3 “The Majesty of England”: The Ethics of Home and the Imperial City in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*

For European modernists after 1914, writing about home meant coming to terms with the impact of global war.\(^1\) Consider, for instance, the novel that many believe to be the period’s greatest achievement: James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), written abroad and named after a hero who, after a protracted and devastating war, can no longer seem to find his way home. At the same time, though the long nineteenth century had arguably come to a close with the armistice on November 11, 1918 (e.g. Osterhammel 88), to political commentators in the early 1920s the meaning of the historical moment was far less clear than it seems in hindsight. The United Kingdom, for instance, mourned the deaths of hundreds of thousands in the bloodiest conflict in human history, but the country had also emerged victorious from the war, and the British Empire in many respects appeared more unified and powerful a world system than ever (Jeffrey 13; see also North 54). Given this strange commixture of triumph and trauma, the profound sense of ambivalence that pervades English postwar novels like *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) is hardly surprising.

In Woolf’s novel, this sense of ambivalence revolves, specifically, around the nature of everyday life in London, the Empire’s proud metropolitan center.\(^2\) However, the novel’s key question is not, as some critics suggest, whether or not it is possible to feel at home in the modern metropolis (Ellis 76; see also Hawthorn 78; Whitworth 153). Rather, *Mrs. Dalloway* explores whether, given the state of British society in the 1920s, to feel at home in the capital is morally justifiable. In the previous chapters, we mainly examined the factors that make it more difficult to feel at home for some characters than for others; accordingly, the focus was on the potential obstacles to an individual’s sense of belonging. We have thus not yet asked whether there may be circumstances under which

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1 I would like to thank Simone Heller-Andrist, Laura Marcus, and Christa Schönfelder for their comments on draft versions of this chapter, as well as Sarah Chevalier and Anja Neukom-Hermann for their feedback on the final version. For a detailed examination of the impact of World War I on modernist fiction, see Stevenson, *Literature and the Great War* (114–120, in particular).

2 See Bryony Randall (595–599) for more general comments on *Mrs. Dalloway* as a novel of the everyday.
one should not truly want to feel at home because the ethical price for belonging is simply too high. It is this question that we will address in the present chapter.

Part of the discussion will revolve around the way in which Woolf’s novel constructs both geographical and discursive space. We will begin by examining how Mrs. Dalloway reflects and renegotiates English debates about the relative merits of the city and the country as sites of home. In particular, the novel dissects the familiar idyll of the English country house, laying bare some of its ideological limitations and pitting it against the pulsating and spectacular space of the modern city. At the same time, however, the space of the city also appears as very precisely delimited in Woolf’s novel, at least for those associated with Clarissa Dalloway and her social circle. In part, the novel uses shifting narrative perspectives to open up this delimited social space, but even the scope of these narrative shifts has very precise boundaries, depending on the characters with whom they are associated. Ultimately, Mrs. Dalloway confronts us with characters whose discursive space of belonging is every much as confined and contested as their geographical room for maneuver in the city.

In order better to understand the conflicts between these characters, we will therefore have to shift the emphasis from the spatial dimensions of home to what we might call the temporality of belonging. In effect, the novel contrasts characters who – for various reasons – gravitate toward a timeless, mythical view of life with those who are more firmly rooted in historical time. The novel’s postwar context is vital here, as the repression of history has much to do with a desire on the part of Clarissa, in particular, to evade questions of responsibility and social injustice. In consequence, Clarissa and others from her circle not only misread the novel’s most tragic figures, Septimus and Lucrezia Warren Smith; they also fail to reflect on the extent to which their own sense of belonging depends on their social position within a political elite that is at least partly responsible for the disasters of the Great War. Importantly, Mrs. Dalloway does not fault these characters for their desire to belong. Rather, the novel emphasizes that their sense of belonging comes at a price, and it encourages us continually to judge whether this ethical price is worth paying. In its wanderings through the imperial city, Mrs. Dalloway thus constitutes nothing short of a narrative quest for an ethics of home.

**The Country and the City**

If debates about the modern metropolis as a problematic kind of home shed light on Woolf’s novel, then this is in part because London has been a central reference point in such discussions since at least the period of the Enlightenment. Raymond Williams, for instance, points out that Enlightenment thinkers like Vol-
Voltaire and Adam Smith disagreed fundamentally with regard to both the nature and the ethical value of the city as a site of home:

Voltaire saw the pursuit of industry and urbane pleasure as the marks of the city and thence of civilisation itself. The golden age and the Garden of Eden, lacking industry and pleasure, were not virtuous but ignorant; the city, and especially London, was the symbol of progress and enlightenment, its social mobility the school of civilisation and liberty [...]. Adam Smith, rather differently, saw the city as securing the industry of the country: a centre of freedom and order but in its very dependence as a market and manufacturing centre liable to breed a volatile and insecure people. (144)

At a time when the modern industrial cities were only beginning to emerge, London was thus already envisaged as both an ideal home and a potentially dangerous space: the cradle of freedom and civilized order, but also a breeding ground for “volatile” urban masses.

In the late nineteenth century, similar arguments were waged in the field of sociology, though by now the metaphoric terms of the debate had shifted from the Enlightenment contrast between unruliness and order to an opposition – better suited to industrialized society – between organic and mechanical ways of life. In his *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* (*Community and Society*, 1887), Ferdinand Tönnies suggested that the supposedly organic rural communities of the past were increasingly being replaced by a rationalized urban society dominated by merely mechanical relations of exchange (Delanty 32–33). Only sixteen years later, however, Émile Durkheim provocatively reversed Tönnies’s thesis in *De la division du travail social* (*The Division of Labor in Society*, 1893) – an argument that Phil Hubbard has summarized succinctly:

For Durkheim […], traditional, rural life offered a form of *mechanical* solidarity with social bonds based on common beliefs, custom, ritual, routines, and symbols. Social cohesion was thus based upon the likeness and similarities among individuals in a society. Durkheim argued that the emergence of city-state [sic] signalled a shift from mechanical to *organic* solidarity, with social bonds becoming based on specialisation and interdependence. […In contrast to feudal and rural social orders, urban society was one which allowed for the coexistence of social differences, with a complex division of labour (where many different people specialise in many different occupations) creating greater freedom and choice for individuals. (15–16; original emphasis)

Whereas in Tönnies’s view rural society was organic because it was based on ‘natural’ kinship relations, Durkheim, by contrast, regarded such kinship relations as automatic or ‘mechanical’ because they lacked any element of freedom and individual choice (Delanty 38). In short, while Tönnies idealized life in the
country, Durkheim – much like Voltaire a century before him – viewed rural existence as narrow-minded and stifling when compared with the exhilarating freedom of the city.

Such debates over the relative value of rural and urban homes arguably had a particularly strong resonance in Britain due to the very common cultural association of rural life with ‘true Englishness’. As David Gervais has shown, it was in the course of the nineteenth century, when the new, industrial cities emerged, that writers increasingly located true Englishness in the rural existence of a rapidly disappearing yeoman class (4). An example for this trend is the influential Garden City movement, which attempted to reintroduce some of the supposedly redemptive qualities of rural life into the city (Gifford 37; Hubbard 61). Even for city-dwellers, the English domestic ideal thus became associated with images of country mansions and rural cottages:

London’s residential neighborhoods exhibited a paradoxical symbiosis of the rural and the urban: paradoxical because, despite their identification as rural and even anti-urban, those suburban villas were also specifically and indelibly metropolitan, just as the song “Home, Sweet Home” (1823) invoked a prelapsarian village abode but was written for a melodrama set and performed in London. (Sharon Marcus 98–99)

A literary example of the privileged cultural position of the English countryside are the novels of Jane Austen, where narrative complications tend to occur in more urban areas, such as seaside towns or London itself, while the happy resolution takes the heroine to a (stately) home in the countryside (Moretti, Atlas of the European Novel 17–19).

Such ruralist ideals of Englishness continued to gain in importance during the Edwardian period, and by the 1920s constituted one of the most prominent features in national self-definitions (Howkins 63). The overwhelming majority of writers between 1910 and 1940 thus regarded as the most representative part of the nation a “favoured enclave of the English countryside, usually presented in pastoral terms as a tranquil idyll” (Baldick 305). In these pastoral visions of Englishness, the city tended to be construed as stimulating yet chaotic, filled with dirt, criminals, and other ‘alien’ elements; indeed, “the discourses of urban investigation that developed in the 1840s argued that especially in London, the city had overtaken and destroyed the home” (Sharon Marcus 101). The metrop-

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3 This association is facilitated by the fact that in English the word *country* can refer both to a nation’s rural area (‘I prefer the country to the city’) and to the nation as a whole (‘England is my country’; see Raymond Williams 1).
It is in part due to this anti-modern celebration of the countryside that the work of many English ‘modernists’ seems tame and insular when compared to avant-garde writing from the United States, Ireland, or the Continent (Esty 33–35).

Mrs. Dalloway, however, questions such ruralist prejudices from the outset by challenging the idea that rural life is stable and idyllic. Woolf’s novel famously opens with Clarissa Dalloway stepping out of her London home in Bond Street to go and buy flowers for a party that she intends to give in the evening. The scene she encounters immediately reminds Clarissa of a more rural past at Bourton, the stately country home of her youth:

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen […]. (3)

On the one hand, Clarissa immediately associates the freshness of the morning air in the city with life in the country, though the air there had been “stiller than this of course.” However, the rural stillness at Bourton is not an unequivocally positive feature for Clarissa; it seems like the “kiss of a wave” and yet somehow solemn, as if “something awful was about to happen.” Moreover, later in the novel, we learn that Clarissa’s rural past is indeed associated with a very personal tragedy, as her only sister was killed in the woods near Bourton by a falling tree (85). In contrast to common celebrations of rural England, there is thus, from the beginning, little sense in Mrs. Dalloway that homes in the country are necessarily more idyllic or carefree than city abodes.

Revisiting the Country House

Importantly, to say that Mrs. Dalloway constitutes a critique of countryside ideals is not to deny any idyllic dimension to Clarissa’s more rural home at Bourton, as some pastoral scenes in Woolf’s novel constitute a self-conscious reworking of the literary topos that Terry Gifford has called “country-house Arcadias” (66). This is particularly evident in those scenes that focus on Clarissa’s intimate friendship with Sally Seton, whom Clarissa continues to remember with glowing affection: “Had not that, after all, been love?” (35). The loving
relationship between the two women culminates, on the terrace at Bourton one star-lit night, in a glorious, passionate kiss:

Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally. (38)

Such celebrations of same-sex affection have long been characteristic of pastoral literature; homoerotic desire was, for instance, already a central concern in the *Idylls* of Theocritus (Holmes M. Morgan), and by the seventeenth century one of pastoral’s primary interests was its “participation in fields of sexual deviation” (Bredbeck 200). It is thus possible to read the love scene between Sally and Clarissa not primarily as a moment of rural authenticity, but instead as a self-consciously literary evocation of pastoral conventions.

However, whereas pastoral texts generally allow the same-sex lovers more than merely a brief moment of bliss, in *Mrs. Dalloway* Sally and Clarissa are immediately interrupted by their friend Peter Walsh, who asks whether they have been star-gazing: “It was shocking; it was horrible! [... Clarissa] felt his hostility; his jealousy; his determination to break into their companionship” (39). The pastoral idyll of homoerotic desire is evoked only to be immediately shattered. It is thus fitting that shepherds – those staple ingredients of classical pastoral (Gifford 15) – are only hinted at in the vaguest of terms in *Mrs. Dalloway*, when we learn that Clarissa, in her youth at Bourton, owned a “great shaggy dog which ran after sheep” (65). Similarly, though the name of Clarissa’s sister, Sylvia (Latin for ‘forest’ or ‘woods’), carries strong pastoral associations (Abel 111), her death – being killed by a falling tree – gives this generic link a decidedly non-idyllic, black-humored twist.⁵ The homely rural idyll of Clarissa’s youth at Bourton is, in short, suffused with conflict, self-consciously artificial, and fragile at best.

If the general literary tradition of country-house Arcadias is reworked in *Mrs. Dalloway* to challenge common preconceptions about rural innocence and stability, the novel also more specifically refers to a novel by Jane Austen to broaden the scope of the domestic novel beyond the confines of the heterosexual courtship plot. As Raymond Williams notes, Jane Austen’s novels are centrally concerned with estates, incomes, and social position as indispensable elements

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⁵ It is, admittedly, possible to place Sylvia’s death in the long-standing tradition of pastoral that highlights the presence of death even in Arcadia (‘Et in Arcadia ego’; see Gifford 154; Heusser 183). However, naming someone who is killed by a tree ‘Sylvia’ nevertheless constitutes a peculiarly cruel variation on the motif.
of all the relationships that are formed (113). In order, Williams continues, to solve the ensuing conflict between economic interest and moral value, Jane Austen “guides her heroines, steadily, to the right marriages” (115); the transmission of wealth is secured through a match between those characters whom the narrative has revealed as being most worthy of it. At the beginning of the heroine’s journey, her family home tends to be under threat; at the end, she is rewarded with an equally deserving husband and a new, far more exquisite home somewhere in rural England (Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel* 18).

Elizabeth Abel astutely observes that this fictional universe is evoked in *Mrs. Dalloway* when Clarissa at first mishears her future husband’s family name as “Wickham,” thus linking him to arguably the most disreputable character in Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). According to Abel, this explicit intertextual reference draws attention to how Woolf’s novel modifies the standard courtship plot of Austen’s fiction:

> Woolf condenses the [...] moment that constitutes Austen’s novel and locates it in a remembered scene thirty years prior to the present of her narrative [...]. Marriage in *Mrs. Dalloway* provides impetus rather than closure to the courtship plot, dissolved into a retrospective oscillation between two alluring possibilities as Clarissa continues to replay the choice she made thirty years before. (107)

The home of Clarissa’s youth, Abel reminds us, was also the scene of her marriage choice, with Peter Walsh and Richard Dalloway as the two competing male suitors. However, while Austen’s novels conclude with the heroine reaching the goal of the ‘right’ marriage, the suggestion in *Mrs. Dalloway* that Richard is similar to Austen’s deceitful George Wickham intimates that Clarissa may in fact have made the wrong choice. This suspicion is, if not explicitly confirmed, then at least kept alive by the fact that much of Woolf’s novel focuses on Clarissa’s lingering doubts, with the heroine sometimes thanking heaven that she refused to marry Peter, yet at other times wishing she had agreed to his proposal rather than to Richard’s (50–51; see Bowlby 147). Whereas in Jane Austen’s novels marriage at least superficially signifies happiness, maturity, and narrative closure, in *Mrs. Dalloway* the country-house world of romantic fulfillment becomes, instead, the past as prelude to the heroine’s conflicts in later life, as well as a subtly playful intertextual reference point.

At the same time, we need to bear in mind that, by the 1920s, life in the actually existing English country houses had itself become a mode of playful perform-

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6 While a long-term relationship between Clarissa and Sally never appears as an alternative to heterosexual marriage in *Mrs. Dalloway*, it is central in *The Hours* (1998), Michael Cunningham’s appropriation of Woolf’s novel.
ance for the nations’ upper class. Since at least the late nineteenth century, the average stately home in the country had few (if any) remaining ties with rural life in the sense of agricultural work; such country houses were, rather, the setting for “ritual enactments” of country life, maintained “on the profits of industrial and imperial development” (Raymond Williams 282). In Mrs. Dalloway, we only have to listen to the rural daydreams of Clarissa’s daughter, Elizabeth, to hear echoes of such upper-class performances as disconnected from the social reality of English farmers:

She might be a farmer. [...] She might own a thousand acres and have people under her. She would go and see them in their cottages. [...] One might be a very good farmer – and that, strangely enough, [...] was almost entirely due to Somerset House. It looked so splendid, so serious, that great grey building. And she liked the feeling of people working. (149)

Hierarchy and privilege are central to this fantasy of rural England (“She might [...] have people under her”), and even Elizabeth acknowledges that Somerset House – situated in the heart of the city and, at the time, home to the government’s principal tax and public record offices (Showalter 224n58) – is the main reason why someone like her might one day be able to style herself as a good ‘farmer,’ for it is the supposedly urban political and financial system that enables a small group of country-house owners to enjoy “the feeling of people working” (emphasis added). Importantly, to highlight the links between the country and the city is not to contradict Elizabeth Abel’s observation that Clarissa herself sees Bourton as a pastoral world that is spatially and temporally disjunct from London, the sociopolitical world of her husband Richard (108). It does mean, however, that Woolf’s novel as a whole portrays ‘rural’ country-house Arcadias as only superficially isolated from the city, whereas in fact they are part of the same overarching social system. Accordingly, we must now leave the countryside and devote our attention to the urban spaces of Mrs. Dalloway.

Street Haunting: Flânerie, Gender, and Class

Just as Mrs. Dalloway’s engagement with ‘country-house England’ constitutes a meticulous reworking of ruralist and pastoral traditions, its depiction of life in the city draws on an already existing image: the urban wanderer or flâneur. As Raymond Williams points out, the experience and perception of the modern city

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7 Historically, the country and the city have been part of the same economic order since the agricultural and industrial revolutions of the eighteenth century, if not earlier (McKeon, The Secret History of Domestcity 689; Raymond Williams 98).
has been “associated, from the beginning, with a man walking, as if alone, in its streets” (233). Long before Williams, Walter Benjamin had devoted sustained theoretical attention to this key figure of modernity, and Sharon Marcus notes how in Benjamin’s writings the city street sometimes appears curiously cozy – almost more homelike than city homes themselves (13–14). Indeed, what is ultimately at stake in Benjamin’s as well as later discussions of flânerie is whether the urban wanderer’s experience of the modern city can be described as a new way of belonging – a genuinely modern sense of home – or whether such urban experiences need to be understood in terms of increasing anomie and alienation.

The figure of the flâneur – around whom these problems coalesced – was, for most critics writing after Benjamin, predominantly male: the relatively privileged man of means who appears in the poems of Charles Baudelaire, or in such stories as Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” (Parsons 4). We also find such a privileged male flâneur in Mrs. Dalloway, in Clarissa’s old friend Peter Walsh, whose life Woolf’s heroine considers to have been a failure (8), but who nevertheless clearly belongs to imperial Britain’s wealthy elite. In one of the many scenes from Woolf’s novel in which Peter is wandering through the streets of London, he encounters an attractive young woman and decides secretly to follow her:

[S]he’s not married; she’s young; quite young, thought Peter, the red carnation he had seen her wear as she came across Trafalgar Square burning again in his eyes and making her lips red. […] There was a dignity about her. She was not worldly, like Clarissa; not rich, like Clarissa. Was she, he wondered as she moved, respectable? […] He was an adventurer, reckless, he thought, swift, daring […] He was a buccaneer. (58)

Peter, the bourgeois man of means, turns the young woman who is “not rich, like Clarissa,” into a spectacle for his own consumption: an erotic fantasy that he admits is “half made up” (59). And in this, too, he resembles the flâneurs in Baudelaire, where according to Deborah L. Parsons women are objectified by

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8 Note, however, that recently critics have also traced accounts of female flânerie as far back as the mid-nineteenth century (e.g. Gleber 12).
the leisured male spectator while they themselves rarely appear in a position that would allow them to become the observers of others (25).9

At the same time, as Parsons rightly points out, there is an element of conscious parody about the way in which Peter observes the city, in “an attitude of rebellion yet ultimate conventionality” (73); Peter styles himself a “buccaneer,” but he is in fact a much more common and decidedly less daring figure: a middle-aged man silently fantasizing about a much younger woman in an attempt to escape “(only of course for an hour or so) from being precisely what he was” (57). Indeed, we can see how far Peter is from being a true rebel in the scene that immediately precedes this fantasied ’adventure.’ After a visit in Bond Street, Peter feels dissatisfied with Clarissa’s conventionality (53), and he begins to reflect on his own position within the Dalloway’s social circle:

He was not old, or set, or dried in the least. As for caring what they said of him – the Dalloways, the Whitbreads, and their set, he cared not a straw – not a straw (though it was true he would have, some time or other, to see whether Richard couldn’t help him to some job). (55)

Peter once again styles himself as a non-conformist, yet at the same time he hopes to profit from his association with the Dalloways. Even so, Peter would like to believe that his own private enthusiasms will, one day, stand revealed as prefiguring nothing less than the future of society as a whole:

He had been sent down from Oxford – true. He had been a Socialist, in some sense a failure – true. Still the future of civilisation lies, he thought, in the hands of young men like that; of young men such as he was, thirty years ago; with their love of abstract principles; getting books sent out to them all the way from London to a peak in the Himalayas; reading science; reading philosophy. The future lies in the hands of young men like that, he thought. (55)

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9 See for instance the following passage from Baudelaire’s essay “The Painter in Modern Life,” in which the gendered nature of the flâneur becomes increasingly apparent: “For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up a house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world – such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito. The lover of life makes the whole world his family, just like the lover of the fair sex who builds up his family from all the beautiful women that he has ever found, and that are – or are not – to be found” (9). For a concise summary of Baudelaire’s and Benjamin’s ideas about the flâneur see Tally (Spatiality 95–99).
Tellingly, however, immediately after this imperial vision of a future created by intellectual ‘renegades’ like him, Peter witnesses a troop of boys parading “in uniform, carrying guns, […] on their faces an expression like the letters of a legend written round the base of a statue praising duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of England” (55). This juxtaposition suggests, for one thing, that the real future may lie, not with bookish young men in love with abstract principles, but with uniformed boys carrying guns, “drugged into a stiff yet staring corpse by discipline” (56). Moreover, it is important to note that this band of boys are on their way to the Cenotaph, a monument commemorating the dead of the Great War and, as such, one of the most “arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism” (Anderson 9). Typically Peter, though not entirely uncritical, ultimately remains convinced that, even if one laughed at such a display, “one had to respect it” (56). We are, significantly, not given a reason why, precisely, “one” ought to respect a militarization of everyday life; Peter merely asserts the fact as self-evidently the appropriate thing for an Englishman to do – which shows just how far Peter is from being a truly reckless “adventurer” or “buccaneer.” As an urban wanderer in London, Peter corresponds to the literary figure of the flâneur, but as was the case with pastoral idylls and the romance of Austen’s stately homes, Mrs. Dalloway evokes this figure in part to lay bare its conventional ideological bias.

This is not to suggest that wandering through the city is seen as an inherently reprehensible pursuit in Woolf’s novel. On the contrary, Mrs. Dalloway to some extent celebrates the liberating potential that ‘street haunting’ can offer for women, in particular. Clarissa, for example, loves to wander through the streets of London, insisting that it is “better than walking in the country” (6). As Laura Marcus points out, through their entry into the public spaces of the city upper- and middle-class women in early twentieth-century literature frequently found “liberation from enclosure in the private, domestic sphere” of the home (61; see also Parsons 27). Virginia Woolf’s own essay on “Street Haunting” (1927) constitutes a particularly important document from this corpus of female literature about the city, for it explicitly suggests that one may feel a sense of liberation when leaving one’s home – a home in which one sits “surrounded by objects

10 See also Pam Morris, Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf and Worldly Realism 66–67.
11 Note that Sharon Marcus has cautioned against an overly strict conception of separate spheres (without, however, denying the concept’s heuristic value): “Feminist scholarship showed how a host of nineteenth-century discourses and practices defined the home as a private, cloistered space, advocated women’s restriction to that space, and correspondingly excluded women from the easy commerce with the city’s public spaces that was the privilege of many men. Crucial as that demonstration was, it anchored those divisions too securely and fixed their extent too widely” (6–7).
which perpetually express the oddity of our own temperaments and enforce the memories of our own experience” (177):

When the door shuts on us, all that vanishes. The shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all these wrinkles and roughnesses a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye. (178)

Leaving the home is thus similar to breaking out of a constricting shell, and as we wander through the city, “everything seems miraculously sprinkled with beauty” (181); we can finally “leave the straight lines of personality” and explore more fully both our own potential and, imaginatively, the lives of others (187). Clarissa, in Mrs. Dalloway, clearly feels some of the euphoric delight described in Woolf’s essay: after her “plunge” into the London streets, she encounters “what she loved: life; London; this moment of June” (4). For women like Clarissa, then, the streets of London may appear, not as the urban nightmare so frequently envisioned by mournful pastoralists, but as a counter-homely source of vitality and regeneration (Whitworth 153).

Nevertheless, if we compare Mrs. Dalloway and Woolf’s essay on “Street Haunting” more closely, we find that there are limits to these texts’ celebration of female flânerie. On the one hand, the two texts have much in common, for both open with a figure leaving the home and subsequently becoming enthralled by the sights and sounds of the city. On the other hand, according to Woolf’s essay the ideal times for such wanderings are evenings in winter (177), while in Mrs. Dalloway Clarissa leaves her home around ten in the morning, on a day in mid-June (3–4). Consequently, if we take the essay’s celebration of street haunting on winter evenings at face value, then this might imply a subtle critique of Clarissa Dalloway’s wanderings, which take place at a different time of the day and year. In addition, though it is true that Woolf’s essay celebrates the liberating sense of dissolution that comes when one imaginatively merges with the darkening crowd, it also posits that there are both temporal and social limits to such delights:

To escape is the greatest of pleasures; street haunting in winter the greatest of adventures. Still as we approach our own doorstep again, it is comforting to feel the old possessions, the old prejudices, fold us round, and shelter and enclose the self, which has been blown about at so many street corners, which has battered like a moth at the

12 Perhaps it is significant, too, that in her essay Woolf singles out evenings rather than nights, for as Matthew Beaumont has shown, “[n]ightwalking is, in both the physical and the moral meanings of the term, deviant” (Nightwalking 5).
flame of so many inaccessible lanterns, sheltered and enclosed. Here again is the usual
door; here the chair turned as we left it and the china bowl and the brown ring on the
carpet. (187)

Escaping to the city, this passage suggests, is a pleasure for those who know
they can return, after a relatively brief period of time, to the “old possessions”
and the comfort of their homes. The idea of flux and instability is thus, as we
have already seen in the discussion of *The Mill on the Floss*, much more attractive
for those with stable homes than for those who live, precariously, on the edge
of a socio-economic abyss.\(^\text{13}\) It is not purely coincidental, then, that in both
*Mrs. Dalloway* and “Street Haunting” the forays into the city streets are, at least
ostensibly, motivated by the protagonists’ intention of buying non-essential
commodities: a pencil in the essay (177), and flowers in the novel. In short,
whether male or female, *flânerie* remains an unequivocally class-based aes‐
thetics: a leisured way of consuming the sights and sounds of the city, and thus
a kind of pleasure that is not equally available to all.

The importance of class to *Mrs. Dalloway*’s depictions of female *flânerie* is
confirmed in a scene in which Elizabeth, Clarissa’s daughter, boards an omnibus
to travel through London’s legal and commercial district, for here we discover
just how small the world of the novel’s *flâneurs* really is. We learn, early on in
Woolf’s novel, that for Clarissa the omnibus is a typically middle-class mode of
transport (18), which in turn may explain why the narrator places so much
emphasis on the unusual nature of Elizabeth’s excursion: “Suddenly Elizabeth
stepped forward and most competently boarded the omnibus, in front of every‐
boby” (148). There is a palpable note of ridicule here, in the text’s emphasis on
Elizabeth’s competence and daring, and it seems fitting that Elizabeth indulges
in her classist daydreams about visiting farmers in their cottages precisely at
this moment, for her trip on the omnibus is daring or “reckless” (148) only ac‐
cording to very narrow standards of upper-class respectability. Moreover, like
Peter, Elizabeth does not indulge in her little act of rebellion for very long: “She

\(^\text{13}\) In Robin Lippincott’s appropriation of Woolf’s novel, *Mr. Dalloway* (1999), there is an
interesting moment when Richard Dalloway encounters an old man selling violets in
the street: “He had always warned Clarissa against giving to the poor – not because he
didn’t want to help them – he did – but because of his belief that giving did them no
good, no good whatsoever. ‘They must learn to help themselves,’ he had told her. ‘And
*that* we can help them with – laws and whatnot.’ But this was different. For he felt as
though he could be this man – turned out; no home; alone. Such thoughts had occurred
to him during the past year when life as he had known it had felt so very, so terribly
threatened; fragile” (33). Though the sense of instability that worries Richard in this
passage is not truly economic, it still leads him to look with new dread at the idea of
material homelessness.
must go home. She must dress for dinner” (150; see Bowlby 146). On her way back to Bond Street, Elizabeth in fact herself defines the perspective from which her excursion seems adventurous: “[N]o Dalloways came down the Strand daily,” and her mother surely “would not like her to be wandering off alone like this” (151–152). The Strand, incidentally, leads away from Westminster, the center of government, to the civil and commercial center of the city, and even in the early nineteenth century, Beau Brummell, a well-known arbiter of fashion, reportedly expressed great mortification at being discovered as far east as that (Roy Porter 99). The area is clearly beyond (as well as below) the socio-geographical circle within which the Dalloways and their likes are wont to move. To style Elizabeth’s trip as a great, non-conformist act of resistance would thus mean to judge it from a very limited upper-class perspective – and, conversely, to expand the term resistance to a point where it no longer retains any real political meaning (Loomba 203).

We can say more generally, then, that Mrs. Dalloway maps the social limitations of its characters’ homes onto the urban geography of London. David Dowling has meticulously traced the itineraries of five central characters in Woolf’s novel – Clarissa, Richard, and Elizabeth, as well as Peter Walsh and Septimus Warren Smith – and his maps show that virtually all the action of the novel’s present takes place in Westminster. Dowling’s itineraries, in fact, cover more or less the same part of London as Franco Moretti’s maps of the so-called silver-fork novels, a largely forgotten genre that thrived between 1810 and 1840 and which, according to Moretti, depicted not a city but a particular class: the fashionable part of English society that would never stray as far as London’s East End (Atlas of the European Novel 79). Moreover, we find that none of the Dalloways even venture as far as Oxford Street, which according to one of Woolf’s own essays “is not London’s most distinguished thoroughfare,” and was rather looked-down upon by the more fashionable people who shop in “secret crannies off Hanover Square, round about Bond Street” (“Oxford Street Tide” 199). And Bond Street is, of course, precisely where the Dalloways live: far from the working-class squalor of the East End tenements, and sheltered from the ‘vulgar’ middle-class display of Oxford Street, in one of the most affluent areas in the city of London. The physical location of the Dalloways’ house, together with their everyday urban itineraries, thus allows us to define with great precision their ‘home space’ within the city of London – a space that may seem fluid and mobile, but which in fact is rigidly circumscribed by the boundaries of social class.
Modernist Spectacles and Pathologies of Narration

If Mrs. Dalloway nevertheless overcomes some of the social limitations of its urban geography, then this is because it incorporates a wide variety of distinct points of views and class perspectives. As Pam Morris points out, in Woolf’s novel “figures from the lowest strata of social life appear fleetingly but recurrently at the margins of the narrative, representing an encroaching material otherness at the perimeter of the enclosed nation of the well-to-do” (“Woolf and Realism” 45). Indeed, in Mrs. Dalloway’s eleven sections, the narrator grants us temporary access to the thoughts, emotions, and perceptions of almost forty characters. Some of these characters are closely associated with Clarissa: her husband Richard and her daughter Elizabeth, for instance, or old friends of the family like Peter Walsh. Other focalizers, however – such as the shell-shocked war veteran Septimus Warren Smith and his wife Lucrezia – have no direct connection with Clarissa, and some are clearly lower-class (e.g. the Irishwoman Moll Pratt, who sells flowers in the street). To understand the social scope of Woolf’s novel we must therefore decide how best to interpret this wide range of perspectives: the relations between the various focalizers, as well as the way in which they are distributed throughout the text.

The first thing we need to note is that, much as is the case with Moby-Dick (see chapter one), Woolf’s novel initially misleads the reader to expect a story organized around a dominant central character; it looks, in Rick Altman’s terms, very much like a single-focus narrative (189). Even before we open the book,
the novel’s title, *Mrs. Dalloway*, cues us to see Clarissa as the central figure, and this expectation seems confirmed by the text’s famous opening sentence: “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself” (3). The novel opens with the eponymous character, whom we then follow on her mundane, but clearly defined narrative quest to buy flowers. The point of view in the opening paragraphs is organized firmly around Clarissa, and she remains the dominant focalizer throughout the novel’s first section. It may therefore be due to the – relatively – traditional nature of the novel’s opening section that Avrom Fleishman sees *Mrs. Dalloway* as “the fictional autobiography of a single character,” with the other figures merely juxtaposed to and surrounding Clarissa (80; see also Baldick 202; Rachman 5).

Indeed, there is a good case to be made that the opening section of *Mrs. Dalloway* constitutes a modification of, but not yet a radical departure from the standard techniques of Victorian narration. Admittedly, the narrative perspective in the text’s first section is more markedly subjective than what we are used to from Victorian novels (Pam Morris, *Realism* 14):

>H|aving lived in Westminster – how many years now? over twenty, – one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. Such fools we are, she thought, crossing Victoria Street. For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh [...]. (4)

In this passage, the ‘omniscient’ narrator is still the one who speaks, but the narrator’s voice threatens to disappear behind the densely poetic texture of Clarissa Dalloway’s focalizing consciousness. Nevertheless, the first section of Woolf’s novel retains a relatively stable narrative perspective, with flashbacks that grant us insight into Clarissa’s past (e.g. 3 and 7–8); with other characters’ perspectives occasionally complementing her point of view (Scrope Purvis and Miss Pym; 4 and 13); and with the heroine eventually reaching “Mulberry’s the florists,” the goal of her quest (13). Though later parts of the novel are more experimental, we should thus not forget that the first section of *Mrs. Dalloway*

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15 It is not entirely clear why Fleishman calls the novel “the fictional autobiography” of its title character (emphasis added), as the novel is not in fact told in the first person.
constitutes a modification (or perhaps better: intensification) of, but not yet a break with, the conventions of realist fiction.  

Intriguingly, to the extent that the first section does modify these conventions, this is linked subliminally to an illness from which Clarissa has only recently recovered. In an essay entitled “On Being Ill” (1926), Woolf contends that illness can have a remarkable effect on a patient’s attitude towards the world:

Directly the bed is called for, or, sunk deep among the pillows in one chair, we raise our feet even an inch above the ground on another, we cease to be soldiers in the army of the upright; we become deserters. They march to battle. We float with the sticks on the stream; helter-skelter with the dead leaves on the lawn, irresponsible and disinterested and able, perhaps for the first time in years, to look round, to look up – to look, for example, at the sky. (104)

In mock-militaristic language (“soldiers in the army of the upright,” “deserters,” “march to battle”), Woolf describes how, in illness, we are no longer required to put on a brave face, and instead may allow ourselves simply to “float” on the stream of existence – which is not a bad description of the mood in Mrs. Dalloway’s first section. There, we learn that Clarissa’s heart is likely to have been affected by a recent bout of influenza (4), and in the two moments in the first section when Clarissa is not the focalizing agent, the temporary bearers of narrative perspective note that Woolf’s heroine looks old and somewhat frail (4 and 13–14). There is thus a sense that the stream-like narrative flow in the novel’s first section, as well as the slight disruptions in point of view, are semi-pathological deviations from the narrative norm; they appear as the lingering symptoms of a feverish state of mind that, as Woolf insists in her essay, has the power to make us see familiar phenomena in a startlingly different light (105). Illness, in short, while in itself undesirable, also leads to defamiliarization, and may thus reveal aspects of the home that seemed intimately known as suddenly strange and little understood.  

At the same time, the modifications of narrative technique described so far are mild compared to the sudden fragmentation of perspective that characterizes the novel’s second section, which is fittingly introduced in the text by the “vi-
violent explosion" of a car that backfires at the end of *Mrs. Dalloway*’s opening section, startling both Clarissa and Miss Pym the florist (14). Whereas in the first section Clarissa is clearly the dominant focalizer and organizing center, the second section confronts us with over ten focalizing agents, and Clarissa’s point of view now constitutes only one among many. As in *Moby-Dicky*, after having essentially been led to expect a single-focus narrative, we are now thrust into that “state of homelessness” that Rick Altman sees as typical of multiple-focus narration (285), and the relative stability of the novel’s opening section is increasingly lost in multiple points of view and a seemingly aimless, meandering storyline.

Indeed, in contrast to section one, which remains at least partially plot-driven (i.e. it tells the story of Clarissa Dalloway leaving her home in order to buy flowers for her party), the second section is organized by a logic of symbolic co-occurrence. The “violent explosion” that startles Clarissa also causes widespread commotion outside the flower shop, among the crowd in Oxford Street, because “a face of the very greatest importance” is briefly seen through one of the windows of the car that backfired: “Was it the Prince of Wales’s, the Queen’s, the Prime Minister’s? Whose face was it? Nobody knew” (15). This entire scene adds little in terms of plot development; it is, at best, a convenient ploy to introduce Septimus Warren Smith, one of the novel’s central characters, who just happens to be present (Lee R. Edwards 103). At the same time, however, the scene is charged with symbolic meaning – a meaning that a passage from Raymond Williams’s *The Country and the City* can help us unravel:

> It is impossible to read the early descriptions of crowded metropolitan streets – the people as isolated atoms, flowing this way and that; a common stream of separated identities and directions – without seeing, past them, this mode of relationship embodied in the modern car: private, enclosed, an individual vehicle in a pressing and merely aggregated common flow […]. (296)

The car around which, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the “common stream of separated identities” is organized is also the symbolic embodiment of a typically urban kind of relationship: co-presence rather than community – a society organized around common spectacles rather than collaborative action.

Four decades after the publication of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Guy Debord suggested, in thesis six of *The Society of the Spectacle* (*La société du spectacle*, 1967), that the spectacles permeating our daily lives are not to be understood as mere ornaments added to the normal course of events; rather, in “all of its particular manifestations – news, propaganda, advertising, entertainment – the spectacle represents the dominant model of life” (8). For Debord, then, the spectacles of
modernity are never innocent, but rather point to the power structures at work in society. More particularly, the fact that Debord mentions propaganda and advertising in his analysis is surely significant for an interpretation of Mrs. Dalloway; after all, while the car in the second section of Woolf’s novel carries a half-recognized passenger who prompts the onlookers to think of “the majesty of England” (i.e. it serves as a means of imperial propaganda; 17), the airplane that suddenly attracts the crowd’s attention towards the end of the same section turns out to be part of an elaborate advertising stunt (30–31). Both the car and the airplane in Woolf’s novel thus provide the crowd with spectacles that are not mere ornament, but that instead represent the period’s dominant political and economic interests: the monarchy as a symbol of government, and the promotion of consumerism in advanced capitalist societies. We can say, therefore, that the slightly feverish, but nevertheless stable narrative perspective that we find in the first section of Mrs. Dalloway is shattered, in the second, by the twin spectacles of advertising and propaganda, both of which appear in quintessentially modern symbolic shapes: a motor car and an airplane (22). Urban space thus not only appears as socially stratified in Woolf’s novel, but also as commodified and pervaded by governmental strategies of power.

**National Virtues and the Memory of War**

If the “violent explosion” that marks the transition between sections one and two of Mrs. Dalloway is associated on one level with the urban spectacles of imperial and capitalist modernity, we must also consider a further layer of meaning that arises from the text’s historical position as a postwar novel. More specifically, we can interpret the differences in narrative perspective between the novel’s first two sections as a stylistic expression of the unequal impact of the Great War on two of the novel’s main characters: Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith. In the first section of the novel, whenever Clarissa looks back on the war, she emphasizes the fact that the conflict is past:

> The War was over, except for some one like Mrs. Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed and now the old Manor House must go to a cousin; or Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed; but it was over; thank Heaven – over.
> (4–5)

Two aspects about this passage are important. First, there is something rather disturbing about the first half of the sentence, which sounds as if the real tragedy consisted, not in the actual fact of a young man’s death, but in how his death affects the Foxcroft family estate; the Foxcrofts no longer have a direct heir, and
in consequence their home will have to “go to a cousin.” Second, though Clarissa acknowledges, dutifully, that the war is not really over for everyone, she is clearly not keen on giving the matter much thought: “it was over; thank Heaven – over.” Revealingly, she later thinks of Lady Bexborough with her “perfectly upright and stoical bearing” as the “woman she admired most” (10). In fact, Clarissa wishes to be “like Lady Bexborough, slow and stately; rather large; interested in politics like a man; with a country house” (11). We may note in passing that once again, in this passage, country-house England serves as the idealized home of the English upper classes. More importantly, it seems that, for Clarissa, the most admirable thing one can do is to maintain, at all times, a stiff upper lip, and to try and carry on much as one did before the War – which is, as we have seen, precisely what happens in the novel’s first section, in terms of both narrative structure and point of view: a modification of, but not yet a true break with Victorian realism.

However, whereas the first section shows us Clarissa managing to maintain her composure despite the impact of the War and her recent illness, the sudden bout of fragmentation in *Mrs. Dalloway*’s second section reveals the seriousness of Septimus Warren Smith’s post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Anne Whitehead has shown that a “fragmented narrative voice” is a typical feature of trauma fiction in general (84), and we know from Woolf’s novel that Septimus suffers from the “deferred effects of shell shock” (201), the term used by contemporaries for PTSD. The suspicion that the second section’s fragmented perspective can be related to Septimus’s condition is confirmed by the fact that he and his wife Lucrezia are, taken together, by far the section’s most dominant focalizing agents. In the edition of the novel used for this chapter, the perspective is organized around either Septimus’s or Lucrezia’s point of view on seven of section two’s seventeen pages (i.e. roughly 40 %). Clarissa, by comparison, who of all the other characters occupies most space in this section, is the focalizer on slightly less than two pages (i.e. not quite 12 %). Moreover, while the section’s other characters – including Clarissa – act as focalizers only once, the narrative perspective returns to Septimus and Lucrezia after a substantial interruption (15–18 and 23–28). Both in terms of perspective structure and the fragmented narrative logic of trauma, in other words, there is good reason for us to regard the Warren Smiths as the key figures in the novel’s second section.

And yet, this is not to say that the other focalizers in section two are unimportant. Rather, we can read their presence as indicative of a broader social

18 The term *post-traumatic stress disorder* was coined in 1980 (Manguno-Mire and Franklin 353).
vision associated with the Warren Smiths, as opposed to the narrowly enclosed, upper-class Dalloways. We have seen that the Dalloways' world is very precisely delimited, and it is fitting that, in the novel’s opening section, the only focalizers apart from Clarissa are a neighbor “who lives next door” (4), and an employee in an expensive flower shop (14). This contrasts sharply with section two, which is associated primarily with Septimus and Lucrezia, and which includes focalizers as diverse as, on the one hand, Sir John Buckhurst and the wealthy group of men standing in the bow window of White’s, a gentlemen’s club (18 and 19), and, on the other, Moll Pratt, an Irishwoman who sells flowers in the street (20); Maisie Johnson, recently arrived from Edinburgh “to take up a post at her uncle’s” (28); and Carrie Dempster, an elderly woman whose husband drinks too much (29). If Mrs. Dalloway can at all be said to represent the whole complexity of London society, then this is to a large part due to the novel’s second section, for in no other section is the cast of focalizers equally diverse in terms of social class. In fact, the only other section with a comparably inclusive perspective is section eight — a section that is, once again, framed by the Warren Smiths: it opens in their home near the Strand, and it ends with Septimus committing suicide by throwing himself out of the window of their living room (103 and 164–165).

If there is an upper-class bias in Mrs. Dalloway, then it is for the most part linked to specific characters and should therefore not be regarded as a structural limitation of the novel or its author. At the same time, we cannot simply dismiss out of hand Jeremy Hawthorn’s point that Woolf’s novel renders the idiom of its upper-class characters much more successfully than the speech of their lower-class counterparts. For instance, Hawthorn quite rightly insists that a character like Mrs. Dempster, who speaks Cockney, would not normally use a phrase like “it seemed to her better to be [...] a little moderate in one’s expectations” (29); the use of “one,” in particular, strikes a false note in a passage that is otherwise at pains to mimic Mrs. Dempster’s working-class idiom (e.g. “She had had a hard time of it”; see Hawthorn 103). Like all of Woolf’s novels, then, Mrs. Dalloway is notably more at home in the genteel idiom of the English upper classes than in any ‘lowlier’ style of speech (Eagleton, The English Novel 308 and 320).

Even if one concedes, however, that there is a certain linguistic class-bias in Mrs. Dalloway, Hawthorn’s concomitant suggestion that the novel as a whole tends to depict members of the lower classes as lacking in individuality, associating them with animality instead, is hardly convincing. Hawthorn’s argument hinges on the idea that, in Mrs. Dalloway, any statement that appears within parentheses constitutes “some implied narrator-interruption of a character’s
stream of thoughts” (101). This explains why Hawthorn interprets a phrase like “The mothers of Pimlico gave suck to their young,” which appears within parentheses in *Mrs. Dalloway* (7), as a narratorial interjection that denies the humanity of lower-class mothers by using the expression *to give suck*, which is usually reserved for animals. However, while Hawthorn is right in claiming that there is a disparaging quality to the statement, we may take issue with his more general claim that all statements in parentheses should be read as narratorial commentary in Woolf’s novel. In the following passage, for instance, in which Clarissa examines the expensive items displayed in a shop window, the statement made in parentheses most likely constitutes an afterthought on Clarissa’s part: “[T]he shopkeepers were fidgeting in their windows with their paste and diamonds, their lovely old sea-green brooches in eighteenth-century settings to tempt Americans (but one must economise, not buy things rashly for Elizabeth) […]” (5). If, however, this as well as other statements in parentheses cannot automatically be ascribed to the narrator, then Hawthorn’s argument concerning the text’s general association of the lower classes with animality no longer holds true. The passage that refers to mothers ‘giving suck’ to their young, for instance, is not a narratorial interjection but instead associated with marginal presences impinging on Clarissa’s consciousness:

[A]s for saying, as Peter did, that he [i.e. Hugh Whitbread] had no heart, no brain, nothing but the manners and breeding of an English gentleman, that was only her dear Peter at his worst; and he could be intolerable; […] but adorable to walk with on a morning like this.

(June had drawn out every leaf on the trees. The mothers of Pimlico gave suck to their young. Messages were passing from the Fleet to the Admiralty. Arlington Street and Piccadilly seemed to chafe the very air in the Park and lift its leaves hotly, brilliantly, on waves of that divine vitality which Clarissa loved. To dance, to ride, she had adored all that.) (7)

It is, at the very least, not absolutely clear whether the class bias of the expression “gave suck” is the narrator’s or Clarissa’s; the narrator’s voice and the focalizing consciousness are notoriously difficult to distinguish in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and interpretative caution is therefore in order (Garvey 60; Snaith 63–64). Quite tellingly, Hawthorn’s only other example for an association of the lower classes with animal-like behavior occurs in a part of the novel where the focalizer is Richard Dalloway (124–128; see Hawthorn 102). Accordingly, while it is difficult to deny the subtle linguistic class bias of *Mrs. Dalloway*’s genteel idiom, we should ascribe the novel’s more blatantly prejudiced statements, not to the narrator or to the text as a whole, but to Richard and Clarissa Dalloway, the text’s
focalizers at the two points in question. This, in turn, confirms the observation made earlier that the novel’s social vision is far less inclusive in the sections that focus on the Dalloways than in the parts of the novel that revolve around Septimus and his wife.

The fact that the segments centering on Septimus and Lucrezia are also the most socially inclusive is particularly noteworthy because this renders it deeply ironic that several characters in Woolf’s novel construe Septimus’s behavior as un-English.19 Even Septimus’s wife in fact worries that Septimus’s condition is too conspicuous and therefore unseemly:

[H]er husband, for they had been married four, five years now, jumped, started, and said, “All right!” angrily, as if she [i.e. Lucrezia] had interrupted him.

People must notice; people must see. [...] Suppose they had heard him? She looked at the crowd. Help, help! she wanted to cry out to butchers’ boys and women. [...] But failure one conceals. She must take him away into some park. (17)

Lucrezia – herself an outsider because she is an Italian expatriate – tries to hide Septimus’s condition from others because she has understood an important characteristic of ‘good’ English society: “failure one conceals.” Later, we learn that Dr. Holmes, the physician whom the Warren Smiths consult, believes that there is “nothing whatever seriously the matter” with Septimus (23); in fact, Dr. Holmes – whose name blends ‘Dr. Watson’ with ‘Sherlock Holmes’ and thus evokes an unsavory combination of medical care and criminal judgment (Braden Shaw xxxii) – explicitly reminds Septimus of his “duty” as an English husband to pull himself together and “do something instead of lying in bed” (101). Much like Clarissa, Dr. Holmes thus regards stoical composure in the face of adversity as one of life’s highest virtues – and a decidedly English one at that. As Alex Zwerdling observes, such “unruffled self-control has everything to do with the ability to retain power,” and those who fail to maintain a stiff upper lip quickly become “outsiders in a society dedicated to covering up the stains” (72). Private misery must, at all cost, be concealed, and those who fail to do so are regarded as un-English even if they are in many ways more representative than those who succeed.

It is therefore particularly poignant that Septimus himself at first also subscribes to the view that one must conceal one’s emotions, realizing too late that his real problem is precisely an inability to feel. Before the war, Septimus’s employer, Mr. Brewer, thought very highly of Septimus’s professional abilities, but

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19 See also Tamar Katz: “Mrs. Dalloway analyzes nationalism acutely in the figure of Septimus Smith” (400).

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was worried by the fact that the young man “looked weakly” (94). Serving as a soldier in the trenches in France, however, Septimus supposedly “developed manliness,” and when his friend Evans was killed in combat, Septimus “congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably” (94–95). As Lee R. Edwards observes, the lesson that Septimus has learnt is that, in this society, becoming a ‘real man’ means that one must not feel (105). For this reason, Septimus is at first not alarmed by the “emotional numbing” that is, in fact, a characteristic symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder (Manguno-Mire and Franklin 356). Soon after the armistice, however, Septimus begins to worry about a lasting absence of feeling:

He looked at people outside; happy they seemed, collecting in the middle of the street, shouting, laughing, squabbling over nothing. But he could not taste, he could not feel. [...] He could reason; he could read, Dante for example, quite easily [...] he could add up his bill; his brain was perfect; it must be the fault of the world then – that he could not feel. (96)

Septimus explicitly suspects here that it is “the fault of the world” that he can no longer feel, and he is evidently not merely deluded in his belief because society does in fact hold the truth to be self-evident that the only proper way for an Englishman to behave is to endure, stoically, the horrors even of total war.

As Karen DeMeester contends, this silencing of emotions also impairs Septimus’s ability to engage in therapeutic storytelling, which in turn renders it less likely that he will manage to recover from the effects of shell-shock (662). Bearing this in mind helps us to see that Septimus’s disturbing hallucinatory fits are best read as a psychological safety valve for pent-up emotions:

[H]e, Septimus, was alone, called forth in advance of the mass of men to hear the truth, to learn the meaning, which now at last, after all the toils of civilisation – Greeks, Romans, Shakespeare, Darwin, and now himself – was to be given whole to... “To whom?” he asked aloud. “To the Prime Minister,” the voices which rustled above his head replied. The supreme secret must be told to the Cabinet; first that trees are alive; next there is no crime; next love, universal love, he muttered, gasping, trembling, painfully drawing out these profound truths which needed, so deep were they, so difficult, an immense effort to speak out, but the world was entirely changed by them for ever. (74)

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20 I have made a similar argument concerning the debilitating effects of an ideal of stoical masculinity in my essay “Between the Wild West and Pastoral Peace” (224).
To a society that values emotional restraint above everything else, Septimus, in his severely traumatized state, responds with rapturous visions of “universal love.” Dr. Holmes, however, remains unsympathetic and interprets even Septimus’s suicide as an un-English, unmanly sign of weakness: “The coward!” (164). What *Mrs. Dalloway* shows is that a society’s demand for emotional control or moderation can itself become excessive: that an unconditional requirement for self-restraint is in fact a form of moral extremism.21

**History as the Return of the Repressed**

Just as it is instructive to examine Septimus’s ‘failure’ to comply with upper-class ideals of stoic composure, it is worth asking why Clarissa herself is unable to maintain her equanimity when confronted with Doris Kilman, the tutor and close friend of her daughter Elizabeth. The intensity of Clarissa’s dislike for Miss Kilman is in fact quite startling:

Miss Kilman would do anything for the Russians, starved herself for the Austrians, but in private inflicted positive torture, so insensitive was she, dressed in a green mackintosh coat. Year in year out she wore that coat; she perspired; she was never in the room five minutes without making you feel her superiority, your inferiority; how poor she was; how rich you were how she lived in a slum without a cushion or a bed or a rug or whatever it might be [...].

It rasped [Clarissa …], to have stirring about in her this brutal monster! […] this hatred, which, especially since her illness, had power to make her feel scraped, hurt in her spine […], and made all pleasure in beauty, in friendship, in being well, in being loved and making her home delightful rock, quiver, and bend as if indeed there were a monster grubbing at the roots, as if the whole panoply of content were nothing but self love! this hatred! (12–13)

The “hatred” Clarissa feels for Doris Kilman endangers, we learn, even her pleasure in “making her home delightful” – and it certainly departs from an ideal of emotional equipoise. The text makes clear, moreover, that Clarissa does not hate Miss Kilman because she objects to the idea of her daughter falling in love with someone of her own sex; rather, Elizabeth’s blunder is that she has fallen for a “[h]eavy, ugly, commonplace” woman (137), quite unlike Clarissa herself, who had had the good sense of pining after the fascinating and more socially acceptable Sally Seton. Moreover, when we learn that Clarissa disdains Miss Kilman’s piety because of her conviction that “religious ecstasy made people

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callous” (12), we should remember the discussion of George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* in chapter two, where the narrator points out that fervent beliefs tend to be deemed unfashionable by those who live in wealthy, comfortable homes (238; bk. 4, ch. 3) and who can therefore afford to retain a properly ironic distance.

The unseemly intensity of Doris Kilman’s beliefs is, however, only one reason why Clarissa reacts with such disgust to her daughter’s friend. Another, equally important reason is that Doris Kilman is of German descent and a teacher of history, for as such she reminds Clarissa of the very thing she would like to forget: the horrors of the Great War, for which the class to which Clarissa belongs was ultimately responsible. Miss Kilman, we learn early on in the novel, was treated badly during the war, “all her soul rusted with that grievance sticking in it, her dismissal from school during the War” (12). We have already seen that Clarissa is all too keen on emphasizing that the war is a thing of the past, which explains why the presence, or even the mere thought, of Doris Kilman is so unbearable for Clarissa. Moreover, if Maria DiBattista is right in arguing that Clarissa seeks “unhistorical happiness in plunging spontaneously into the present” (40), then Doris Kilman’s “really historical mind” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 12) points us toward a fundamental conflict: the clash between, on the one hand, someone who did not suffer directly during the war and who displays an intense love for the present, and, on the other hand, a person who was treated unfairly and whose very presence serves as a reminder of historical injustice.

This is of course not to say that we should see Doris Kilman as a flawless character, for she may indeed, as Alice van Buren Kelley insists (91–92), occasionally use religion merely as a shield, or be too possessive in her love for Elizabeth (see *Mrs. Dalloway* 144: “If she could grasp her, if she could clasp her, if she could make her hers absolutely and forever and then die; that was all she wanted”). The very name Kilman (‘kill man’), moreover, hardly helps to paint Elizabeth’s friend in a positive light. At the same time, however, we should be wary of situating Doris Kilman “at the negative pole” of the novel’s value system (Kelley 92), as this would mean simply to accept Clarissa’s problematic judgment. Instead, we need to recognize that the extent of Clarissa’s disgust is entirely disproportionate to any real offence on Miss Kilman’s part – a circumstance to which Clarissa readily admits: “[I]t was not her one hated but the idea of her, which undoubtedly had gathered into itself a great deal that was not Miss

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22 Doris Kilman thus functions as a Jungian shadow that Clarissa notably fails to integrate into her sense of self.
Kilman” (12–13). Characteristically, however, Clarissa does not accept any responsibility on her part; it is simply that “one” – not she herself – hates Miss Kilman, because of an “idea” that has, almost magically, “gathered into itself a great deal” that, in fact, has little to do with the real Miss Kilman. The text’s very language – the impersonal pronoun, the passive voice – thus testifies to the extent to which Clarissa desires to repress her own agency and responsibility for injustice.

This evasion of responsibility is most clearly in evidence when Clarissa thinks of her husband’s work in a government committee concerned with the Armenians, a people Clarissa cannot even distinguish from the Albanians:

[Richard] was already halfway to the House of Commons, to his Armenians, his Albanians, having settled her on the sofa, looking at his roses. And people would say, “Clarissa Dalloway is spoilt.” She cared much more for her roses than for the Armenians. Hunted out of existence, maimed, frozen, the victims of cruelty and injustice (she had heard Richard say so over and over again) – no, she could feel nothing for the Albanians, or was it the Armenians? but she loved her roses (didn’t that help the Armenians?) – the only flowers she could bear to see cut. (131–132)

Clarissa’s admission that she cares more about flowers and her parties than about the Armenians is problematic irrespective of historical context. However, if we bear in mind the extent of genocidal violence committed against the Armenians by the Ottoman military forces during World War I, then Clarissa’s indifference surely is nothing short of appalling:

We don’t know the exact number of Armenians killed in the years following 1915 – or even the number living in Turkey. 1.2–1.4 million killed might be a reasonable guess for 1915–16. [... O]nly about 10 percent of the Armenians living in Turkey in 1914 remained in the country in 1922 – the most successful murderous cleansing achieved in the 20th century. (Mann 140)

Clarissa even muddles “Armenians and Turks” (134), and David Bradshaw rightly points out that doing so in the early 1920s “is only a little less bizarre than muddling Jews and Nazis would be in the latter half of the following decade” (xx).

Nevertheless, Lee R. Edwards attempts to defend Clarissa’s ‘apolitical’ stance, readily conceding that Clarissa’s roses may not help the Armenians much, but also wondering whether the usual schemes of politics – petitions, committees,

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23 On how Doris Kilman is treated by Clarissa Dalloway, see, for example, Pam Morris: “Part of the misery she suffers is at the hands of Clarissa Dalloway. [... She] becomes a figment of her hatred rather than a real person” (65).
charitable donations – had done much good, either (110–111). And indeed it is true that British policies during and after the war remained largely ineffective, despite initial promises to hold those who committed the massacres responsible:

Power politics intruded […] and Britain found itself forced – by circumstances and by preference – to back away from its stated commitments to the Armenians. This found its clearest expression in the half-hearted attempts by the British authorities to bring arrested Young Turk leaders before a military or criminal tribunal after the war; most of those in British custody were ultimately released, with only a few trials of minor figures having taken place (resulting in few convictions). (Totten and Bartrop 20)

Given the British government’s failure to keep its promises to the Armenian people, one could hardly blame Clarissa for being angered, perhaps even disillusioned. However, for her to opt for indifference – to care more about her roses and do nothing at all – is hardly the appropriate response, especially for someone so closely associated to the very governing class that has failed to keep its promises to the Armenians in the first place. This, however, is precisely what Clarissa prefers to do: to forget the war, and in particular to repress the fact that she is guilty by association. Accordingly, while we began the discussion of Woolf’s novel with an emphasis on the spatial dimensions home (e.g. country-house Arcadias, or the social geography of imperial London), we must now turn to the problem of history, and thus the temporality of belonging.

**Time on the Clock vs. Time in the Mind**

At first sight, it seems plausible to relate a recurring hostility against clocks in *Mrs. Dalloway* to Clarissa’s desire to repress historical responsibility. However, as Randall Stevenson has shown, such hostility against mechanical timepieces occurs frequently in modernist fiction in general, and was to some extent shared by contemporary philosophers like Henri Bergson, who believed that time exists as duration within the self: a seamless continuum of conscious states, rather than a sequence of mechanically divisible and measurable items (Stevenson, *Modernist Fiction* 105). There is, in the words of the narrator in Woolf’s *Orlando*, a “discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind” (95), and precisely this discrepancy is highlighted in *Mrs. Dalloway* through one of its leitmotifs: the sound of a bell tolling the hour, penetrating even into the private space of the home and interrupting a character’s introspective mood (e.g. 103, 139–140 and 204).24

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24 The centrality of time is also evident in Woolf’s working title for *Mrs. Dalloway*, “The Hours” (Jo-Ann Wallace 18; York 52).
According to Stevenson, there are historically specific reasons why Woolf and her contemporaries were so concerned with mechanical time and its impact on people’s everyday lives. For one thing, Stevenson argues, the spread of the railways in the mid-nineteenth century had made it necessary to standardize time throughout Britain, and thus contributed to an increasingly strict regime of time-keeping. Moreover, the newly regulated working environment of the industrial factories ensured that standardized time became an everyday reality for millions of laborers (e.g. through the ritual of ‘clocking in’ and ‘clocking out’; Modernist Fiction 113–114). The complexity of military action during the Great War, finally, depended on exact synchronization and thus contributed to the spread of wristwatches (116). For all these reasons, Stevenson suggests, mechanical timepieces not only became an increasingly prominent feature in people’s lives; they also came to symbolize a growing mechanization of human existence, with individuals reduced to wheels and cogs in a soulless military-industrial machine.

And yet, while Stevenson’s argument explains the general preoccupation with clocks in modernist fiction, it is important to note that in Mrs. Dalloway, characters’ attitudes towards timepieces vary depending on their particular situation and social status. We can see this in a passage from Woolf’s novel that Stevenson discusses in the course of his argument:

Shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing, the clocks of Harley Street nibbled at the June day, counselled submission, upheld authority, and pointed out in chorus the supreme advantages of a sense of proportion, 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 Messrs. Rigby and Lowndes to give the information gratis, that it was half-past one. (Mrs. Dalloway 112; see Stevenson, Modernist Fiction 134)

Stevenson is surely right in claiming that the hostility directed in this passage at the clocks of Harley Street is related to a critique of the status quo (“counseled submission, upheld authority”). However, what Stevenson does not discuss is that the value judgments at this point in Woolf’s novel are, in all likelihood, the narrator’s and Lucrezia Warren Smith’s, whereas other characters exhibit en-
tirely different attitudes towards mechanical timepieces. For instance, in the paragraph that immediately follows the passage quoted above, Hugh Whitbread – a pinnacle of respectability, and viewed by both Peter Walsh and Sally Seton as the embodiment of mindless conformism (7 and 79–80) – feels “gratitude” rather than hostility towards the clocks in Harley Street (112). Or, to give a second example, immediately after her husband’s suicide, even Lucrezia, hearing a clock striking the hour, thinks “how sensible the sound was; compared with all this thumping and whispering” (164). In moments of great emotional turmoil, an otherwise oppressive order may suddenly seem “sensible” and reassuring. Without denying the general validity of Stevenson’s observations, we nevertheless need to examine more closely when and why, precisely, Woolf’s characters react to timepieces in the way they do.

If we pay attention to the details of Woolf’s text, we find that, for Clarissa, clocks are problematic not as symbols of an oppressive social order, but for two rather different reasons: on the one hand they remind her of human mortality, and on the other they threaten to thwart her efforts to repress the reality of historical change. The former idea is made explicit early on:

[Clarissa] 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 colours, salts, tones of existence, so that she filled the room she entered […]. (32–33)

Lady Bruton’s face here becomes the dial of a clock that measures the (life-)time Clarissa has left. Of course, the idea that clocks are mementoes of human mortality is far from new and has long been central to the carpe diem theme (Stevenson 113). Yet for Clarissa, mechanical timepieces also symbolize more than

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25 In the paragraph that precedes the excerpt quoted above, Lucrezia Warren Smith is the focalizing agent, and it is at least plausible that she continues to be the focalizing agent (as there is no explicit indication of a change in perspective). Moreover, the language used in the excerpt echoes a passage that occurs a few pages earlier in Woolf’s novel, where the point of view at first seems to be associated exclusively with the omniscient narrator. The phrase “Rezia Warren Smith devined it,” however, which occurs in that passage, suggests that the narratorial perspective (including the narrator’s value judgments) is, if not identical with, then at least similar to Lucrezia’s; the point of view is both the narrator’s and Lucrezia’s. Given the parallels between that earlier passage and the excerpt quoted above, I would argue for a similar combination of narratorial and character focalization in the second passage.

26 See Paul K. Saint-Amour, who notes that “[s]ometimes clock time tyrannizes in Mrs. Dalloway,” but who also suggests that “oftener the striking of a clock is the occasion for linking or shuttling among characters” (89).
the general principle of mortality, as we discover when the sound of a bell tolling
the hour immediately makes her think of Doris Kilman:

The sound of Big Ben flooded Clarissa’s drawing-room, where she sat, ever so an-
noyed, at her writing-table; worried; annoyed. It was perfectly true that she had not
asked Ellie Henderson to her party; but she had done it on purpose. [...] Why should
she invite all the dull women in London to her parties? Why should Mrs. Marsham
interfere? And there was Elizabeth closeted all this time with Doris Kilman. Anything
more nauseating she could not conceive. Prayer at this hour with that woman. And
the sound of the bell flooded the room with its melancholy wave [...]. (128–129)

Here, the intrusion of time into the (supposedly inviolate) privacy of the home
initially leads Clarissa to think of a dull acquaintance who would spoil her up-
coming party – but her thoughts are then mysteriously propelled forward to her
daughter’s “nauseating” friendship with Miss Kilman, the history teacher with
German roots. The two passages thus illustrate Clarissa’s concerns with time: a
‘universal’ fear of mortality, and a very personal dislike of Doris Kilman. Both
these impulses express a desire on Clarissa’s part to stop time and halt the
progress of history. Therefore, if at first sight Clarissa’s dislike of clocks may
seem similar to Lucrezia’s, on closer inspection we find that the reasons for their
hostility are fundamentally different. Whereas Clarissa fears the idea of history
and mutability itself, Lucrezia dislikes clocks as symbols of a particular
socio-historical order and thus desires change (except in moments of existential
crisis – e.g. after her husband’s suicide – when even Lucrezia appreciates the
sense of order and predictability that clocks convey).

**Everyday Myths**

It is in the same context that we have to see the use of mythical elements in
*Mrs. Dalloway*, for myth should not only be conceived as a departure from the
“everyday time” that Mikhail Bakhtin sees as characteristic of the novel (“Forms
of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel” 128; see Walder 9); it also constitutes
an attempt to empty the past of its historical dimension. According to Franco
Moretti, rewriting an event in mythical form means “freeing it from the profane
world of causes and effects, and projecting into it the symbolic richness of the
archetype” (*Modern Epic* 248). And perhaps the most effective way of aban-
donning the logic of cause and effect is to adapt myth’s non-linear conception of
time, which breaks down the distinction between past and present (Tobin 266).
Because of this different conception of time, Roland Barthes suggests, mythical
objects seem to “come from eternity”; they no longer appear in a linear, causal
sequence – as produced or chosen – and in consequence “history evaporates,”
together with any notion of human responsibility, since no one can be responsible for a state of affairs that is eternal and unchangeable (151). In short, then, myth is a kind of discourse that purports to discover, underneath the mundane historical surface of everyday life, a deeper, unchanging, eternal reality.

In Woolf’s novel, a concern with this shift from surface to depth is intimated continuously through the frequent use of water imagery.27 Such imagery is omnipresent, for instance, in the opening paragraphs of Mrs. Dalloway, in which Clarissa plunges into a London morning in June 1923 just as she had “plunged at Bourton into the open air,” which for her felt “like the flap of a wave” (3); we learn that she loves the city’s “waves of divine vitality” (7), and the beauty of flowers is to Clarissa like “a wave which she let flow over her and surmount” the hatred she feels for Miss Kilman, that stern woman with her unduly historical mind (14). Similarly Septimus, looking out of the window of the Warren Smith’s living room, notices how the “trees dragged their leaves like nets through the depths of the air; the sound of water was in the room” (153). In both cases, the narrator’s language associates everyday occurrences with images of watery depths and blissful submersion, and perhaps the pervasive presence of aquatic metaphors in Mrs. Dalloway has contributed to critics’ tendency to attribute a stream-like quality to Woolf’s prose style (e.g. Love 71; Nalbantian 84; Naremore 91; Judith Ryan 191). At any rate, the recurrence of water imagery in the novel suggests a continual tension between mythical depths and the flow of everyday reality.28

The novel’s most celebrated attempt to explore the mythical substratum of everyday life occurs in a scene in which an old beggar-woman sings a song in Regent’s Park. The focalizer at this point in the text is Peter (Booker, Techniques of Subversion 174), whose train of thought is interrupted by the sound of the old woman’s song, which “bubbled up” and “streamed away in rivulets over the pavement” – note, once again, the use of aquatic metaphors. Peter imagines the woman to have been singing “through all ages”: “Still remembering how once in some primeval May she had walked with her lover, this rusty pump, this battered old woman with one hand exposed for coppers, the other clutching her

27 See Juan Eduardo Cilot, who insists that water alludes to the “connexion between the superficial and the profound” (175); see also Sánchez-Vizcaíno for the significance of water imagery in Woolf, William James, Henri Bergson, and Sigmund Freud. Many critics have, of course, noted Woolf’s use of water imagery – e.g. Janine MacLeod (55) or Roger Poole (266).

28 It might, incidentally, be interesting to pursue the theoretical link between this definition of myth and Fredric Jameson’s characterization of postmodernism as a schizophrenic “breakdown of temporality” that results in the experience of an isolated present of “heightened intensity” (Postmodernism 27).
side, would still be there in ten million years” (89–90). There are two reasons why the phrase “rusty pump” is important here. For one thing, it shows again that, when a lower-class character is implicitly dehumanized in Woolf’s novel (i.e. the woman is not regarded as human, but merely as a rusty, mechanical thing), the perspective is invariably that of a member of the Dalloway circle. For another, a pump is an instrument designed to tap sources that lie buried deep beneath the ground, just like the life-giving, mythical meaning that supposedly lurks somewhere beneath the surface of everyday reality.

For Peter, a poor beggar-woman singing a song thus becomes an awe-inspiring mythical presence related to the archetypes of the eternal feminine and the earth-mother (e.g. Fleishman 84; Viola 244; Wyatt 443) – a timeless being who already existed “in some primeval May,” and who “would still be there in ten million years”:

But the passage of ages had blurred the clarity of that ancient May day; [...] and she no longer saw, when she implored him (as she did now quite clearly) [...] black whiskers or sunburnt face but only a looming shape, a shadow shape, to which, with the bird-like freshness of the very aged she still twittered “give me your hand and let me press it gently” (Peter Walsh couldn’t help giving the poor creature a coin as he stepped into his taxi) [...] ; and her fist clutched at her side, and she smiled, pocketing her shilling, and all peering inquisitive eyes seemed blotted out, and the passing generations – the pavement was crowded with bustling middle-class people – vanished [...]. (90)

History – “the passing generations,” the “bustling middle-class people” – disappears in this mythopoetic vision, and there remains only an ancient female lover with her eternal song. Crucially, the rhapsodic language of myth threatens to distract us from the ‘superficial’ sequence of events: Peter, when stepping into a taxi, is importuned by an old beggar-woman to whom he gives a shilling (though, it seems, rather unwillingly: he “couldn’t help giving”). At the same time, if there is an evasion of reality in this scene, then it is either Peter’s or the narrator’s, but not, as Michael Whitworth rightly insists, the novel’s as a whole (156), for the mythicizing sequence is immediately followed by Lucrezia Warren Smith’s correctively prosaic perception of the same beggar-woman: “Oh poor old wretch!” (90). Whereas, in short, the mythopoetic vision of the privileged flâneur threatens to dazzle us with symbolic richness, the perspective of a beleaguered middle-class wife with a foreign background returns us to the sparse, historical prose of everyday life.

It is thus no coincidence that, in Mrs. Dalloway, the ‘visionary’ characters who sense a mythical unity underlying everyday existence – Clarissa, Peter, and
Septimus – are also, albeit in different ways, cut off from ordinary personal relationships. James Naremore, for instance, points to Peter’s dream vision of himself as a “solitary traveler” as evidence of his sense of isolation (99; see *Mrs. Dalloway* 62–64). Naremore also highlights Clarissa’s tendency to retreat from people into her upper room and, most emphatically, to Septimus’s post-traumatic estrangement from his wife and the world (110). Each of these three characters experiences moments of intense and isolated subjectivity during which they believe they have discovered a mysterious, transcendent cosmic unity. As Raymond Williams notes:

> This is the ‘collective consciousness’ of the myth, the archetype: the ‘collective unconscious’ of Jung. In and through the intense subjectivities a metaphysical or psychological ‘community’ is assumed, and characteristically, if only in abstract structures, it is universal; the middle terms of actual societies are excluded as ephemeral, superficial, or at best contingent and secondary. Thus a loss of social recognition is in a way made into a virtue: as a condition of understanding and insight. (246)

These characters’ union with a “metaphysical or psychological ‘community’” flows, as Margaret Blanchard astutely observes, from vision rather than from action; it consists in a solitary way of seeing the world, not in a collective attempt to interact with and change it – and thus, like *flânerie*, ultimately constitutes a luxury that depends on the socio-historical circumstances of the individual in question: “One can afford to conjure up a better world without trying to actualize it only if the world one lives in is tolerable as it is” (Blanchard 305). In the light of these observations, it becomes crucial to note that, of the novel’s three ‘visionary’ characters, only Peter and Clarissa survive, whereas the more beleaguered and less privileged Septimus is unable to re-establish a sense of home in the world and therefore eventually takes his own life.

**Misreading the Other**

More generally, a key feature of Woolf’s novel is that it continually emphasizes the parallels between, on the one hand, the Warren Smiths, and, on the other, the Dalloways and their circle – but only simultaneously to highlight the crucial differences between them. To neglect these differences would mean to misread the story of Septimus and Lucrezia much as it is misread by Peter Walsh early on in Woolf’s novel. In a scene set in Regent’s Park, Peter passes Septimus and Lucrezia, and while he acknowledges that he does not know enough about the two to interpret their behavior adequately, he nevertheless supposes that they

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29 For an argument similar to Naremore’s, see Carlson (57).
are merely “lovers squabbling” (77) – an assessment that gravely underestimates the depth of the Warren Smiths’ personal crisis. The sense that Peter misreads events connected to the Warren Smiths is confirmed later, after Septimus has killed himself. Lucrezia’s reaction to her husband’s suicide is, understandably, a mixture between shock and resignation, and looking back on their married life she movingly concludes: “Of her memories, most were happy” (165). This mood of loving sadness at the end of the novel’s eighth section is disrupted brutally by the opening sentences of section nine, in which Peter hears the sound of an ambulance – in all likelihood the very ambulance that is on its way to the Warren Smiths – and thinks: “One of the triumphs of civilization” (165). A moment of deep sadness for Lucrezia is thus, for Peter, comforting, even uplifting.

We must therefore keep the possibility of misinterpretation in mind when we proceed to Clarissa’s interpretation of Septimus’s suicide towards the end of Woolf’s novel. When the psychiatrist Sir William Bradshaw mentions Septimus’s suicide at her party, Clarissa’s first reaction is one of anger and frustration: “What business had the Bradshaws to talk of death at her party?” (201). Irritated perhaps because the intrusion of death into her home reminds her of her general fear of mortality, Clarissa briefly retires to her room. There, Clarissa’s mood soon changes, and initially she interprets Septimus’s suicide as an indirect comment on her own ethical failures:

They (all day she had been thinking of Bourton, of Peter, of Sally), they would grow old. A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he [i.e. Septimus] had preserved. Death was defiance. (202)

Clarissa admits, here, not only to a sort of emptiness in her life – her self appears “wreathed about with chatter” – but even to a fundamental sense of dishonesty (“corruption, lies”). By contrast, she believes, Septimus’s suicide has allowed him to save his innermost self from the corruption that comes from living in society:

Somehow it was her disaster – her disgrace. It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced to stand here in her evening dress. She had schemed; she had pilfered. She was never wholly admirable. She had wanted success. (203)

Given Clarissa’s unflinching criticism of herself, it would be tempting to think that being confronted with Septimus’s suicide constitutes a truly life-changing epiphany for her: a moment of recognition concerning the extent to which the suicide of a shell-shocked war veteran reflects on her own life (including her desire for “success,” and the ethical price she has been willing to pay for it).
However, Clarissa ultimately shies away from her insight and characteristically reinterprets Septimus’s death in entirely apolitical terms. The same, moreover, is true for at least one literary critic, who argues that Septimus’s case should not be regarded in its own right at all, but instead as merely enhancing that of Clarissa in order “to bring to the surface something buried deep in her own life” (Rachman 5). In this view, the story of the shell-shocked war veteran Septimus Warren Smith is not to be read in political terms, but merely as a means of individual self-discovery for Clarissa. However, as John G. Hessler points out, the society that Clarissa has assembled at her party is “the same society that sent Septimus Warren Smith (and many others like him) to the trenches” (135), and we must bear this in mind when we read Clarissa’s final assessment of Septimus’s suicide:

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 circles 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. (204)

While at first Clarissa had read Septimus’s suicide as highlighting her own failures, she ultimately sees his death as little more than an appeal for her to seize the day (he “made her feel the fun”); she does “not pity him,” and even feels “glad that he had done it.” In sharp contrast, Septimus himself had felt little joy when he killed himself, as Deborah Gut reminds us: “Instead, there is the terror of the hunted beast” (“Self-Evasion” 19). Septimus has not preserved his innermost self, as Clarissa would like to believe; rather, he has obliterated his entire self because he could not find a way to restore it from its fragmented, shell-shocked condition. Clarissa’s attempt to interpret a shell-shocked young man’s suicide as an uplifting spiritual triumph is chillingly inappropriate, as well as conveniently compatible with her political complacency.

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30 This argument would be one piece of evidence in support of Dominic Head’s impressively broad thesis that “most of the accepted modernist ‘epiphanies’ are problematic” (21).

31 Margaret Blanchard suggests that Septimus’s suicide cannot be seen as a political gesture (302), and she is of course right in the sense that Septimus is unlikely to have intended it as such. This does not mean, however, that there is no political significance to his action, for – as is generally the case when it comes to interpretation – intentions do not determine entirely the meaning of the interpreted object.
The argument that Clarissa misreads Septimus’s death is supported by another of Mrs. Dalloway’s leitmotifs: a quotation from Shakespeare’s Cymbeline that highlights the differences, rather than the similarities, between Clarissa and Septimus. Early in the novel, Clarissa sees an open book in a shop window and there discovers the following lines: “Fear no more the heat o’ the sun / Nor the furious winter’s rages” (10). These are the opening lines of a funeral dirge from Cymbeline, sung by two male characters:

Guiderius.   Fear no more the heat o’th’sun
       Nor the furious winter’s rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
       Home art gone and ta’en thy wages.
Golden lads and girls all must,
       As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.
Arviragus.   Fear no more the frown o’th’great;
       Thou art past the tyrant’s stroke;
Care no more to clothe and eat;
       To thee the reed is as the oak.
The sceptre, learning, physic, must
       All follow this and come to dust. (84; IV.ii.258–269)

One may note in passing that this dirge evokes the age-old Judeo-Christian topos of death as a return to God as man’s original, true home, and that it also refers to the threat posed by “the tyrant’s stroke” (a theme which, arguably, resonates more strongly with Septimus’s rather than with Clarissa’s story). More importantly, we need to bear in mind that the dirge in Shakespeare’s play is sung for two sharply distinct characters: for Imogen, King Cymbeline’s daughter who, much like Clarissa, remains virgin-like even after her marriage (Mrs. Dalloway 34: “she [i.e. Clarissa] could not dispel a virginity preserved through childbirth”; see King 103); and for Cloten, son of the king’s second wife, a rather self-important and obtuse villain who was in fact killed by Guiderius, one of the two characters who sing the dirge. Hermione Lee thus overestimates the extent to which the Shakespearean intertext suggests a fundamental similarity between Septimus and Clarissa (31). What ought to be emphasized instead is that, for the audience of Shakespeare’s play, the scene is ripe with irony, since the dirge aligns the fate of a lowly villain, killed by one of the singers, with that of a regal woman who – unbeknownst to the singers, but not the audience – is not even dead (i.e. Imogen has drunk a potion that induces a sleep which merely resembles death). The Shakespearean text thus presents us with two widely differing characters: a male figure who dies a violent death, and a female figure who may...
appear lifeless, but who in fact remains entirely unharmed and will be miraculously resurrected.

Given these differences, it is worth examining more closely at which points in *Mrs. Dalloway* Clarissa recalls the lines from *Cymbeline* that she finds in a book early on in the novel. If we do so, it becomes apparent that they serve mainly to provide her with a sense of consolation in moments of comparatively mild distress. For instance, the reference to *Cymbeline* is repeated for the first time when Clarissa learns that Lady Bruton has failed to invite her to a lunch party – an event that constitutes a “shock” in the eyes of Clarissa (32). Clarissa remembers the opening lines of the dirge again later, when she is mending a dress in the quiet of her room, “calm, content,” and secluded from the world’s troubles in her comfortable home: “Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall” (43). Here too, thinking of Shakespeare leads to reconciliation, and typically this sense of reconciliation is expressed in aquatic metaphors that create a mythical mood of rebirth and renewal. The third and last time Clarissa remembers the lines is, as we have seen, when she abandons her thoughts about Septimus’s suicide and decides to go back to her party (204). In each of these scenes, then, the Shakespearean text has a consolatory function for Clarissa, though at the same time it is clear that she is not in fact suffering a great deal; her ‘wounds’ are, if not entirely illusory, then clearly not life-threatening.

This contrasts sharply with the case of Septimus, whose psychic wounds prove too deep for literary consolation to be effective. Before the war, Septimus used to admire Shakespeare and what he stood for; indeed, according to the narrator, Septimus “went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare’s plays and Miss Isabel Pole,” whose public lectures on Shakespeare Septimus had admired greatly (94). After the war, however, Septimus remains, for a long time, unable to derive any joy from Shakespeare:

That boy’s business of the intoxication of language [...] had shrivelled utterly. 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 words. The secret signal which one generation passes, under disguise, to the next is loathing, hatred, despair. Dante the same. Aeschylus (translated) the same. (97)

The very cultural artifacts that, for Septimus, used to express the highest human values now speak to him only of the deepest despair, and Julia Briggs rightly points out that, in part, Shakespeare has become tainted for Septimus because
of the way he was used as a national icon in war-time propaganda (14; see also Gordon Williams 243).

Nevertheless, when Septimus later thinks of the lines from Cymbeline – “Fear no more the heat o’ th’ sun” – he seems to regain a sense of joy in the beauty of the bard’s words; he is lying on his sofa, resting and watching the play of light on the wall-paper in the sitting-room, and for a brief moment “not afraid” (153); despite everything, Septimus suddenly believes in recovery: “He would not go mad” (155). For once, Septimus proceeds from vision to action: He joins Lucrezia, who sits at the table and is working on a hat, and while they are employed in common labor Septimus even makes a few jokes, leading Lucrezia to exclaim that they “were perfectly happy now” (160; see Hawthorn 95). However, recovery lasts only for the briefest of moments, for when Dr. Holmes suddenly interrupts the scene, Septimus panics and throws himself out of the living-room window (163–164). While, in short, a few lines from Shakespeare may help Clarissa to reestablish a sense of home, beautiful words alone are not enough for Septimus to recover – which, incidentally, is a sobering reminder that the power of literature to make us feel at home in the world may not be as great as literary critics, in particular, would perhaps like to believe.

The Home of Civilization: Shakespeare, Britain, and the Empire

In addition to putting in relief the many contrasts between Clarissa and Septimus, the Shakespearean intertext of Woolf’s novel allows us to address one final issue that is crucial to Mrs. Dalloway’s exploration of home: imperial conquest and colonial domination. Cymbeline is, among other things, a play about a war between a subject people – the Britons – and the Roman Empire, written at a time when the English were actively colonizing Scotland and Ireland, and beginning to venture further abroad (Innes 16; Floyd-Wilson 102). This, in turn, renders it significant that the other two Shakespearean texts referred to in Mrs. Dalloway are Othello (37–38 and 202) and Antony and Cleopatra (93 and 100): two other plays that are clearly related to questions of ethnic difference, imperial power, and colonization.

For a general overview of the importance of anti-imperialism in Woolf’s novels, see Helen Carr’s article on “Virginia Woolf, Empire and Race,” as well as the chapters on Woolf in Rebecca Walcott’s Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism beyond the Nation (2006) and Paul Stasi’s Modernism, Imperialism, and the Historical Sense (2012).

Woolf’s novel also refers to Shakespeare’s sonnets, which Richard Dalloway dislikes because reading the sonnets “was like listening at keyholes” (82). In contrast to the plays, then, which relate to the novel’s concern with ethnicity and empire, the sonnets are related to the text’s examination of gender and ‘deviant’ sexuality.
In addition to noting the imperial implications of Shakespearean texts in 
_Mrs. Dalloway_, we need to consider Peter Walsh’s position as an agent of 
colonialism. Focusing on Peter’s role in the opening paragraphs of _Mrs. Dalloway_, 
for instance, we find that these passages not only revolve around an uneasy 
opposition between a ‘rural’ past and an urban present; rather, the novel’s 
opening also suggests that colonialism is omnipresent even at home. We have 
already seen that Clarissa is immediately reminded of her youth at Bourton 
when, at the beginning of the novel, she steps out on Bond Street to buy flowers 
for her party in the evening. Significantly, her reminiscences end with the image 
of her old friend Peter, a man “from a respectable Anglo-Indian family which 
for at least three generations had administered the affairs of a continent” (60), 
and whom Clarissa expects to “be back from India” one of these days (3). Clar‐ 
issa’s thoughts thus return to present-day London from recollections of a 
country-house past via a colonialist ‘detour’: a man returning from India, that 
‘jewel in the imperial crown’ which was so central to Britain’s geopolitical 
strategy of domination (e.g. Hobsbawm, _Age of Empire_ 68–69).34

The opening of Woolf’s novel thus implicitly confirms Edward Said’s claim 
that, partly because of colonialism and its effects, the national home always 
already includes the foreign, colonial Other (_Culture and Imperialism_ xxv). In an 
analysis of Jane Austen’s _Mansfield Park_, Said focuses specifically on the English 
country house as a site that may appear isolated from the wider world, but which 
in fact depends for its existence on “overseas sustenance” (89). Franco Moretti 
has questioned Said’s idea that the colonies were, in actual fact, economically 
However, as Ian Baucom points out, Said focuses not only on the notion of 
economic interdependence between empire and ‘motherland,’ but also “relates 
the ordered moral economy which the country house represents to the apt ad‐ 
ministration of colonial property” (166). Similarly, Susan Strehle insists that 
idealizations of Empire use a particular kind of home for their symbolic repre‐ 
sentation of national values (21), with the ideology of ‘true Englishness’ de‐ 
pending on the image of the very country-house Arcadias we have already dis‐

34 This is not to deny the complexity of Peter’s character, whom, as Elizabeth Clea Lamont 
rightly insists, one should not reduce to a “colonialist power-monger” (174). It is merely 
to highlight his thematic function as the first palpably colonial(ist) presence in Woolf’s 
novel.
cussed, and whose ordered stability is envisioned not only as a remedy for the city’s social ills, but also as a cure for the ‘barbarism’ of the colonies.35

Later, *Mrs. Dalloway* in fact makes explicit this link between a supposedly rational order at home – what the narrator calls “Proportion” – and Britain’s ongoing imperial project. In section eight of Woolf’s novel, the narrator introduces Sir William Bradshaw, a renowned London psychiatrist, as the most fervent believer in the idea of Proportion:

Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion – his, if they were men, Lady Bradshaw’s if they were women (she embroidered, knitted, spent four nights out of seven at home with her son) [...].

But Proportion has a sister, less smiling, more formidable, a Goddess even now engaged – in the heat and sands of India, the mud and swamp of Africa, the purlieus of London, wherever in short the climate or the devil tempts men to fall from the true belief which is her own – is even now engaged in dashing down shrines, smashing idols, and setting up in their place her own stern countenance. Conversion is her name and she feasts on the wills of the weakly, loving to impress, to impose, adoring her own features stamped on the face of the populace. (109)

Not only do Sir and Lady Bradshaw adhere strictly to a high-bourgeois model of separate spheres that, for women, revolves mainly around household duties (“she embroidered, knitted, spent four nights out of seven at home with her son”); the establishment of a supposedly disinterested and rational order turns out to be intimately related to a ‘will to power’ and domination – a fact that is, perhaps, hinted at even by Sir William Bradshaw’s first name, which is not only quintessentially English (William the Conqueror, William Shakespeare), but which can also be parsed as ‘will-I-am.’ Less speculatively, we may note that, according to the narrator, assuming the ‘white man’s burden’ (i.e. converting one’s colonial subjects to English Proportion) generally leads to acts of violence: “dashing down shrines” and “smashing idols.”

Some critics have commented on the fact that, precisely at this point in the novel, the narrator of *Mrs. Dalloway* seems to lose all sense of equanimity and

35 See Raymond Williams (281) and, in particular, Peter Borsay on the enlightenment culture of improvement: “[T]he improvers [believed in] a struggle between the forces of civilization and enlightenment, and those of barbarity and heathenism. It cannot be denied that some of this spirit was to infuse the class conflict that gained increasing strength in the early years of the nineteenth century and the spread of empire later in the century” (210).
moral proportion (e.g. Blanchard 299), seemingly contradicting Woolf’s own belief, stated in her essay “Women and Fiction,” that authors should never let bitterness or anger seep into their work (135).36 Avrom Fleishman even suggests that the moral outrage expressed in this passage constitutes a stylistic ‘lapse’ that can be explained by Woolf’s own experience of mental illness and her consequent dislike of psychiatrists (69; see also Jouve 251). Importantly, however, in her essay Woolf is careful to distinguish between, on the one hand, the “distortion” that partisanship may introduce into a literary text and, on the other, artistic weakness; for Woolf, distortion only “frequently” – and thus not necessarily – results in artistic weakness (135). Moreover, even if we were to assume that Woolf was indeed fundamentally opposed to authors expressing any strong convictions in works of fiction, we would still be faced with a paradox that haunts all forms of ‘dogmatic relativism.’ As Christopher Herbert puts it: “In a world where all nonrelativistic truth has been abolished, the relativity principle itself is proclaimed as a universal verity” (118). The assumption that everything is relative, and that art should therefore refrain from expressing strong partisanship, is itself an absolutist creed – and thus inherently contradictory. Accordingly, the narrator’s ‘lapse’ from equanimity when faced with the ‘ideal’ of English Proportion is best understood as a novelistic counterpoint to an absolutist moral relativism that would render political critique entirely impossible.

It is therefore fitting that the very language the narrator uses to describe the twin-sisters of Proportion and Conversion is suffused with a sense of ‘unproportional,’ excessive enjoyment (“feasts on the will of the weakly”; emphasis added). If domination can be associated with such boundless pleasure, then this belies any idea that Empire is truly based on order and proportion. Rather, the narrator envisages the imperial project as a profoundly narcissistic endeavor, concerned not with higher ideals but with admiring its “own features stamped on the face of the populace” (i.e. with remaking the world in its own image). Reversing the colonialist stereotype that ‘natives’ are child-like and in need of guidance (Loomba 181), in this passage the imperialists themselves appear as overly powerful and unpredictable children who throw tantrums whenever ‘their’ colonial subjects dare to frustrate the self-serving needs of the imperial masters.

We have already seen, in the case of Ahab in Moby-Dick, that power is apt to re-enforce such narcissistic delusions of grandeur (see chapter one), and we encounter the same phenomenon in Mrs. Dalloway in the figure of Lady Bruton.

36 See also A Room of One’s Own, where Woolf suggests that, in the case of Jane Eyre, “it is clear that anger was tempering with the integrity of Charlotte Brontë the novelist” (66).
and her colonialist “project for emigrating young people of both sexes born of respectable parents and setting them up with a fair prospect of doing well in Canada” (119). In the scene in question, Lady Bruton has just asked Hugh Whitbread, a government official, to help her write a letter to The Times in support of her project – and it is precisely at this point that Mrs. Dalloway highlights the extent to which the work of domestic servants turns Lady Bruton’s home into a cocoon that shields her from the vicissitudes of everyday life:

(The coffee was very slow in coming.)

“The address?” murmured Hugh Whitbread; and there was at once a ripple in the grey tide of service which washed round Lady Bruton day in, day out, collecting, intercepting, enveloping her in a fine tissue which broke concussions, mitigated interruptions, and spread round the house in Brook Street a fine net where things lodged and were picked out accurately, instantly, by grey-haired Perkins, who had been with Lady Bruton these thirty years and now wrote down the address; handed it to Mr. Whitbread, who took out his pocket-book, raised his eyebrows, and slipping it in among documents of the highest importance, said that he would get Evelyn to ask him to lunch.

(They were waiting to bring the coffee until Mr. Whitbread had finished.)

Hugh was very slow, Lady Bruton thought. He was getting fat, she noticed. […] She was getting impatient […]. (118–119)

An army of domestics is employed in order to spare Lady Bruton any undesired interruptions, and the phrase “tide of service” – another instance of water imagery – dehumanizes the servants by turning them into a natural phenomenon, underlining the extent to which their efforts seem natural to Lady Bruton and her class. If Lady Bruton wants the food to be served, there will immediately be “a soundless and exquisite passing to and fro” (114); she has “only to nod” for her servants to be “instructed to quicken the coffee” (117). In such an environment, the object of desire – Lady Bruton’s project of emigrating young people to Canada – “becomes inevitably prismatic, lustrous, half looking-glass, half precious stone”; it is a narcissistic mirror that reflects back only her own sense of self: “Emigration had become, in short, largely Lady Bruton” (119).

Once we recognize the profound significance of colonialism in Woolf’s novel, the virtual absence of characters that could be described as colonial subjects must appear striking. Peter Walsh, though admittedly a kind of outsider due to his Anglo-Indian background (Lamont 174), is also the scion of a family of colonial administrators and thus hardly qualifies as a colonial subject, if by that term we mean someone who is subjected to colonial rule. Indeed, even though he sees himself as “disliking India, and empire, and army,” he also experiences
“moments of pride in England” and ultimately approves of “London; the season; civilisation,” which he regards as a “splendid achievement” (60). What is striking here is that Peter thinks of London as “civilisation,” in implicit contrast to the uncivilized disorder of ‘the East.’ Moreover, this particular moment of pride occurs only a few pages after the nationalistic display, discussed earlier, of a group of boys “in uniform, carrying guns,” marching through the streets of London towards a “statue praising duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of England” (55). For all his sense of isolation and psychological complexity, then, Peter is a marginal figure only when seen from within the very narrow upper-class circle of the Dalloways, not from a broader social perspective.

Only two characters thus remain in Mrs. Dalloway whom we might plausibly describe as colonial subjects: the Irishwoman Moll Pratt, who sells flowers on the street (20), and a nameless “Colonial” who appears a little earlier in Woolf’s novel (19). Of these two, only Moll briefly becomes a focalizing agent, as if in reward for the “loyalty” she feels towards the Prince of Wales, who – supposedly – passes by in a car (“she wished the dear boy well”). Moll, we learn, would even have liked to express her loyalty more clearly by tossing a bunch of roses into St. James’s Street; however, she refrains from doing so because she finds a “discouraging constable’s eye upon her” (20). Despite the fact that Moll is a loyal subject, in other words, her freedom is very precisely delimited in Woolf’s text (as, incidentally, was that of the recently established Irish Free State; see Robbins 82–83).

It is instructive to compare the way in which the novel treats Moll with the fate of the nameless “Colonial,” who reacts to the (assumed) presence of the Prince of Wales, not with expressions of loyalty, but by insulting the royal family – “which led to words, broken beer glasses, and a general shindy” (19). Colonial dissent is thus immediately silenced within the fictional world of Mrs. Dalloway (Bradshaw xxix; Snaith 73). Moreover, the “Colonial” never becomes the focalizer or bearer of narrative perspective. In fact, we do not even learn what, precisely, the “Colonial” said, and are therefore unable to judge whether he was purposely insulting the royal family in order to pick a fight, or whether he was merely trying to make a valid political point. In either case, it is clear that neither he nor Moll Pratt can express themselves freely in Mrs. Dalloway because they are at all times monitored closely by the – official as well as unofficial – guardians of the imperial nation, who are prepared violently to suppress any oppositional point of view.
Mrs. Dalloway and the Ethics of Home
The imperial nation is thus not a true homeland for its colonial subjects. Moreover, we have seen that the urban space of the imperial capital is not only very precisely delimited, but also not fundamentally different from those ‘rural’ country houses that are among the key symbolical markers of ‘true’ Englishness. Throughout, it has become clear that ideas about what it means to be truly English – such as the glorification of stoical composure – are not in the end separable from questions of gender (e.g. manliness vs. cowardice) or the vagaries of social class (e.g. Doris Kilman’s unfashionably emphatic religious beliefs). Accordingly, it is difficult for outsiders like Doris Kilman or Lucrezia Warren Smith to feel at home in the city of London. Likewise, in the wake of the Great War, “home” for Septimus ultimately comes to mean, not security or belonging, but the threat of being sent, against his will, to one of Sir William Bradshaw’s or “[Dr.] Holmes’s homes” (106–107). It is telling, moreover, how differently Clarissa reacts to Septimus and to Miss Kilman. Doris Kilman is a woman whom Clarissa actually meets, and whom she considers her “enemy”:

That was satisfying; that was real. Ah, how she hated her – hot, hypocritical, corrupt; with all that power; Elizabeth’s seducer; the woman who had crept in to steal and defile (Richard would say, What nonsense!). She hated her: she loved her. It was enemies one wanted, not friends [...]. (191–192)

Clearly, Clarissa loves to hate Doris Kilman, and this contrasts sharply with her reaction to Septimus, who remains an anonymous and mostly imaginary presence in Clarissa’s life. This, in turn, makes it easy for her to reinterpret Septimus’s suicide as a metaphysical triumph that reconciles her with life – or, more precisely, with the current state of society, as well as her position in it.

We must, in other words, always bear in mind Septimus Warren Smith, Doris Kilman, and the general (mis-)treatment of the ‘lower orders’ – working-class people and colonial subjects – when we examine Clarissa’s attempts at “making her home delightful” (13), and particularly when we discuss the hospitality she displays at her parties. Clarissa herself believes that giving parties is inherently positive and, quite simply, “her gift”:

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37 As Jo-Ann Wallace so aptly puts it, Mrs. Dalloway suggests “the complex relationship between various components of ‘the social system’: education, medicine, religion, class, politics, imperialism, and the military” (26). See also Jane Goldman, who suggests that Clarissa and Septimus inhabit a social world that is profoundly distorted by “patriarchal imperialism” (57).
Here was So-and-so in South Kensington; some one up in Bayswater; and somebody else, say, in Mayfair. And she [i.e. Clarissa] 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? (133–134)

There is genuine generosity here, in Clarissa’s vision of spontaneous interconnection, and it resonates powerfully with Jacques Derrida’s idea that hospitality is not just one virtue among many, but rather the key to “culture itself”:

Insofar as it has to do with the ethos, that is, the residence, one’s home, the familiar place of dwelling, inasmuch as it is a manner of being there, the manner in which we relate to ourselves and to others, to others as our own or as foreigners, ethics is hospitality […]. (“On Cosmopolitanism” 16–17; original emphasis)

Opening one’s home to others and making them feel at ease is, for Derrida, the quintessentially ethical behavior, and Clarissa’s hospitality surely is not without merit. Yet even if her “offering” is virtuous in principle, we must ask not only why Clarissa can afford such conspicuous displays of generosity, but also – as the text of Mrs. Dalloway itself suggests – to whom, precisely, her hospitality is offered (“but to whom?”).

Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopic spaces can help us shed some light on the extent to which Clarissa’s parties are anything but the disinterested works of art that she herself imagines them to be (“an offering for the sake of offering”; 134). In “Of Other Spaces,” Foucault defines heterotopias as spaces that project an ideal vision of a particular society, but which in contrast to utopian spaces actually exist as real places within that society (e.g. theaters and museums; 24–26). Among the six principles of heterotopic spaces that Foucault outlines in his essay, the one that is crucial in our context is that they are, in general, “not freely accessible like a public place” (26). This is, of course, also true for Clarissa’s parties, which do not just bring together any sort of people, but only members of the London establishment, including the Prime Minister,

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38 The six principles of heterotopias that Foucault indicates are: (a) there is no society that refrains from constructing heterotopic spaces (24); (b) the same heterotopic space can have different meanings in different historical periods (25); (c) heterotopias can juxtapose in a single real space “several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (ibid.); (d) most heterotopias are linked to particular “slices of time” (such as museums, which are associated with “indefinitely accumulating time”; 26); (e) heterotopias “presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable” (ibid.); (f) with regard to all the spaces that remain, heterotopias either function as spaces of illusion or as spaces of compensation (27).
“this symbol of what they all stood for, English society” (189). Clarissa’s hospitality may, in other words, be perfectly sincere and gesture toward a genuinely admirable ideal. However, her parties also conveniently help the Dalloways fulfill societal expectations and thus to uphold their privileged position.

This is, importantly, not to say that Woolf’s novel constitutes a relentless indictment of its eponymous heroine. In fact, many critics would agree with Alex Zwerdling’s suggestion that Mrs. Dalloway is “finally a sympathetic picture of someone who has surrendered to the force of conventional life and permitted her emotions to go underground” (78). And it is indeed understandable that Clarissa wants to plunge into the present in order to forget, not only her recent illness or human mortality in general, but also the horrors of the Great War. It is understandable, too, that she looks to literary works like Cymbeline for consolation, in order to maintain a sense of belonging. Moreover, even if we believe that the society portrayed in Mrs. Dalloway is profoundly unjust, it does not follow that Clarissa has a moral obligation to be unhappy, for the oppressed of the world gain nothing by the misery of others – even the unhappiness of the privileged.

What is problematic about Clarissa is thus not her desire to feel at home, nor even the fact that she actually manages to find a place in the world. The problem is, rather, that she is willing to do so in ways that not only fail to combat injustice (her refusal to engage with key political issues, such as the British government’s role during and after the Armenian genocide), but that even help maintain the status quo (e.g. fulfilling her role as “perfect hostess”; see Mrs. Dalloway 8 and 67), and which occasionally add insult to injury (e.g. her treatment of Doris Kilman, who poses a threat to Clarissa’s sense of home because she reminds her of things she would prefer to forget). Clarissa herself acknowledges a peculiar “hollowness” at the heart of her social triumphs – triumphs which, perhaps because she was “growing old, satisfied her no longer as they used” (191) – and even in the eyes of her old friend Sally, Clarissa appears as “at heart a snob” (208).

This leads us to what is perhaps the least acknowledged fact about Mrs. Dalloway, and one that is crucial to the novel’s attempt to establish an ethics of home, namely that judgments of all kinds are passed continually in the novel by various characters and, occasionally, by the narrator. If we look, for instance, at the first ten paragraphs of Mrs. Dalloway, we not only find Clarissa judging Peter Walsh and Hugh Whitbread, as well as reporting Peter and Richard’s

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39 Julia Carlson has rightly emphasized the importance of Peter as a critic of Clarissa’s character (58), but she does not discuss the notion of judgment in more general terms.
judgments of “the admirable Hugh” (5); we also learn that Scrope Purvis, who – like the Dalloways – lives in Westminster, finds Clarissa a “charming woman” (4). Later in the novel, we have Dr. Holmes, whose name, as we have seen, suggests both medical care and criminal judgment, and who indeed does not hesitate to call Septimus a coward. Moreover, there is the narrator’s judgment of Sir William Bradshaw and his love of Proportion, and even Doris Kilman’s view of Clarissa is given some space: “She despised Mrs. Dalloway from the bottom of her heart” (141). Crucially, we also have Clarissa’s reactions to the judgments of others:

[S]omething that Peter had said, combined with some depression of her own, in her bedroom, taking off her hat; and what Richard had said had added to it [...]. That was it! Her parties! Both of them criticised her very unfairly, laughed at her very unjustly, for her parties. [...] 

Well, how was she going to defend herself? Now that she knew what it was, she felt perfectly happy. They thought, or Peter at any rate thought, that she enjoyed imposing herself; liked to have famous people about her; great names; was simply a snob in short. Well, Peter might think so. Richard merely thought it foolish of her to like excitement when she knew it was bad for her heart. It was childish, he thought. And both were quite wrong. What she liked was simply life. (132–133)

We learn here that both Peter and Richard are critical of Clarissa’s enthusiasm for parties (though both, of course, nevertheless dutifully attend), and Clarissa’s only defense is that she “simply” likes life. If Woolf’s novel shows us anything, however, it is precisely that simply liking life is not enough – neither in the imperial city, nor in the seemingly pastoral environment at Bourton.

To love life “simply” thus ultimately proves inadequate in a novel that confronts us with multiple points of view in two related, but distinct senses: a ‘technical’ sense relating to vantage points from which the fictional world is perceived; and a ‘political’ sense pertaining to conflicting judgments and diverging opinions. Woolf’s novel provides us with a broad, albeit far from all-inclusive or politically neutral range of focalizers, and thus immerses us in a sea of ethical judgments. And this continual and contradictory passing of judgment can hardly fail to have an effect on the reader. Put somewhat bluntly: Can anyone read, say, Clarissa’s idea that Richard and Peter criticize her “very unfairly” without beginning to judge her, too? When doing so, we may disagree with Karen DeMeester’s idea that Clarissa, like other members of her social class, merely domesticates the social evils that are “evident in England’s perpetuation of its empire and its sacrifice of a generation to war” (665). But it is difficult to
read *Mrs. Dalloway* without at least considering the ethical implications of Clarissa’s home-making practices.

By choosing the title *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf – consciously or not – emphasized Clarissa’s social position as successful wife to the government official Richard Dalloway (in contrast to, say, Samuel Richardson, who did not include the patronymic “Harlowe” in the title of his novel *Clarissa*, thus foregrounding the heroine’s first name), and Clarissa Dalloway’s social success in what is arguably an unjust system may well be considered an ethical failure (Hawthorn 43). At the very least, Woolf’s novel examines how, precisely, its eponymous character tries to make a home in a world that is not of her own making and over which she – like all of us – has only limited control. At the same time, *Mrs. Dalloway* encourages us to consider the ethical price Clarissa is willing to pay for such belonging, and it makes these abstract costs concrete by counterpointing her successful quest for belonging with the story of Doris Kilman and, in particular, with the tragedy of Septimus, who quite literally embodies the traumatic kernel of Clarissa’s ideological fantasy. Something awful may lurk at the center of even the most delightful home: a repressed but familiar, uncanny presence that haunts *Mrs. Dalloway* in the figure of Septimus. It is this kind of political uncanny that takes center stage in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, which precipitates us into a veritable nightmare of belonging.