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Difference and Continuity: The Voices of *Mrs. Dalloway*

I am spacious singing flesh: onto which is grafted no one knows which I—which masculine or feminine, more or less human but above all living because changing I.

Cixous and Clément

“My party to-night! Remember my party to-night! [Clarissa] cried, having to raise her voice against the roar of the open air, and, overwhelmed by the traffic and the sound of all the clocks striking, her voice . . . sounded frail and thin and very far away.” This moment in Virginia Woolf’s novel, when Clarissa Dalloway calls after the departing Peter Walsh to remind him of the evening’s party, offers a dynamic illustration of the interaction between women and the modern city. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, as in other female visions of the city, women’s voices must contend with the noise of urban space, an arena traditionally defined and experienced as masculine. As Claudine Herrmann has observed, “Physical or mental, man’s space is a space of domination, hierarchy and conquest, a sprawling, showy space, a *full space*” (169). Surprisingly, Woolf’s novel may at first appear to recreate just such an approach to space, as its third-person narrator often suggests the teller’s vast control, an imposition of uniformity; furthermore, salient linking devices such as the motor car in Bond Street, the sky-writing, and the hourly chimes can be criticized as transitions too simple and intrusive, ones that emphasize the narrator’s victory over urban complexity—a mastery of both time and space (Rosenberg 212, 217). Nevertheless, even such overt methods of connection and unification point to more crucial concerns of the text: the nature of a social order and women’s place(s) in relation to it; the passage of time, with implications of an irretrievable past and inevitable death; ways of reading and interpreting the city, particularly as a bastion of patriarchal institutions (Squier, *Women Writers* 3–10). Virginia Woolf works with the different voices of her re-created London in two seemingly antagonistic ways, both to unify and to fragment urban time and space. Just as Clarissa’s personal voice must contend with the loud presence of the patriarchal city, so must the woman

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writer both accept and deny the urge to impose a unifying vision. Incorporated into the voices in the novel, especially through the use of water imagery, these preoccupations form the basis of Woolf's feminist re-visioning of urban—and human—experience.

In attempting to distinguish between a character's thoughts and the narrator's commentary or description, the reader often discovers sentences that could belong to either—or to no one, what linguist Ann Banfield has termed “unspeakable sentences.” The recurrent imagery—particularly that related to water—reinforces the impression that everything is running together, that consciousness and city are becoming indistinguishable. Such an effect has led Hugh Kenner to comment, “How very alike are the half-conscious minds presented by Mrs. Woolf or Dorothy Richardson!—one semi-transparent envelope much like another, ‘stream of consciousness’ an undifferentiating verbal soup” (23). A disparaging remark that does not do justice to the richness of layers in *Mrs. Dalloway*, this observation perhaps indicates the commentator's uneasiness with a narrative strategy that refuses to dominate, conquer, contain—his preference for man's space. Indeed, what we are witnessing in Woolf's language is a sea of voices, waves of words that continually pass between what Julia Kristeva has identified as the semiotic and the symbolic in such a way as to erase hierarchies and to emphasize multiplicity and transformation: “changing I.” As the narrative of this continuing process, *Mrs. Dalloway* subverts masculine visions not only of urban space but of the institutions that have served to bound and to maintain it.

One modern cover illustration of the novel shows the central character demurely perched on a fence, face shaded—and thus obliterated—by a large hat, body folded paper-doll-like into a flowered gown. Such an image of impersonality is appropriate for a “Mrs. Dalloway,” but the title emerges as a massive joke, a subterfuge or red herring that can misdirect the reader raised on or groomed for the traditional marriage plot. Implicit in the title yet denied throughout the text itself, this ending is exposed as a lie or a “pargetting” of women's and men's actual lives—a conclusion we must read beyond (Hinz; Du Plessis 31–46, 57–61). For we see Clarissa less as wife than as both cloistered nun and potential lesbian lover, Rezia not as a contented “Mrs. Smith” but as a foreigner estranged from both husband and surroundings, Peter Walsh perpetually feeding on romantic dreams that bear little resemblance to reality, and Septimus driven to self-destruction by society's inability to accept “deviant” desires. Specifically, Woolf employs water imagery to reveal differences within apparent unity, to undermine patriarchal institutions such as marriage, and ultimately to create a female vision of the cityscape.

Deviance or marginality appears as a subtext in Woolf's essay “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” (1930), in which “we” set off at dusk, ostensibly in search of a lead pencil. Describing the “sociability” of the city streets, the writer explains how the “evening hour, too, gives us the irresponsibility which darkness and lamplight bestow. We are no longer quite ourselves [and thus able to] become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one's own room” (155). This borderline or liminal experience inspires the wanderer, allowing the “eye” both to observe

and to imagine, to create buildings and inhabitants, and equally to dismantle such scaffoldings. Significantly, the persona involved in this process is plural, part of the city's tides rather than a separate, individual ego; and the streets are indeed washed by oceanic imagery, becoming streams dotted with islands, surfaces on which to float and then depths to plumb. We are invited to participate in a protean time and space, very like the "space-off" Teresa de Lauretis has described, which allows for a view from "elsewhere": "spaces in the margins of hegemonic discourses, social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions and in the chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge apparatus" (25). Woolf recognizes the paradoxical liberation and empowerment available to those on the margins of the city's economic, political, and social systems—the freedom offered by the ability to "haunt" such sites of power and yet not to be trapped or implicated in them.

Fragmentation provides a complement to marginality, another quality of Woolf's feminist vision of London in both essay and novel. As Claudine Herrmann notes, "women must provide another division of time and space, refusing their continuity, fragmenting them into moments and places that are not linked together, in such a way that each is a sort of innovation in reference to its temporal or geographical context" (172). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf's narrative strategies lend themselves to this division and re-vision. A thought attributed to Peter effectively expresses the process of building and dispersal perpetuated throughout the text:

And it was smashed to atoms—his fun, for it was half made up, as he knew very well; invented, this escapade with the girl; made up, as one makes up the better part of life, he thought—making oneself up; making her up; creating an exquisite amusement, and something more. But odd it was, and quite true; all this one could never share—it smashed to atoms. (81)

This circular passage, its very syntax disruptive as it "breaks the sentence/sequence," not only acknowledges the fictive nature of any firm idea of self or other, but also emphasizes the inherent instability of such constructs. The smashing of the moment enacts a refusal of the full space of patriarchy, ironically inscribed in the thoughts of one of the novel's clearest adherents to domination and conquest. Woolf here demonstrates a respect for what Herrmann terms "empty space": "[woman] must conserve some space for herself, a sort of *no man's land*, which constitutes precisely what men fail to understand of her and often attribute to stupidity because she cannot express its substances in her inevitably alienated language" (169). Peter's pursuit of the unknown woman through city streets he certainly regards as "full space," his personal province or area, ends in failure. His proprietary vision is "smashed," revealed as an empty fiction, while the woman preserves her space and her difference.

Certainly this shattering or atomizing mirrors a preoccupation of twentieth-century consciousness, one that incessantly finds its way into fiction and poetry: the apparent predominance of fragmentation, as if everything is splintering and disintegrating. One thinks of Eliot's "fragments . . . shored up against my ruin" or recalls Yeats' lines, "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold;/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." To the writer, attempting to capture or recreate city

and consciousness, words become weapons against such destruction or loss; for Woolf, war and violence were obviously forces to be countered and erased, in part by searching for continuity and community. Nevertheless, we see in *Mrs. Dalloway* a different view of fragmentation, one subversive in that very difference. While her male counterparts such as Joyce and Eliot appear anxious to retreat to the past and thus likely to repeat it, Woolf sees beyond such ordering (egotistical, in her opinion) to multiplicity as creation and innovation. Rather than evincing a single, linear urge to shape and contain, to control, the narrative instead evolves in a fluid process alternating between semiotic and symbolic. The vision clearly complements Julia Kristeva's propensity to "emphasiz[e] the values of multiplicity and difference." According to Ruth Salvaggio, Kristeva does not "shape rhetorical space into a feminine configuration but instead regards women and feminism as crucial instigators in the creation of a new discourse and ethics" (269–70). In Woolf's text, an important part of that discourse is a pronounced reliance on marine terminology.

The water imagery Virginia Woolf employs in *Mrs. Dalloway* indicates the nature and sometimes marks the development of each fictive consciousness, from minor characters such as Lady Bradshaw or Miss Kilman, to Peter Walsh, Septimus Smith, and Clarissa Dalloway herself. The metaphors and similes repeatedly connect city to ocean, human consciousness to watery depths; the work itself becomes protean, operating according to principles of metamorphosis on two major planes—external topography (London and, in a different mode, Bourton) and internal experience—with aspects of time serving as framing devices. In a parenthetical aside to his own interior monologue, Peter imagines Clarissa thinking of humanity as a "doomed race chained to a sinking ship" and comments: "(her favorite reading as a girl was Huxley and Tindall, and they were fond of these nautical metaphors)" (*MD* 117). This casual remembrance suggests the narrator's own awareness of the constant recurrence of such language in the text being produced. In his or her own way, each character will, by the conclusion, have been related to the ocean—as either person, object, or animal encountering it, or through a comparison of mental state to aqueous element. Past and present are tenuously connected through memories of Bourton that infiltrate the characters' minds in London; in crucial ways, however, the present is an island, or indeed a sinking ship, cut off from both past and future, which loom as ruined or uncivilized, the very antithesis of the civilization epitomized by civic representatives such as the Prime Minister or even by Clarissa Dalloway's party. This stress on the present moment can serve to eliminate the baggage of the past in an attempt to topple hegemonic structures, to erase patriarchal codes, to look to an unforeseen future:

Not the origin: she doesn't go back there. . . . A girls' journey is farther—to the unknown, to invent [T]hat is how she. . . . writes, as one throws a voice—forward, into the void. . . . Contrary to the self-absorbed, masculine narcissism, making sure of its image, of being seen, of seeing itself, of assembling its glories, of pocketing itself again. (Cixous and Clément 93–94)

In particular, the water imagery subverts the "Selfsame," flowing into the cracks of the symbolic order and infusing it with the semiotic.

The implied isolation of the present—reflected in the physical aspect, England as island, as well as in the focus on a single day—creates an underlying sense of impending disaster, of shaky foundations, a modern uneasiness and malaise. The balancing force comes from the aesthetic realm, the fertilizing powers of expression that the novel demonstrates. And linking the two effects, the bridge between them, is the language itself, the many metaphors and similes that hold the text together. Aside from the dominant ones that turn this into what may be called a novel of city voyages, other comparisons—of consciousness to topography, whether real or imagined—create the impression of blank past and fruitful if also terrifying future.

Kristeva comments that poetic language includes a “*heterogeneousness* to meaning and signification,” a heterogeneousness that

operates through, despite, and in excess of it and produces in poetic language ‘musical’ but also nonsense effects that destroy not only accepted beliefs and significations, but, in radical experiments, syntax itself, that guarantee of poetic consciousness (of the signified subject and ego). (133)

The most striking example of Woolf’s inclusion of this semiotic level of language occurs in the description of an old woman, singing of love, opposite a tube station. The perceptions are Peter’s, the narrator’s, and Rezia’s, which intersect and overlap in such a way that the marginal gradually replaces the dominant, the “foreign” invading the established order. Very unlike controlled narrative or the symbolic (“this inevitable attribute of meaning, sign, and the signified object” [133]), connected to origins while also having none, the woman’s voice metamorphoses into water, her body into an aging conduit for a spring:

A voice bubbling up without direction, vigour, beginning or end, running weakly and shrilly and with an absence of all human meaning . . . , the voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth; which issued . . . from a tall quivering shape, like a funnel, like a rusty pump . . . (122)

The comparison, expressed in water imagery, continues for several pages, in which the narrator traces a thread, unending, from past to future, eventually obliterating the present moment, before returning to it with Rezia’s thoughts about the woman:

[T]hough it issued from so rude a mouth, a mere hole in the earth, muddy too, matted with root, fibres and tangled grasses, still the old bubbling burbling song soaking through the knotted roots of infinite ages, and skeletons and treasure, streamed away in rivulets over the pavement and all along the Marylebone Road, and down towards Euston, fertilizing, leaving a damp stain. (123)

Unmistakably an image of female creativity, the old woman’s song is both incomprehensible and yet full of power and fecundity. Through it we have passed from Peter’s colonizing visions to the perspective of Rezia, outsider to British civilization and perhaps *because* of that marginality possessed of greater insight. For while Peter hears something “weak” and “shrill,” lacking in human (i.e., male) meaning, Rezia perceives the enormous power embodied in the female voice. From the process of fertilization, the vision moves toward one of both destruction (negation) and continuity (affirmation): “and the passing generations—

the pavement was crowded with bustling middle-class people—vanished, like leaves, to be trodden under, to be soaked and steeped and made mould of by that eternal spring” (124). Just as the narrator in an earlier passage imagines a London overgrown with grass and covered by dust, here the speaking voice first turns a woman’s song into a spring from an ancient source and then dissolves the city’s population into “mould.” As Cixous has observed, “To fly/steal is woman’s gesture, to steal into language to make it fly. . . . she/its pleasure in scrambling spatial order, disorienting it, moving furniture, things, and values around, breaking in, emptying structures, turning the selfsame, the proper upside down” (96). Such an overturning and even obliteration is what we witness in the old woman’s song in *Mrs. Dalloway*, which floods the seemingly solid and hierarchized space of London, just as it interrupts and drowns out the voice of Peter, representative of masculine power and order.

Like that transformation of both city and human being, the protean element permeates Woolf’s novel in two major domains; comparisons drawing upon water imagery continually present both urban topography and internal experience from unique perspectives. The narrative creates not a strictly mimetic representation of London and its inhabitants but a flowing procession of impressions, sensations, and visions, interrelated, joined in their participation in a floating, diving, surfacing—life as in a marine setting. The actual physical elements, the spatial features of both Bourton (remembered) and London (encountered), do play a role, though not so great a one as do the linguistic devices such as metaphor. The lake at Bourton provided the impetus for adventure and investigation, for nocturnal navigation and nascent romance. The fountain, on the other hand, becomes equated with Clarissa’s rejection of Peter: “. . . they stood with the fountain between them, the spout (it was broken) dribbling water incessantly. How sights fix themselves upon the mind!” (*MD* 96). The fountain—potentially symbolic of a life-source, vitality, refreshment, fruition—malfunctions, just as the intimacy between the two characters runs aground. Just as Clarissa refused a marriage plot that would have stifled her, absorbing her into a husband’s identity, the narrative subverts conventional images and demonstrates their impotence.

In this way, topography serves not only to characterize and dramatize but to elaborate on Woolf’s feminist re-visioning of the traditional assumptions about gender and urban representation. The Serpentine in Hyde Park and the Embankment above the Thames function significantly in the representation of consciousness in London. Both bodies of water are connected to death—to suicide in particular. These two sites, never seen directly during the course of this day, attract characters who never meet directly, yet whose outlooks on life and death share a common basis. Septimus’ desire to kill himself is directly related to moments when he and Rezia have stood on the Embankment, so that whenever he repeats his intention or she recalls it, this setting comes to her mind: “Suddenly he said, ‘Now we shall kill ourselves,’ when they were standing by the river, and he looked at it with a look which she had seen in his eyes when a train went by, or an omnibus—a look as if something fascinated him” (96). Indeed, the river draws the observer toward an abyss, toward self-annihilation, drowning. On sev-

eral occasions Septimus imagines himself a drowned sailor (which recalls this image in *The Waste Land*; see Wyatt 444). He seems to have entered the "no man's land" Herrmann conceives as woman's space, the void she says can become a "respectable value" (169). Another passage draws a line connecting Septimus' insanity to both death and river, when he hears sparrows in the park: "they sang in voices prolonged and piercing in Greek words, from trees in the meadow of life beyond a river where the dead walk, how there is no death" (*MD* 36). Clearly disturbed, disconnected from the life of London surrounding him, Septimus resurrects the dead, converses with the birds, and in a strangely twisted way affirms life by denying its reminders of death. He experiences the semiotic in an intense manner and seems incapable of passing between it and the symbolic realm. Linguistic alienation results when the individual is denied communication on his own terms. For Septimus, the city's time and space have lost their official ordering: his experiences as soldier, his latent homosexuality, and the ignorant intervention of Dr. Bradshaw cause him to turn away from "civilisation" into madness. Paradoxically, his affirmation of life resembles Clarissa's.

A phrase linking these two characters concerns another feature of London's topography: the Serpentine, the large body of water in Hyde Park. In her morning walk through London, Clarissa remembers having once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine. Apparently an innocuous detail, one of the myriad memories and fleeting associations that the June morning calls forth, this particular one will expand in the final scenes into a metaphor for a way of approaching life—and of regarding death. The catalyst for this accumulated meaning comes in the news of a suicide, unnamed in the Bradshaws' remarks at the party. Their talk of death profoundly disturbs Clarissa's thoughts: "She had once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine, never anything more. But he had flung it away" (280). The metaphorical distinction between the two acts posits the Serpentine as a potential site of suicide: Clarissa has only tossed away a small, near-worthless piece of metal, while Septimus has completely forsaken the world, specifically London's seeming vitality and variety. Yet, despite her initial distress, her rejection of his act, Clarissa does sympathize with the unknown man: "Death was defiance. 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" (280–81). The importance of communication and the accompanying threat of alienation if the "centre" remains unattainable impel consciousness to seek solace in death. The passage reflects a modern sensibility faced with an increasing incoherence, which may paradoxically seem epitomized by the (patriarchal) city, center of male privilege, power, and the drive to destroy. In a world recently ravaged by war and facing an uncertain future, those who value life may ironically be the first to turn away toward death as an ultimate statement and solution.

The cityscape, besides serving as symbol for states of mind and methods of coping with external reality, also undergoes frequent transformations into a body of water, most often an ocean, but sometimes a river or stream. By day, most of these changes occur at the hands of the narrator or through the thoughts of Clarissa; by night, they result from Peter's visions as he walks to Clarissa's party.

The effect of an aqueous environment helps to create fluidity in the spatial realm as well as within and between the numerous consciousnesses.

The initial descriptions of London come through Clarissa's narrated monologue: from the beginning she is characterized as drawn to the water; indeed, in her consciousness the city constantly metamorphoses into an ocean, an element comforting yet dangerous, soothing or threatening depending on the given moment. Indicative of her ambiguous position, alternating between semiotic and symbolic, the following passage expresses Clarissa's paradoxical nature:

She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very dangerous to live even one day. (11)

The sense of danger, of aloneness, highlights the precarious situation of the woman who lives as married nun and foreshadows the affinity she will feel for Septimus. In Clarissa we may also see a parallel to the ambiguous, marginal position of the woman writer, especially in relation to the polis. Loving "this, here, now, in front of her," Clarissa wonders if death matters: "Or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived . . . ; being laid out like a mist . . ." (12). If one can see and believe in the interrelatedness of life, rather than being immersed in a hallucinatory "not here," then the ebb and flow, the ocean waves, can give way to or perhaps create a mist that joins and permeates—a continuity.

Such a continuity appears in another metaphor, which again emphasizes the perpetual concern for preservation in the face of what seems an inevitable ruin. In the middle of Elizabeth's "daring" bus ride, the narrator interjects a commentary on the city's noise and its ignorance of death:

this voice, pouring endlessly, year in year out, would take whatever it might be; this vow; this van; this life; this procession, would wrap them all about and carry them on, as in the rough stream of a glacier the ice holds a splinter of bone, a blue petal, some oak trees, and rolls them on. (209–10)

A fluid, "pouring" voice becomes a frozen "stream" that rolls up disparate objects lying across its path and preserves them for generations. Through a similar process, metaphorically, the novel pulls together and offers to the reader a plethora of fragments from the city's tangled, teeming life, pieces of the visible London along with flashes from the consciousnesses wandering through it. Skillfully woven together into a fused vision, the book can enact another preservation; though the elements are partially real, partially fictional, the recreated world has the potential to give longevity to what in experienced time lasts but briefly, ineffably. Recurrently, the water imagery implicitly highlights the writer's concern for continuity through both creativity and a concerted attachment to life itself.

These daytime metamorphoses of the cityscape—through the many comparisons to river or ocean, of a bus to a ship or an eel, of the sound of chimes to waves and tides—either occur in the narrator's descriptions or appear as the creations of Clarissa's consciousness. Later, after dark, the topography takes on

new traits through Peter's unspoken observations. In these, the ocean seems already to have invaded London, turning it into a version of Atlantis or Venice. Of the evening light, he thinks, "on the leaves in the square [it] shone lurid, livid—they looked as if dipped in sea water—the foliage of a submerged city. He was astonished by the beauty . . ." (246). In almost an oxymoron, the negative suggestions of the adjectives ("lurid" and "livid"), making the evening somehow grotesque or dangerous, oppose Peter's unexpected impression of it as beautiful. The "sea change" (and *The Tempest* echoes throughout this novel) leads to a vision of an underwater city, full of treasures; as happens by day in Clarissa's consciousness, here, too, the city perceived as ocean offers both danger and beauty. Perhaps we are witnessing in the transformation of Peter's perceptions a subverting of the negative male response to female nature into a more positive vision. In a subsequent passage, the physical sensation, the lonely, haunting sound from the real river, gives way to the haste and press of the metaphorical one, headed—Peter imagines—directly for his own destination: "cabs were rushing around the corner, like water around the piers of a bridge, drawn together, it seemed to him because they bore people going to her party, Clarissa's party" (250). Peter's impressions during his nocturnal stroll echo and balance the daytime motions of Clarissa's consciousness as she walks through the London streets. The combination is paradoxical because Peter's more daylight, surface consciousness focuses on the ego, while Clarissa embraces the nighttime as well. Nevertheless, Clarissa is by convention confined to daytime walking, while Peter's masculine freedom allows him access to London both day and night.

Not only does the cityscape undergo metamorphoses, but the characters themselves are also often transformed through comparisons to persons, objects, even animals associated with the aqueous element. These changes occur in several ways: a character may perceive him- or herself in oceanic images; one character sometimes views another as part of a marine setting; or the narrator may present the metaphorical relationship. The source of the perception is not always as important as the image it produces, however. The relationship of consciousness to water explicitly illustrates how we are to understand a character. Moreover, the water imagery establishes a triadic structure—three principal ways of reacting to life in general, twentieth-century London in particular. Thus emerge a diver, a buccaneer, and a drowned sailor.

In the opening paragraphs, Clarissa thinks of the June day as something into which she "plunges," as she used to at Bourton—time, as well as space, continually turns into water. Both at the center—the knife image—and far removed out at sea, she occupies an ambivalent position. Her attachment to life, both past and present, weighs against her apprehension of death, or any notion of throwing "it" away. Her duality has a dynamic quality, one of tension and vitality. Thinking of Lady Bruton, Clarissa contemplates her own aging, a perpetual, exhilarating experience of liminality rather than a definite crossing over to death:

how year by year her share was sliced . . . so that she filled the room she entered, and felt often, as she stood hesitating one moment on the threshold of her drawing-room, an exquisite suspense, such as might stay a diver before plunging while the

sea darkens and brightens beneath him, and the waves which threaten to break, but only gently split their surface, roll and conceal and encrust as they just turn over the weeds with pearl. (44)

The central image of Clarissa as diver implies her familiarity with the ocean, a knowledge of and delight in the chaotic element, and also a direct confrontation with passing time, a recognition of the inevitable end. The passage itself is more ambiguous, however, delineating the precarious nature of Clarissa's seemingly stable position. The "threshold" becomes a borderline between two abysses and inspires vertigo. This liminal sensation is emblematic of the experience of consciousness in the twentieth century, particularly in the interwar period. The conflicting emotions evoked by these unsettled and unsettling years underlie Clarissa's thoughts: the sea "darkens and brightens"; the waves are both threatening and gentle. The ocean holds pearls among its weeds, a suggestion of treasure to be found in that which one fears. But here, too, the anticipation of death intrudes, a reminder of the "sea change" that turns human body into precious stones. Thus, in the complete metaphor Clarissa expresses both her fear of and fascination with the ultimate end. She chooses life but remains constantly aware of the approach of annihilation.

Peter stands firmly on the side of patriarchal existence, egotistical, moderately irresponsible, and because of this attitude, both attractive and unacceptable to Clarissa. A comparison he makes illuminates his position, just as Clarissa's image of a diver serves to explain her own consciousness. When he follows an unknown woman through the streets, Peter describes himself:

[H]e was an adventurer, reckless, he thought, swift, daring, indeed (landed as he was last night from India) a romantic buccaneer, careless of all these damned proprieties, yellow dressing-gowns, pipes, fishing-rods, in the shop windows; and respectability and evening parties. . . . He was a buccaneer. (80)

The repeated metaphor underscores Peter's role. He does not contemplate the depths but rather journeys on the surface; in a romantic vein, he sees himself as a "free spirit," wandering, adventuring. Resembling Clarissa in his appreciation of life, of the moment, he is also unlike her in that he feels no dread of death. His is the more stolidly masculine perspective, lacking a dimension, his ignorance shown most sharply in his reaction to the ambulance bearing Septimus' broken body: "That was civilisation. It struck him coming back from the East—the efficiency, the organisation, the communal spirit of London" (229).

Peter's romantic nature colors his perception of Clarissa, just as it creates his own self-image. His view of her at the party helps to identify their relationship, based as much on fantasy as on reality:

She wore ear-rings, and a silver-green mermaid's dress. Lolloping on the waves and braiding her tresses she seemed, having that gift still; to be; to exist; to sum it all up in the moment as she passed; . . . all with the most perfect ease and air of a creature floating in its element. But age had brushed her; even as a mermaid might behold in her glass the setting sun on some very clear evening over the waves. (264)

The dress transforms Clarissa into a mermaid, a creature half-human, half-fish, mythical and magical. Like a siren she draws Peter but remains unpossessable—

perhaps a reflection on her asexual quality. Once again, the relationship to water emphasizes how we are to "read" a character, in this case Peter himself, who imposes this image on Clarissa and thus reveals chauvinistic ways of assessing women, based on sex, age, looks. For Clarissa appears at ease on the waves, as if she truly belonged to the ocean, just as the mermaid can signal female empowerment (Auerbach 7, 93–96). Peter tries to "tame" this image by making it age—the advancing of years suggested by the "stateliness of her grey hair" and the setting sun. Thus we see a symbolic construction that confines her, making her easier for Peter to "see." While implicitly illustrating the romantic fantasy involved in Peter and Clarissa's friendship, the mermaid metaphor does enrich our understanding of Clarissa herself, however; in particular, it shows that her role as hostess allows her to take control, to be "in her element" and thus to set aside her own more cosmic fears.

Septimus, however, cannot escape the fears and anxiety that will lead him to a death that his self-defeating visions constantly prefigure, dominated as they are by an element of horror (as when he "sees" a dog turning into a man). Unable to feel, incapable of satisfactory communication with others, Septimus imagines frightening changes, not magical "sea changes" but protean processes creating unnatural, dreadful figures.

The most important of these figurations is Septimus' image of himself as a "drowned sailor," a comparison that occurs several times in the novel. Like Clarissa's and Peter's views of self, this metaphor both establishes Septimus' idea of his own role and serves to place him in the overall schema of the text. Shortly after observing the dog, Septimus imagines himself "high on his rock, like a drowned sailor on a rock. I leant over the edge of the boat and fell down, he thought. I went under the sea. I have been dead, and yet am now alive, but let me rest still . . ." (*MD* 104). As he recognizes, he is talking to himself, engaged in an internal dialogue that he finds "awful!" Indicative of his split nature, the passage expresses his familiarity with death and his reluctant urge to survive. The inner struggle continues "as . . . the sleeper feels himself drawing to the shores of life, so he felt himself as already drowning towards life" (104). In the vision of himself as already drowned, Septimus foresees his eventual relinquishing of life. He has given up already. That Septimus is occasionally aware of his own madness does not prevent his ultimate enactment of his vision. The semiotic permeates his consciousness so that he cannot recognize a mirror image or enter into the symbolic. Both he and Clarissa take part in a debate between involvement in living and submersion in the void; they illustrate difference within similarity, diving as opposed to drowning.

Thus through water imagery the three central consciousnesses identify their roles, their places within the configuration of characters, and their relationships to each other. Two sorts of voyagers stand on either side of the main figure, Mrs. Dalloway: a romantic, carefree "buccaneer" and a mad, "drowned sailor." Clarissa—the focus of the text, the character whom it works to illustrate—appears paradoxical, a diver both threatened by and at home in the sea, a mermaid provocative yet asexual. Drawn to both sides, she vacillates between her public identity as Mrs. Dalloway and the private self that seeks to blend into a

heterogeneous multiplicity. When she looks into a mirror she sees “her self—pointed; dartlike; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self drew the parts together, she alone knew how incompatible and composed for the world only into one centre . . .” (55). The composition is a lie, just as is the identification “Mrs. Dalloway,” empty reflections that her true selves belie.

While Peter and Septimus provide partial reference points in the reader’s process of understanding Clarissa, the women represent a galaxy of possible channels into which her life might be directed—versions of the marriage plot or alternatives to it, as well as ways women have of relating to the city. Five of these characters are compared to objects or animals associated with the water, often with voyaging. Objectified in this manner, either by another character or by the narrative voice, they symbolize options Clarissa has rejected, but they also relate to aspects of her own nature. Miss Kilman in her water-repellent mackintosh has rejected almost all forms of social communion, heterosexual ones in particular (Harper, “Mrs. Woolf” 233). At odds with the world in general, hostile and alienated, she leads a life of abnegation, of constant self-denial and self-torment. In the Army and Navy stores, Elizabeth “guided her in her abstraction as if she had been a great child, an unwieldy battleship” (*MD* 196). Though Clarissa has not gone this route, has not turned life into an eternal struggle or battle with male systems, she has nevertheless engaged in private skirmishes, establishing an attic room of her own just as she has rejected “normal” marital relations; in fact, one can see intriguing connections between this facet of Clarissa and the life of Woolf herself (Marcus 115–35, 151–56). Though Miss Kilman demonstrates a rather farcical extreme of the repudiation of traditional marriage, Clarissa does express some sympathy—indeed identification—with her.

On the other hand, Rezia has submerged her life in her husband’s, has identified herself completely with Septimus and forsaken her own family, country, language, even the possibility of motherhood and some degree of autonomy. Watching her trimming hats, Septimus thinks, “She looked pale, mysterious, like a lily, drowned, under-water . . .” (*MD* 134). And a vision shortly before his suicide echoes this suggestion that she is a modern version of Ophelia: “Miracles, revelations, agonies, loneliness, falling through the sea, down, down into the flames, all were burnt out, for he had a sense, as he watched Rezia trimming the straw hat for Mrs. Peters, of a coverlet of flowers” (216). She seems already drowned—pure like the lily, a sacrificial victim to her husband’s growing insanity—and yet appears to be sewing a shroud-like coverlet, flowers to be strewn on his own grave. This total sharing of another’s agony, a “drowning” in the other, resembles what Clarissa imagines life with Peter (as a Mrs. Peters?) would entail—the sort of marriage she turned away from years before and which she has refused even as Mrs. Dalloway.

Meanwhile, in counterpoise to the extremes symbolized by battleship and drowned lily, Clarissa’s own family offers two more balanced images: her aunt and her daughter. Old Miss Parry provides a sense of continuity with the past, a preservation of name and identity, a link between the memories of Bourton and the experience of London, all drawn together at Clarissa’s party. With her glass

eye, she embodies the decay in life that preoccupies both Clarissa and the narrator; in her perservering, she represents a strength and tenacity that the book as a whole presents as admirable, an attitude to emulate. Mistakenly assuming her dead, Peter nevertheless describes her aptly as he walks to the party: "she belonged to a different age but being so entire, so complete, would always stand up on the horizon, stone-white, eminent, like a lighthouse marking some past stage on this adventurous, long, long voyage, . . . this interminable life" (247). The past persists into the present, appearing as whole—"entire," "complete"—in an age of fragmentation and insecurity. Embodied in a female character, it provides a marker, a touchstone of sorts, or a "lighthouse" whose beacon guides the voyager.

The future, too, offers a sense of certainty and direction, if not for Clarissa herself, then perhaps for the next generation. We observe a thinking forward as well as back through female relations, a branching out of sorority rather than a strict patrilinear descent. In her "adventurous" ride (echoing Peter's wanderings) down the Strand, on a bus that turns into a pirate and then a pirate ship, Elizabeth unknowingly repeats Clarissa and Peter's journey of years earlier. The entire description, replete with water imagery, suggests Elizabeth's rejection of Miss Kilman, an alliance with her mother, and, even more important, a prospect for the younger generation:

The impetuous creature—a pirate—started forward, sprang away; . . . for a pirate it was, reckless, unscrupulous, bearing down ruthlessly, circumventing dangerously, boldly snatching a passenger, or ignoring a passenger, squeezing eel-like and arrogant in between, and then rushing insolently all sails spread up Whitehall. (205)

The bus resembles Peter as buccaneer—indeed, is described with similar adjectives and adverbs—so that Elizabeth's brief voyage parallels Peter's life in general, the kind of experience that Clarissa retreats from in search of greater security and more control. Yet the subsequent image conveys the impression that Elizabeth may be able to achieve a synthesis beyond her mother's reach: she responds to the bus's motions "like the figure-head of a ship . . . ; the heat gave her cheeks the pallor of white painted wood; and her fine eyes, having no eyes to meet, gazed ahead, blank, bright, with the staring incredible innocence of sculpture" (206). She participates in the excitement of a city voyage, experiencing the bus trip as a dangerous and exhilarating passage through the ocean of London. Elizabeth also, however, can become an art work—self-contained, immovable, untouched, or unshaken. She, like Clarissa, combines the semiotic and the symbolic realms. Furthermore, as "figure-head" who looks forward, she appears to be leading the way, guiding the vessel through the waters, an active counterpart to the lighthouse that stands on shore to orient the traveller. Her journey can in fact be seen as a potential revisioning of gender difference in the urban milieu (Bowly 80–98).

Clarissa—mermaid and diver—becomes more and more clearly defined for the reader through the use of these water-related images for the other female characters. Negative and positive points in the constellation of possible choices and outcomes, the devoted wife or bristly spinster, the serene aunt and questing

daughter, are joined by a fifth, a comic addition to the group. The consummate hostess, Clarissa must welcome and converse with all, including those guests whom she dislikes: "She must go up to Lady Bradshaw (in grey and silver, balancing like a sea-lion at the edge of its tank, barking for invitations, Duchesses, the typical successful man's wife), she must go up to Lady Bradshaw and say . . ." (*MD* 277). Inserted parenthetically, this comparison accentuates the negative depiction of those like the Bradshaws, in both social and political terms. The humorous description of Sir William's wife expresses Clarissa's antagonism, turning the elegantly attired woman into an object of near-contempt, a captive creature performing for treats. Co-opted by the male establishment, acceding to prescribed behavior, the sea-lion also represents another extreme, one more direction that Clarissa has not pursued. She has not let life in the upper strata of society imprison her in an endless struggle, a game based on appearance rather than substance, an existence creating its own bars. The "tank" is a debased, artificial (man-made) double of the "ocean" into which Clarissa plunges, the waves on which she floats. She has maintained her individuality and independence, has not become so absorbed in superficial posturing and the desire to impress that she loses any humanity or self-respect. And *Mrs. Dalloway* thus is not primarily, as Zwerdling argues, the inside view of one who belongs to a decadent social class (see also DiBattista 29–30; Rose 130; Waugh 115–21). Clarissa seems more aligned with the old woman singing, whose voice interrupts Peter and takes over the narrative, obliterating and consuming as it also fertilizes and engenders.

Peter has the final word in the novel, the concluding vision of Clarissa as she reappears in a doorway. He thus appears to complete the multi-dimensional picture of her that *Mrs. Dalloway* itself offers (Harper, *Between*, 121–23; Beker 281; see also Carlson). As the third central consciousness in the book, Peter is relatively easy to grasp—the reckless, irresponsible, romantic voyager. Though his position has an element of paradox, for he stands both very close to and yet very remote from Clarissa, this seemingly contradictory position actually says more about the ambiguity inherent in Clarissa than it reflects upon Peter Walsh himself. For he is the least torn, the most integrated of the three main characters, not surprisingly since he is the most comfortable in the symbolic order. The metaphors that appear in his internal monologues—that connect mind to water—cover a spectrum wider than Septimus' visions, perhaps because the latter lacks access to the lines of power chartering the city. Peter also evinces neither Clarissa's acute preoccupation with time nor her ambivalent attitude toward sexuality. The images that cross his mind range from the personal to the all-encompassing, so that it may seem fitting that he offer the summation in the final lines of the book: "It is Clarissa, he said. For there she was" (*MD* 296). Narrative irony inheres in these words, however. He assumes his own ability to contain and to define others, particularly women, while the text has continually subverted such possession and control. The heterogeneous quality implicit in Clarissa belies her identity as "Mrs. Dalloway" or indeed any single self.

Antithesis, alternation, and conjunction: such are the key rhythms in an earlier passage in which Peter, having decided to attend Clarissa's party, meditates on the soul:

For this is the truth about our soul, he thought, our self, who fish-like inhabits deep seas and plies among obscurities threading her way between the boles of giant weeds, over sun-flickered spaces and on and on into gloom, cold, deep, inscrutable; suddenly she shoots to the surface and sports on the wind-wrinkled waves; that is, has a positive need to brush, scrape, kindle herself, gossiping. (244)

Built on opposites that alternate within the individual consciousness, this extended metaphor works in several ways to encapsulate the themes, patterns, and characterizations in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Clearly attributed to Peter Walsh, the comparison describes his own sense of inner balance. Independent, yet able to love, frequently alone but also maintaining contact with others, he both is and is not the adventurous buccaneer of his imaginings. As ocean traveller, Peter also would perhaps sense his soul's "fish-like" quality; indeed, he has spent much of his life voyaging, never truly putting down anchor with any permanence or finality.

Though the passage may thus refer directly to Peter, the description even more aptly fits Clarissa. Her affinity with the ocean made evident from the opening pages, she continually alternates between poles—of life and death, heat and cold, community and solitude. She may contemplate "obscurities," particularly human mortality and what happens after death. At other moments she, too, "shoots to the surface": the image of her as "lolloping" mermaid illustrates such times, as does her walk through London, involving "brushing" and "scraping." For most of the day we see her by herself, interrupted by her maid Lily, by Peter or Richard, then retreating to her attic room to recoup, to gather strength and find a "center." Her sewing reflects this meeting of contraries; in order once again to play hostess, she mends a tear in her dress. She must bridge an inner rift, as well, close a gap or at least hide it, if she is to participate actively in her society. Still, she manages to pass with ease between the different layers of experience.

Finally, the major concerns of the novel, as well as its structure, are symbolized in Peter's description of the soul. Throughout *Mrs. Dalloway*, various forms of water imagery transform—as they also create—the city and Bourton, present and past, along with all of the consciousnesses to which the narrator has access. The ocean possesses protean powers, combining depth and surface, containing both weeds and treasures. In the words of Cixous, "our seas are what we make of them, fishy or not, impenetrable or muddled, red or black, high and rough or flat and smooth, narrow straits or shoreless, and we ourselves are sea, sand, corals, seaweeds, beaches, tides, swimmers, children, waves . . . seas and mothers" (88–89). The narrative, too, can create and transform a world and its inhabitants. The narrating voice can penetrate deeply to offer the inner workings of consciousness; so, too, can the controlling artificer sport on the surface, tracing elaborate patterns, providing striking descriptions of colors and contours. This persona can take us into "gloom, cold, deep, inscrutable," as well as "over sun-flickered spaces"; express the fear of death, even convey the experience of dying; enlighten our understanding of life, of time, of others. In a sense, the whole novel partakes in gossip, between the narrator and the reader, quoting not only characters' spoken words but their inner thoughts as well and depicting emotions and sensations with vivid images. Both narrator and reader become the

"soul, fish-like," moving through the aqueous spaces of a re-created 1923 London and the equally marine-like consciousnesses of sailor, buccaneer, and mermaid/diver. Through her use of water imagery, enacting a continual oscillation between the symbolic and semiotic realms, Woolf illustrates the importance of difference as well as of continuity. The result of her innovations is a feminist revisioning of the cityscape, undermining masculinist preconceptions of hierarchy and domination. Ultimately, *Mrs. Dalloway* illustrates Hélène Cixous' observation that "the power to be errant is strength," as woman becomes "the unknown quantity in the household whole" (91).

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