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,

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 juxta‐pose 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.39 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

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.