Failed Witnessing in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*

*Kaley Joyes*

Virginia Woolf intended *Mrs. Dalloway* “to give life & death” and “to criticise the social system, & to show it at work, at its most intense” (D2 248). Because Woolf’s unflinching critical gaze encompasses the ongoing influence of First World War traumas, including death, disability, and psychic injury, *Mrs. Dalloway* can be considered modernist trauma literature. Cathy Caruth characterizes trauma as a “wound of the mind” (4) that defies comprehension and is thus unavailable to consciousness. Such a wound can encompass an individual’s sense of his/her relationship to the outside world—that is, his/her subjectivity. Traumatic events make themselves known to consciousness through repetitious calls for a witness who can actively receive trauma narrative. Such narrative transmissions can “re-externaliz[e]” the traumatic event (Felman & Laub 69) by helping make trauma available to the conscious mind. Such re-externalization can restructure traumatic wounds’ repetitious calls as coherent narrative. Kelly Oliver’s model of dialogic subjectivity provides a clearer understanding of how witnessing can heal traumas that affect an individual’s sense of self: the subject, Oliver explains, “is a response to an address from the other” (Oliver 5). The calls and responses that make up our relations with others, and through which our subjectivities form, constitute a witnessing process. By dialogically receiving trauma narrative, a witness recognizes a traumatized individual’s subjectivity, and because witnessing is subjectivity’s “constitutive event and process” (Oliver 7), such recognition can help heal psychic wounds. *Mrs. Dalloway* addresses trauma’s effects on subjectivity through detailed depiction of Septimus Smith’s shell shock and the witnessing efforts put forth by Rezia Smith and Clarissa Dalloway. Despite their capacity to receive Septimus’s trauma and engender healing, however, Woolf’s witnesses remain enmeshed within the repressive subject hierarchies that impede recovery. Woolf’s authentic representation of individual psychological struggle and its cultural context can expose, but not overcome, the innumerable challenges to healing First World War trauma.

One of the reasons witnessing fails in *Mrs. Dalloway* is that modernism’s representative strategies are not compatible with recovery. The modernist period seems to be, as Suzette Henke contends, “not only circumscribed, but virtually defined by historical trauma” (“Modernism” 555). Such traumas leave their mark on modernist artistic forms. Texts we retrospectively identify as modernist often investigate human psychology, formal dissolution, and the effects of social change, and modernist representative strategies generally include a high degree of verisimilitude. Based on these artistic principles, as Karen DeMeester argues,
modernist art is "well-suited for depicting the traumatized mind but ill-suited for depicting recovery" ("Trauma and Recovery" 649). I see failed witnessing and lack of recovery as integral to Woolf's treatment of post-war British culture. Failed recovery in Woolf's novel should not be construed, as DeMeester seems to suggest, as a product of modernism's shortcomings. Indeed, unhealed trauma and failed witnessing fulfill Woolf's modernist verisimilitude. Because Rezia and Clarissa interpret Septimus's shell shock according to their culture's norms, their witnessing embodies Woolf's critique of the hierarchical social structures—especially patriarchal gender norms, militarism, and imperialism—that contributed to the First World War and its traumas. That neither Septimus's male doctors nor his female witnesses are able to facilitate healing reveals the need for cultural change: recovery cannot be achieved within post-war culture's repressive hierarchies.

There are several characters in Mrs. Dalloway who observe Septimus's shell shock, including Dr. Holmes, Dr. Bradshaw, and passers-by like Peter Walsh, but only Rezia and Clarissa respond in ways that approximate the dialogic witnessing that can heal psychic wounds. To recover from his shell-shock trauma, Septimus must end traumatic repetition with the assistance of a witness who can receive his words and actions as a coherent narrative. Although Rezia and Clarissa do provisionally understand Septimus's shell shock as an expression of identity and a plea for renewed subjectivity, their witnessing fails. Rezia responds to her husband's increasingly fragmented pronouncements, she accepts his exploration of feminized behavioral norms, and she attempts to support him when he defies his doctors. Clarissa's awareness of domination and her understanding of identity's performative nature facilitate her acceptance of Septimus as a subject, and she recognizes his suicide as communication. In the end, however, neither Rezia nor Clarissa can facilitate healing, in part because of their subordinate social positions. As a foreign woman, Rezia is marginalized by both patriarchal and national hierarchies. Clarissa's class and nationality give her more cultural capital than Rezia, and therefore more capacity to resist domination, but her

1 DeMeester is one of an increasing number of critics who approach Woolf's life and writing from perspectives informed by trauma theory. Although Louise DeSalvo does not use trauma theory's terminology, her landmark study of the effects of sexual abuse on Woolf's life and work marks a definite shift toward considering Woolf in relation to trauma. More recent contributors to this field include Marlene A. Briggs, Cornelia Burian, Patricia Moran, and the various critics collected in Virginia Woolf and Trauma: Embodied Texts, edited by Henke and David Eberly. Mrs. Dalloway also plays a central role in Henke's discussion of modernism and trauma in Bonnie Kime Scott's collection Gender in Modernism. My intention here is not to retread the worthwhile analytic paths of unpacking the traumas experienced by Woolf and her characters; rather, I will focus on the repeated failures to witness trauma in Mrs. Dalloway.
gender and her class privilege limit her witnessing ability. Rezia and Clarissa’s failed witnessing reinforces Woolf’s modernist social critique by suggesting that within post-war Britain’s hierarchical subject relations, witnessing that leads to healing may not be possible.

*Mrs. Dalloway* illustrates how irrevocably the First World War changed British culture. Although the novel is set in 1923, five years after Armistice, the war pervades characters’ inner lives and social interactions. Josephine O’Brien Schaefer contends that the years 1918–1923 “were the years in which the experiences of the Great War were absorbed into people’s lives” (144), although some experiences remain “unassimilable” (144). Though Schaefer does not use the term trauma, her description of experiences that cannot be “absorbed” corresponds to the definitions of trauma provided by Caruth and others. The war is an ever-present traumatic absence that can be neither absorbed nor dismissed, and its lingering influence is particularly apparent when Woolf uses free indirect discourse to create cityscapes that demonstrate shared post-war culture. When an unidentified but assuredly important car backs fires in Bond Street, the “violent” pistol-like sound recalls the war (14), and the brief glimpse of the “Queen, Prince, or Prime Minister” (17) in the car sends “a slight ripple” (19) through the streets. The ripple’s power is traditional, its appeal emotional; for in all the hat shops and tailors’ shops strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of Empire” (19). The citizens of London, witnesses of war, are momentarily united by their memories of conflict and nationalism, but their shared culture also includes individual experiences of loss. Although Britain and its Allies won the war, memories of the war and its dead² complicate that victory. A skywriting airplane evokes wartime air raids,⁴ and as Londoners try to decipher the plane’s message, a clock striking eleven recalls the date and time of Armistice (21-22). The plane’s message is ultimately indecipherable, and a question hangs in the air like the smoky letters: “what word was it writing?” (23). The skywriting’s ambiguity represents post-war Britain’s ongoing confusion in the face of nearly incomprehensible levels of change and loss. Ambiguity is also part of Septimus’s attempts to narrate his trauma. He sees the skywriting as a profound message

² Schaefer specifically identifies Septimus Warren Smith and Doris Kilman as “unfortunate reminders” who “have not recovered, will never completely recover from the war” (144). Septimus and Kilman remain traumatized.

³ See Allyson Booth’s *Postcards From the Trenches* for an excellent analysis of the British civilian experience of “corpseslessness” (21) during and after the war.

⁴ Vincent Sherry notes that skywriting began in 1922 “under the official and published encouragement of the Air Ministry, which argued that skilled pilots could be kept thus in training, and at no cost to the state” (265). The skywriting seen over Bond Street not only evokes the war but is also a direct product of military policy.
but cannot decipher its meaning: “that is, he could not read the language yet; but it was plain enough, this beauty, this exquisite beauty, and tears filled his eyes” (23). Here and elsewhere in the novel, as Christine Froula argues, Septimus “brings the war home in his very person” (112). As the post-war era’s “archetypal damaged man” (Hynes 345), he is a marker of the war’s ongoing presence in British culture.

Septimus’s shell-shocked breakdown, though instigated by his war experience, is also a product of post-war British culture’s refusal to acknowledge psychological trauma. Septimus’s first appearance in the novel coincides with the car’s gun-like backfire, the unidentified “face of the very greatest importance,” and the “male hand” that obscures that face from view (15). The noise, face, and hand combine to symbolize the war memories that torment Septimus, “who found himself unable to pass” (15). This initial description neatly establishes Septimus’s relationship to his social milieu: his inability “to pass” distinguishes him from the “[p]assers-by” (15) in Bond Street, who meld into the post-war cityscape while he remains trapped in the past. His eyes have “that look of apprehension in them which makes complete strangers apprehensive too. The world has raised its whip; where will it descend?” (15). Septimus is disconcerting because he is obviously, though not specifically, unable “to pass” for normal. Woolf later reveals that Septimus’s psychological condition has been steadily declining. He hallucinates, and he is suicidal (72). Some critics argue that Septimus suffers from schizophrenia, perhaps because his breakdown occurs five years after the war, but the passage of time does not nullify war trauma. As Anthony Richards notes, many soldiers’ shell shock “continued to be a serious problem after their return to civilian life, sometimes only appearing once they had reached home” (4). While Septimus may have had latent mental illness before the war, his suicide results from shell shock, which we would today identify as post-traumatic stress disorder, and his culture’s negative reactions to his breakdown. Though

3 See, for example, Henke’s article “Virginia Woolf’s Septimus Smith,” Ban Wang, and So Hee Lee.

4 Richards estimates that “[a]bout 114,600 men applied for pensions for shell shock-related disorders in the decade following 1919” (4). Joanna Bourke also uses pension statistics to illustrate the effects of post-war shell shock: “In 1921, there were still 65,000 men receiving pensions for neurasthenic disablement. In the early 1930s, 36 per cent of ex-servicemen receiving disability pensions were listed as ‘psychiatric casualties’” (109).

5 Karen L. Levenbach maintains that, regardless of Septimus’s pre-war psychological history, “the experience of the war in combination with the experience of the postwar world” causes his suicide (70). DeMeester similarly argues 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” (“Trauma and Recovery” 653; “Postwar Recovery” 80).
Septimus’s psychological history remains a matter of debate, understanding Woolf’s social criticism requires us to read Septimus within his cultural context. Septimus may have had pre-existing mental health problems before the war, as some critics argue, but his post-war breakdown is the product of war trauma. Moreover, Septimus’s shell shock and suicide are motifs for not only individual trauma but also its broader social significance.

In addition to providing a trope for post-war culture’s failings, Septimus’s shell shock is part of Woolf’s modernist narration. Her representation of his trauma is an obvious example of the modernist “inward turn” and interest in psychology. Woolf’s use of modernist forms to describe Septimus’s experiences, as DeMeester notes, “preserves the psychological chaos caused by trauma” (“Trauma and Recovery” 650; “Postwar Recovery” 78). When his beloved Evans dies, “Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognising that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him” (95). This pride soon gives way to fear, however, and when the war ends, “the panic was on him—that he could not feel” (95). His repressed emotions—fear, grief, and anger—find alternate modes of expression via hallucination. He sees trees coming to life and knows the sight “would have sent him mad. But he would not go mad. He would shut his eyes; he would see no more” (24). As his symptoms worsen, Septimus tries to ignore the psychological crisis that is increasingly evident to those around him. It is within the ironic gap between Septimus’s experiences and others’ reactions that Woolf forges her cultural criticism. Woolf’s representation alternates between revealing Septimus’s pain from within his psyche and exploring the outside world’s largely pejorative view of his behavior. This dual perspective indicates Woolf’s understanding of the relationship between traumatized subjects and witnessing processes. As Septimus becomes increasingly incapable of denying his breakdown, he tries to narrate his trauma. Unfortunately, the witnesses to whom he attempts to transmit his trauma narrative tend to dismiss him. The failure of this witnessing, even by characters who want to understand Septimus, is, like his fragmentary narration, centrally important to Woolf’s modernist aim to accurately depict post-war Britain’s unhealed wounds.

Even as Septimus tries to deny his shell shock, he turns to his wife, Rezia, and he seeks shelter in the feminized realms of beauty and creativity she represents. Years before, Septimus watched Rezia and her sister make hats, and though he could not feel, “scissors rapping, girls laughing, hats being made protected

---

8 See DeMeester for detailed analysis of Woolf’s depiction of Septimus’s efforts to communicate his shell shock (“Trauma and Recovery” 655-656; “Postwar Recovery” 77-79).
him; he was assured of safety; he had a refuge” (95). Septimus married Rezia in order to access this feminine refuge, and her support has become integral to the maintenance of his identity. He believes Rezia anchors him: “Rezia put her hand with a tremendous weight on his knee so that he was weighted down, transfixed” (24). By fixing Septimus in the “normal” world, Rezia’s refuge allows him to ignore his breakdown, but such repression cannot alleviate trauma. One of the reasons Rezia initially censures Septimus’s behavior is that, as a foreign woman, she is acutely dependent on Septimus’s ability to maintain a coherent, socially acceptable identity. She labels Septimus’s shell shock as deviance and is fearful of others’ reactions:

People must notice; people must see. People, she thought, looking at the crowd staring at the motor car; the English people, with their children and their horses and their clothes, which she admired in a way; but they were ‘people’ now, because Septimus had said, ‘I will kill myself’; an awful thing to say. Suppose they had heard him? (16-17)

In addition to being separated from “the English people” by her nationality, Rezia is further detached from them by Septimus’s abnormal actions. When Septimus begins to hallucinate in public, Rezia acts out her isolation by physically distancing herself from him (24). In effect, Septimus is calling out for a witness. His behavior manifests the “moving and sorrowful voice” that is “released through the wound” (Caruth 2). This voice “witnesses a truth” that he himself “cannot fully know” (Caruth 3) and calls for other witnesses to help make the trauma knowable. In order to recover from trauma, Septimus needs a witness to receive his narrative, to turn toward him, but Rezia turns away. Bearing witness to trauma requires the creation of connections across experiential divides, but Rezia feels that “failure one conceals” (17), and Septimus is making his failure far too visible. Like Dr. Holmes, Rezia blames Septimus for his condition: “He was selfish. So men are. For he was not ill. Dr. Holmes said there was nothing the matter with him” (25). In Holmes’s view, which Rezia here adopts, Septimus’s behavior results from internal failing, and this denial of Septimus’s condition reinforces shame and repression.

Rezia cannot help Septimus until she acknowledges his breakdown, and her first step towards witnessing is to defy his doctors. At first Rezia trusts Holmes because she is relieved by his diagnosis that there is “nothing whatever the matter” with Septimus, but she cannot ignore the increasing severity of his symptoms (73). As Rezia begins to accept that there is indeed something wrong with her husband, her frustration mounts: “It’s wicked; why should I suffer? she was asking, as she walked down the broad path. No; I can’t stand it any longer, she was saying” (71).
She considers leaving Septimus and returning to Italy (73). That Rezia considers abandoning her marriage indicates her growing desperation. She clings to her trust in doctors and hopes that, unlike Holmes, Dr. Bradshaw will be able to help her husband: “They were going to see Sir William Bradshaw; she thought his name sounded nice; he would cure Septimus at once” (91). Despite her faith in the authority conveyed by Bradshaw’s name and title, Rezia is disappointed by his diagnosis, for, unlike Holmes, Bradshaw declares Septimus “a case of [. . .] complete physical and nervous breakdown, with every symptom in an advanced stage” (104). Despite his insight, however, Bradshaw’s treatment resembles Holmes’s in that both advocate repression. Bradshaw recommends “rest, rest, rest; a long rest in bed” at a nursing home in the country (106). While Holmes advised individual repression, Bradshaw’s rest cure represents repression at a community level. The rest cure would hide Septimus from a society that finds his outbursts disturbing.9 Disappointed, Rezia now shares Septimus’s sense of having been deserted (98, 101, 108). Though painful, this break with the hierarchical authority represented by the doctors actually facilitates the dialogic connection required for witnessing.

Once Septimus and Rezia feel deserted, marriage becomes the last normative structure in their lives. Until this time their marriage has been structured according to traditional gender norms: Septimus relied on Rezia as a feminine domestic refuge, and Rezia expected Septimus to protect her, earn an income, and father children. However, when Septimus enters Rezia’s typically feminine realm of creativity and domesticity rather than perceiving it as a shelter, their ensuing non-hierarchical interaction brings them closer to the mutual subject recognition necessary for witnessing. Having been disappointed in the public world, the Smiths come together in the private space of their home. As Rezia trims a hat, Septimus carefully verifies that what he sees is real: “He must be cautious. He would not go mad. First he looked at the fashion papers on the lower shelf, then gradually at the gramophone with the green trumpet. Nothing could be more exact” (155). In order to stay sane, Septimus must rebuild positive relationships with his surroundings. As he confirms the room’s reality, he wonders, “Why seek truths and deliver messages when Rezia sat sticking pins into the front of her dress [. . .]? Miracles, revelations, agonies, loneliness, falling through the sea, down, down into the flames, all were burnt out” (156). By turning away from his truths and messages, Septimus rejects the public post-war world in favor of his private relationship with Rezia. Septimus then speaks to Rezia about the hat, and she thinks, “For the first time for days he was speaking as he used to do!”

9 On the repressive nature of the rest cure, see Elaine Showalter, DeMeester, and Schaefer.
(156). They laugh, Septimus helps Rezia design the trim, and together they create something “beautiful” (157). Significantly, the Smiths’ collaboration parallels witnessing: both designer/speaker and seamstress/listener actively engage in dialogic production that allows mutuality apart from the hierarchic roles of husband and wife. The Smiths take equal part in the creative process, as Septimus plans the trim design and Rezia sews it together. Although one could read this division of labor as gendered, with male design impelling female labor, this is not how either Septimus or Rezia feels about their millinery. Septimus thinks the hat is “wonderful. Never had he done anything which made him feel so proud. It was so real, it was so substantial, Mrs. Peters’ hat” (158). Rezia is also pleased: “Yes, it would always make her happy to see that hat. He had become himself then, he had laughed then. They had been alone together. Always she would like that hat” (158). Septimus and Rezia share positive emotions and recognition through a task well done, and the beautiful hat signifies what Septimus and Rezia can accomplish when they come together as dialogically responsive individuals.

By helping Rezia trim the hat, Septimus actively contributes to the “substantial” world rather than escaping it. By using his “wonderful eye” (157) to create, Septimus feels pride that counteracts the shame forced upon him by post-war culture’s repressive responses to his shell shock. Rezia then extends this positive affect by accepting his atypically masculine behavior as she sews his design onto Mrs. Peters’ hat. The Smiths’ shared happiness about the hat demonstrates the potential benefits of destabilizing gender roles, as Woolf shows individual happiness to be contingent on a balance between relationships with others and individual wholeness. According to Oliver, because subjects form through dialogic relationships with one another, any attempt to hold power over another individual is a refusal to recognize him or her as a fellow subject (7-9). Septimus needs to communicate with Rezia in order to cease idealizing her as a refuge, and Rezia can help Septimus by accepting his subversive behavior. Woolf presents Rezia and Septimus as capable of escaping gendered hierarchies through

---

10 Jeremy Tambling reads Septimus’s hat making as an expression of androgyny (144). Nancy Topping Bazin explores Woolf’s approach to androgyny in detail, while Showalter argues that androgyny “is another form of repression” (288) that “represents an escape from the confrontation with femaleness or maleness” (289). I see Septimus as renegotiating masculinity rather than retreating into androgyny. Male participation in “feminine” pursuits and female acceptance of such participation should not be read as androgyny; rather, the Smiths’ collaboration defies oppressive gender hierarchies. Christine Darrohn reads Septimus’s hat trimming as a challenge to the gender norms that Woolf condemns as products of “a society that violently regulates the borders of social identity” (101). Like my own argument, Darrohn’s analysis frames Septimus’s subversive masculinity in a broader cultural context that Tambling does not consider.
dialogical witnessing that rebuilds subjectivity, so that the seemingly trivial act of hat trimming may provide a first step toward healing trauma.

The connection that Septimus and Rezia forge while trimming the hat facilitates their opposition to his doctors. Once the Smiths have experienced the rewards of non-hierarchical subjectivity, they feel capable of contesting authority. Septimus recalls that Bradshaw said he and Rezia “must be separated” (161), and he objects: “‘Must,’ ‘must,’ why ‘must’? What power had Bradshaw over him? ‘What right has Bradshaw to say ‘must’ to me?’ he demanded” (161). Rezia, for whom the hat-trimming has resulted in the certainty that “she could say anything to him now” (160), answers his question honestly: “‘It is because you talked of killing yourself’” (161). Because of the renewed connection and newfound honesty between them, Rezia can witness Septimus’s distress rather than denying it, and she supports Septimus’s resistance: “Even if they took him, she said, she would go with him. They could not separate them against their wills, she said” (162). Rezia refuses separation in order to maintain the mutually fulfilling dialogic connection they formed while trimming the hat. Rezia’s resistance leads Septimus to see her as triumphant and powerful: “She was a flowering tree; and through her branches looked out the face of a lawgiver, who had reached a sanctuary where she feared no one” (162). Where she once represented an escapist refuge, Rezia now provides sanctuary for subjective self-determination. She acknowledges, understands, and supports Septimus’s defiance. With time, the Smiths may be able to reframe their marriage in order to extend the non-hierarchical connection they formed while trimming the hat. Unfortunately, the healing possibilities of Rezia’s repeated insistence that “nothing should separate them” (163) are never realized, because Holmes’s intrusion soon leads to the perhaps inevitable outcome of Septimus’s shell shock: submission. Any conventional “cure” for the behavioral symptoms of his trauma would require normative conformity, and although Mrs. Dalloway certainly illustrates the terrible consequences of this coercion,^{11} Woolf’s modernist verisimilitude precludes an unrealistic upheaval of established social order. Septimus’s suicide becomes part of her critique of post-war Britain’s rigid power dynamics.

Woolf portrays Septimus’s suicide as a culmination of Holmes’s aggression and dominance. As Holmes enters the Smiths’ home, pushes past Rezia and climbs the stairs, Septimus turns to death in order to escape. He rejects several possible suicide methods before settling, rather dispassionately, on a jump:

^{11} Woolf provides several examples of social order’s individual costs: Sally, Clarissa, and Septimus deny homosexual impulses, Kilman’s pre-war career ends because of her German sympathies, and most of the characters practice some form of emotional repression.
“There remained only the window, the large Bloomsbury lodging-house window; the tiresome, the troublesome, and rather melodramatic business of opening the window and throwing himself out” (163). Septimus sees suicide as tedious and somewhat theatrical, but he jumps in order to avoid Holmes, Bradshaw, and their repressive approaches to his trauma. His suicide also indicates the failure of Rezia’s witnessing. Despite her brief alliance with Septimus, Rezia is unable to stop Holmes, and she is unable to save Septimus from the consequences of his trauma. It is perhaps ironic, then, that Rezia’s initial reaction to her husband’s suicide parallels the witnessing process: “Rezia ran to the window; she saw; she understood” (164). She clearly recognizes Septimus’s suicide as a defiant escape from intimidation. This moment of understanding is Rezia’s last independent act in the novel, however, because Holmes immediately takes charge. By declaring that Rezia “must be spared as much as possible, would have the inquest to go through, poor young woman” (164), Holmes constructs her as passive and incapable. In addition to controlling Rezia, Holmes also denies all responsibility for and even awareness of the apparent severity of Septimus’s condition: “Who could have foretold it? A sudden impulse, no one was in the least to blame (he told Mrs. Filmer). And why the devil he did it, Dr. Holmes could not conceive” (164). Mrs. Filmer recognizes Rezia’s rights and briefly considers resistance, but both are subjugated to Holmes’s authority: “They were carrying him away now. Ought she not to be told? Married people ought to be together, Mrs. Filmer thought. But they must do as the doctor said” (165). Despite Holmes’s control over the immediate aftermath of Septimus’s suicide, Woolf’s narration satirizes him by clearly indicating the destructive potential of the hierarchies he serves.

As discussed above, Bradshaw distinguishes himself from Holmes by acknowledging Septimus’s breakdown and making efforts, however patronizing, to help him; nevertheless, Bradshaw, like Holmes, uses Septimus’s suicide to reinforce his own authority. At Clarissa’s party, Bradshaw talks to Richard Dalloway about Septimus’s “case” in undertones (201). That Clarissa learns about Septimus from Lady Bradshaw follows from their mutual subordination to their husbands. Lady Bradshaw “draw[s] Mrs. Dalloway into the shelter of a common femininity, a common pride in the illustrious qualities of husbands and their sad tendency to overwork” (201). A “very sad case” (201) like Septimus helps maintain the medical, political, and masculine authority upon which Lady Bradshaw’s position and wellbeing rely. Though Clarissa is similarly dependent

---

12 Septimus’s name is never mentioned here, though he is identified as a veteran. Levenback sees this namelessness as significant: “Civilians in peacetime as in war prefer the dead either to be heroes or anonymous—sometimes both. Septimus (like the mass of veterans) has no identity” (77). Alex Zwerdling similarly notes that the Bradshaws perceive Septimus as a depersonalized “category” (139).
on her husband, her reactions to Lady Bradshaw’s tale reveal the structural violence of hierarchical social relations. When Lady Bradshaw tells her about Septimus, Clarissa reacts with characteristic self-interest: “Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here’s death, she thought” (201). She is next indignant: “What business had the Bradshaws to talk of death at her party? A young man had killed himself. And they talked of it at her party—the Bradshaws talked of death” (201). Her objection here is ostensibly contextual: she is distressed by the Bradshaws’ socially inappropriate discussion of death during a party that she considers her gift to life. However, Clarissa’s apparent propriety can also be read as an objection to Bradshaw’s oppressive authority. Bradshaw seeks to convert everything and everyone to his own perspective, and Clarissa’s resistance to his domination of her party corresponds to her more general opposition to his coercive worldview.

Woolf’s descriptions of Bradshaw’s two goddesses (109), Proportion and Conversion, further her critique of British culture’s pervasive social hierarchies. Bradshaw first invokes Proportion in relation to Septimus’s mental health: “Sir William said he never spoke of ‘madness’; he called it not having a sense of proportion” (106). This euphemism for sanity is also a doctrine of normative control that has engulfed Lady Bradshaw, currently threatens Septimus, and is integral to England’s national well-being: “Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered but made England prosper” by controlling individuals unless “they, too, shared his sense of proportion” (109). At the international level, Proportion’s contributions to English prosperity also support imperialism. Indeed, proportion epitomizes imperialism’s hierarchical ideology: some humans are more human than others, and disparate groups must be kept in proper relation to one another. Such proportional hierarchies lead to multiple forms of inequality, including colonialism, racism, classism, sexism, and war. Proportion’s ideology

13 Tambling reads Proportion and Conversion as allegories of Queen Victoria, similar to the statues of Motherhood, Truth, and Justice on her monument outside Buckingham Palace (142). Zwerdling’s focus on Woolf’s depiction of social systems leads him to explain Proportion as “atrophy of the heart, repression of instinct and emotion” (136) enforced upon marginalized people by the governing class. Briggs reads the words as categories through which Woolf explores “narrative tyranny” (46). All of these interpretations of Proportion and Conversion, like my own, identify the terms’ connections to hierarchal systems of domination.

14 Lady Bradshaw had “gone under” through a “slow sinking, water-logged, of her will into his” fifteen years ago (110).

15 The “monster” of fascism Woolf describes in Three Guineas is the result of Proportion’s “widened [. . . ] scope. He is interfering now with your liberty; he is dictating how you shall live; he is making distinctions not merely between the sexes, but between the races” (TG 118).
of inequity is maintained through its "sister" (109), Conversion. Woolf explicitly identifies Conversion as imperialist by describing it as "a Goddess even now engaged—in the heat and sands of India, the mud and swamp of Africa" (104), though Conversion is part of London's metropolis as well. While "dashing down shrines, smashing idols" in India. Conversion also "stands preaching" at Hyde Park Corner and "walks penitentially disguised as brotherly love through factories and parliaments" (109-110). To colonial subjects abroad and national subjects at home, Conversion "offers help, but desires power; smites out of her way roughly the dissentient, or dissatisfied; bestows her blessing on those who, looking upward, catch submissively from her eyes the light of their own" (110). As she blesses Proportion's disciples, like Bradshaw, and censures its dissenters, like Septimus, Conversion gains subjects' consent to her domination; as Woolf says, Conversion "feasts most subtly on the human will" (110). By connecting Conversion to both colonial locales and domestic culture, Woolf identifies Proportion and Conversion's domination of individual subjects as a mainstay of the British social system.

Clarissa's resistance to Proportion and Conversion distinguishes her from other female characters in the novel. Rezia can sense Conversion "in Sir William's heart, though concealed, as she mostly is, under some plausible disguise; some venerable name; love, duty, self-sacrifice" (110). Although Rezia attempts to evade the doctors' domination, her own marginalization circumvents her ability to deny their authority. Lady Bradshaw, for her part, once "caught salmon freely: now, quick to minister to the craving which lit her husband's eye so oilily for dominion, for power, she cramped, squeezed, pared, pruned, drew back, peeped through" (110). These multiple images of Lady Bradshaw's submissive activities connote self-limitation. Unlike Rezia or Lady Bradshaw, Clarissa resists Conversion. Her intense dislike of Miss Kilman, for example, is due in part to her disdain for religious Conversion. Clarissa thinks, "Had she ever tried to convert any one herself? Did she not wish everybody merely to be themselves?" (138). She believes strongly in the "solitude" of individuality, which must be respected because it confers "one's independence, one's self-respect—something, after all, priceless" (131). Clarissa's parties indicate her complicity with hierarchical social systems, but she also seeks to nurture solitude. By reflecting on the "old lady opposite climbing upstairs" (138) Clarissa begins to accept mortality by celebrating the individual dignity that makes such acceptance possible. She respects her neighbor's independence: "There was something solemn in it—but love and

15 It is worth noting that Woolf does not capitalize Proportion until she connects it to Conversion. I have chosen to consistently capitalize both terms in order to emphasize their importance within Woolf's social criticism.
religion would destroy that, whatever it was, the privacy of the soul” (139). Clarissa contrasts the dignity of the individual soul, as represented by the old woman, with Kilman’s Conversion: “Why creeds and prayers and mackintoshes? when, thought Clarissa, that’s the miracle, that’s the mystery; that old lady, she meant” (139-140). Each individual, dignified in his/her solitude, is unknowable to other individuals except through social relations; to Clarissa, the tension between private mysteries and the routines of social performance encapsulates the essence of life. Her love of life, which can help her resist Conversion,17 aligns with the concept of dialogic subjectivity. The subject forms in response to others, but a cohesive sense of self also requires that individuals be respected as such during these formative dialogic interactions. Because coercion implies a fundamental lack of respect for individuals’ private souls, Conversion is incompatible with the subjective recognition on which witnessing depends. Resistance like Clarissa’s is an important component of the witnessing that can heal traumas caused by Conversion’s brutalities. To heal Septimus’s war trauma, witnesses must reject the hierarchical subject relations that inform Proportion and Conversion.

Clarissa’s concept of subjectivity is key to Woolf’s exploration of the cultural hierarchies that contribute to trauma. As her thoughts on mortality reveal, Clarissa believes in an immortality based on people “liv[ing] in each other” (9). She will survive death by “being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself” (10). Her belief in people’s essential interconnectedness accords with the dialogics that Oliver argues are the true foundation of subjectivity: the subject is the self we perform in response to another and exists only in constant response to that other (Oliver 5). Accordingly, Clarissa’s image—in which the mist represents her subjectivity and the trees are the others to whom her subjectivity is a response—conveys an implicit awareness of subjects’ ontological dependence on the other. By recognizing that individuals exist through others, Clarissa reconciles her love of life (4) and the inevitability of her death in a way that recognizes all individuals as valid subjects. Such recognition is self-serving, to be sure—after all, her love of others’ “trees” is founded on their ability to hold her “mist”—but her conceptualization of subjects’ interconnectedness nevertheless shows her capacity for witnessing. In addition to presenting subjectivity as dialogic, Woolf explores identity’s

17 Clarissa’s similar reactions to Kilman’s religion and Bradshaw’s Conversion reveal that it is their shared desire to convert, and not their individual belief systems, that is the focus of Woolf’s critique of authoritarian hierarchies.
performativity\textsuperscript{18} by contrasting Clarissa’s self-perception with how others see her. Woolf describes Clarissa “collecting the whole of her at one point” as she looks into a mirror (40). When Clarissa purses her lips in an expression that “give[s] her face point” (40), she constructs the face of her identity: “That was her self—pointed; dartlike; definite. That was herself when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together” (40). Clarissa makes her private self into “one centre, one diamond, one woman” (40) to show the world. The concept of identity in *Mrs. Dalloway* combines the individual’s self-perception, which is composed like a diamond to protect the privacy of the soul, and others’ constructions, which dialogically shape responsive subjectivity. Clarissa’s love of parties enacts this model of identity by merging individuality and dialogic interaction. She knows that neither Peter nor Richard understands her parties; the former believes Clarissa is “simply a snob” while the latter thinks her love of parties is “childish” (133). Clarissa, by contrast, believes both men to be “quite wrong. What she liked was simply life” (133). To her, parties are “an offering” (133) to the life she loves. Hosting parties simultaneously builds the self-regard that feeds the private soul and creates the connections that bring subjectivity into being. Clarissa feels “quite continuously a sense of [others’] existence; and she felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it” (133-134).\textsuperscript{19} Clarissa’s parties create opportunities for the dialogic interactions that enact subjectivity, yet she also realizes that solitude is necessary for individual identity formation.

In addition to signifying Woolf’s model of identity, Clarissa’s appreciation of the individual as both separate from and connected to others assists her resistance to Proportion and Conversion. Bradshaw and the broader structural hierarchies he represents seek to influence individuality at both levels: those in thrall to Proportion will privately form their identities according to its ideological principles, and individuals overcome by Conversion will dialogically perform their identities in ways that fit within its structures. Clarissa instinctively dislikes Bradshaw, though she is not sure why: “Only Richard agreed with her, ‘didn’t like his taste, didn’t like his smell.’ But he was extraordinarily able” (201). Clarissa knows she is supposed to admire and respect Bradshaw’s abilities and position, but she senses his capacity to destroy intellectual and artistic passion through painful, potentially lethal, repression. Though she knows nothing about Septimus,

\textsuperscript{18} On performance and identity in relation to Victorian femininity, see Shannon Forbes.

\textsuperscript{19} Zwerdling points out that Clarissa’s class status limits the scope of these connections: “Clarissa’s integration is horizontal, not vertical” (138).
other than his wartime service and his post-war suicide, Clarissa wonders if he had gone to see Bradshaw, who is

a great doctor, yet to her obscurely evil, [. . .] capable of some indescribable outrage—forcing your soul, that was it—if this young man had gone to him, and Sir William had impressed him, like that, with his power, might he not then have said (indeed she felt it now), Life is made intolerable; they make life intolerable, men like that? (202)

Clarissa’s description of Bradshaw “forcing your soul” neatly characterizes Conversion’s violence. After Lady Bradshaw tells her about Septimus’s suicide, Clarissa reaffirms her resistance to authoritarian Conversion by first identifying Bradshaw’s ability to force the individual soul into conformity and then sympathizing with Septimus’s subjugation.

Clarissa’s sympathy for Septimus’s suffering and suicide marks her potential ability to rebuild his subjectivity by witnessing his trauma narrative. Her first reaction to his suicide is physical identification: “Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt” (201). She accurately imagines the details of his death and asks, “But why had he done it?” (202). Many party guests now know about Septimus’s suicide, but asking and understanding why, as only Clarissa does, is integral to witnessing his death. Also, Clarissa’s query as to why Septimus committed suicide links his individual narrative to Mrs. Dalloway’s broader exploration of subjectivity. Having spent most of her day trying to reconcile her love of life with mortality’s inevitability, Clarissa needs to understand why Septimus “had flung it away” (202), though her access to such contemplation is limited by the party: “she would have to go back; the rooms were still crowded; people kept on coming” (202). This juxtaposition of Clarissa’s private thoughts and the social context in which she must perform reiterates Woolf’s concept of identity. The individual is him/herself and his/her relationships to others, both the diamond face in the mirror and its display to the world, both the private soul and the dialogic subject. By applying this model of identity to Septimus’s suicide, Clarissa gleans that his reason for rejecting social relations lies within the complex relationship between the individual and the social. Clarissa knows that identity’s performance can require suppression of the private soul’s desires, that the two poles of identity—individuality and performativity—are frequently in conflict. She herself gave up intellectual leanings and homosexual desire in order to succeed within heteronormative patriarchy. Septimus, on the other hand, has refused to sacrifice his private soul, and Clarissa recognizes his suicide as an allegiance to the self: “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” (202). Clarissa’s rationale for suicide should be tempered with an emphasis on its irony. Septimus’s suicide may have preserved the privacy of his soul, but it has also rendered the consequent space of self-determination irrelevant, for what does self-determination matter to a dead man? Still, Clarissa’s interpretation of suicide takes into account both Septimus’s intentions and his act’s significance: “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” (202). Suicide is a solitary act that preserves the privacy of the soul, yet the public nature of its performance communicates dissatisfaction. Clarissa’s witnessing provisionally recognizes Septimus’s subjectivity by respecting his individual decision and understanding his message of cultural resistance.

Woolf’s use of witnessing bolsters her criticisms of the norms that create conflict between individual desires and social demands. One should not have to relinquish individual happiness, as Clarissa has done, in order to survive, nor should one have to die in order to be true to him/herself, as Septimus has done. Clarissa wonders, “this young man who had killed himself—had he plunged holding his treasure?” (202). She then remembers Sally, and by connecting Septimus’s suicide to her first love, Clarissa identifies with Septimus by recognizing their similar losses. In another room at the party Sally wonders, “to be quite frank, how could Clarissa have done it?—married Richard Dalloway?” (207). Although she too has married into comfortable complacency despite the political and sexual impulses of her youth, Sally wonders why Clarissa gave in to the status quo by binding herself to Richard Dalloway. Sally’s question is, of course, both ironic and rhetorical, for how could Clarissa have done otherwise? For those who occupy marginalized subject positions, survival may require conformist sacrifice, but defiance can be deadly. Clarissa is aware of the price she has paid for survival and that life can be intolerable under authority like Bradshaw’s. She feels “in the depths of her heart an awful fear” (203) and thinks that without Richard, “she must have perished. She had escaped. But that young man had killed himself” (203).\(^{20}\) Clarissa narrowly escaped life’s potentially fatal

\(^{20}\) That Septimus’s suicide functions as a replacement for Clarissa’s own is particularly obvious here. Froula sees the replacement through which “his death inversely mirrors her life” (117) as part of the elegiac genre (118). This line of analysis leads to a relatively generous reading of the benefits Clarissa garners from Septimus’s suicide. Ariela Freedman, on the other hand, maintains that the replacement has definite moral shortcomings: “One life cannot be substituted for another, since two lives are not commensurable” (98). I would argue that Clarissa’s respect for Septimus’s individual choice acknowledges each life’s singular significance, but Freedman’s objections to Clarissa’s gratification are valid in
intolerability because the particular man to whom she is subjugated, Richard, does not require her to sacrifice any more than she already has. Benevolent subjugation is a small mercy, to be sure, but Clarissa’s fear indicates that, for those who lack power, small mercies are preferable to none. She empathizes with Septimus because of their similarly marginalized social positions, and her response to his death strengthens Woolf’s critique of cultural hierarchies.

Although Clarissa respects individuality and appreciates the high cost of conformity, she does not fulfill her potential for transformative witnessing. She can listen to individuals’ trauma narratives without enacting the authoritarian hierarchies that force the soul, and she seeks the dialogic social relations that can heal trauma by reaffirming subjectivity. Nevertheless, Clarissa has watched—but not witnessed—others fall victim to social expectations: “Somehow it was her disaster—her disgrace. It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced to stand here in her evening dress” (203). Clarissa feels the obligation to witness, but heretofore she has not responded. Her “disaster” or “disgrace” is that she shirks the responsibility inherent in dialogic subjectivity. Clarissa’s understanding of identity’s performativity and her respect for the private soul could lead her to respond to trauma’s call, but she too has been caught up in social hierarchies: “She had schemed; she had pilfered. She was never wholly admirable. She had wanted success” (203). This willingness to ignore trauma in favor of her own ascendency reinforces systems of domination, including sexism, imperialism, and war, wherein one individual is considered to be more valuable than another. As with others who have slipped under while she stood there in her evening dress, Clarissa’s witnessing of Septimus’s trauma is partial at best. She is open to dialogic witnessing on a personal level but fails to make any public change.

Clarissa’s witnessing fails for several reasons. First, her second-hand witnessing makes no real difference to Septimus because it occurs after his death. Given that she learns about Septimus after—and, moreover, precisely because—he is dead, Clarissa cannot possibly heal his trauma. A second limitation on Clarissa’s witnessing is that, like Rezia, Clarissa is constrained by her sociocultural position. She is aware of the sacrifices demanded by hierarchical social relations and the potentially fatal consequences of oppression, but her marginalized status limits her ability to create change. Her intellectual defiance terms of witnessing. Booth’s reading is more negotiated: “As removed as Clarissa is from Septimus, from the war in which he fought honorably but is not able to leave behind, she attends to him, concentrates on him, and gets it, at least as far as she is able, right” (167). That Clarissa witnesses “as far as she is able” is, I argue, precisely Woolf’s point: the compromised nature of Clarissa’s response to Septimus’s suicide emphasizes the impossibility of healing within hierarchies.
of Bradshaw’s authority does not change her conformist behavior. The third limitation on Clarissa’s witnessing stems from her self-interest and Septimus’s structural position as her suicidal replacement. Clarissa’s use of Septimus’s death to assuage her own fear of mortality is a self-consolatory act that borders on appropriation. While pondering why Septimus committed suicide, Clarissa sees the old woman in the room opposite: “The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three, with all this going on. There! the old lady had put out her light!” (204) Clarissa combines her sympathy for Septimus’s defiance and her connection to the old woman—who, by putting out her light, has symbolically died—in order to accept death. In this way, Septimus’s suicide resolves Clarissa’s concerns about mortality. She now thinks of aging and death as necessary parts of life and as possible sources of liberation, but her convictions are limited by her self-interest. As Kathy J. Phillips notes, Clarissa empathizes with Septimus “not because she accepts any indirect responsibility but only because she draws everything into her own orbit” (25). That Clarissa does not pity Septimus signifies respect for his individual choice, but her self-interest redirects her empathy back toward herself. Although Clarissa accepts Septimus’s suicide as an individual subject’s defiance, her witnessing benefits her far more than it does him.

The self-serving nature of Clarissa’s witnessing prevents her from challenging the social relations that contributed to Septimus’s death. Ultimately, his suicide makes little real difference to her. When Clarissa returns to the party, her reflections on the meaning of Septimus’s death remain within the private realm. She fails to carry witnessing forward into the public sphere. Like Bradshaw, as DeMeester explains, Clarissa “obstructs meaningful recovery by reaffirming her commitment to a flawed culture instead of encouraging it to change” (“Trauma and Recovery” 665). Clarissa’s own oppression curtails her ability to create change, but her witnessing is also limited by her self-interested willingness to benefit from another’s trauma. Marlene Briggs argues that what I call Clarissa’s witnessing “culminates in an act of appropriation implicated in the very critiques which the text launches against those who seek to impose, coerce, or confine a particular narrative understanding” on traumatized subjects (47). Briggs is correct about Clarissa’s implication in hierarchies of normative coercion; however, I would add that Clarissa’s inevitable reinvestment in the hierarchical subject relations that prevent transformative witnessing satisfies Woolf’s aim to “to criticise the social system, & to show it at work, at its most intense” (D2 248). The failure of Clarissa’s witnessing is an indication of post-war Britain’s virulently enforced normativity. In short, the failure of Clarissa’s witnessing is part of the ironic verisimilitude central to Woolf’s modernism.
By practicing non-hierarchical dialogics, Clarissa identifies with Septimus and recognizes his suicide as individual choice rather than failure: “She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living” (204). Clarissa understands and accepts Septimus’s death as defying the hierarchical authorities that oppress individuals by demanding normative performance of identity, but then she returns to her party. Yet the significance of Clarissa’s failed witnessing is, in fact, Woolf’s point: within the social hierarchies embodied by Clarissa’s party, healing is not possible. There is no recovery from war trauma within the text of the novel, and this failure underscores Woolf’s social critique. Septimus’s message to the world is never conveyed; Rezia’s tacit acceptance of non-hierarchical subject relations is truncated; Clarissa returns to the party. Through Clarissa, Woolf indicates that even those who are marginalized by hierarchical social relations can maintain the privacy of the soul necessary for individuated subjectivity; Septimus, by contrast, signifies the very high cost of maintaining that individual integrity. Social survival seems to require the constant performance of normative identity, and until hierarchical social relations are no longer the mainstay of dominant cultural hegemony, survival may be all that is possible. The conclusion of Mrs. Dalloway bears this out: after privately witnessing Septimus’s trauma by recognizing the ways in which his suicide preserves his subjectivity, Clarissa “must go back. She must assemble” (204). Clarissa rebuilds her diamond pattern in order to protect her private soul while performing her public identity at the party. She tenuously balances her individual need for self-determination with the dialogics through which identity is enacted. This, in her repressive cultural context, is as healed as she can be, and it is as much as she can do for Septimus.
Works Cited


———. “Trauma, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Obstacles to Postwar Recovery in *Mrs. Dalloway.*” In Henke and Eberly, eds. 77-94.


