely linked with time, but she chose instead to name it after its main character. In her diary, she wrote of the process of writing the book, and hesitated over its title, asking, “this book, that is, the Hours, if that’s its name? One must write from deep feeling, said Dostoevsky. And do I? Or do I fabricate with words, loving them as I do?” (D2 248). This is the question that fiction begs us to consider, which comes to light in *To The Lighthouse* as well. That is, the place of language as mimicker or truth teller. There is always a fabrication involved in describing experience through language, but through language there is also always an array of possible meaning. This kind of multiplicity abounds in

Mrs. Dalloway, where nothing is singular, but has instead multiple significances, the double selves, parallel lives and thoughts and experiences.

Time, for example, as is evident, does not signify just one thing. It is the clock, as well as the “Immortal Time” ( 68) that is connected to Septimus. But even the names of the characters have an elastic meaning, for as Clarissa remarks, “She had herself the oddest sense of being herself invisible...this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway” (10). Woolf seems to suggest that somewhere in between these signifiers exists the woman herself. On an individual basis, within the self, there is no cohesion, but where lives converge, there is a wholeness to be found. Woolf demonstrates this in the text by overlapping experience. Clarissa, with her three different names signaling three possible identities, does not, despite this, fall through the cracks. Septimus does fall through though, recalling Ricoeur’s argument that there are holes in the narrative fabric, between the external and internal experience. Septimus ends up literally flinging himself out of this world by jumping off of the railing outside of his bedroom window.

Echoing Septimus’ fall is a small piece of text from Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents* where the author recalls to himself a bit of text from a play by the German author Christian Dietrich Grabbe. In Freud’s words, “the consolation offered by an original and somewhat eccentric dramatist to his hero who is facing a self- inflicted death. ‘We cannot fall out of this world’” (Fred 25). Freud uses the passage to understand the sensation of having no ego boundary between the self and the world. He calls it “the oceanic feeling”, describing it as, “a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole” ( 25). Septimus severs himself completely from the world by ending his life, but if it is as Grabbe writes, that one cannot fall out entirely, then his presence at the party is perhaps evidence of a kind of

permanence in life. Though unknown previously to Clarissa, Septimus is brought in close to her center in the final scene of the novel when she learns that he has died.

### Chapter III

#### Returning to the Lighthouse

#### **The dark side of the human being as it is seen in both *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway***

The sin for which Septimus decides himself guilty is a sin against humanity. He cannot feel. This is contrasted by his hatred of man. After the war ends he comes home and sees, or so he believes, the selfish nature of human beings, capable of inflicting all number of cruelties against their fellow men. This realization gnaws away at Septimus, making life unbearable. This is perhaps how he slowly begins to dissolve away from the world and to lose his grasp on life. Even Shakespeare's plays corroborate for him this terrible realization:

How Shakespeare loathed humanity—the putting on of clothes, the getting of children, the sordidity of the mouth and the belly! This was now revealed to Septimus: the message hidden in the beauty of the words. The secret signal which one generation passes, under disguise, to the next is loathing, hatred, despair. (86)

Before the war he loved to read Shakespeare, but now he sees it differently, understanding its contents as proof of the hideous crowd that is humanity. Poetry, which previously might have been a balm for the sick soldier, becomes the instrument with which to condemn the world further. Septimus thinks to himself, in spite of his wife Rezia who coaxes him to take pleasure in little daily frivolities, “The truth is (let her ignore it) that human beings have neither kindness, nor faith, nor charity beyond what serves to increase the pleasure of the moment” (87). Suddenly he sees the human being as a wretched creature who has no capacity to exist beyond the present moment, as one driven by the quest for pleasure at the cost of the

happiness of others. The word *moment* stands out in the passage, symbolizing something for Septimus that is quite different from what it means within the larger framework of Woolf's narrative. For Septimus it is disgusting that the human being should take pleasure in the moment, because for him it symbolizes gluttony for fleeting pleasure. By contrast, the moment is, according to narrator/ author, an important element of both the narrative of *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. Woolf constantly comes back to both time and meaning, begging us to wonder at how it is that the moment fades or persists.

Septimus' view is much more related to Sigmund Freud's, who also considered the human being to have an innately aggressive nature. According to him, as detailed in *Civilization and its Discontents*, the human being is driven by self satisfaction at the cost of the contentment of his fellow men. Woolf's concept of the moment, time, and the human being is at odds here with both Freud and the character whom she designed. While the moment is something cherished by Woolf's two heroines, Clarissa Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay, it is loathed by Septimus. Freud's understanding of the greedy man, in accordance with Septimus', overturns the Christian doctrine that one should love one's neighbor, proving it to be a lie which disregards human nature. According to Freud, no man could indeed love his neighbor:

The element of truth behind all this, which people are so ready to disavow, is that men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. (94)

In this passage by Freud the word "instinct" can be understood as a translation of its original German, meaning "drive": sex drive, life drive, death drive, that which can be understood as the human being's will to live in its various forms. Freud elucidates that in fact the

human being is driven by aggression rather than love. At the level of drives, which are unconscious, he writes that the human being is endowed with “a powerful share of aggressiveness.” The fact that Freud came to this idea after most of a lifetime spent studying the human subject does not diminish Septimus’ insight. The difference is that one man, the doctor, separates himself enough from it to write a book on the subject, while the other man is inside of a narrative and ends up being devoured by the demons that he finds present in his fellow men. There is, however, further evidence for the efficacy of Septimus’ realization, given by Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents* when he writes that if one cares to look at the atrocities of genocide and world war, there is ample evidence of human aggressiveness:

Anyone who calls to mind the atrocities committed, indeed, the horrors of the recent World War—anyone who calls these things to mind will have to bow humbly before the truth of this view” (95)

Such an understanding reflects Septimus’ own that he developed after his time in World War I. His illness is a result of his realization: mankind is cruel. But he is not exempt himself, instead, he condemns himself as a part of what he sees and loathes, his sin being that he feels nothing. He is no better than the rest of the sordid human race, because their suffering at the hands of each other does not touch him, that is to say, as Woolf writes, “That he did not feel” (89). That is the sin that he believes he committed, that he did not feel, felt nothing during the war and nothing afterwards, yet he is in anguish. At the same time he suffers, sees the horror but is numb to it. Woolf writes:

He had not cared when Evans was killed; that was worst; but all the other crimes raised their heads and shook their fingers and jeered and sneered over the rail of the bed in the early hours of the morning at the prostrate body that lay realizing its degradation. ( 89)

It is as if Septimus has taken responsibility, though perhaps unwillingly, for the crimes committed during war. It drives him towards madness, but there is a truth to be found amidst the madness. His realization, while it is evidence of a deepening instability of mind, bears with it a certain truth about the human being, that is, namely, that each of us holds a shadow, is capable of hatred and cruelty, and as Woolf seems to intimate through her investigation of this very same darkness, it is according to chance which side will be acted upon. But through her prose, in both *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, she sheds light on the human spectrum in such a way as to reveal that knowing of human aggression does not incriminate Septimus because our aggression exists along side the love of which we are also capable. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud writes about this coexistence of love and hate within the human being, a phenomenon that Woolf herself wrote about in *Moments of Being*: “It was only the other day when I read Freud for the first time, that I discovered that this violently disturbing conflict of love and hate is a common feeling” (108). As Freud understands it, love and hate are two sides of the same coin. They go hand in hand. It is natural that the human being should seek happiness by striving for love for we “look for satisfaction in loving and being loved” ( Freud 52). However, we are never so vulnerable as when we love, “never so defenceless against suffering as when we love” ( 52). So we protect ourselves against it. The other side of the coin is the innate aggression that operates at the same time as does the striving towards happiness by the path of love. Civilization threatens both our aggression and our drive to have pleasure through loving and being loved. Woolf shows this paradox that exists at the center of human experience through the temporal orientation of her prose in which experience is rendered by revealing its simultaneity, what is described by Michel Serres in “Feux et Signaux de Brume: Virginia Woolf’s Lighthouse”, as, “the superabundant multiplicity of durations” ( Serres 111). This is perhaps the particular power of the form of Mrs.

Dalloway. Woolf places lived experience on an equal plane, allowing the dark to be present beside the light, what is otherwise, discrepant experience.

Human aggression, as understood by both Freud and Septimus, is in direct conflict with the sense of being completely connected with the world, the sense that “we cannot fall out of this world but are in it once and for all”( Freud 25). Woolf, it seems to me, through her investigation of the place of the artist and time, shows evidence of a concern for the tension between the human proclivity towards violence and its opposite: that we want to hold on to this life and create something lasting of it. Woolf’s decision to take on the public life of man as well as his inner life reveals a sense of this dichotomy in the human being. She wrote of a design for Mrs. Dalloway in her diary, demonstrating her desire to highlight this point in the novel: “I want to give life & death, sanity and insanity; I want to criticize the social system, & to show it at work, at its most intense”( D2, 248). Continuing on in the same passage, Woolf describes what it is to strip down experience, attempting to show how it is not one sided. Her prose exposes internal experience as through it she peels back the casings which surround it. She wrote, “I feel as if I slipped off all my ball dresses & stood naked. Of course the mad part tries me so much, makes my mind squint so badly”( D2, 248). The feeling of standing naked after having slipped one’s dress off evokes the end of the night once the party is over and one undresses. Mrs. Dalloway will inevitably do just this after her party has ended and the novel concluded. As for the “mad part”, as she puts it, that was terribly difficult, but she put herself up to the task of peeling back the layers to expose us all standing naked at the end of the day. Within all of us there is the possibility of madness, as well as that of great pleasure and immense happiness.

Mrs. Ramsay and Mrs. Dalloway are two characters who seem to have a sense of both sides of the coin. Each is confronted by the shadowed side of man while at the same time cleaving towards lightness. In *To the Lighthouse* Mrs. Ramsay wonders:

How could any Lord have made this world? With her mind she had always seized the fact that there is no reason, order, justice: but suffering, death, the poor. There was no treachery too base for the world to commit; no happiness lasted. (64)

The presence of God comes into Mrs. Ramsay's dialogue in only two places in the text, though in each it is evoked with uncertainty. The question of impermanence rings out above the rest, but whether or not Mrs. Ramsay believes "No happiness lasted" to be true, is not clear. Perhaps she knows its truth but manages also to hold it at bay by living against it somehow. In another scene Mrs. Ramsay again evokes God:

Children don't forget, children don't forget—which she would repeat and begin adding to it, It will end, it will end, she said. It will come, it will come when suddenly she added, We are in the hands of the Lord. (63)

The repetition of each phrase signals its mystery. Life will end and presumably Mrs. Ramsay repeats her warning to the children in an attempt to save them from this inevitability. But the human will is given over in this context to that of the Lord. It provokes the question of where the divine is to be placed in this context. Mrs. Ramsay holds a sense of the divine throughout the novel. After she considers God, Mrs. Ramsay is immediately embarrassed before

herself. No one has heard her, at least the narrative suggests that these are her thoughts displayed as thoughts rather than spoken out loud. Woolf writes:

But instantly she was annoyed with herself for saying that. Who had said it? Not she; she had been trapped into saying something she did not mean. She looked up over her knitting and met the third stroke and it seemed to her like her own eyes meeting her own eyes, searching as she alone could search into her mind and her heart, purifying out of existence that lie, any lie. (63)

The light in which Mrs. Dalloway's own eyes are reflected is the stroke of the lighthouse that lashes out over the water, reminding her of existence. It seems to redeem her after she has spoken the name of God, for existence in this sense seems to be so much more indicative of the divine. It purifies the lie that is told by religion, but it is Mrs. Ramsay who is self-conscious about having a sense of religiosity. That is because Woolf cultivates a sense of the divine that is not rooted in any kind of religion. Rather, it comes to be through Mrs. Ramsay's communion with the natural world, and her particular power of creation in conjunction with this.

As Serres writes of this, "Mrs. Ramsay becomes the beam of the Lighthouse at which she is looking" (Serres 128). Serres argues for the presence of animism within the novel, using it as a way to understand how Woolf conceives of the importance of her physical world. Writing in the same essay about Woolf, he states that through her prose, "the soul of the world itself sings" (112). In *To the Lighthouse*, a life is measured according to the house, to a dinner of Boeuf en Daube, the stroke of the lighthouse. Mrs. Ramsay is a character steeped in animism. Though she carries considerable weight among people, she is also someone who animates the inanimate. The barrier between thing and person is diminished by their mixing. For Mrs. Ramsay, the rhythm of her external world becomes the measurement of time as well as meaning. For Serres, this is further proof of the underlying animist principles of the novel: it is the shifting of the world that

surrounds the human, by which a human life can be measured. But it is only by our presence within it—the eyes that see the stroke of the lighthouse—that give to these things their meaning and their life. It is, as Serres understands it, perception that creates what is perceived, or as he puts it, “perception changes the perceived” (116). One of the ways that this phenomenon can be understood within *To the Lighthouse*, is according to the physical structure of the house as it relates to its human inhabitants. The house comes alive through the presence of the people within it, but at the same time it is the house that marks the passage of life, and this, its living inhabitants are not granted the power to demonstrate

In Part II of the novel, entitled, “Time Passes”, Woolf animates the house in such a way as to give it a life of its own, walking the reader through its barren rooms, showing the degradation that comes of its having been abandoned by the family. This is Serres’ proof that the process of life is contingent upon perception. He asks, “Might our perception, then, oppose the entropy of things? *Might we exist as lighthouses* ( 117)? Woolf too asks why entropy cannot be kept at bay by the presence of the human being. Perhaps that presence is very much linked to perception, as Serres argues, one exists because one sees, the world is made real because one sees it. Surely this is true, but there exists in the same moment a tension between what comes and what goes just as quickly. Mrs. Ramsay dies and the house is left quite forgotten, perhaps because without her eyes, to “make it dazzling” ( 117) it can no longer stand up against time. Lily Briscoe and Septimus are two characters for whom the vision is so essential that it becomes painful at times. But while Lily creates something permanent by translating it onto the page, Septimus is unable to create from his. He is not an artist. On the other side, Mrs. Ramsay and Clarissa both have visions but theirs are different, rooted in the cultivation of their physical

surroundings, rather than its reproduction. Their form of art is the social gathering that does not persist past its event in time.

### **Creation Through Perception**

The work of fiction might be understood as the creation that comes of perception. An author, in a way, by seeing her story, makes it real. She has her vision, and then creates from it something on the page. Then the question: what is the purpose of this vision, or its making? Who profits by it? How does art change its beholder, and what, as with life, is its purpose? In *To the Lighthouse* it is the female world wherein life is preserved and given its brightness. Mrs. Ramsay does this for the people around her: husband, children, guests. She exists both inside and outside of the narrative, integral to its construction, as well as being the eyes looking in. At the center of the novel during the grand dinner scene in which Mrs. Ramsay serves out the brilliant Boeuf en Daube from the head of the table, her internal dialogue flows to and from the event as she both watches it happen and participates in its making. Woolf writes:

Raising her eyebrows at the discrepancy—that was what she was thinking, this was what she was doing—ladling out soup—she felt more and more strongly, outside that eddy; or as if a shade had fallen and robbed of colour, she saw things truly. There was no beauty anywhere. Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate. And the whole effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her. Again she felt, as a fact without hostility, the sterility of men, for if she did not do it nobody would do it, and so, giving herself the little shake that one gives a watch that has stopped, the old familiar pulse began beating, as the watch begins ticking—one, two, three. And so on and so on, she repeated, listening to it,

sheltering and fostering the still feeble pulse as one might guard a weak flame with newspaper. ( 83)

Mrs. Ramsay's voice in this scene is somewhat akin to that of an omniscient narrator. She watches from above, while at the same time she is a part of the action because it is she who allows it to occur. She serves the soup, feeds her guests. Like Woolf herself who presides over the making of her novel, the fictional Mrs. Ramsay orchestrates the narrative of the moment. Part of her power is due to her role as a woman ["she felt as a fact, the sterility of men."] for she is saddled with the weight of making life something beautiful. As Suzette A. Henke writes in her essay, "Mrs. Dalloway": The Communion of Saints", "Woolf pays tribute to the delicate and ephemeral art forms that grow out of the daily lives of women"(Henke 128), and characterizes Mrs. Ramsay as "a social artist who brings people together in new imaginative configurations" (128). Mrs. Ramsay does not accomplish this unconsciously, but rather with a great deal of effort. The "still feeble pulse" must be kept alive, she must wind the clock, or fan the flames—here Woolf conveys her truth through a mix of metaphors, not explaining in literal terms what it is that Mrs. Ramsay does exactly for those who surround her and for the male in particular.—by goading herself into creating something beautiful out of the mundane.

The male is nowhere to be found in this passage of the text. In fact it is as if all other presences have disappeared entirely and Mrs. Ramsay stands alone before existence. She is almost akin to God, so important is her particular creation; the creation of life. And that is perhaps why it must be the role of the feminine, the mother, who having literally given life to eight children, repeatedly gives life to the male for whom such giving is absolutely necessary. Like "a match burning in a crocus" (Woolf 35), it is both an external and an internal kind of beauty that she gives, one that burns from the inside out. The divine in this sense can be

glimpsed through Woolf's sense of the aesthetic. For there is beauty found in things. In her diary she wrote:

That the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. (72)

Mrs. Ramsay creates beauty as does a painter or a poet, so one might understand the divine to be present in this sense through the aesthetic. The spiritual nature of it is rooted in the act of creating, which belongs to the human world. Woolf sees that there can be no God, that the holy aspect of art is the thing itself and that the human being can take hold of such holiness, can become it in a sense. At the dinner table Mrs. Ramsay presides over the meal as an artist over her creation. She has cultivated and orchestrated the evening, thereby giving it meaning for those who partake of her creation.

The dinner scene might be understood as a sort of node within the narrative, from which many different meanings fan out. Questions of time, and of meaning amidst impermanence, come into full view in this rich scene. It happens to be at a dinner table that this occurs, a perfect place—so fully at the center of the quotidian that shapes the novel—to explore such questions. As Susan Dick argues in “Literary Realism”, the dinner scene is an instance of Woolf's *moments of being*, wherein one comes fully into existence through, as Dick writes, “experiencing a moment of heightened consciousness” (Dick 61). However, the previous passage signals a kind of awareness of being that is not wholly peaceful. Mrs. Ramsay's dialogue conveys a weary resolve to go on doing what she must do, even in a moment such as this when she sees how void of meaning life is, how drab and pitiful, and still she must do her work of creating meaning in her external world. It is different from earlier on in the scene when she wonders, “Of such

moments, the thing is made that endures” (89). On the contrary, in this context it is the shadowed side of the moment that Mrs. Ramsay perceives. It bubbles up to the surface and she catches at it reluctantly but without hesitation, for “she saw things truly” suddenly “robbed of color.” It is her task to bring back life to the moment through a process of merging.

Just as she breathes life back into the present she restores the mess made by time. The clock had stopped its ticking but she winds it back up again. She restores balance to the mechanism. The work of merging is perhaps to be understood within the context of the whole novel as a metaphor for assuaging the inevitable disarray of life, the entropy caused by the passage of time. Mrs. Ramsay takes these fraying pieces and dispels the entropy by restoring meaning to our lives. As Michel Serres argues, this is work that can only be done by a female heroine. He writes, “Women, dense with existence and perception, reverse entropy” (Serres 121). If it is perception which accounts for a reversal of entropy, then the claim must follow that Mrs. Ramsay must perceive a sort of integration that already exists, or to return to the question raised in Chapter I, she must perceive inherent meaning within the patchwork of existence. Serres would argue that this is precisely what goes on, writing that she and Lily Briscoe, “discover on their own, among all the things that are scattered, disordered, and chaotic, an unforgettable and immobile essence that neither varies nor changes” (Serres 121). Serres argues that through perception our world is made, which is to say that through perception meaning is also constructed; however, at the same time he argues for the existence, *a priori*, of this “immobile essence,” what is otherwise a kind of meaning. It resembles Woolf’s idea from *Moments of Being* that there is a pattern which lies behind the “cotton wool” of life. However, in the same passage in which she describes this pattern, she lays claim to the fact that it is we who create it because we *are* it. She writes, “we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself” (72).

The natural world however must alter this statement. The human cannot be the sole maker, because the movement of life persists with or without human perception.

In “Time Passes,” the reader is confronted with the passage of time as seen from within the abandoned seaside house. The summer is over and it has been several years since the Ramsays have returned to the house, so it has begun its slow process of dissolution. The wind and the sea’s spill beat against it, causing cracks and leaks to open up and expose its insides. Woolf narrates it from the point of view of an omniscient third person, all of the characters are suddenly gone and it is only the reader and narrator who remain at the scene, watching and waiting for the final board to fall and the whole thing to come crashing down. As Woolf writes:

For now had come that moment, that hesitation when dawn trembles and night pauses, when if a feather alight in the scale it will be weighed down. One feather, and the house, sinking, falling, would have turned and pitched downwards to the depths of darkness.  
(138)

The image of the scale is raised here again as it is in *Mrs. Dalloway*. In the case of Septimus, it was perhaps one feather that tipped the scale and sent him downwards towards the darkness, but the house is saved at that precarious moment. It seems in this instance that Woolf hints towards the force of fate to determine what will be and what will come to its end. The human will acts but not without fate’s deciding hand and so the scale is tipped. As Woolf describes it, “there was a force; something not highly conscious” (139). And whatever this force was, it was the reason why the house remained, why, when Mrs. McNab returned, “she came with bucket and brooms” seeing to the laborious repairs of the house, and “stayed the corruption and the rot; rescued from the pool of Time that was fast closing over them now a basin, now a

cupboard” (139). It is the female character who prevents entropy, giving the old sea-worn house its re-birth.

It is a fragile domain where nature meets with man, and Woolf explores it in “Time Passes.” Undisturbed nature, as it appears in this section of the novel, does not offer us any answers to the questions raised throughout. She places an imaginary dreamer within its realm, writing:

Should any sleeper fancying that he might find on the beach an answer to his doubts, a sharer of his solitude, throw off his bedclothes and go down by himself to walk on the sand, no image with semblance of serving and divine promptitude comes readily to hand bringing the night to order and making the world reflect the compass of the soul. The hand dwindles in his hand; the voice bellows in his ear. Almost it would appear that it is useless in such confusion to ask the night those questions as to what, and why, and wherefore, which tempt the sleeper from his bed to seek an answer. (128)

In this part of the novel Woolf inserts the potential of human presence even though it is for the most part unseen. But the human being that walks the beach at night, asking the sea for an answer, is imagined by the narrative voice. It seems that Woolf points out how the human being longs for nature to hold the answer. If not God, then at least the beach or the sea at night might provide some response to our seeking. Man seeks desperately for meaning in a natural world that is unmoved by him. Nevertheless the presence of the human being, albeit a spectral one, abuts his overwhelming absence. Throughout “Time Passes,” asking becomes a refrain: “why, how wherefore? “iterating and reiterating their questions, will you fade? Will you perish? (129). A second time Woolf places an apparition —“The mystic, the visionary”— upon the beach to wonder and ask, “What am I, What is this?” (131). These are the questions that are not met with answers, except perhaps through the form of *To the Lighthouse*. It is not at the level of plot

but at the level of form that one can seek an answer to the how and the what. When one completes the novel and then recalls, there is a resolution, one is satiated. But this is only through the larger arc of the narrative form that propels towards Lily's healing and the final trip to the light house. These are two plot events, but it is the entire sweep that leads one to them, offering possible answers to the questions raised throughout.

"Time Passes" is not the final section of the novel. It marks instead an intermediary place of stasis. The final chapter is called "To The Lighthouse" and in it there is a return as well as a resolution. Lily comes to terms with the death of Mrs. Ramsay, but the two remaining children, Cam and James, go with their father finally to see the Lighthouse. It is a fitting ending for a novel that begins with the little boy James asking if they would go to the lighthouse tomorrow. Mrs. Ramsay's reply, and the first line of the novel is, "Yes of course, if it's fine tomorrow" (3). But James' father says that they will not go, that it will not be fine weather and so the whole first part of the novel passes without there ever being an excursion to the Lighthouse. At its end, Mr. Ramsay takes his two youngest to the Lighthouse, but it is not a happy expedition, it is one rather more fraught with bitter anger and despair than bright expectation.

James remembers the Lighthouse from his childhood as a different lighthouse from the one he finally visits at the end of the book. He remembers it then as "a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye, that opened suddenly, and softly in the evening" (186), a vision that echoes his mother's eyes as they met with their own light: "her own eyes meeting her own eyes"(68). "No," he thinks, "the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing" (186). The image he remembers belongs to his mother. That is the lighthouse he wishes to visit, but she has been dead many years when he does go and see it. Imagination becomes as powerful as experience so that it is difficult to say which lighthouse the novel calls into being in

its title. Is it the Lighthouse that is finally reached at its end, or the one hoped for and imagined by a little boy at its beginning? A similar doubling occurs for Lily before her painting — her vision — as she wonders at the “razor edge of balance between two opposite forces; Mrs. Ramsay and the picture” ( 193). The balance must be found somewhere between the scene remembered and the scene as it is recreated. Neither holds more weight and yet the artist struggles between the two. It recalls the house as it tittered on the edge of being tipped towards oblivion.

To finally reach the Lighthouse, as Woolf offers her reader at the end of the novel, is not to be given the answers that one searched for throughout the text. That is not the way that the form of the narrative functions. To call the book *To the Lighthouse* does not allude to a final event, but rather to the process by which one goes there. This is also true of *Mrs. Dalloway*. In each novel there is a powerful vector which directs the narrative towards an end point; however in reaching finally that point one is not met with a resolution. The power of both novels is not housed in a point of conclusion. Woolf writes of Mr. Ramsay sitting in the little boat at sea and gazing too towards the lighthouse, that, “he might be thinking, We perished, each alone, or he might be thinking, I have reached it. I have found it: but he said nothing.” (207). Perhaps the vision has been had, as Lily says in the last line of the novel, “I have had my vision” (209), but that is not the point at which one sees clearly and understands. If Mr. Ramsay reached the lighthouse finally, or if Lily finally saw, the reader will not know.

Clarissa too has her vision at the end of *Mrs. Dalloway* — also a novel that sails towards an important final scene, Clarissa’s party — but the reader is similarly excluded from sharing in it. One does not know what truth is revealed, what meaning created. We know only that Septimus died and that Clarissa gains clarity from knowing of his suicide, wondering, “But this

young man who had killed himself—had he plunged holding his treasure? (180). Life feels enriched for her in the event of the young man's death and the scene of her party.

About her process of writing fiction, Woolf wrote of a technique that she developed, what she called "my tunneling process" (D2 263), which she describes, writing, "I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect, & each comes to daylight at the present moment" (Woolf 263). If we are to understand this process of tunneling as being present in both *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, it is by virtue of the fact that time strings these caves together. The characters' experience converges; the connecting of the caves when they are brought to light.

In *To The Lighthouse* Woolf's tunneling process is made manifest through Mrs. Ramsay's experience. In certain moments, sitting down alone, she wonders at how singular the self is when one disengages from the external world, while at the same time, experience converges in the open.

When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless. And to everybody there was always this sense of unlimited resources, she supposed; one after another, she, Lily, Augustus Carmichael, must feel, our apparition, the things you know us by, are simply childish. Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by. (62)

The rising of the self to the surface that Mrs. Ramsay describes seems akin to Woolf's idea of the caves connecting and coming to light. That is how she connects the experience of her characters within the narrative. But the self in darkness, before its rising, is the singular solitary self. Mrs. Ramsay exists here but she also harnesses the social sphere. She is both fully connected to the external and therefore to the people who surround her while at the same time

she dips down towards the darkness beneath. She sees the underbelly of man, something Septimus and Clarissa also see. Then she rises to the surface and communes with the others who have risen there too. It is there at the surface that Mrs. Ramsay creates just as Clarissa does.

There is a consolation for Mrs. Ramsay, leading us back to Woolf's sense of aesthetics, that she finds in the external world. Perhaps this is not the world of social interactions, but the surface, where one finds connection with the physical world. For Mrs. Ramsay there is something holy in nature that intersects with internal experience:

And there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity; and pausing there she looked out to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke, for watching them in this mood always at this hour one could not help attaching oneself to one thing especially of the things one saw. (63)

The stroke of the lighthouse seems to function in this place as a marker of what brings order to our lives; steadies the still thinker. Mrs. Ramsay, placed at the apex of the narrative, creates meaning through her orientation towards cultivating the world of the social, but she also encounters proof of its existence through her relationship to life outside. The Lighthouse might be considered the emblem of many things within the novel but for Mrs. Ramsay its steady stroke proves that there is sense and meaning amidst a world that seems at times to be without it.

## Conclusion

According to Freud, the magic of words proves a certain truth about psychoanalysis; there is the possibility of healing through language. Psychoanalysis is among many things, a method of interpretation, in which the analyst reads the unconscious of the patient. The power of language, or poetry, fiction, and philosophy is what is brought, through psychoanalysis, to the individual in an attempt to assuage suffering. I would say that that is the task which occupies all of us. At least we strive certainly for happiness and there are many ways that one might seek to meet that goal and to avoid its opposite. The work of fiction is one way that we are able to exit our own singular experience and dwell for a time in the many different worlds, whether beautiful or bleak, that it creates. The story told by the analyst is no less wondrous, no less packed with mysterious mishaps of speech, innuendo and double entendre, than are those fairy tales or tragedies or comedies that we delight in.

Woolf presents three female characters between the two novels, *To The Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, who are distinguished by the way that each creates meaning. In *To The Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe is the painter who mourns through her process of making, while Mrs. Ramsay in the same novel and Clarissa Dalloway in *Mrs. Dalloway*, create meaning within the social sphere. What the latter two make is experience, heightened and honed around a specific event: the dinner party. The dinner party is the most fitting example of this kind of creation because it brings together the aesthetic, and time within the social sphere.

We are bound by chronological time, as Woolf makes clear in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Its ticking shapes our lives, but within that structure there is another rhythm that belongs to internal time.

This beats differently and carves out space for thoughts and experience which might not otherwise have room within the greater fabric of perfectly syncopated life.

The dinner party is performed, the evening party is performed, both are artificial, a process of mimesis, in that they are durational events during which their maker, in this case, their host, instills a sense of meaning within the people who experience and participate in the event. This meaning persists well past the end of the party or the conclusion of the dinner, as a trace within those who have experienced it. This may be an answer to Freud's companion, the sad poet, who was so dismayed at knowing that summer would fade. Though we cannot still time in order to prevent change, one might still cultivate a lasting meaning that persists past its creation. The power of stories, of fiction as a mode of translating experience, is perhaps due to the way that it consecrates our experience that is fated to pass. As Woolf reminds us through her fiction, we are each of us searching to encounter some individual sense in life, but the interpersonal is incredibly important. Woolf is one of the great physicians of the interpersonal. She sculpts this space into her prose in such a way as to strengthen singular experience. For there is always the other, always the clatter of common experience to remind us of the pattern that lies beneath.

We are always losing things, one another, little scraps of the everyday, words that don't come to mind when you need them to. It seems as if life goes on according to chance, that it is senseless, which is how Septimus perceives it, finally taking his own. Mrs. Ramsay and Clarissa however, embrace life with great deliberation, shaping it here and there with the hands of great artists, and so are unable to fall out of this world.

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