
Geometries of Space and Time: The Cubist London of "Mrs. Dalloway"

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Geometries of Space and Time: The Cubist London of Mrs. Dalloway

Jennie-Rebecca Falcetta

Virginia Woolf's affectionate portrait, *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940), refers again and again to Fry's sense of the connections and formal likenesses among painting, music, and literature, particularly in the contemporary art world. In their intellectual discussions, Woolf recounts, "The arts of painting and writing lay close together, and Roger Fry was always making raids across the boundaries. . . many of his theories held good for both arts. Design, rhythm, texture—there they were again—in Flaubert as in Cézanne" (RF 240). Because Fry brought a unique mixture of critic's eye and painter's sense to bear on his evaluations of her fiction, Woolf sought and valued his opinion. In one instance of "making raids across the boundaries," Fry was spurred to an act of interartistic comparison that is especially relevant to a reading of Woolf's fiction. In a 1919 review of French art at London's Mansard Gallery, Fry addresses the Cubist project of "introduc[ing] at some point a complete break of connection between ordinary vision and the constructed pictorial vision"; describing in particular a painting by Cubist Léopold Survage, Fry exclaims, "how much of modern literature is approximating to the same kind of relationship of ideas as Survage's pictures give us!"¹ ("Modern French Art" 341). The "modern literature" Fry had in mind was none other than the work of Virginia Woolf.

To test his theories of Cubism's possibilities for literature, Fry performed an exercise of *ekphrasis* on Survage's 1911 painting *Ville* (Fig. 1). His "narrative" emphasized in particular the spatial relations of the pictorial elements:

Houses, always houses, yellow fronts and pink fronts jostle one another this way and that way, crowd into every corner and climb into the sky; but however close they get together the leaves of trees push into their interstices. . . . Between house and leaves there move the shapes of men; more transient than either, they scarcely leave a mark . . . ("Modern French Art" 341-342)

¹ For the sake of clarity, I use the capitalized "Cubism" and "Cubist" to refer to practitioners of the movement, its principles and techniques, and the visual art works produced in that mode; "cubism" or "cubist" with a small "c" designates broader philosophical and aesthetic principles related to the movement and the non-Cubist works and writers to which they may be applied.



Fig. 1. Leopold Survage, *Ville*, 1911

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Fry pinpoints the dynamism of the visual field and the interplay of textures and planes. Even the human elements are evaluated by spatial and dimensional characteristics. Following his description Fry reflects, “I see, now that I have done it, that it was meant for Mrs. Virginia Woolf—that *Survage* is almost precisely the same thing in paint that Mrs. Woolf is in prose. Only I like intensely such sequences of ideas presented to me in Mrs. Virginia Woolf’s prose, and as yet I have a rather strong distaste for *Survage*’s visual statements” (“Modern French Art” 342; my emphasis). Upon reading the review, Woolf appears to have been neither insulted nor spurred to reflection, merely amused.² In Fry’s view, Woolf’s cubistic style—still gestating but detectable in such elements as the snail’s eye view of color, space, and time in “Kew Gardens” (1919)—trumps a mediocre painting making use of a similar technique.³

Fry’s early connection of Woolf’s prose to Cubism is prescient, anticipating as it does the wealth of studies analyzing Woolf’s fiction in relation to visual art.⁴ His analogy not only broaches the complex subject of translating the dynamics and effects of one expressive medium into another, it raises the equally crucial concern of humanity’s relation to the modern city. How might that unstable relationship be translated into the material of art? How can the subject of humans negotiating the metropolis influence the shape of a narrative or the structure of a painting? In *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Woolf depicts urban reality as it is perceived and experienced: an ephemeral and piecemeal admixture of sense and memory. In order to surmount the formal challenges presented by the novel’s themes—the experience of lived time, the phenomenon of memory, and the complex dynamics of the modern city—Woolf formulated her aesthetic response in part by

² Woolf wrote to Fry, “I enjoyed immensely finding my name in your article. Also I thought your translation, what you call a parody, most charming” (L2 385).

³ Léopold Survage (1879-1968), a Russian-born painter who eventually emigrated to Paris, was himself interested in the interrelation of art forms. Not only did he design costumes and sets for Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, he completed a series of abstract water colors entitled *Coloured Rhythm*, “which he planned to animate by means of film, using colour and spatial movement to evoke sensation as an analogy to music” (Daniel Robbins, “Survage, Léopold.” Grove Art Online. Oxford University Press, [19 December 2006], <http://www.groveart.com/>).

⁴ In addition to the scholarship used in my study, the following broader treatments have provided a useful background to this aspect of Woolf’s creativity: Ian Blyth, “Virginia Woolf and Jacques Raverat” *Virginia Woolf Bulletin* 6 (Jan. 2001) 31-35; Jane Dunn, *A Very Close Conspiracy: Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990); Christine Froula, *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde* (New York: Columbia UP, 2005); Jane Goldman, *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge UP, 1998); and *The Multiple Muses of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Diane Filby Gillespie (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1993).

borrowing from Cubist principles and by materializing the formal possibilities suggested by Fry in his Mansard Gallery review.

The cubist lynchpin of *Mrs. Dalloway* is London as it was in June, 1923. The city appears in pieces and fragments as its streets and buildings, sounds and crowds catalyze the characters' internal monologues. Woolf renders her characters' experiences as plural realities of the same geographical space, moment in time, event, or phenomenon, thus asserting the presence of dynamic, simultaneous perspectives. Like the Cubist painters, Woolf's cubist fiction maintains the integrity of the thing represented (in this case, the living city), revealing its qualities and essence instead of a fixed homogenous view. Her achievement in *Mrs. Dalloway* reveals her apprehension of Cubism's inherent epistemology, as articulated by poet and proponent of Cubism Guillaume Apollinaire: "One does not have to be a cultivated person to realize that a chair, for example, never ceases to have four legs, a seat, and a back, no matter how we may look at it" (219). Virginia Woolf enacts this same truth in the construction of her fiction: her characters never cease to have pasts, memories, consciousnesses, sense impressions, and private thoughts, no matter how they may appear to others. As she herself attested in September 1924, in the thick of completing *Mrs. Dalloway*, "All this confirms me in thinking that we're splinters & mosaics; not, as they used to hold, immaculate, monolithic, consistent wholes" (D2 314). Humanity's perception of itself had altered, and Woolf realized that a novel about the remembered past and the subjective present required a form comprehending individual lived time and memory in its very architecture. In Cubism Woolf found a useful blueprint.

The Potentiality of Cubism

Cubism marked the most radical shift in visual language since Giotto "discovered" linear perspective in the early 14th century. Only now, instead of rendering objects in space as viewed from a particular perspective, with proportional distances, foreshortening, and dimension, the Cubists rendered objects in a mode which took into account more than one viewpoint. As Apollinaire wrote, the Cubists favored "conceived reality" over "the reality of the vision" (219). As dynamic as its treatment of space, Cubism was an evolving project: it achieved a greater degree of abstraction and universality the further away it moved from an early piece like Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907). Although Cubist works may abstract their forms from forms in nature, the movement differs from later schools like Abstract Expressionism in that Cubism is *never* non-representational. In Cubism's Analytical mode, objects and subjects maintain some of their representational status, even as they are abstracted. The function of the can-

vas alters: "It is no longer the representation of a segment of nature, but an architectural formula expressing an abstract order" (Haftmann 1: 99).

Thus in a painting like Picasso's *Reservoir, Horta de Ebro* (1909), the buildings remain recognizable (Fig. 2). The formal treatment exaggerates the geometry while simultaneously offering views not accessible from a single vantage point. What appears in the painting is not the reservoir but a universalized abstraction of the reservoir's form. Synthetic Cubism, which developed around 1912, achieved the inverse of the Analytic approach: the construction of representation from forms of pure abstraction. This type of painterly practice led to the "invention" of collage, in which the introduction of an actual fragment of paper or fabric onto the canvas "produced an effect of shock on the viewer, surprised to discover a completely realistic passage in an otherwise non-naturalistic picture" (Haftmann 1: 116).

Examining the implications of a Cubist way of seeing, John Berger asserts, "The Cubists created the possibility of art revealing processes instead of static entities. The content of their art consists of various modes of interaction: the interaction between different aspects of the same event, between empty space and filled space, between structure and movement, between the seer and the thing seen" (153). To a novelist like Woolf in search of a new fictional architecture, Cubism offered specific plastic possibilities. My analysis explores Woolf's translation of essential cubist principles from painted canvas to fictional form in order to produce *Mrs. Dalloway*—a novel she described as "a study of insanity & suicide: the world seen by the sane & the insane side by side" (*D2* 207). Cubism allowed Woolf her "sides."

In its depiction of multiple subjective Londons, *Mrs. Dalloway* exhibits qualities attributed by Robert Hughes to Cubist paintings: "As description of a fixed form, they are useless. But as a report on multiple meanings, on process, they are exquisite and inexhaustible: the world is set forth as a field of shifting relationships that includes the onlooker" (32). The terms "process" and "relationship" clearly seconding Berger's summation of Cubism's innovation, Hughes also emphasizes the dynamism of perception and the viewer's complicity in constructing the view—principles which translate readily into the realm of fiction. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, I argue, Woolf puts to work Cubist ideas about structure, continuously locating, dislocating and relocating her characters within this "field of shifting relationships." She deliberately populates the novel with characters who are not only socially Other—shell-shocked Septimus, Rezia the foreigner, Maisie Johnson the Scot—but also Other in the city, unsure of how to negotiate the urban space. Their experiences of dislocation within the English capital stand in high contrast to Clarissa Dalloway's intimate, personalized relationship with the city. Furthermore, the reader must accommodate and synthesize the multiple

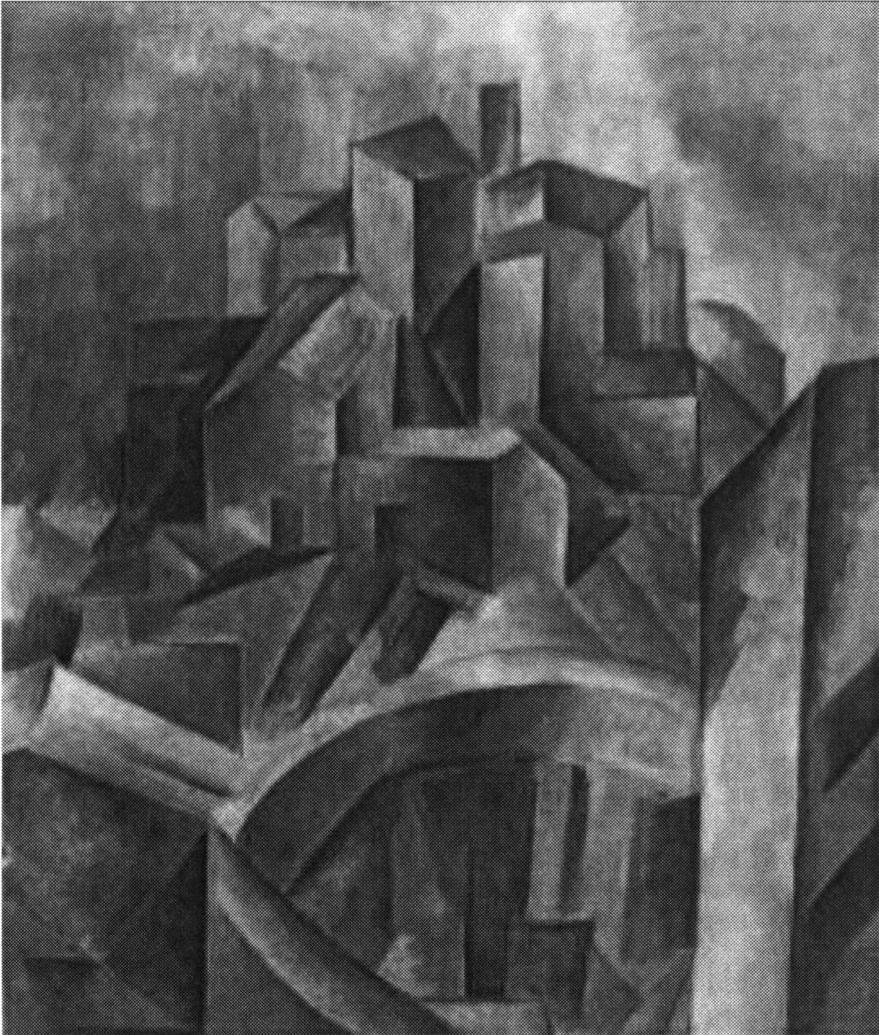


Fig. 2. Pablo Picasso, *Reservoir, Horta de Ebro*, 1909

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unstable views to participate in the creation of *Mrs. Dalloway*'s narrative discourse.

Although *Orlando: A Biography* and not *Mrs. Dalloway* occasioned his comments, Raymond Williams offers a useful summary of Woolf's treatment of the urban environment. In her fiction, "the discontinuity, the atomism of the city were aesthetically experienced, as a problem of perception which raised questions of identity—and which was characteristically resolved on arrival in the country" (241). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, however, inscribed within London city limits, the characters return to the country only in memory. For Clarissa, the country is Bourton, site of "the most exquisite moment of her whole life," Sally Seton's kiss (*MD* 35); for Rezia, her home in Milan, a city, yes, but not the impersonal, grey metropolis she finds London to be. Septimus's country is the Italian front which robbed him of his beloved Evans. For him, the pastoral can never be antidote to the urban, for his "problem of perception" lies far beyond mere "questions of identity." Woolf skillfully appropriates Cubism's ability to problematize received notions of perception, keeping her characters and their city in creative instability.

A Woolf Among the Painters

Roger Fry may have been the first to connect Woolf's experimental prose to painterly technique, but he has hardly been the only one to do so. In fact, Fry's theories have become implicated in the project of analyzing Woolf's relation to visual art. In 1946, just five years after Woolf's suicide, John Hawley Roberts examined the unity of *Mrs. Dalloway* in light of Fry's remarks on Cézanne. Roberts contends that "The reader's response to the whole [of the novel] is very much like that of one who standing before a painting begins to see, as Fry would see, how this mass necessarily balances that, how this line repeats, with a difference, that one, how a high-light here inevitably answers a shadow there, how, in other words, the meaning of the picture lies in our discovery of the fact that the forms agree" (839).

Nearly forty years later, David Dowling's 1985 study *Bloomsbury Aesthetics and the Novels of Forster and Woolf* cites the sense of "divorce" between the literary and visual arts Woolf felt early on, adding that "two important biographical accidents helped to bridge this gulf in Woolf's career: her close friendship and subsequent aesthetic education with Roger Fry, and her affection and sympathy for the work of her sister Vanessa" (96). By contrast, Diane Filby Gillespie's *The Sisters' Arts* aims "to shift the emphasis in the ongoing discussion of Virginia Woolf and the visual arts from Roger Fry to Vanessa Bell" (2). In my view, both Fry and Bell heightened Woolf's awareness of the possibilities for fictional form

latent in Cubist abstraction, but each contributed quite differently to her development. While Fry may have had a more cerebral influence and Bell a more intuitive, experiential one, I do not mean to imply any gender essentialism. Bell's and Fry's influences on Woolf resulted from their respective functions in Woolf's life as sister and trusted friend. By exploring new territories of figuration and representation in her paintings and drawings, Vanessa showed Virginia how art might originate from private interior life, especially formative experiences like the early death of their mother Julia. "Because the sisters shared values and a view of reality," writes Gillespie, "they often found themselves stimulated by each other's work or capable of creating parallel work. Just as Woolf was tempted to produce verbal versions of some of her sister's paintings . . . so Vanessa found pictures forming when she read Virginia's stories" (*Sisters*' 10).

If Vanessa Bell modeled formal experimentation for Woolf, Roger Fry equipped her with the critical vocabulary for discussing it. Fry introduced her to terms like "psychological volumes," a concept he drew from the work of French philosopher Charles Mauron, a personal acquaintance of Fry and Forster (he was the dedicatee of Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*). Detecting in the literature of some of his contemporaries a three-dimensionality of consciousness akin to the plastic mass of visual art mediums, Mauron helped to pioneer psychological literary criticism. Ever fascinated by the possibility of equivalences—or at least of analogues—between art forms, Fry seized upon Mauron's concept and employed it as a tool "to explore those kinds of visual art which approximate to literature" (Dowling 31)—an echo of Fry's observation about modern literature in the Mansard Gallery review.

Other studies corroborate and extend Dowling's examination of Fry and Woolf, particularly the sense that Woolf's novelistic goals required the development of an aesthetic theory that was primarily visual and plastic. Yet few investigate the possible influence of visual art on *Mrs. Dalloway* and none pursues the novel's cubist dimensions.⁵ In fact, responding to Wendy Steiner's use

⁵ In *The Pictorial in Modernist Fiction*, Deborah Schnitzer connects *Jacob's Room* to the "ocular realism" of Impressionism, and the more mature narrative of *To the Lighthouse* to the "conceptual realism" of the Post-Impressionists. Even as she suggests the progressive nature of Woolf's appropriation of art, Schnitzer stops just short of linking her to the pivotal innovations of Cubism; of the writers she examines, only Gertrude Stein fits her paradigm of cubist "total representation" in narrative (207). Panthea Reid, calling *Mrs. Dalloway* "a painterly novel," mentions it in conjunction with both the paintings of Bell, Fry, and Duncan Grant and the innovations of the Cubists, but does not develop these connections with any specificity (279). For Goldman, who focuses her penetrating examination of Woolf and visual aesthetics on Woolf's other writings, *Mrs. Dalloway* escapes mention.

of “cubism” as a period concept, Marianna Torgovnick remarks early in her introduction to *Visual Arts, Pictorialism and the Novel* that none of the writers in her study (James, Lawrence, and Woolf) “makes Steiner’s list of cubist writers” but concedes, “each, moreover, *might* be fitted into the cubist framework, though I see little to be gained by that maneuver” (9, Torgovnick’s emphasis). However obliquely, Torgovnick appears to have thrown down the gauntlet, and this reading takes up the challenge by way of questioning why *Mrs. Dalloway* is so often treated as an exception to Woolf’s engagement with visual art. Andelys Wood gestures toward an explanation when she reviews the “too limiting” critical tendency to focus on *either* time *or* space in the novel without acknowledging Woolf’s frequent distortion of the relations between the two (26). By bringing Cubism’s temporal-spatial engagement to bear on Woolf’s urban novel, my analysis offers an analogy to pictorial representation in line with the productive visual art readings of her other work.

If literary critics generally hesitate to connect Woolf to Cubist innovations, critics of visual art seem more able to make the leap. As we have seen, it was a Cubist cityscape that inspired Roger Fry’s comparison of Surville and Woolf. More recently, no less a historian of Cubism than the late Robert Rosenblum has traced the movement’s translatability into other forms of art. Writing in 1959, Rosenblum heard Cubism in Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps*, with its tonality “destructive of a traditional sense of fluid sequence.” In literature, Rosenblum looked not to the poetic experiments of Gertrude Stein for the realization of Cubist principles, but to the urban narratives of Joyce and Woolf, both, as he points out, “born within a year of Picasso and Braque.” In *Ulysses* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, “the narrative sequence is limited in time to the events of one day; and, as in a Cubist painting, these events are recomposed in a complexity of multiple experiences and interpretations that evoke [*sic*] the simultaneous and contradictory fabric of reality itself” (43). Cubist fragmentation, multiplicity, and simultaneity may have originated with painted canvas, but in Rosenblum’s estimation, they need not remain only there.

One literary critic who explicitly entertains the possibility of Woolf’s appropriation of cubist effects is Jack F. Stewart. In an astute, well-researched, and generously illustrated application of Cubist principles to *Between the Acts*, Stewart proposes that “a new economy and compactness closely related to Cubist structures” allows “objective reality [to be] split and reassembled in patterns that no longer depend upon unified narrative perspective” (68). He does suggest, however, that Woolf did not apply her understanding of Cubism until this last novel, in which “Cubist esthetics contribute to the general ferment of ideas that made her late stylistic changes possible” (87). While not refuting the particulars of Stewart’s reading, I would argue that *Between the Acts* was neither the first nor

the only time Cubism's inherent epistemological shift furnished Woolf with a paradigm for representing abstractions like consciousness or history. After all, the documentary evidence of Woolf's exposure to Cubism Stewart provides at the start of his article dates mainly from the 1910s, including Vanessa Bell's meeting with Picasso in 1914 and his visit to London five years later.⁶

Reading Woolf's work in visual art terms has a long and rich history (and by all indications, a healthy future) and a firm grounding in historical particulars, but what of Woolf's own cubist sensibility? In 1925, the same year *Mrs. Dalloway* appeared, Woolf published an essay entitled "Pictures" in the *Nation and Athenaeum*. This brief but dense essay reveals Woolf's sense that painting was the dominant mode of the age, tempered by a note of playful skepticism toward painters. "Pictures" also provides insight into her sense of an art gallery's usefulness to verbal artists: "They are not there to understand the problems of the painter's art. They are after something that may be helpful to themselves. . . . Free to go their own way, to pick and choose at their will, they find modern pictures, they say, very helpful, very stimulating" (142). This grazing method, applied to individual paintings, yields useful fragments and tidbits: nourishing color or "somebody's room, nose, or hands" (143). The foraging writer also finds in the "silent painters"—Cézanne, Sickert, Mrs. Bell, and Picasso—something beyond mere words, which "as we gaze . . . begin to raise their feeble limbs in the pale border-land of no man's language, to sink down again in despair" (142). That this quartet of painters represents a spectrum of color use, a range of forms, and varying levels of abstraction suggests that Woolf herself benefited from the visual elements of different painting schools. That she never directly applies the label "Cubism" to her writing does not preclude her digestion and deployment of the movement's structural and epistemological principles.

The Novelist As Architect

In a 1923 diary entry Woolf clearly articulates her intended architecture for *Mrs. Dalloway* in terms that emphasize spatiality:

I should say a good deal about The Hours [the novel's working title], & my discovery; how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect, & each comes to daylight at the present moment. (D2 263)

To lend her characters dimension, incorporate their remembered pasts, and link their existential situations, Woolf lights upon a decidedly spatial solution, artic-

⁶ See Stewart 66-67 for more particulars of the Bloomsbury-Cubism relation.

ulated in revealingly visual terms. When these caves of consciousness connect around shared objects or events (as in the explicit link between Clarissa and Septimus), it is analogous to the Cubist method of depicting objects experienced simultaneously or sequentially by more than one beholder.

Furthermore, the phrase “beautiful caves” encapsulates Woolf’s need for a form as gorgeous as it was structural, and purchasers of the original Hogarth Press edition would have caught a glimmer of this ordered loveliness on the book’s cover. Vanessa Bell’s *Mrs. Dalloway* design is the most austere of the covers she produced for Virginia’s work, with large black and white shapes alleviated by occasional strokes of a cool yellow (Fig. 3).⁷ The lettering of the title and author’s name, larger and more fluid in other of Bell’s designs, here appears boxy, as if cut out or stenciled, and is confined to the top third of the cover. The bottom third contains an open fan rhyming in shape with the bouquet of flowers beside it, twin emblems of female class privilege. The central part of the design features a wide band of white with five black ovals, the largest located in the middle, and the two on the end half hidden by an undulating shape around the border, suggestive of a curtain ruffle. The exact nature of this form is difficult to determine: it could be an edifice with windows or archways; it could be a bridge; it could be a grove of trees with spaces between. Or, it could be Woolf’s “beautiful caves,” all come to daylight at the same time. The cover design relies heavily on structural abstraction, as well as on key Cubist principles. The picture plane is flattened, a hallmark of Bell’s style, one she shared with Cézanne and Matisse. In contrast to those French masters, however, color plays a minimal role in Bell’s image, as in the drab canvases of high Analytical Cubism. Although not Cubist in the strictest sense, the cover illustration heralds the importance of abstracted structural form to the novel’s texture and substance.

To realize the novel’s architecture, of which London was the cornerstone, “[Woolf’s] business was to select, arrange and present the London she experienced in the 1920s. Civilised or not, there it must be” (Dowling 137). The terms “select, arrange, and present” indicate deliberate composition of formal and spatial relationships within a frame. Dowling’s succinct idea also underscores the centrality to the novel of both “lived” London and “real” London. The narrator renounces investment in a single, stabilized depiction of the city in order to accommodate the characters’ subjective experiences of it; in the gap between these Londons and “London,” the universal signifier, lurks a tension. Cubism

⁷ See chapter five of Diane Filby Gillespie’s *Sisters’ Arts*, “Still Lives in Words and Paint,” for a discussion of Bell’s book designs, particularly for her sister’s texts (224-266). In an extended endnote Gillespie inventories the critical treatment of Bell’s designs for Woolf and implies that the topic has suffered severe neglect (332-33 n21).

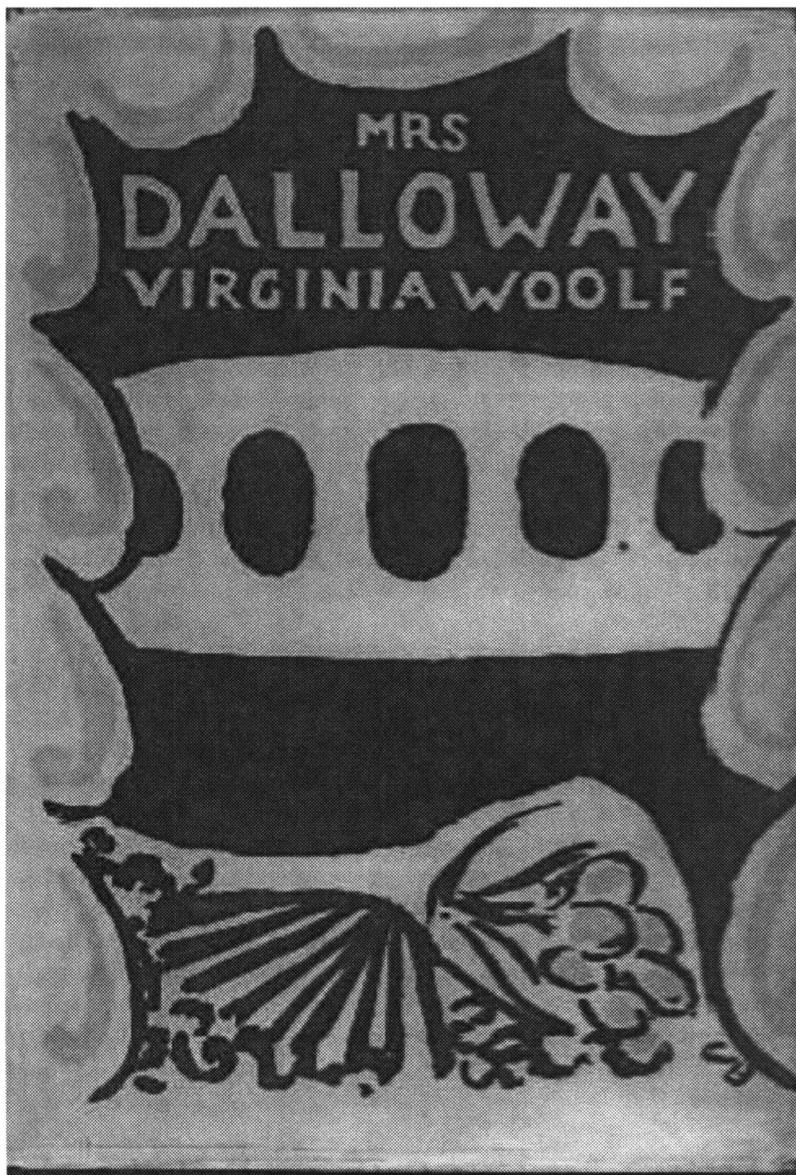


Fig. 3. Vanessa Bell, *Mrs. Dalloway* cover design. Hogarth Press, 1925
© Vanessa Bell Estate, courtesy Henrietta Garnett.

attempted to address, if not resolve, that tension by simultaneously presenting the fragments, without privileging any one over the other, to render the whole. Just as Cubist canvases maintain “the attachment between the picture surface and the material reality” (Schnitzer 185), Woolf’s fidelity to the physical actualities of London stabilizes the narrative in the midst of multiple subjective representations. Emphasizing topographical specificity—Bond Street, Mayfair, Regent’s Park, the Serpentine—*Mrs. Dalloway* maintains the integrity and recognizability of these landmarks while simultaneously fracturing the picture plane, as it were, in its depiction of the urban environment. The reader of *Mrs. Dalloway* may find herself in the dense thicket of a character’s consciousness and memory, but she always knows the coordinates of her location in the city.

Not surprisingly, critical attempts to “map” Mrs. Dalloway have revealed a highly patterned, almost mathematical, geometry undergirding the narrative, lending support to a cubist analysis. In Susan M. Squier’s reading, Clarissa’s Bond Street flower purchase, Septimus’s walk down the same street to Regent’s Park, and the short trip of Peter Walsh from the Dalloways’ house to Regent’s Park, function as three legs of a triangle (95). Charting the main characters’ movements within 21 episodes, Avrom Fleishman maps circular trajectories which for him embody the novel’s recursive treatment of time and point up Woolf’s evocation of death’s inevitability. The overlap which occurs as the figures traverse the same streets and parks, I would add, constitutes a cubist narrative infrastructure, a geometry of place. Superimposing the “leaden circles” of Big Ben’s regular chime over the triangles and circles of physical movement, Woolf appears to follow Cézanne’s famous admonition to Émile Bernard, taken to the extreme by the Cubists: “treat nature by the cylinder, the sphere, the cone” (Cézanne 19). Woolf, however, treats time and subjectivity—greater abstractions by far than Cézanne’s material “nature”—and thus requires an architecture more precise, actualized, and multivalent than the precepts of Post-Impressionist painting could anticipate.

Woolf invests the novel’s larger physical symbols, experienced uniquely by different characters, with concepts and metonymies similar to those taken up by the Cubist painters. Thus Big Ben stands in for time, an analogue to the simultaneous composite view.⁸ While a Cubist painting might allude to specific material trappings to suggest social status or function (e.g. newspapers and absinthe glasses to evoke café society) Woolf uses the Prime Minister’s car; the skywrit-

⁸ In Christine Froula’s reading of *Mrs. Dalloway* as a postwar elegy, the repetition of Big Ben and the novel’s other motifs are implicated in the work of mourning (89). See her chapter four.

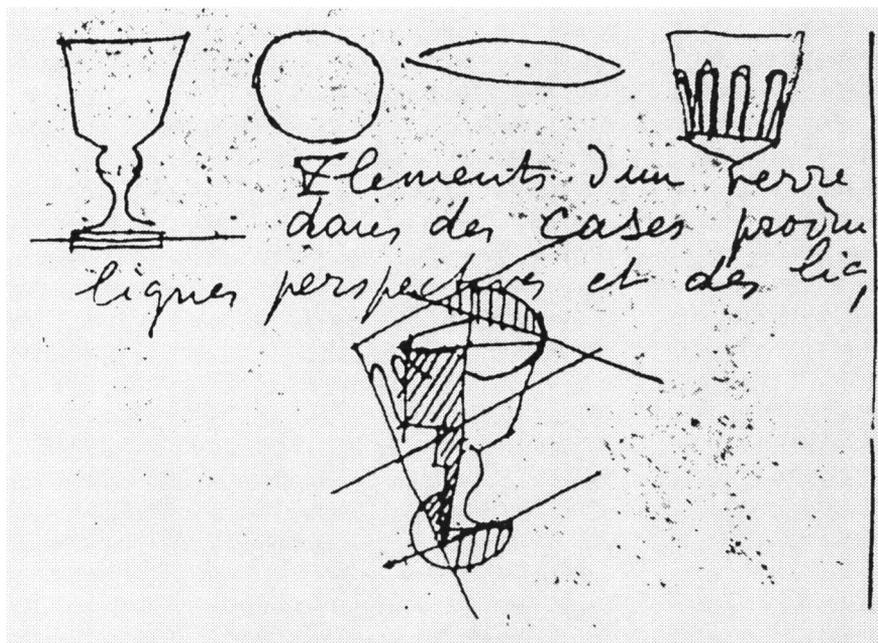


Fig. 4. Andre Lhote's composite sketch of a glass, 1952.

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ing signifies both modernity and the arbitrariness of language, akin to newsprint collaged or letters painted onto a Cubist canvas.⁹ One can even trace the cubist structuring elements of *Mrs. Dalloway* through the lived experience of the characters, down into the specifics of syntax and fragment, literary parallels to the passages and brushstrokes of painterly language.

Time Reconsidered

In Cubist painting, “[T]he premise that the canvas represents one atemporal moment of vision by a perceiver standing in a fixed position is exploded by the multiple views of a single object simultaneously on the picture plane” (Steiner 180). In this more accurate record of an object’s totality, the viewer must extrapolate the object’s form from the tangle of perspectives presented. This activity requires both awareness of and adjustment in the viewer’s perception: she must acknowledge the limitation of a fixed view in time and space and accept the opening up of many views—and thus many times—enacted by a Cubist painting.

Consider this example of a visual-narrative parallel. A 1952 sketch by Andre Lhote shows discrete elements of a goblet: the outline of the form; the top view, a circle; the indentations and texture of the glasswork; the lip of the glass looking like a slit, as one approaches to drink. Beneath the parts, he drew a composite whole, a unified Cubist image (Fig. 4). Similarly, Woolf collapses time by allowing her characters to travel a greater distance than actually possible in the time allotted,¹⁰ and by keeping other times and places constantly in play on the field of London, 1923. Peter Walsh’s London perambulations, complicated by memories of his youth with Clarissa and his recent experience in India, illustrate this narrative tendency. After noticing Septimus and Rezia in Regent’s Park, Peter returns to the present after reminiscing about his sad past with Clarissa and thinking it “awful.” In response, his consciousness constructs the moment as a series

⁹ For a helpful general overview of collage elements in Woolf, see Mary Ann Caws, “Framing, Centering, Explicating; Virginia Woolf’s Collage,” *New York Literary Forum* 10-11 (1983): 51-78. Caws defines a “successful ‘literary’ collage” as a text in which “elements of another style, period, or substance can be imported into and then imposed on the already existing matrix, the entire product then exposed and explicated as a two-layered structure” (52). A prominent example of this importation, the repetition of “Fear no more the heat o’ the sun” throughout *Mrs. Dalloway*, also functions as a key connective between Clarissa and Septimus.

¹⁰ Andelys Wood’s “Walking the Web: The Lost London of *Mrs. Dalloway*” documents specific time-place inconsistencies. Wood reads Woolf’s inaccuracies as a deliberate technique to keep the reader equally conscious of place and time and as “clues to meaning in a London that no longer exists, some of which had already vanished by 1925 when the novel was published” (30).

of contributing factors, multiple perspectives cemented to one another by the repeated and conditional “still”: “Still, the sun was hot. Still, one got over things. Still, life had a way of adding day to day. Still, he thought, yawning and beginning to take notice—Regent’s Park had changed very little since he was a boy, except for the squirrels—still, presumably there were compensations” (*MD* 64-65). Peter experiences the Regent’s Park moment cubistically, as a simultaneous composite of time, memory, and sensory perception.

According to Cubism’s early advocates Apollinaire and Salmon, “Cubist art was conceptual, not only perceptual . . . that is, it drew upon memory as well as upon objects actually viewed by the eyes” (Chipp 194). If time and memory become “conceptual” subjects of the painting, then the inclusion of such abstract elements demands a new style of rendering. If anything, the verbal nature of fiction allows it to treat greater stretches of time than painting and thus to accommodate memory more adroitly. The novel’s treatment of Regent’s Park constitutes a composite view in which time functions as a primary component of perception. Of Woolf’s subjective handling of location, Miroslav Beker writes, “Regent’s Park is never described, its place in the structure of the novel is never adjectival, subsidiary, a frame around a character, but rather it is verbal, fully functional in revealing the characters of those who are found there” (384). Eschewing any external view of the park, Woolf’s narrative renders it instead as variously constituted by each of its visitors. Cast in cubist terms, Regent’s Park works similarly to both Analytic and Synthetic Cubism, which, according to Stephen Scobie, “In their different ways . . . play along this border of legibility: reducing or fragmenting the sign, dispersing its elements across the grid of the picture surface, setting its attributes in new and paradoxical relationships to each other, deconstructing but never abandoning its codes of representation” (86-87). Woolf’s treatment of the park tests the limits of signification in quite the same way. Considering that she often compared her novels to “canvases” (*D2* 323; *D3* 176; *D5* 336), and bearing in mind her emphasis on compositional form in *Mrs. Dalloway*, it follows that Woolf deliberately lays out a composite of Regent’s Park by accommodating competing views.

And the various “Regent’s Parks” play this out. Young Maisie Johnson, “only up from Edinburgh two days ago,” passes the Warren Smiths in the park, thinks them “queer” and speculates about the manufacture of memory:

should she be very old she would still remember and make it jangle again among her memories how she had walked through Regent’s Park on a fine summer morning fifty years ago. For she was only nineteen and had got her way at last, to come to London; and now how queer it was . . . now all these people (for she had returned to the Broad Walk), the stone basins, the prim flowers, the old

men and women, invalids most of them in Bath chairs—all seemed, after Edinburgh, so queer. (*MD* 26)

Maisie's perception, a catalogue of both people and landscape, animals and plants, is marked by the "queerness" of her new environment, a fact Cubism's rupturing tendency can contain. As she has no past with Regent's Park, Maisie's temporal sense must necessarily point future-ward. Peter Walsh's movement through the Park, however, walks the reader around to the other side of time-perception, while staying within the same geographical space. Peter's initial sensory apprehension of the Park in the present links almost simultaneously to his memory, and the narrative combines statement, affirmation and memory to convey all: "There was Regent's Park. Yes. As a child he had walked in Regent's Park" (*MD* 55).

Peter's revisited memories exemplify Wendy Steiner's general claim that "The cubist interaction with the past makes a simultaneity of it, a system whose elements are altered not in substance but in context" (191). Individual memory is the by-path Woolf employs most often to inventory her characters' mental lives, but it is not the only one. If personal history is an inevitable influence on perception, shared public history is exponentially so. The novel's specifics of time and place occasion meditations on the Great War, which bruised the collective English consciousness. Steiner aptly summarizes Cubism's potential as a historical lens:

Cubism thus tells us to think of history in a new way, not as a plotted narrative moving toward a resolution, but as a cubist painting whose elements maintain their heterogeneity—objects, people; things, signs; the banal, the dramatic; the contemporaneous, the anachronous—in an aestheticized structure of interrelations. (191)

In applying Steiner's concept to the postwar London of *Mrs. Dalloway*, we note that war, while ended, remains ever present. Its having been (and having been so scarring and horrifying) is incorporated into the integrity of everything seen and experienced. Of "life, London, this morning in June" it is inextricably a part, imparting an inescapable sadness and producing an exquisite sense of relief. The dynamic of war, even war ended, embeds itself into the fabric of the novel. Thus, even on her way to the flower shop, under a washed blue June sky, Clarissa cannot help but think of "Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed" and others for whom the war is not over (*MD* 5). In this moment, Clarissa's relief cannot be separated from her perception of her surroundings.

As the novel's embodiment of the war conflict, Septimus bears psychological wounds—still open and raw. For him the elements of his environment do not,

as Steiner puts it, “maintain their heterogeneity.” He conflates topographies—Regent’s Park with the trenches. He sees Evans everywhere—behind a tree, in a man (Peter Walsh) walking toward him. The signs of the skywriting, the royal seal, his own urgent scribblings, do not signify to him as they ought. While it is true that he is Clarissa’s double, he is also her foil. As Sue Roe points out, “the radical difference between them is that Clarissa, though her thoughts transcend the spatial relations which define her, may always return to those spaces, while Septimus can never return” (180). By nature ruptured, a cubist narrative can accommodate the mental fracturing caused by Septimus’ experience with trench warfare—a task never required of a novel before 1914.

Dynamics of the Present Moment

The past indeed complicates the present, but the present harbors its own complexity. Woolf confirms this truth via another mode of temporal representation: the depiction of synchronously lived moments of multiple characters, which constitute a clear deployment of cubist narrative strategy. One such passage provides a multidimensional view of the noon hour:

It was precisely twelve o’clock; twelve by Big Ben; whose stroke was wafted over the northern part of London; blent with that of other clocks, mixed in a thin ethereal way with the clouds and wisps of smoke, and died up there among the seagulls—twelve o’clock struck as Clarissa Dalloway laid her green dress on the bed, and the Warren Smiths walked down Harley Street. Twelve was the hour of their appointment. Probably, Rezia thought, that was Sir William Bradshaw’s house with the grey motor car in front of it. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. (*MD* 94)

This relatively brief paragraph, less about consciousness than about ironic difference, enacts skillfully what Erich Auerbach has called “polyphonic treatment” (34). The various sectors of central London connect through the shared sound of Big Ben’s chime, and the narrative gains height by following the sound upward. Constructing the moment of noon cubistically, the paragraph sets the banality of Clarissa’s dress-mending (metonymy for her party) alongside Septimus’s need to consult a doctor for his precarious mental health. The implicit class contrasts combine to form a multisided social picture: compare Clarissa’s pampered domesticity and the Bradshaws’ automobile with the Warren Smiths, who live in rented rooms, travel London on foot, and work menial jobs. Also, juxtaposing the three families—Dalloways, Bradshaws, and Warren Smiths—prefigures the overlapping relational geometry by which Clarissa will hear of Septimus’s suicide at her party.

Here the narrative voice itself is cubist, shifting from a third person reportage into Rezia's consciousness and back out again with the repeated line, "The leaden circles dissolved in the air." The phrase has chimed before; it will resound before the narrative is out. Its familiarity and solidity ground the reader amidst the narrative flux. Repetition within the novel replicates the recursive nature of memory and functions as a marker to help the reader impose order on what might otherwise feel like a chaotic narrative. Big Ben is the central repeated motif and the one shared by the greatest number of characters, all of whom live out their day within earshot of its booming chime. The striking of the great clock is a particularly multivalent grounding device: it represents time, it foreshadows death.

Big Ben sounds first at the opening of the novel, when the narrative eye is trained upon Clarissa; present in the description are the "leaden circles" but also the sinister evocation of time's ineluctable progression: "First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable" (*MD* 4). Throughout the day, the clock sound penetrates and punctuates the inner monologues of its hearers: the 11:30 chime "stuck out between them with extraordinary vigour" at the awkward meeting between Peter and Elizabeth in Clarissa's drawing room (*MD* 48); the half-one chime gives rise to Richard Dalloway's annoyance with luncheon parties (*MD* 117); sedated after her husband's suicide, Rezia hears the "sensible sound" of the six o'clock chime as the only ordered thing in her traumatized consciousness (*MD* 150).¹¹ The final striking occurs at the party as Clarissa ponders Septimus' death and watches the old woman in the window opposite (*MD* 186). Big Ben is time translated into sound, its "leaden circles" the geometry of the hours.

The Subject in the City

Evaluating various cubist readings of literature, Wendy Steiner expresses concern that such studies "almost never make explicit the basis of a given comparison—why perspective is parallel to point of view, for example" (179).¹² Steiner cautions us against the lack of rigorous theoretical underpinning in order to avoid "an impressionism that is embarrassing to read" (178), yet in *Mrs. Dalloway* generally and in the skywriting scene in particular, perspective as seen from an exact location in space (in combination with other, more individuated factors) determines narrative point of view. Occurring shortly after the passing of the car, the skywriting is an especially significant event because of its semiotic

¹¹ The British Library holograph edition identifies the 6:00 chime Rezia hears as St. Pancras (Wood 30).

¹² Marianna Torgovnick echoes Steiner's claim in the outlining of her own methodology (10).

nature. In this instance, Woolf deploys a group of characters, many of whom do not reappear, to construct a microcosm of London life and to emphasize class distinctions. Quite literally standing around a circumscribed space and looking up, the characters offer varying interpretations of the same event, and physical perspective *does* correlate with point of view.

At its first appearance, “the sound of an aeroplane bored ominously into the ears of the crowd”—an understandable reaction in a city traumatized by the German bombing raids of the Great War (*MD* 20). Over the course of this scene, airspace is reclaimed for the use of commerce, and thus redeemed—at least until the next war. Sarah Bletchley and Emily Coates, “the poor mothers of Pimlico”; Mr. Bowley, who lived in the Albany; a nursemaid or two; and Septimus and Rezia all share in this moment, but read the skywriting differently:

But what letters? A C was it? an E, then an L? . . . a K, an E, a Y perhaps?
 “Glaxo,” said Mrs. Coates, in a strained, awe-stricken voice . . .
 “Kreemo,” murmured Mrs. Bletchley, like a sleepwalker. . . .
 “That’s an E,” said Mrs. Bletchley— . . .
 “It’s toffee,” murmured Mr. Bowley— . . .
 So, thought Septimus, they are signalling to me. (*MD* 20-21)

Like the Cubist painters, who incorporated fragments of abstracted text into their canvases (e.g. the “JOU” often used by Picasso to denote, among other things, *Le Journal* newspaper), Woolf abstracts bits from the advertisement to point up the relatively arbitrary nature of the letters as signs. These Ts, Os, Fs, presumably suggesting a banal consumer product, cut language down to its basic phonemic level. In the sky as in a Picasso, “the incompleteness of the words is also important,” as Stephen Scobie writes. The outlines of letters are the brushstrokes of language, calling attention to the structural bones of speech and reading by exposing and orphaning them to our own interpretation. A set of non-words “invites the viewer [reader] to guess its complete form,” and yet, “the word fragments insist on their own incompleteness” since “they refuse any reading as iconic signs, as exact resemblances” (97, Scobie’s emphasis). When we cannot decipher the signified, we become that much more aware of the properties of the sign.

One can also read the scene as an ironic modernist reworking of the *topos* of heavenly revelation: instead of angels singing “Gloria in excelsis Deo, et in terra pax,” modern London receives a vaporous and inscrutable message—which is ultimately an advertisement—dispensed by an aeroplane. Thus, the episode concludes with the aircraft flying over an unnamed man poised to enter St. Paul’s Cathedral, contemplating going before “a cross, the symbol of something which has soared beyond seeking and questing and knocking of words together and has

become all spirit disembodied, ghostly" (*MD* 28). But the reader never knows for certain if the man goes inside. Instead, the scene ends with a final glimpse of the aeroplane "curving up and up, straight up, like something mounting in ecstasy, in pure delight, out from behind poured white smoke looping, writing a T, an O, an F" (*MD* 28-29)—the language here hinting at both sexuality and religion. Furthermore, the prominence of the aeroplane suggests that the cross of its wings has supplanted the Christian cross as a symbol of transcendence.

And yet, for Clarissa at least, the city offers the possibility of transcendence. More than the other characters, she obliterates any subject-object division between herself and London. Early in the narrative, spurred to thought by the passing of the Piccadilly omnibuses, Clarissa revels in the inscrutability of being, refusing to "say of anyone in the world now that they were this or were that," and allowing herself a multiple and simultaneous apprehension of life (*MD* 8). Later, as Peter Walsh recalls her atop a city bus, his memory suggests that London and Clarissa construct one another mutually:

. . . she felt herself everywhere; not "here, here, here"; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere. She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that. So that to know her, or anyone, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places. (*MD* 152-153)

While aspects of London merely suggest identity or spur memory for the other characters, Clarissa seems most completed by her urban surroundings, most liable "to confuse inner and outer, self and other" and to "[possess] a spiritual vision of human relatedness and endurance firmly grounded in the daily creativity of the city around her" (Squier 98).

In a sense, then, Clarissa *is* London—or, at least, *her* London. In a single lived day, the city serves her as locus of memory, of community, of death, of possibility and future—of "what she loved; life; London; this moment of June" (*MD* 4). As for Peter Walsh, "Never had he seen London look so enchanting—the softness of the distances; the richness; the greenness; the civilisation, after India" (*MD* 71). Even Septimus Warren Smith, with his questionable sanity, embraces the trees, birds, and sounds of the city, which "All taken together meant the birth of a new religion" (*MD* 23). The continuity of ecstatic identification within the novel prefigures and prepares for the complex and seemingly contradictory climax of death-in-life at the party scene.

Ironic Isolation

Virginia Woolf understood that modern urban life comprehended both Wendy Steiner's "aestheticized structure of interrelations" and Raymond

Williams's "aesthetically experienced atomism." Despite their opposition, these binaries both can be—indeed, *are*—aestheticized. The flux between the two poles is in a sense the subject of the novel, the "supreme mystery" pondered by Clarissa: "here was one room; there another. Did religion solve that, or love?" (*MD* 127). The novel does not answer the question either, but a problem so crucial to human experience needs to be asked anew in the language of its age. A narrative that makes use of cubism can depict relationships within a field (the watchers of the skywriting) and the atomization present even between a married couple (Richard Dalloway's inability to speak his love for his wife even as he hands her a bouquet of white and red roses). Assisted by Woolf's cubist prose, the death of Septimus accommodates both opposing elements.

The novelistic trajectory of the Warren Smiths, each isolated within their troubled marriage, culminates when Septimus hurls himself out the window to his death. While the reader experiences the suicide firsthand through the narrative, more pathos lies in oblique, secondhand experiences than in the direct account. Peter Walsh hears the ambulance rushing too late to the scene of Septimus's self-destruction—ironically unaware of the connection between the arguing couple he had noticed earlier in Regent's Park and the ambulance he thinks of as "one of the triumphs of civilisation," an indicator of "the communal spirit of London" (*MD* 151). Peter's narrated monologue here supports Dorrit Cohn's claim regarding the mode's ironic power: "Precisely because they cast the language of a subjective mind into the grammar of objective narration," narrated monologues "throw into ironic relief all false notes struck by a figural mind" (Cohn 117). Peter's ignorance of his encounter with the tragic couple simultaneously undercuts and reinforces the concepts of civilization and community which he ponders, revealing their less attractive facets of denial and exclusion.

This irony of not knowing that one knows is balanced by Clarissa's feeling of connectedness to Septimus, whom she did not know or ever see. When Sir William Bradshaw, Septimus' doctor and witness to his suicide, appears at Clarissa's party and shares the news of the tragedy, her initial reaction illustrates the complex variety contained by one moment. She exclaims, "Oh! . . . In the middle of my party, here's death" and moves to an empty room to be alone (*MD* 183). Viewing the mutual corroboration of the two main characters as vital to the book's success, Josephine O'Brien Schaefer writes, "without the presence of Septimus, Clarissa's emotions might seem minor and trivial" (86). Indeed, she echoes Woolf's original assertion that "Septimus and Mrs Dalloway should be entirely dependent on one another" (*L3* 189).¹³ If this dependence is thematic,

¹³ For discussions of the complementary relationship between Clarissa and Septimus, see Fleishman (1975), Squier (1985), Roe (2000), and Matz (2001).

reinforcing the novel's meditations on memory and death, it is equally structural, providing two complementary views of shared urban space in postwar London.

Attempting to puzzle out the inscrutability of death, Clarissa surveys its many sides. She tries to conjure the visceral experience of a voluntary jump and violent fall to one's end, and meditates on the purity and "defiance" of death. In the end, rooted in life as she is, Clarissa relates death to what she knows:

She had once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine, never anything more. But he had flung it away. They went on living (she would have to go back; the rooms were still crowded; people kept on coming). They (all day she had been thinking of Bourton, of Peter, of Sally), they would grow old. . . . Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre, which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death. (*MD* 184)

If, as we have seen, Clarissa sees little boundary between herself and her city, her conception of not-being would naturally incorporate some element of London. Throwing something of value into the depths—a coin into a lake—is the best comparison she can muster. And yet, try as she might to imagine dying, Clarissa can keep neither the present moment nor memory from breaking into her thoughts, indicated syntactically by intrusive parentheses. Here is the novel's most poignant brand of cubism at work: a composite of disparate physical spaces, present time, past time, and imagined sensation, working in concert to construct from the facets and fragments of death its ultimately impenetrable whole. This passage underscores the isolation which death certifies, while allowing a Clarissa to experience a kind of imaginative sympathy, however unconsummated.

Clarissa's metaphysical moment, a result of Septimus's suicide, demonstrates the fact that her London of June, 1923, is not his—nor does that divide become more traversable by her understanding of his fate. In fact, Clarissa's is not the same London from minute to minute, from leaden circle to leaden circle, reminding one that Raymond Williams observed of Leopold Bloom's Dublin "in a way, there is no longer a city, there is only a man walking through it" (243). Even were we to alter Williams's claim to reflect "a woman walking through it," the single perceiver, Clarissa, cannot hold all the Londons of her experience (let alone the London of another's) in her consciousness at once. But the novel *can*: its cubist aesthetic integrates several subjective Londons into a whole, expressing in Woolf's glittering prose the idea that at any given moment, the crowd of minds walking in, around, and through a city in one sense *are* that city.¹⁴

¹⁴ I wish to acknowledge a debt to Jerry Phillips, who provided the original context for the production of this essay. Margaret Higonnet has read and responded to this piece

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