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):

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

---

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.16

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.17

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-

---

16  See Anna Snaith’s argument that Woolf “is not a stream of consciousness writer, since apart from rare, isolated phrases of direct interior monologue, she captures private thought through free indirect discourse” (68–69) – a technique that, as Snaith rightly points out, has been used in novels since the eighteenth century (67).

17  On the frequent link between modernist techniques of narration and crisis, madness, illness, and suicide see Franco Moretti, Modern Epic 169–176. (On page 171, Moretti explicitly cites Septimus as an example.)
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