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TRAUMA AND RECOVERY IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *MRS. DALLOWAY*

Karen DeMeester

Modernist literature is a literature of trauma: in the 1920s, it gave form and representation to a psychological condition that psychiatrists would not understand for another fifty years. Virginia Woolf's characterization of Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway* illustrates not only the psychological injuries suffered by victims of severe trauma such as war but also the need for them to give meaning to their suffering in order to recover from the trauma. Septimus's death is the result of his inability to communicate his experiences to others and thereby give those experiences meaning and purpose. By bearing witness to his experiences and suffering, Septimus could edify others about not only war but also human nature and the social and political institutions that emerge from and reflect that nature. Septimus's war trauma, however, is perpetuated and its psychological damage aggravated by a culturally prescribed process of postwar reintegration that silences and marginalizes war veterans. To comprehend fully Septimus Smith's tragedy, one must understand the psychological effects of trauma and the process of recovery. Furthermore, critics studying modernist literary forms can enrich their understanding by exploring recent discoveries in the field of trauma psychology, which reveal why modernist forms are so well-suited for depicting the traumatized mind but ill-suited for depicting recovery.

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The modernist narrative form of Woolf's novel brilliantly mirrors the mind of a trauma survivor like Septimus. In fact, the modernist literary works written in the decade after World War I constitute a literature of trauma: their forms often replicate the damaged psyche of a trauma survivor and their contents often portray his characteristic disorientation and despair. Imagist poetry and the experimental novels of the postwar decade, for example, reflect the fragmentation of consciousness and the disorder and confusion that a victim experiences in the wake of a traumatic event. Trauma inevitably damages the victim's faith in the assumptions he has held in the past about himself and the world and leaves him struggling to find new, more reliable ideologies to give order and meaning to his post-traumatic life. Like trauma survivors, the modernist writers suffered a similar loss of faith in the ideologies of the past and particularly in the literary forms that emerged from those ideologies. Their works depict in both form and content a modern age severed from the traditions and values of the past first by new discoveries in such fields as psychology, anthropology, physics, and biology, and later by the First World War's unprecedented destruction, the magnitude of which revealed the pernicious potential of technological advancements originally intended to improve and extend life.

In her novels, Virginia Woolf demonstrates the power of the modernist literary form to delineate the psyche of a trauma survivor. Her narrative form preserves the psychological chaos caused by trauma instead of reordering it as more traditional narratives do. Psychiatrist Jonathan Shay describes how traditional narratives restructure the survivor's fragmented consciousness: "Severe trauma explodes the cohesion of consciousness. When a survivor creates [a] fully realized narrative that brings together the shattered knowledge of what happened, the emotions that were aroused by the meanings of the events, and the bodily sensations that the physical events created, the survivor pieces back together the fragmentation of consciousness that trauma has caused" (188). The trauma story, before the survivor has structured it into a "fully realized narrative," is a "prenarrative," which "does not develop or progress in time" (Herman 174). By drawing her narratives from the characters' prespeech levels of consciousness, Woolf created such a prenarrative in her novels and preserved the fragmentation of consciousness that occurs in the aftermath of trauma (Humphrey 2–3). At the prespeech level of consciousness, the charac-

ter has not yet attempted to order his fragmented thoughts into a sequentially arranged, communicable narrative.

Woolf's stream-of-consciousness narrative form also corresponds to the trauma survivor's perception of time. The survivor's traumatized mind apprehends the traumatic event as ever-present, and his memories of the event often exist in the present consciousness as encapsulated images and fragments of thought that are juxtaposed against other nontraumatic memories but do not meaningfully relate to them sequentially or chronologically. The survivor cannot think of the traumatic event in chronological terms such as "This was my life before. . . . This is what happened. . . . This is what I became," and he struggles to describe his traumatic experience "in a language that insists on 'was' and 'will be' [when] [t]he trauma world knows only *is*" (Shay 191). Consequently, he is unable to integrate the traumatic event into his personal life history and ultimately to re-envision the event as a critical moment in his life but not one that must inevitably define his identity. Woolf similarly contracts time, intermingling the past and future with the present in a continuous flow of narrative time. Woolf's readers, like the survivor contemplating the meaning of the traumatic event, cannot apprehend the text chronologically, because, as Joseph Frank observes, the meaning of the text does not emerge from temporal relationships but rather from spatial ones (10).

One technique Woolf uses to structure her narratives spatially is repetition. She repeats sentences and phrases—for example, in *To the Lighthouse*, using Mr. Ramsey's refrain "Some one had blundered" from "The Charge of the Light Brigade," to indicate narrative time, which is easily confused because of the many shifting consciousnesses and their lengthy wanderings away from the story's chronological flow. Woolf also creates set pieces by beginning and ending a section of narrative with the same sentence. These set pieces and refrains suggest a lack of advancement in understanding because the character, despite his intervening speculations, does not revise the original thought but merely reiterates it. The repetition establishes a rhythm of futility in which thoughts fail to lead to new understandings and conclusions. The trauma survivor similarly orders his consciousness by structuring his life around a single traumatic event that he constantly relives and reconsiders in the closed system of his private, subjective consciousness. Consequently, all other events derive meaning from their rela-

tionship and association with the traumatic event. The survivor is unable to escape the entropy created by the continuous repetition; caught in his own set piece, he is unable to create forward movement toward recovery.

Although Woolf's form is particularly well-suited for depicting trauma and deftly manifests in art a psychological condition that science failed to understand until half a century and several wars later, it is ill-suited to depicting recovery. Modernist literature defines the post-traumatic condition, but the task of giving individual and cultural meaning to the suffering falls to later generations of artists. As John Johnston claims, "modern literature defines itself through formalistic, self-reflexive procedures, yet at the same time proves to be essentially transgressive of the inherent limits of the discourse of its time and hence of the categorization of experience the latter articulates" (803). However, "a language wrenched free of its social functions and hence no longer obsequiously obedient to 'discourse' turns out to be intimately close to madness" (803). Meaningful recovery from the "madness" suffered by a trauma survivor requires an escape from the private, self-reflexive view of the traumatic event, because the traumatic event and the debilitating emotions associated with it retain their power when they remain encapsulated and dissociated from the social discourse of the time, the reality of experience, and the social function the suffering may serve. To recover, the survivor must escape the debilitating repetition and the isolation of his own consciousness and reestablish a connection between his pre- and post-traumatic worlds. For recovery to begin, the past must be reclaimed "in order to 'recreate the flow' of . . . life and restore a sense of continuity" (Herman 176). Such an exploration of the past "provides a context within which the particular meaning of the trauma can be understood" (176). He must escape the prespeech chaos of his traumatized psyche and form his fragments of thought into a coherent, communicable narrative.

The ultimate paradigm of the trauma survivor and hence modernist man emerged in the aftermath of the First World War—the shell-shocked war veteran. The severely traumatized war veteran, whom Septimus Smith epitomizes, embodies the essential characteristics of modernist man. The discoveries the veteran made during the war alienated him from his past by undermining his prewar assumptions about himself and the world that had previously given order and

meaning to his life. His traumatic war experiences shattered the cohesion of his consciousness and left it fragmented, a stream of incongruous and disconnected images and bits of memory devoid of the connections and relationships necessary to give meaning to those experiences. Septimus Smith's tragedy is inherently related to his identity as a war veteran and trauma survivor; therefore, an understanding of the power of trauma and the psychological injuries it inflicts upon its victims enhances the critic's understanding of the character of Septimus and Woolf's novel in general.

Critics who have previously diagnosed Septimus as schizophrenic and applied a conventional psychoanalytic interpretation to his character have failed to recognize that Septimus suffers not from a psychological pathology but from a psychological injury, one inflicted by his culture through war and made septic by that same culture's postwar treatment of veterans.¹ Septimus's identity as a war veteran makes him a particularly powerful tool with which "to criticise the social system, & show it at work, at its most intense" (Woolf, *Diary* 248), and his testimony is what could give meaning to his suffering. Society, represented in the novel by Septimus's doctors and by Clarissa Dalloway herself, however, silences and marginalizes the war veteran and thereby prevents Septimus from beginning to recover, which results in his suicide, a desperate but futile last attempt to communicate. Septimus's psychological pain does not cause his suicide. It is caused by society's refusal to let him give meaning to that pain: "He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings—what did *they* want?" (*Dalloway* 226).

Septimus's neurosis is the direct result of the trauma he sustained during the First World War, and critics applying a strictly psychoanalytic reading to his character not only fail to recognize the destructive power of trauma but also fail to recognize that hysteria, a disorder consistently associated with war neurosis, originates in a traumatic event rather than in sexual repression. The history of the development of psychoanalysis reveals that repression is a consequence of trauma and a symptom of psychological injury rather than its cause. By 1896, Freud, in a report entitled *The Aetiology of Hysteria*, claimed that hysteria was caused by "one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience" (203), the trauma experienced as the result of childhood sexual molestation. However, within a year of publishing this report,

Freud repudiated this theory because of its disturbing social implications. According to Judith Herman,

His correspondence makes clear that he was increasingly troubled by the radical social implications of his hypothesis. Hysteria was so common among women that if his patients' stories were true, and if his theory were correct, he would be forced to conclude that what he called "perverted acts against children" were endemic, not only among the proletariat of Paris, . . . but also among the respectable bourgeois families of Vienna, where he had established his practice. (14)

Consequently, "[p]sychoanalysis became a study of the internal vicissitudes of fantasy and desire, dissociated from the reality of experience" (14). Septimus Smith demonstrates, however, that the reality of experience and the trauma suffered as a result of that experience are the causes of his problems as well as the key to his recovery.

Suzette Henke interprets Septimus's character through a Freudian perspective. She misdiagnoses him as schizophrenic and attributes "[h]is loss of cathexis for other human beings . . . to frustrated homosexual desire" for his friend and commanding officer Evans (15).² She goes on to cite this repressed desire and guilt as the cause of his megalomaniac fantasies and paranoia (15). In discussing her diagnosis, Henke cites Freud's works of 1914 and 1917, which were written after the study of psychoanalysis had been severed from the reality of experience and focused on fantasy and desire.³ The reality of Septimus's experience, however, and the trauma he sustained in war are more psychologically damaging than the guilt or humiliation of homosexuality, and witnessing Evans's death is more disturbing than any disgust he may have felt regarding homosexual desires he felt for the dead soldier. Henke goes on to argue that the horrible crime Septimus claims to have committed is homosexuality, but, in light of his combat experiences during the war and what we know of the guilt that veterans often feel as the result of such experiences, it seems more likely that the crime he refers to is the killing and, particularly, killing with indifference that he saw and more than likely participated in. Rezia and Sir William Bradshaw claim that Septimus had done nothing wrong because he had served with great distinction and been promoted, but

his success suggests that, although he did nothing beyond the requirements of war, he was probably responsible for destruction and death, whether by his own hands or those of the soldiers he commanded. Although it is often assumed that, because killing is an inevitable part of war, soldiers do it without thought, guilt, or shame, veterans' testimonies often refute this assumption.

Henke astutely describes another symptom of Septimus's neurosis, his idiomatic use of language: "His language degenerates into an idiomatic dialect that is at once the language of the poet and the madman" (17). "Tragically, Septimus Smith is trapped in a private, autistic language that denies him the possibility of direct communication with his fellow men and women" (22). She attributes Septimus's idiosyncratic language to schizophrenia and cites Norman Cameron's conclusion, "The schizophrenic, of course, is not speaking in a foreign language; but he is speaking in an asocial dialect full of idioms that have value only for himself" (Henke 18; see also Cameron 62). Septimus's language, however, is an extreme example of the struggle all trauma survivors experience in trying to create a means of describing their traumatic experiences so that others will fully comprehend them.⁴ The limitations of language inevitably frustrate the veteran, and he may, as Septimus does, turn to traditional, socially inscribed modes of expression such as analogy, metaphor, or myth. Much as trauma destabilizes the veteran's ideological assumptions, it also destabilizes his linguistic ones: "Traumatic experience catalyzes a transformation of meaning in the signs individuals use to represent their experiences. Words such as *blood*, *terror*, *agony*, and *madness* gain new meaning, within the context of the trauma, and survivors emerge from the traumatic environment with a new set of definitions" (Tal, *Worlds* 16). Communication between a trauma survivor and an untraumatized listener is diminished by a gap in meaning that to an extent exists in all attempts to communicate. Though the listener recognizes the words the traumatized person uses, she cannot comprehend the reality these words represent; there is an irreconcilable gap between the intensity of experience and emotion the veteran wishes to convey and the experience and emotion the listener can imagine and feel. Elie Wiesel, speaking as a trauma survivor, describes the limitations of language as follows: "What can we do to share our visions? Our words can only evoke the incomprehensible. Hunger, thirst, fear, humiliation, waiting, death; for us these words

hold different realities. This is the ultimate tragedy of the victim” (Weisel 33).⁵ It is important to recognize that Septimus’s symptoms—his guilt, numbness, and idiomatic language—are manifestations of a postwar stress disorder, because in recognizing the true nature of his illness, one gains an understanding of the elements necessary for his recovery and hence his failure to recover.

Since the publication of *Mrs. Dalloway*, substantial advances have been made in our understanding of war neurosis and the psychological effects of trauma. For example, it was previously assumed that veterans experiencing symptoms six months after service ended more than likely suffered from the traumatic effects of toilet training rather than combat. Septimus defies conventional notions of shell shock because he suffers from a delayed stress response. He doesn’t experience a breakdown until four years after the Armistice and nine months before the novel opens (Knox-Shaw 100). Rezia, remembering Septimus before his breakdown, thinks, “Only last autumn she and Septimus had stood on the Embankment wrapped in the same cloak and, Septimus reading a paper instead of talking” (Woolf, *Dalloway* 22). Contrary to the opinion expressed in the “Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry into ‘Shell-Shock’” published in 1922, the etiology of severe and persistent war neurosis, like that suffered by Septimus, is not a crisis of will or courage as a result of “sudden or prolonged fear” (Thomas 52). Persistent and delayed responses to combat stress occur because traumatic events, especially war, damage the foundations of the victim’s identity. According to psychologist Erik Erikson, combat damages the soldier’s ego identity, which is “[a] sense of identity [that] produces the ability to experience oneself as something that has continuity and sameness”; and therefore, the soldiers’ lives “no longer hung together and never would again” (qtd. in Leed 3–4). War neurosis is the result of a shattered sense of identity, the inability to integrate the veteran’s identity as a warrior into his pre- and postwar civilian identities.

Woolf’s characterization of Septimus illustrates the disillusionment and confusion that result from this postwar identity crisis. Septimus could no longer be the man he was before the war or have faith in his prewar beliefs and values: “The War had taught him. It was sublime. He had gone through the whole show, friendship, European War, death, had won promotion. . . . He was right there. The last shells

missed him. He watched them explode with indifference” (130–31). Septimus “went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare’s plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square” (130). For Septimus, the traditions and conventions of English life and particularly its art lost their meaning, and his disillusionment echoes that of the modernist artist. After the war, he reinterpreted them in light of what he experienced and learned during his time as a soldier:

he opened Shakespeare once more. That boy’s business of the intoxication of language—*Antony and Cleopatra*—had shrivelled utterly. How Shakespeare loathed humanity. . . . This was now revealed to Septimus; the message hidden in the beauty of words. The secret signal which one generation passes, under disguise, to the next is loathing, hatred, despair. Dante the same. Aeschylus (translated) the same. (133–34)

War invalidated the fundamental beliefs that gave Septimus’s prewar life meaning.⁶ The civilized order of England and its social rubrics, which defined Septimus’s assumptions and expectations about himself and his world, could not stand up against the truth that Septimus discovered in war. The war had changed Septimus’s understanding of human nature. During the war, he saw humanity stripped of the trappings of civilization and witnessed its primitive nature and its potential for evil and destruction, which is merely constrained—not eradicated—by civilized order. Though Clarissa Dalloway shields herself from the truth with a parasol of social order—“a sacred weapon which a Goddess, having acquitted herself honorably in the field of battle, sheds, and place[s] . . . in the umbrella stand. . . . Fear no more, said Clarissa. Fear no more the heat o’ the sun” (43)—the horrible reality of war burned away Septimus’s protection, and he attributes his current neurosis to an overexposure to the heat: “It was the heat wave presumably, operating upon a brain made sensitive by eons of evolution. Scientifically speaking, the flesh was melted off the world. His body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left” (102).⁷

Paradoxically, Septimus claims that despite the raw, exposed nerve fibers, he is unable to feel pain for his own suffering or that of others like Rezia and Evans. Woolf’s characterization of Septimus’s sen-

sual and emotional paralysis illustrates the numbing effect so characteristic of traumatic injury and the obstruction of grief that contemporary psychologists recognize in their war-veteran clients.⁸ During combat, indifference is a survival tool that protects the psyche from being overwhelmed by the horror received through the senses—the sight of mutilated comrades, the smell of their blood and bowels, the incessant sound of their cries and moans heard through the noise of machine guns and exploding shells, and even the taste of death.⁹ Though Septimus’s inability to feel begins before the end of the war, it is perpetuated and exacerbated by his inability to find meaning in his war experiences and his suffering during and after those experiences. Remarkably, Woolf recognized the shell-shocked veteran’s fundamental problem—not the suffering he experienced during the war, but his inability to give meaning to that suffering after the war. As Friedrich Nietzsche claims, it isn’t the horror of suffering but rather the realization that the suffering is meaningless and serves no purpose that is so unbearable to the sufferer. As Septimus illustrates, the traumatized veteran suffers in an existential vacuum in which nothing has meaning. Septimus thinks, “his brain was perfect; it must be the fault of the world then—that he could not feel. . . . It might be possible, Septimus thought, looking at England from the train window, as they left Newhaven; it might be possible that the world itself is without meaning” (133).

Psychiatrist and neurologist Viktor Frankl, the founder of what has come to be called the Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy (after Freud’s psychoanalysis and Adler’s individual psychology)—the school of logotherapy—claims that “[m]an’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a ‘secondary rationalization’ of instinctual drives” (Frankl 121).¹⁰ The principles of logotherapy reveal much about how victims of trauma survive and recover from their ordeals because Frankl, a trauma survivor himself, developed his concepts while a prisoner in German concentration camps during World War II.

According to Frankl, the ability to give meaning to suffering is an essential element for survival and recovery. When man’s will to meaning is frustrated—what Frankl refers to as “existential frustration”—neurosis occurs. In order to fill the “existential vacuum,” the victim must “bring repressed meanings and meaning opportunities to the

conscious level of awareness. . . . [T]he awareness and discovery of meaning occur in response to the self-transcendent relationship. Self-transcendence occurs in a relationship with another person, a useful and important cause, or in a relationship with nature” (Lantz 487). Frankl’s approach reveals that the pain and suffering of trauma victims, like Septimus, contain meaning and meaning-potentials and that “the pain of the trauma experience can be transformed into meaning awareness, as opposed to being repressed and/or acted out” (Lantz 487). Woolf demonstrates her early understanding of what logotherapists would later recognize through her description of Septimus’s struggle to “discover and make use of unique personal meaning opportunities for self-transcendent giving to the world which can be found within the memories of trauma and terror” (Lantz 487). Septimus’s truths are the result of the meaning he discovered in the war, in his “memories of trauma and terror.” Septimus learned in war that “Men must not cut down trees. There is a God. (He notes such revelations on the backs of envelopes.) Change the world. No one kills from hatred. Make it known (he wrote it down)” (Woolf, *Dalloway* 35). Septimus’s testimonies are a means of “self-transcendent giving to the world” because they edify others and thereby have the potential to instigate positive social change.¹¹ The trauma survivor’s testimony has the power to destabilize his culture’s social, political, and economic status quo and thereby to bring about change in that status quo. Though critics use Septimus’s messianic vision of himself as truth-teller to demonstrate his megalomania and his delusions of grandeur, his view of himself as a prophet, despite the seemingly fantastical presentation, is quite valid.

Only through communication could Septimus begin to heal from his trauma, for as he says, “Communication is health; communication is happiness” (*Dalloway* 141). Only through communication could he validate the deaths of the soldiers who haunt him and fulfill the unique role of prophet that the war so brutally prepared him for. To fulfill this role successfully, he would not only have to tell the truth but also to instigate social change by telling those who have the power to accomplish such change. Septimus thinks,

he, Septimus, was alone, called forth in advance of the mass of men to hear the truth, to learn the meaning, which now at last, after all the toils of civilisation . . . was to be given

whole to. . . . “To whom?” he asked aloud. “To the Prime Minister,” the voices which rustled above his head replied. The supreme secret must be told to the Cabinet; first that trees are alive; next there is no crime; next love, universal love, he muttered, gasping, trembling, painfully drawing out these profound truths which needed, so deep were they, so difficult, an immense effort to speak out, but the world was entirely changed by them for ever. (101; original ellipses)

Woolf seems to understand innately that, for the trauma survivor, telling the story of his trauma or what he learned from that experience is “a personally reconstitutive act and expresses the hope that it will also be a socially reconstitutive act—changing the order of things as they are and working to prevent the enactment of similar horrors in the future” (Tal, “Speaking” 230). After the Second World War, Lawrence Langer echoes what Woolf seems to realize after the First World War when he claims that “[i]n one sense, all writing about the Holocaust represents a retrospective effort to give meaningless history a context of meaning, to furnish the mind with a framework for insight without diminishing the sorrow of the event itself” (qtd. in Tal, “Speaking” 229; see also Langer 185).

Although the principal way Septimus could give meaning and purpose to his war experiences is by communicating—sharing his experiences and knowledge with others for their edification and the salvation of future generations—he encounters resistance from members of the community, because his messages, and most war veterans’ testimonies, challenge the community’s understanding of war and ultimately its view of itself as a participator in the war. Woolf illustrates the conflict between the veteran and his community in her portrayal of the relationship between Septimus and his doctors, Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw. Because war veterans’ testimonies threaten the community’s social equilibrium and order by challenging its fundamental cultural and ideological assumptions, the community may avoid and deny the truth of the veterans’ testimonies. The testimonies may create a sense of instability and confusion in the community, and consequently cause it to suffer the same feelings of disorientation the veteran himself suffers. The symptoms of traumatic psychological injury, such as “[r]epression, dissociation, and denial are phenomena of social as well

as individual consciousness” (Herman 9). In its effort to protect and preserve itself from this secondary trauma, the community jeopardizes the veteran’s recovery from his own trauma by forcing him to deny or repress what he learned in war and to attempt to resurrect his prewar identity rather than to establish a new one consistent with his experiences as a warrior. The community wants him to be the man he was before the war—the man who was willing to die to preserve the community’s social order, a man who “went to France to save an England which consisted entirely of Shakespeare’s plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square”—and to affirm its belief in that order or to bear the burden of his knowledge in silence.

A struggle for control over the interpretation of the trauma, in this instance war, may develop between the community and the veteran:

If survivors retain control over the interpretation of their trauma, they can sometimes force a shift in the social and political structure. If the dominant culture manages to appropriate the trauma and can codify it in its own terms, the status quo will remain unchanged. (Tal, *Worlds* 7)

Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw illustrate the dominant culture’s attempt “to appropriate the trauma and . . . codify it in its own terms.”¹² Holmes’s advice to Rezia to get Septimus to look at “real things, go to a music hall, play cricket” (Woolf, *Dalloway* 39), suggests that such conventional activities are more representative of reality and truth than what Septimus experienced and learned in war. Holmes and Bradshaw encourage Septimus to revise and repress the understanding and knowledge obtained during the war. They want him to accept and confirm rather than to call into question the socially prescribed notion of warfare that evokes public-school ideals of sportsmanship, etiquette, and ceremony. But Septimus knows the war was no “little shindy of schoolboys with gunpowder” (145) despite the public’s attempt to delude itself and the efforts of those in power to promote such a delusion.

Bradshaw represents the social and political forces of a community that does not want revealed “profound truths which needed . . . an immense effort to speak out, but the world was entirely changed by them for ever” (102).¹³ Bradshaw’s goal is to protect and perpetuate the world of proportion that his life exemplifies:

Proportion, divine proportion, Sir William's goddess, was acquired by Sir William walking hospitals, catching salmon, begetting one son in Harley Street by Lady Bradshaw, who caught salmon herself and took photographs scarcely to be distinguished from the work of professionals. Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade child-birth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion. (150)

Bradshaw ensures that Septimus and others who threaten the social status quo never share their revelations with others in the community, especially not with the Prime Minister. The rest cure Bradshaw intends for Septimus conveniently secludes England's veterans and hides them away from others that they may taint with their revelations. Moreover, the isolation it imposes encourages conversion by weakening the veteran's resolve so that he will deny what he knows to be true just to be allowed to return to society. Despite its designation as a cure, this conversion therapy prevents recovery, because, although it removes any sources of agitation or stress which might aggravate the patient's symptoms, it fails to address the origin of the disorder—the patient's frustrated search for meaning.

Bradshaw's rest cure only robs Septimus of opportunities to achieve self-transcendence and satisfy his will to meaning by limiting his relationships with others and particularly by rendering him unable to pursue actively an important cause—that of communicating and thereby educating those in power about the war they waged but never experienced firsthand. The result of Bradshaw's effort to silence Septimus is twofold: he destroys Septimus's chance to recover by robbing him of the essential way he can give meaning to his war experiences, and he destroys his own culture's meaningful recovery from the war by perpetuating a social, political, and economic status quo that sacrificed a generation of men to the First World War and enslaved and exploited numerous indigenous cultures and their lands to expand its empire. Septimus's suicide is his final "refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or to repress experience, a decision to embrace conflict rather than conformity . . ." (Tal, *Worlds* 7). Yet his death ultimately

changes nothing, because Clarissa Dalloway, who is a trauma survivor herself and recognizes the truth of Septimus's testimonies, refuses to change. Contemplating Septimus's suicide, she thinks, "A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate" (280–81). Nevertheless, she chooses repression and recommits herself to a life, like Bradshaw's, devoted to perpetuating the status quo. Clarissa silences Septimus and robs his death of meaning by refusing to change in response to his message.¹⁴ In spite of her initial horror that death had violated the sanctuary of her party, she returns to her party secure in the notion that Septimus's death will not dispel its magic or the illusion of harmony and order it creates. One also feels sure that no one will interrupt the Prime Minister's conversation with Lady Bruton about India to talk of Septimus's death, even though his testimonies have much to do with that conversation.

Woolf's characterization of Septimus as a martyr who gives his life in a final effort to communicate and thereby to change a culture that perpetuated war and imperialism challenges an interpretation of Clarissa's return to her party, her recommitment to a life of Proportion and her efforts at Conversion, as a triumph. Though Clarissa's reaffirmation of the meaning of her life is a brilliant moment of artistic order and harmony within the novel, it is undermined by the example set by Septimus. Instead of presenting in Clarissa a positive alternative to Septimus's failure to recover from his war trauma, Woolf presents another inappropriate method of dealing with trauma.

Clarissa's faith in social convention as a means of ordering a post-traumatic world originates in her own attempt to recover from a trauma. For Clarissa is a trauma survivor herself, as Peter Walsh explains: "To see your own sister killed by a falling tree . . . before your very eyes, a girl too on the verge of life, the most gifted of them, Clarissa always said, was enough to turn one bitter" (117–18). After the death of her sister Sylvia, Clarissa struggled to find a way to rebel against the whimsical cruelty of the gods and concluded that

[t]hose ruffians, the Gods . . . who never lost a chance of hurting, thwarting, and spoiling human lives were seriously put out if, all the same, you behaved like a lady. . . . Later she

wasn't so positive perhaps; she thought there were no Gods; no one was to blame; and so she evolved this atheist's religion of doing good for the sake of goodness. (117–18)

Clarissa resigns herself to the belief that the world is chaos with no inherent ordering principle or guiding force, so she devotes herself to creating a façade of order. Though she admirably brings beauty and harmony to the disorder and isolation of modern society, at least to its ruling class, her assembling activities merely repress what she knows to be true about the evil inherent in human nature. Like Septimus, she recognizes its presence because to experience a traumatic event or “[t]o study psychological trauma is to come face to face both with human vulnerability in the natural world and with the capacity for evil in human nature” (Herman 7).¹⁵

Septimus witnessed the evil inherent in human nature during the war and continues to see it in the people back home in England. He comments on the offensive nature of his species, saying:

One cannot bring children into a world like this. One cannot perpetuate suffering, or increase the breed of these lustful animals, who have no lasting emotions, but only whims and vanities, eddying them now this way, now that. . . . For the truth is . . . that human beings have neither kindness, nor faith, nor charity beyond what serves to increase the pleasure of the moment. They hunt in packs. Their packs scour the desert and vanish screaming into the wilderness. They desert the fallen. (135)

The war revealed to Septimus the primitive, instinctual nature of man—lustful animals that hunt in packs in the desert and wilderness—and the vulnerable underbelly of a civilized culture created by such animals. Clarissa also recognizes the vulnerability of her world as well as the capacity for evil in human nature and even feels it stirring within herself: “It rasped her, though, to have stirring about in her this brutal monster! to hear twigs cracking and feel hooves planted down in the depths of that leaf-encumbered forest, the soul; never to be content quite, or quite secure, for at any moment the brute would be stirring, this hatred . . .” (17).

Clarissa perpetuates the conflict in herself by continuing to repress her understanding of the evil nature of man.¹⁶ She no longer fears the heat of the sun not because it has lost its power but because she reenforces her protective shield, fortifies her defenses. Clarissa protects herself and her community from the evil by assembling people into harmonious social units that move about against a backdrop of beautiful flowers and dresses, well-appointed tables, and insignificant observations about quite serious topics. Though Clarissa Dalloway condemns Bradshaw's method of conversion, which "feasts on the wills of the weakly, loving to impress, to impose, adoring her own features stamped on the face of the populace" (151), she participates in it when she makes people sacrifice their individuality and assemble into social units. "Conversion has her birth in the desire to connect everything up, to impose similarity and to iron out difference" (Webb 280). Clarissa, like Bradshaw, obstructs meaningful recovery by reaffirming her commitment to a flawed culture instead of encouraging it to change. Conversion is a social as well as an individual pursuit:

But Proportion has a sister, less smiling, more formidable, a Goddess even now engaged—in the heat and sands of India, the mud and swamp of Africa, the purlieus of London, wherever in short the climate or the devil tempts men to fall from the true belief which is her own—is even now engaged in dashing down shrines, smashing idols, and setting up in their place her own stern countenance. Conversion is her name and she feasts on the wills of the weakly, loving to impress, to impose, adoring her own features stamped on the face of the populace. (151)

Clarissa and the members of her social class do not abolish evil; they merely domesticate it. They veil it with social convention and protocol, but the evil is evident in England's perpetuation of its empire and its sacrifice of a generation to war.

Apparently oblivious to the implications of hypocrisy, Clarissa takes comfort in her assembling activities and in obtaining the favor of others. As she is choosing flowers for her party, she says to herself that her fear of the stirring monster within her is nonsense: "she said to herself, more and more gently, as if this beauty, this scent, this

colour, and Miss Pym liking her, trusting her, were a wave which she let flow over her and surmount that hatred, that monster, surmount it all; and it lifted her up and up" (19). She also suggests the negative side-effect of such a superficial existence and the loss of individuality and identity inherent in the repression of knowledge in order to conform to socially prescribed ideologies. She laments that "half the time she did things not simply, not for themselves; but to make people think this or that; perfect idiocy she knew. . . . She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street" (13–14).

Although Clarissa's reaffirmation of life at the end of the novel seems to be a victory, it becomes less impressive when one realizes that she is recommitting herself to a life in which even her creativity is harnessed for the purpose of preserving the order she finds so oppressive. Throughout the novel Woolf includes references to the meaninglessness of Clarissa's life and her coldness and frigidity. Peter Walsh, thinking of Clarissa, says,

it was her manner that annoyed him; timid; hard; something arrogant; unimaginative; prudish. The death of the soul. He had said that instinctively, ticketing the moment as he used to do—the death of her soul. (89)

. . . she frittered her time away, lunching, dining, giving these incessant parties of hers, talking nonsense, saying things she didn't mean, blunting the edge of her mind, losing her discrimination. (118)

She remains on the fringe of life, walking the porch at Bourton, watching the woman from her window, standing at the edge of the Serpentine, and even dying through another. She ultimately is able "to hate Conversion and convert, to be both Septimus and part of the world that sacrifices him, to die and continue her life unchanged" (Guth 22–23). According to Deborah Guth,

It is this standing at the window, on the edge of the Serpentine of life, that constitutes her major problem: the incapacity to commit herself fully. . . . [B]y the end of the novel, as she watches the old woman opposite closing the blinds, she

is poised . . . outside the loop of time. This, it would appear, is the condition of her visionary freedom, and this is what invalidates it. (25)

Ironically, Clarissa's effort to suppress the monster within her is what condemns her to a superficial, unfulfilling life. Although she envisions the monster to be the manifestation of only evil, it is also the site of the instinctual impulses and desires that embody the passion her life lacks.

A lack of commitment to change and a dissociation from the reality of experience plagued the modernist literary movement itself, and, in discussing the work of the writers in the 1930s, Jean-Paul Sartre attributes the change in the new generation to its realization of the gap between "literary myth and historical reality" (Sartre 174). According to Sartre, the eccentricity and idiosyncrasy of the avant-garde artist's works alienated him from contemporary society and, consequently, rendered him powerless to instigate change in that society. He claims that "their revolutionary doctrines remain purely theoretical (since they change nothing by their attitude), do not help them gain a single reader, and find no echo among the workers; they remain parasites of the class they insult. Their revolt remains on the margins of the revolution" (141). Moreover, T. S. Eliot said that the works written in the first half of the postwar decade described the death of an old age, not the beginnings of a new one (Hynes 33).¹⁷ Though writers like Eliot and Woolf defined the postwar age, they seemed to contribute little to its healing. The rain never comes to revitalize the *Waste Land*, and even though Clarissa recommits herself to life and returns to her party, that life lacks meaning and vitality. However, the modernists brilliantly portrayed the effects of trauma, which psychologists were unable to do until decades later, and, as Woolf's depiction of Septimus Smith shows, revealed the potential for recovery within the very nature of the trauma.

It was the artists of the thirties who attempted to give meaning to the war in cultural terms, and it is no coincidence that many of these artists were war veterans. The narratives by authors such as Ford Madox Ford, Robert Graves, Vera Brittain, and Siegfried Sassoon evidence recovery from—rather than the perpetuation of—trauma. They restore order to the fragmented consciousness of the postwar

world and reestablish chronological relationships by presenting the war story in a form of “This was my life. . . . This is what happened. . . . This is what I became.” Moreover, these novels evidence the rebuilding of identity so essential for meaningful postwar recovery not only in the author but also in the culture. These novels, like the testimonies of all war veterans, force the reader to integrate World War I into his understanding of his culture’s identity and history. Cultural identity must be revised to integrate the experience of war into our understanding of ourselves so we may learn from that experience, change, and thereby prevent future wars. Such integration of World War I into our twentieth century identity seems to take place finally in the last decade of that century, some seventy years after the war to end all wars, in Pat Barker’s trilogy of novels, *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door*, and *The Ghost Road*.

Notes

1. Septimus’s disorder is often discussed as schizophrenia. See articles by Ban Wang, So Hee Lee, and Suzette Henke. Both schizophrenia and post-traumatic stress disorder involve a loss of ego identity; however, as Victor J. DeFazio claims, men suffering from traumatic war neurosis are often misdiagnosed because “[t]he contraction of ego functioning often resembles schizophrenic deterioration while the phobic elaboration that the world is a hostile enemy-infested place is often mistaken for a psychotic persecutory delusion” (38).
2. Henke cites the following incident as evidence of Septimus’s homosexual relationship with Evans: “It was the case of two dogs playing on a hearth-rug; one worrying a paper screw, snarling, snapping, giving a pinch, now and then, at the old dog’s ear; the other lying somnolent, blinking at the fire, raising a paw, turning and growling good-temperedly. They had to be together, share with each other, fight with each other, quarrel with each other” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 130). Henke also claims that Evans’s emergence from Thessaly in one of Septimus’s visions is indicative of the “Greek love” he had for Evans and that he could not express. However, the relationship between soldiers is uniquely close while not necessarily homosexual. Jonathan Shay claims that “Modern American English makes soldiers’ love for special comrades into a problem, because the word *love* evokes sexual and romantic associations . . .” (40). In Homer’s *Illiad*, Achilles, referring to the death of Pátroklos, laments

that he has lost his *philos*, his greatest friend. Martha Nussbaum claims that the “emphasis of *philia* is less on intensely passionate longing than on . . . benefit, sharing, and mutuality. . . .” (354; original ellipses).

3. Henke cites Freud’s “On Narcissism: An Introduction” and “The Libido Theory and Narcissism.”
4. Herman claims, “The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma. People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy” (1).
5. Furthermore, Elaine Scarry reveals that this disparity in meaning is also inherent when a person attempts to describe the physical pain associated with traumatic injury: “Physical pain is not only itself resistant to language but also actively destroys language, deconstructing it into the pre-language of cries and groans. To hear those cries is to witness the shattering of language. . . . [T]he person in pain very typically moves through a handful of descriptive words to an ‘as if’ construction” (172). Judith Lee concludes from Scarry’s claim that “war’s purpose is to injure—to cause bodily pain—and thereby to destroy the verbal, material, and ideological signs that constitute the culture embodied in those individuals who are fighting” (181).
6. Kalí Tal explains this process as follows:

Psychologist Daniel Goleman suggests that personal myths take the form of schemas—unconscious assumptions about experience and the way the world works. The schemas operating in a particular situation determine the actual information an individual absorbs and interprets. Such operations inevitably skew perceptions of events; in fact, that is their purpose. The misinterpretation of what goes on around us is frequently useful as a coping strategy if a properly interpreted event threatens important, foundational schemas. This process results in the “trade-off of a distorted awareness for a sense of security,” and Goleman believes that this is an organizing principle of human existence (21). Grand revision of a personal myth must always spring from a traumatic experience, for the mechanism which maintains those foundational schemas will automatically distort or revise all but the most shattering revelations. (Tal, “Speaking” 225)

See also Daniel Goleman.

7. John Del Vecchio in his novel about the postwar adjustment of Vietnam veterans, *Carry Me Home*, echoes Woolf's reference to the war's stripping away of the soldier's skin. Del Vecchio's veteran Robert Wapinski says, "[S]ometimes I feel like I've been shaved by a razor that was set too high. . . . It's like it's taken off my outer layer of skin. It's like my nerves are exposed. Like everything rubs the raw ends" (80).
8. Herman explains that the trauma victim's "[p]erceptions may be numbed or distorted, with partial anesthesia or the loss of particular sensations. . . . These perceptual changes combine with a feeling of indifference, emotional detachment, and profound passivity in which the person relinquishes all initiative and struggle" (43). In addition, Shay observed in working with Vietnam veterans that the "long-term obstruction of grief and failure to communalize grief can imprison a person in endless swinging between rage and emotional deadness as a permanent way of being in the world" (40).
9. Pat Barker in her novel *Regeneration* describes an incident in which a World War I soldier named Burns tastes death: "He'd been thrown into the air by the explosion of a shell and had landed, head-first, on a German corpse, whose gas-filled belly had ruptured on impact. Before Burns lost consciousness, he'd had time to realize that what filled his nose and mouth was decomposing human flesh" (19).
10. Jim Lantz claims, "In Frankl's system of treatment, the human will to meaning is more powerful than the motivational factors of sex, safety, pleasure, achievement, security, comfort, or power" (486).
11. Communicating the story of one's trauma to other members of the community is a crucial element of successful postwar adjustment. Shay refers to this fundamental need to communicate as "communalization," which is "being able safely to tell the story to someone who is listening and who can be trusted to retell it truthfully to others in the community" (4). Tal, in *Worlds of Hurt*, further explains the power of bearing witness to a traumatic event such as war. She claims:

Bearing witness is an aggressive act. It is born out of a refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or to repress experience, a decision to embrace conflict rather than conformity, to endure a lifetime of anger and pain rather than to submit to the seductive pull of revision and repression. Its goal is change. The battle over the meaning of a traumatic experience is fought in the arena of political discourse, popular culture, and scholarly debate. The outcome of this battle shapes the rhetoric of the dominant culture and influences future political action. (7)

12. Ban Wang claims that there is “a network of symbols and representations that functions to sustain the political powers that be, and to define the identity of individuals and produce them as subjects of the state. . . . The novel can be read not so much as a systematic penetration into individual consciousness as an exploration of the ways in which the individual tries or fails to establish his or her identity as the subject of the state” (178–79).
13. Wang claims that characters like Bradshaw, Hugh, and Lady Bruton “are produced by the ideological state apparatus, which [he] take[s] to mean the same as the symbolic order in the more empirical form of institutions, functions—through language, social and educational institutions, church, and the media—to reproduce the appropriate subjects for the perpetuation of the political order of the state” (180).
14. Karen L. Levenback points out that Woolf herself recognized little change after the war. According to Levenback, Woolf said in her diary that there was “nothing different in the atmosphere” after the signing of the Armistice, and that “most people have grasped neither war nor peace” (qtd. in Levenback 215).
15. Pat Barker’s trilogy of novels, *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door*, and *The Ghost Road*, explores the way modern war illustrates not only the duality of human nature but also the necessity to satisfy both sides of that nature. Instead of categorizing the two sides as good and evil, like Woolf seems to in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Barker categorizes them as primitive and civilized, instinctual and rational.
16. Deborah Guth explores the separation between Clarissa’s inner world and external reality as a means of limiting her understanding:

Clarissa justifies the distance she keeps from her external life, encoded in her ceremonial attitude, as protection of her inner life which, through its free-flowing associativeness, is felt to be more “real.” If one looks closely, however, this inner world is also largely composed of strangely stylized gestures and romanticized self-images. . . . Just as her social self, she feels, is gathered up for presentation to an external audience, so also her inner world is an ingathering of images and imagined gestures, a self she creates for her own edification, a story she tells herself and lives out in the privacy of the soul. (21)
17. T. S. Eliot claims, “From about that date [1926] one began slowly to realize that the intellectual and artistic output of the previous seven years had been rather the last efforts of an old world, than the struggles of a new” (Eliot 271).

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