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.18 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

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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 (Bradshaw 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).
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).20 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)