

Private Religion, Public Mourning, and *Mrs. Dalloway*

ELYSE GRAHAM

Yale University

PERICLES LEWIS

Yale University

The experience of loss in the twilight of public religion, and the search for private kinds of spiritual consolation, is the subject of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Woolf sets her novel about the dispersion of religious idioms in a London where the traditional functions of the church—its ability to join souls in worship, its authority to offer explanations for the mysteries of existence, its administration over the major events of life—have given way to uneasy freedom. This situation is built into the terrain of the first major episode, in which the narrator, watching an airplane skim the city skyline “over the little island of grey churches, St. Paul's and the rest,” lingers on a small drama on the steps of St. Paul's:

Then, while a seedy-looking nondescript man carrying a leather bag stood on the steps of St. Paul's Cathedral, and hesitated, for within was what balm, how great a welcome, how many tombs with banners waving over them, tokens of victories not over armies, but over, he thought, that plaguy spirit of truth seeking which leaves me at present without a situation, and more than that, the cathedral offers company, he thought, invites you to membership of a society; great men belong to it; martyrs have died for it; why not enter in, he thought, put this leather bag stuffed with pamphlets before an altar, a cross, the symbol of something which has soared beyond seeking and questing and knocking of words together and has become all spirit, disembodied, ghostly—why not enter in? he thought and while he hesitated out flew the aeroplane over Ludgate Circus.¹

What this nameless man finally decides we never learn, but it seems unlikely that he will broach the cathedral (which takes its name, incidentally, from the saint whom Woolf would blame in *Three Guineas* [1938] for the failings of institutional Christianity). The traditional consolations that

1. Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt, 1981), 23, hereafter cited parenthetically.

the church seems to promise have ceased to inspire the city's inhabitants. When, later in the novel, another character enters a historic church, she finds the pews nearly empty. In this modern London, the symbolic position of the cross, which represents the spirit's transcendence over the claims of the flesh, has given way to that commercial instrument and weapon of war, the airplane.

For Woolf's audience, the choice between the church and the city was still fraught. In the modernist period, and especially the 1920s, traditional forms of religious observation continued to occupy a central role in the lives of many. Some measures of church adherence, including renewed interest in Catholicism and High Church Anglicanism, even saw a surge in growth, albeit not necessarily to prewar highs. In 1927, the year that *To the Lighthouse* was published, Anglo-Catholicism won its most famous modernist convert, T. S. Eliot, and baptisms in the Church of England reached 66.8 percent of all live births, the highest level ever.² Even those who left the church often became dedicated to seeking alternatives to traditional religion. The vogues for occultism, spiritualism, and magic that had fascinated W. B. Yeats and William James in the fin de siècle made a comeback in the 1920s, especially as people tried to communicate with the wartime dead.³

The extent to which even an urbane modernist audience felt the grip of these issues became apparent when in October 1926 the *Nation and Athenaeum* published the results of a survey on religious feeling in modern life. The results, which have not often been discussed in the critical literature or by social historians, give a fascinating account of the religious views of the readership of a large publication with a modernist flavor.⁴ John May-

2. Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001), 6. On the persistent fascination with Catholicism in the modernist generation, see Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 365–75.

3. Occultism, spiritualism, and psychical research are well treated in Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (University of Chicago Press, 2004). Their renewal in the 1920s is discussed in J. M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge University Press, 1995). For historical background and a related reading of *To the Lighthouse*, see Pericles Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 51–53, 194–231.

4. In a book chapter that appeared after this article was written, Diana Gillespie offers a valuable inventory of the *Nation* survey on religion and of R. B. Braithwaite's subsequent book, in the context of a larger discussion of publications by the Hogarth Press on the subject of religion. The purpose of her discussion is to show that the Woolfs involved themselves in the publication of numerous works, many of them unconventional, that interrogated "entrenched religious concepts and institutions." However, her emphasis is on the publishing networks surrounding the Hogarth Press, and she does not mention *Mrs. Dalloway* in particular. See Diana F. Gillespie, "'Woolfs' in Sheep's Clothing: The Hogarth Press and 'Religion,'" in *Leonard*

nard Keynes served as editor of the newspaper, whose contributors included T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and Aldous Huxley. The study had its inception when Leonard Woolf, the periodical's literary editor, casually referred in a book review to the "liberal scepticism, atheism, or agnosticism which is characteristic of the majority of educated moderns."⁵ Several readers objected to the remark; one, the head of a Quaker school, advised that if the *Nation* planned to throw around such claims, it should back them up with statistics. Realizing that no such numbers existed, and realizing as well that religious belief had withdrawn so far from public life that its contemporary prevalence was now anyone's guess, the editors developed a questionnaire on the subject and distributed it to readers of the *Nation* and the mass-circulation *Daily News* (both Liberal-Labour in their political attitudes).⁶

The results suggest both the ongoing vitality of traditional religious observation and the reasons for a recent revival of spiritualist beliefs. Fifty-one percent of the *Nation's* respondents said they believed in some "form of Christianity" (as against 75 percent for the *Daily News*), while only 44 percent believed in "personal immortality" and 6 percent in the historical truth of the first chapter of Genesis (as against 72 percent and 38 percent, respectively, for the *Daily News*). The lack of belief in some of the key tenets of Christianity is notable. Conversely, more readers of the *Nation* than of the *Daily News* (38 percent versus 34 percent) believed in an "impersonal, purposive and creative power" such as the Life Force or élan vital; more than half of such "spiritualist" readers disbelieved in Christianity.⁷

Such figures, though they do not overturn the claim that church attendance and doctrinal loyalty were falling among the educated classes in Britain, suggest the limits of the "scepticism" that Leonard Woolf assumed in his readers. A large majority (over 70 percent) of "educated moderns" in fact believed in either Christianity or some sort of "Life Force." People were reluctant, however, to accept traditional religious dogmas, and this reluctance gave rise to odd configurations of belief. How does one categorize someone who believes in neither personal immortality nor the divinity

and Virginia Woolf, *the Hogarth Press and the Networks of Modernism*, ed. Helen Southworth (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 83–88.

5. Leonard Woolf, "Rationalism and Religion," *Nation and Athenaeum*, June 12, 1926, 279. Figures below are tabulated from "The Questionnaire: Final Results," *Nation and Athenaeum*, October 16, 1926, 75–76.

6. The survey garnered responses from 1,849 readers, amounting to about one-sixth of the journal's circulation. The *Daily News* (London), which also sent out the survey, had 15,168 responses, or about one-fortieth of its circulation. The publications promised to keep names and individual responses confidential, although they required a signature as a guarantee of good faith.

7. R. B. Braithwaite, *The State of Religious Belief: An Inquiry Based on the Nation and Athenaeum Questionnaire* (London: Hogarth, 1927), 55–56.

of Christ, but who still identifies as Christian? R. B. Braithwaite, an economist who took enough interest in the survey to write a small book on the subject, argued that these contradictions demonstrate the tenacity of religious feeling even after the old supports have crumbled away: “I believe that the decay of religious belief”—that is, the loss of confidence in institutions like the book of Genesis—“is due not so much to a contempt for the experiences of religion as to a conviction that ultimate explanations of the universe are impossible.”⁸ In other words, although the continued rise of scientific enterprise had made people mistrustful of public dogma, it had not done away with private feeling: “Because some of us are so alive to the danger of erecting our valuable experiences into a metaphysic and pretending that they solve the enigma of life that we either do not class them at all or consider them as aesthetic or intellectual, it does not follow that they are the less what would have been called religious.”⁹

Woolf was famously no supporter of institutional religion. Yet even if the world of *Mrs. Dalloway* is one to which St. Paul’s Cathedral can offer little, it is a mistake to suppose that its author therefore deprecates religious experience. On the contrary, the novel recognizes the historical importance of religious institutions in giving shape and coherence to community life and the search for meaning. The problem the novel poses is that, while an awareness of the dangers and problems of religion makes itself continually felt, appearing as ghostly figures of intolerance and narrow-mindedness (the Goddess Conversion and the “spirit of religion . . . with her eyes bandaged shut and her lips gaping wide” [13]), the characters nonetheless covet religious experience, especially such as would help them make sense of the devastation of the recent war. This desire translates into a competition between Clarissa Dalloway’s disdain for the old myths and Septimus Smith’s demand for their return. In Clarissa, we learn early on, the enchantments of traditional religion find no hold: “not for a moment did she believe in God” (30). Yet her alter ego, Septimus, the traumatized veteran who makes plans to found a new religion, lives in a storm of enchantment. In his illness, Septimus soars up in sudden epiphanies, which Woolf undercuts by juxtaposing them with the drab materials of ordinary life: “Men must not cut down trees. There is a God. (He noted such revelations on the backs of envelopes)” (24). Though Septimus is the one the world has ground down to the point of near death, it is he who insists in literal terms on the possibility of rebirth—although, as we shall see, Clarissa too feels the need for such a belief. The novel plays out as a struggle between the efforts of the two protagonists to satisfy that need by finding an acceptable theory of resurrection.

8. *Ibid.*, 68.

9. *Ibid.*, 74.

Critics of Woolf's work have often taken her declarations of secularism at face value, ignoring her interest, despite her resistance to institutional religion, in alternative forms of the sacred.¹⁰ Analyses of her "moments of being," for instance, usually assume a psychoanalytic rather than a religious framework.¹¹ Some critics have sought to characterize her work as distinctively atheist: Michael Lackey, for instance, interprets *Orlando* (1928) and *The Waves* (1931) as proposing a "post-God" and "post-subject" discourse.¹² Others have been able to frame Woolf's project as a kind of exorcism of religious belief from modern culture.¹³ Yet an important critical literature has also developed suggesting that Woolf, without rejecting all religious experience, attempts to reformulate it by jettisoning the patriarchal God.¹⁴ In recent years, the mystical dimension of Woolf's work has attracted attention

10. Despite this general absence of attention, there are a number of brief discussions of Woolf's views of religion and the sacred. In addition to critics primarily concerned with Woolf's attitude to religion or atheism, who are discussed below, a few critics have, in major studies devoted to other aspects of Woolf's work, written briefly but perceptively of Woolf's concern with religious experience. Alice Van Buren Kelley surveys Woolf's novels in terms of the struggle between insight and empirical truth in *The Novels of Virginia Woolf: Fact and Vision* (University of Chicago Press, 1973). Maria DiBattista explores *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* in relation to Woolf's rejection of a patriarchal God in *Virginia Woolf's Major Novels: The Fables of Anon* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 64–69, 149–55. Mark Hussey discusses the "struggle between faith and despair" in Woolf's understanding of a numinous "reality" behind the appearances of this world in *The Singing of the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986), 96–106. Patricia Ondek Laurence touches on Woolf's relationship to meditative religion in *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (Stanford University Press, 1991), 52–55, 98. James Wood writes perceptively of Woolf's mysticism in *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 105–18. Lisa Ruddick touches briefly on a number of religious themes in *The Seen and the Unseen: Virginia Woolf's "To the Lighthouse"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977).

11. For discussion of the "moments of being," see Hussey, *Singing of the Real World*, 136–40; and Christine Froula, *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 226–34.

12. Lackey's rather polemical approach tends to flatten out the problem of religion in Woolf's works. See Michael Lackey, "The Gender of Atheism in Virginia Woolf's 'A Simple Melody,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 35 (1998): 49–63, "Atheism and Sadism: Nietzsche and Woolf on Post-God Discourse," *Philosophy and Literature* 24 (2000): 346–63, and "Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot: An Atheist's Commentary on the Epistemology of Belief," *Woolf Studies Annual* 8 (2002): 63–90.

13. Such an aim informs Vincent Pecora's analysis of the Evangelical Clapham sect to which Woolf's ancestors belonged. He finds in its emphasis on individualism, freethinking, moral sobriety, and self-control a sense of group consciousness that, he argues, Woolf translated into her literary works, while stripping away its religious content; Vincent P. Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Nation, Religion, and Modernity* (University of Chicago Press, 2006).

14. See, e.g., Elizabeth J. Gualtieri-Reed, "Mrs. Dalloway: Revising Religion," *Centennial Review* 43 (1999): 205–25.

from such critics as Christopher Knight, Julia Briggs, and James Wood.¹⁵ Our essay seeks to extend that critical tradition from the standpoint of the public/private divide.

On a parallel track, Virginia Woolf's treatment of elegy and mourning has recently been the subject of growing scholarly interest. As Tammy Clewell notes in "Consolation Refused: Virginia Woolf, the Great War, and Modernist Mourning," scholars began seriously examining this aspect of Woolf's work in the 1970s, when the publication of her letters and memoirs showed how substantial an influence death had exerted over her emotional life. These earlier studies were "remarkably uniform," Clewell says, in their drive to treat Woolf's mental illness as a neurotic overflow of personal grief and her literature as another symptom of that condition.¹⁶ Yet in the past decade the critical tide has turned, producing works by scholars such as Thomas Caramagno, Susan Bennett Smith, John Mepham, and Clewell herself, who attribute to Woolf the power over her works of an author rather than a patient, and who emphasize the way in which she proposed new and productive models of mourning—in which the work of mourning need not end with a complete break from the dead in order to be healthy, indeed need not ever completely end at all.

Few of these recent works overlook the relevance of the First World War to these issues. Christine Froula reads *Mrs. Dalloway* as a "communal postwar elegy," showing how the tropes of classical elegy inflect the novel's treatment of the postwar scene.¹⁷ For her, Woolf's turbulent narrative dynamics enact the phases and ceremonies of mourning, in which the many voices of grief, as well as processes such as rites enacting the fall and rise of a nature deity, guide the reader from a sense of loss toward consolation, with the ultimate aim, Froula argues, of honoring a lost feminine principle that the patriarchal world of domination and war has suppressed. Karen DeMeester, too, sees in Woolf's use of elegiac tropes a bitter commentary on the postwar world. Reading *Mrs. Dalloway* from the perspective of trauma theory, she contends that Septimus's decline and eventual suicide result from his inability, as a trauma survivor, to find a language with which he could share what he has been through, which would have helped him to process his grief and given meaning to the deaths of his comrades by warning later generations of the realities of war. Clarissa, the best candidate to receive his

15. Christopher J. Knight, "'The God of Love is Full of Tricks': Virginia Woolf's Vexed Relation to the Tradition of Christianity," *Religion and Literature* 39 (2007): 27–46. Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (New York: Lane, 2005).

16. Tammy Clewell, "Consolation Refused: Virginia Woolf, The Great War, and Modernist Mourning," *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 50 (2004): 197.

17. Christine Froula, "Mrs. Dalloway's Postwar Elegy: Women, War, and the Art of Mourning," *Modernism/Modernity* 9 (2002): 126, hereafter cited parenthetically as "Postwar Elegy."

message, since her parties position her symbolically as a representative of elegy's task to bring the community together in reconciliation, proves ultimately to be too cold, too far on the fringes of human fellowship, to be lit by the spark he sends.¹⁸

The analysis that follows builds especially on Froula's examination of Woolf's connections with the genre of elegy. Froula argues persuasively that Woolf wrote *Mrs. Dalloway* as a self-conscious addition to the elegiac tradition that began with funeral rituals and classical modes of lamentation. And it is certainly difficult to argue with her statement that "In modernizing the elegy by adapting its poetics to prose fiction and its work of mourning to postwar London's post-theological cosmos . . . Woolf . . . discover[s] and explore[s] the genre's full profundity, complexity, and power" ("Postwar Elegy," 125). We wish to develop this broad identification of a theme by adding to it an important distinction—which Woolf seeks throughout the novel to call to the reader's attention—between private and public mourning. The novel draws on and critiques a series of public, communal traditions and narratives of mourning, complicating and at times undermining our sense of what it means to participate in them. Examining how the conflict between private and public complicates *Mrs. Dalloway's* elegiac commitments enables us to throw new light on what it might mean for Woolf, in focusing on a character who openly subscribes to an "atheist's religion," to invoke so repeatedly an elegiac canon that abounds with Christian typology and evocations of the story of Christ.

Froula views Clarissa's rejection of religion primarily through a feminist lens, as the rejection of "providential father-gods" and, by extension, the celebration of a feminine principle that the martial, masculine spirit of the British Empire suppresses ("Postwar Elegy," 133). Yet abundant evidence exists to show that Woolf understood that the salient fact about religion in postwar England was that it scarcely seemed to exist in any public sense. Woolf sets *Mrs. Dalloway* in the midst of a "death of religion" that she understands to be definitive of her era, and for that reason she seems to see her moment as an opportunity to reevaluate the typologies with which we pattern and explain not only the heavens but our world below. "Adonis-like Sylvia," writes Froula of the sister who died in Clarissa's childhood, "counters sacrificing fathers and father-gods" ("Postwar Elegy," 134). The truth in this statement is undeniable; yet the center of the Christian narrative—and of the problems of loss with which Clarissa, still mourning her

18. Karen DeMeester, "Trauma, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, and Obstacles to Postwar Recovery in *Mrs. Dalloway*," in *Virginia Woolf and Trauma: Embodied Texts*, ed. Suzette Henke and David Eberly, with the assistance of Jane Lilienfeld (New York: Pace University Press, 2007), 77–94.

sister, and the British public, recovering from the war, must contend—concerns not the sacrificer but the sacrificed.

A quick acceptance of old narratives of sacrifice promotes perhaps incautiously messianic readings of Septimus Smith. Froula follows the familiar reading that makes Septimus a figure of prophetic sanity. In this view, his madness is no true madness but rather a vision too clear to withstand: “He suffers, owns, and tries to bear witness to his civilization’s ‘appalling crime’ but is finally forced to reenact it through a death that he *expects to be read*—a death that he offers as a gift, and that the narrative insulates from dismissal as madness” (“Postwar Elegy,” 150). Our view is that the translation of death into heroic sacrifice is precisely the kind of sentiment that Woolf strives to resist. Woolf indulges that sentiment because she wants us to feel its history and its power, but ultimately she presents a picture of its ugliness. Her novel gestures toward a new conception of elegy within which older myths and conventions will no longer obtain.

Yet Woolf’s ingenuity as a secularist lies, in part, in finding ways to lay claim nonetheless to religious aspects of experience. At the same time that she dramatizes the decline of institutional religion, she presents an image of religious experience continuing within a more private, individual locus. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the disparities between conscience, communion, and the scale of the losses to be borne exacerbate the problems not only of how to mourn the dead, but also of how to build communities that sustain the living in a real way.

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In a diary entry of 1925, when Woolf was at work on *To the Lighthouse*, she speculated that she might “invent a new name for my books to supplant ‘novel.’ A new—by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?”¹⁹ The description may seem odd for prose fiction rather than verse, but for Woolf it was fundamental to an idea that she had been working out for some years. In 1920, she had written about her “idea for a new form for a novel”: “Suppose one thing should open out of another—as in *An Unwritten Novel*—only not for 10 pages but for 200 or so—doesn’t that give the looseness and lightness I want: doesn’t that get closer and yet give form & speed, & enclose everything, everything?”²⁰ Her achievement of this form is a major part of her legacy, her individual extension of the modernist aesthetic that Ralph Freedman has termed the “lyricization” of the novel: the inversion of point

19. Entry for June 27, 1925, in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell assisted by Andrew McNellie, 5 vols. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980–84), 3:34.

20. Entry for January 26, 1920, in *A Writer’s Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf* (New York: Harcourt Trade, 2003), 22.

of view, the angling of sentences away from reportorial distance and toward the techniques of poetry, so that external events in the narrative take their shape and significance from internal processes. Drama of action becomes drama of mood.²¹

Indeed, this aspect of Woolf's aesthetic is in part a self-conscious extension of the theme of the inward, privatized turn of religious feeling in her own time. Following the work of Peter Sacks, Froula indicates some of the ways in which the formal structures of poetry offer resources for emotional work: "The poetic elegy submits mourning's formidable psychic turbulence to the rigorous formal mechanics of elegiac temporality. Meter, rhyme, repetition, refrain, repeated questions, procession, and ceremony: all serve to divide, order, pace, tame, channel the mourner's chaos of feelings" ("Postwar Elegy," 127). If Woolf's narrative shows how the public spaces of the sacred have emptied out, then the modernist form of her novel—her intensely lyrical and incantatory prose, her emphasis on form and technique—shows how the sustaining "formal mechanics" of public ceremony can endure in secular art. In this sense, Woolf's form extends her theme: the emotional work of liturgy may no longer have a viable place in the public realm, but her modernist aesthetic models its safe transition to the private and psychological realm of the novel.

Woolf signals to the reader her debt to the elegiac tradition early in *Mrs. Dalloway*, in a bravura passage that sweeps a character through the full round of pastoral elegy: the piping of shepherds, the story of loss (drowning, as in *Lycidas*), the death and rebirth of a vegetation god, the multiplication of voices, and the return to the world. The character is Septimus Smith, who in his delirium imagines himself as the fallen god, with a crown of leaves: "He lay resting, waiting, before he again interpreted, with effort, with agony, to mankind. He lay very high, on the back of the world. The earth thrilled beneath him. Red flowers grew through his flesh; their stiff leaves rustled by his head." To his ears, the sound of traffic

became an anthem, an anthem twined round now by a shepherd boy's piping . . . which, as the boy stood still came bubbling from his pipe, and then, as he climbed higher, made its exquisite plaint while the traffic passed beneath. This boy's elegy is played among the traffic, thought Septimus. . . . But he himself remained high on his rock, like a drowned sailor on a rock. I leant over the edge of the boat and fell down, he thought. I went under the sea. I have been dead, and yet now am alive, but let me rest still . . . and as, before waking, the voices of birds and the sound of wheels chime and chatter in a queer harmony, grow louder and louder

21. Ralph Freedman, *The Lyrical Novel: Studies in Herman Hesse, Andre Gide, and Virginia Woolf* (Princeton University Press, 1963). See also Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

and the sleeper feels himself drawing to the shores of life, so he felt himself drawing towards life, the sun growing hotter, cries sounding louder, something tremendous about to happen. (68)

The passage signals Woolf's (and perhaps Septimus's) familiarity with elegiac tradition, but from a perspective perhaps just beyond that tradition: the speaker is, after all, not in his right mind. His line about elegy playing among the traffic sketches an image of disenchantment that will resurface in the thoughts of Miss Kilman: "In the midst of traffic, there stood the habitation of God" (100). In an age of technology and science, of machines rushing along the grid of rationality, magic and deities lose their place. Unfolding as it does in this scene of belatedness, this narrative cannot end where elegiac tradition might once have led, namely, in Christian consolation. Yet Septimus still seems to sense that some sort of culmination is nigh. Indeed, the first half of the novel gets much of its momentum from these constant, mysterious, half-articulated suggestions that something is about to happen.

Septimus's longing for radical transformation is motivated by his experience of a world shattered by war. He went to the front a young man alive with poetry; he returned with his best friend killed, his mind damaged, and something broken in the psyche of his nation. (The novel's symbols of the latter include a line about a shell having "smashed a plaster cast of Ceres," the goddess of the land's cultivation and renewal [86].) This mixture of loss and the desire for transformation registers in the general atmosphere of the novel, which often shatters moments of contentment with sharp reminders of loss. If the novel begins with a sense of uplift, with the purchase of flowers for a party, the first reference to the war appears by the third page: "The War was over, except for some one like Mrs. Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed . . . or Lady Bexborough . . . with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed; but it was over; thank Heaven—over" (5). Introducing this theme alters the tone of gestures in the narrative that otherwise would seem less complicated—lending Clarissa's purchase of flowers, for instance, a funereal accent. The presence of flowers at scenes of mourning is a tradition that began as a tribute to the renewal of life but also as an effort to mask the smell of death. Both purposes hover behind Clarissa's party, which is one reason she becomes so upset when the reminder of death interrupts the gaiety.

In short, even on what presents itself as an ordinary day, the war surfaces constantly in the minds of the characters as a marker against which to check their activities. Richard Dalloway, bounding across London with flowers for his wife, wonders at the continuation of normalcy and its pleasures after such devastation: "Really it was a miracle thinking of the War, and thousands of poor chaps, with all their lives before them, shoveled together, already half forgotten" (115). Sometimes these moments show a

startling myopia: Clarissa pauses in front of a shop and pouts: “before the War, you could buy almost perfect gloves” (11). For some characters, the war has become the consuming drama of their lives. Septimus’s wife, Rezia, discouraged by her husband’s grief over his friend, reminds herself that he is not alone in his sorrow: “But such things happen to every one,” she thinks. “Every one has friends who were killed in the War” (66). Yet even the legacy of the war is only part of the more timeless problem of existing in a world where loss is omnipresent, down to the grim reminder of personal death. “Did it matter,” Clarissa asks herself early on, “that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely?” (9). Soon afterward, she discovers in the thought that it is too late for romance with Peter the fear that soon it will be too late for everything, arriving at an image of romantic barrenness that doubles as an image of a coffin: “If I had married him, this gaiety would have been mine all day! It was all over for her. The sheet was stretched and the bed narrow” (47). Peter likewise connects the passing of old hopes with the successive narrowing into age and death. When a church bell interrupts his thoughts about Clarissa, “the sudden loudness of the final stroke” seems to toll “for death that surprised in the midst of life, Clarissa falling where she stood, in her drawing-room. No! No! he cried. She is not dead! I am not old” (50). The most compact, and the most poignant, of these discourses on death comes from Septimus: “‘Evans!’ he cried. There was no answer” (147).

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That Woolf saw dramatic potential in the collision of postwar angst with the rising talk of God’s own death is clear from her works of the 1920s. The search for meaning on the other side of Arnold’s darkling plain drives all her novels, from *Jacob’s Room* (1922) to *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Her interest in themes of death and resurrection had roots in the events of her youth and childhood, including the deaths of her parents, half sister, and brother; but only after the war, under the pressure of confronting death on a massive scale, did her writing begin explicitly to address the question of God’s existence. In one of the earliest such stories, “Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street” (1922), the title character, while absently shopping for gloves, finds herself brooding on the “religious question,” which leads her to reflect on how the war has eroded her faith: “there are moments when it seems utterly futile . . . simply one doesn’t believe, thought Clarissa, any more in God.” Yet she decides (with an offhandedness that is almost a parody of patrician reserve) that she must pretend to believe, for the sake of the shopgirl selling the gloves and for the “thousands of young men [who]

had died that things might go on.”²² The celebration of the war dead as a patriotic duty was in fact something that Woolf, as a committed pacifist, rejected. Yet the sense remains that the living do bear some kind of moral responsibility toward the dead, a responsibility that needs to be defined; and the silence around Clarissa’s thin remark, which compounds as she exchanges nothings with the shopgirl, makes her purchase, and moves on, fills the interaction with electricity. Woolf’s exploration of these spaces led to the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, which begins, not incidentally, with a gesture toward the kind of nationalistic sentimentality that smothers real thinking about debts toward the dead, as the sight of the royal car sweeps the collective mind of Bond Street into thoughts “of the dead; of the flag; of Empire” (16). Over the novel’s course, Woolf seeks to work out terms that allow her to recognize those debts without glorifying the flag or the empire, and without the rhetoric that glorifies death.

The Clarissa of the novel, unlike her precursor, has apparently never believed in God.²³ The reader learns of her more explicit views on religion mostly through the memories of her friend Peter Walsh, who reflects that, for all her human warmth, “Oddly enough, she was one of the most thorough-going sceptics he had ever met” (59). As Peter recalls, she once made some allowance for the supernatural; her first impulse, when her sister died suddenly, had been to hurl blame at “the Gods,” arguing that “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.” Then, as her grief settled, she came to think “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” (59). The comment seems to echo Leslie Stephen’s remark, “I now believe in nothing, to put it shortly; but I do not the less believe in morality etc. etc. I mean to live and die like a gentleman if possible.”²⁴

Yet although Clarissa, like many of Woolf’s heroines, subscribes to a secular outlook, choosing to see in the diversity of human experience a “supreme mystery” too great for one religion to fill up, her language, at philosophical moments, often echoes scripture (95). The coming of old age, in particular, stirs in her such dread that she confronts the subject in language that echoes passages on the last judgment. Musing that women

22. Virginia Woolf, “Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street,” in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Dick (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1989), 158–59.

23. Woolf wrote of her own mother (in a reminiscence addressed to her nephew Julian Bell), “She flung aside her own religion, and became, as I have heard, the most positive of disbelievers” (Virginia Woolf, “Reminiscences,” in *Moments of Being: A Collection of Autobiographical Writing*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind [New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1985], 32).

24. Frederic William Maitland, *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen* (London: Duckworth, 1906), 144–45, quoted in Noel Annan, *Leslie Stephen: His Thought and Character in Relation to His Time* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1951), 198.

fade from relevance upon leaving youth, she looks into her own future and thinks, echoing Matthew 24:38, that there will be “no more marrying, no more having of children now” (10). An image of death already mentioned, which first appears as she regards her dreary marriage bed, seems to allude to Isaiah 28:20: “The sheets were clean, tight stretched in a broad white band from side to side. Narrower and narrower would her bed be” (31).²⁵

With the reunions she anticipates at the party adding a fresh sting of nostalgia to this general ache, Clarissa spends much of the day contemplating the question of the “soul.” Her friends, who likewise stand outside the church, also worry about her soul, but their concern lies in the present world: basically, whether her social instincts will deaden her capacity for poetry. Sally Seton once predicted that Clarissa’s marriage with Richard Dalloway would “stifle her soul” (58), and Peter Walsh regards Clarissa’s talent for social success as one of “the defects of her own soul” (8). He fears that he may have already seen “the death of her soul” at a luncheon years ago, in her prim and officious reaction to the news of a neighbor’s child born out of wedlock (46). Clarissa works with much the same vocabulary of ideas, but she cautiously pushes their application toward transcendental ideas of resurrection. She has a loosely Romantic, though secular, notion of the soul as an elemental force, a more authentic, more free-flowing alternative to the public self. But in the activity of that force in the world she sees an argument for the possibility of survival after death. One of her ideas, as Peter recalls, “ended in a transcendental theory which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe, or say that she believed (for all her scepticism), that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death . . . perhaps—perhaps” (114). When in the novel’s opening pages Clarissa asks herself whether, after death, “somehow, in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive of the trees at home,” she reveals the fear of loss that drives the search for resurrection and, at the same time, suggests a way in which her social activity offers her a means of imagining protection from extinction (9).

25. Compare Matthew 24:38–39: “For as in the days that were before the Flood, they were eating, and drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the Ark, And knew not until the Flood came, and took them all away: so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.” Also, compare Isaiah 28:20: “For the bed is shorter, than that a man can stretch himself on it: and the covering narrower, than that he can wrap himself in it.” The passage from Isaiah refers to the coming of the Messiah; that in Matthew to the last judgment. Woolf is also echoing Matthew Arnold’s “Creep into thy narrow bed” (“The Last Word,” in *Matthew Arnold*, ed. Miriam Allott and Robert H. Super [Oxford University Press, 1986], 269). All biblical quotations are from the KJV.

There is a tension in this outlook, which asserts natural indifference but also a haunted world. Death does not suit Clarissa's sensibility; her genius for life, the lyrical temperament that enjoys the world's plenitude and responds in like terms, urges her toward a more Romantic and optimistic sense of an ending. In her appeal to the trees at home, she is straining to say that the soul lives on, even though she knows it does not. The effort to resolve this tension relies on her using metaphor to reorder, at least, what cannot be rejected: we return to the earth, but the earth to which we return is not merely (per the saying) dead history but living poetry, like the leaves of a tree. (That Clarissa's sister was killed by a falling tree gives the image a poignant edge.) By these terms, we need the community in order to endure: excessive socialization may threaten to stifle Clarissa's soul, but her social instincts enable her to imagine a form of resurrection that does not first require destruction.

Yet if Clarissa allows for the possibility that the dead can reconnect with the living world, she takes a darker view of the promise that religious fellowship can connect the living. In her private thoughts, Clarissa often addresses "the privacy of the soul," a term that Woolf makes use of in the earlier essays "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1917) and "An Unwritten Novel" (1921). Like the author of those essays, Clarissa finds a symbol for the concept in an anonymous old woman: "the old lady opposite," a neighbor in the opposite flat, whose movements Clarissa observes throughout the day and whose life she describes as a "mystery," since the significance of the woman's daily rites are unreadable to outsiders like her (95). The boundary that shuts her out of the woman's world of values at once renders that world purely theoretical and, by warding off intrusion, assures its existence. Thinking of the evangelical Miss Kilman, Clarissa identifies as its greatest danger the kind of despot benevolence that tries to change people's values for their own good: "love and religion would destroy that, whatever it was, the privacy of the soul" (95).

Yet the claim to be acting out of love has a basic sympathetic appeal that is hard for us to dismiss emotionally. Perhaps for this reason, Woolf gives a special viciousness to her portrait of Miss Kilman, the character who most often speaks for love. Still, Woolf makes the moral balance between this woman and the character who most resembles the author herself more ambiguous than she might have done, given how prominently Miss Kilman represents the orthodox religions Woolf despised. It is presented as one of Clarissa's less attractive characteristics, for instance, that she feels such animosity toward Miss Kilman, who is a churchgoer, a philanthropist, an energetic committee volunteer, and admittedly a very disagreeable woman. The divided allegiance of Clarissa's daughter intensifies the tension between the two women, but their deeper animus has to do with the way each reflects back the other's vices. Clarissa wearily catalogs the other woman's

habit of pushing her class origins into every conversation: “she was never in the room five minutes without making you feel her superiority, your inferiority; how poor she was; without a cushion or a bed or a rug or whatever it might be” (11). For her part, Miss Kilman broods that Clarissa has never treated her seriously: “She had been merely condescending” (123). Standing amid the comforts of Clarissa’s life, Miss Kilman has to struggle to regain self-assurance, first telling herself in barely concealed fury that she “pitied and despised” women like Clarissa Dalloway “from the bottom of her heart” but working herself into enough satisfaction in her own magnanimity to think, “But Miss Kilman did not hate Mrs. Dalloway” (125). Miss Kilman’s sense of charity comes down to a wrestling match between two aspects of herself, one that despises patricians like Clarissa Dalloway and one that needs to believe that, as a Christian, she loves her neighbors. But the point of so carefully cataloging the multiple perspectives at work in her mind is to show that in her case, the two motivations are the same: the profession of humility is necessary to lay claim to Christianity’s claim of superiority from below. Meekness like this is more contemptuous than condescension.

Woolf’s more somber examination of the challenges surrounding the modern quest for religious experience begins with Septimus Smith. Like Miss Kilman, this character is shown as someone vulnerable to the appeal of large institutions. Before the war, as a penniless newcomer to London, Septimus tried out churches as part of an anxious program of self-improvement. But what eventually drives him to the farther reaches of the supernatural, to mystical highs and messianic fantasies, is the trauma of his experiences as a soldier in the Great War. Part of this trauma is the psychological damage of shell shock; still, the images and scenes that preoccupy his fantasies revolve around a catalyzing loss: the death of his friend Evans.

For Septimus, the impossible formulas of mysticism offer endless ways to undo that loss. His visions depict reincarnation, resurrection, even the end of death itself, with Evans himself rising up, at once Lazarus, John the Baptist, and the Angel of the Annunciation, with a message that Septimus hails as an “astonishing revelation” that will comfort the lamenting “millions” (54). Against this image Septimus projects himself as a figure of Christ, as “the greatest of mankind, Septimus, lately taken from life to death, the Lord who had come to renew society . . . the scapegoat, the eternal sufferer” (21).²⁶ The very eclecticism of these visions, which rapidly build and demolish huge structures of myth, conveys not only the disorganization of madness but also the sense of desperation involved in throwing answers at a problem too large for any known resource to handle. Internalizing his losses

26. James Naremore notes the accuracy of Septimus’s self-description as a scapegoat in *The World without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), 106–7.

in a portrait of himself as a figure of elegy, Septimus brings together Eliot's drowned sailor, Milton's *Lycidas*, and Pater's *Mona Lisa*: "I went under the sea. I have been dead, and yet am now alive, but let me rest still" (53).

But the idea that the role that Septimus imagines for himself—as sacrificial lamb and redeemer—is a worthy story of loss and redemption is one of the assumptions that Woolf seeks to undermine in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Under its terms, his final action should enable the transcendence of suffering and loss through the sacrificial expulsion of his community's sorrows. But Woolf was no devotee of Christian myth. In recent years, critics such as those mentioned earlier have suggested ways of understanding Woolf's intervention in the work of mourning as a movement toward provisional and earthbound responses to the problem of loss. In the person of Septimus, the desires and fears that pull against this movement demonstrate their continuing power. Although ultimately Septimus will achieve something like his vision of renewal—albeit by means so accidental and indirect as to make a joke of the suggestion that his is an act of self-sacrifice—the event will be neither miraculous nor redemptive. Rather, it will represent the endurance of a whole complex of social ills for which we might find a figure in Peter Walsh's use of the term *civilization*.

* * *

Hearing the receding siren of the ambulance that carries away the body of Septimus Smith, victim of modern war and bureaucratized medicine, Peter Walsh reflects approvingly on the "communal spirit of London" that makes room for the ambulance to pass, and thinks: "One of the triumphs of civilization" (152). The remark carries a certain bitter irony, of course, revealing an entitled innocence that Peter has shown before; such an ideal of the ease and orderliness of British life clouded his perception earlier, when he witnessed an argument between Septimus and Rezia, a scene that he paused to admire as a kind of picture postcard: "lovers squabbling under a tree; the domestic family life of the parks . . . the richness; the greenness; the civilization, after India, he thought, strolling across the grass" (71). Woolf was sharply aware of the capacity of highly developed societies to make possible not only great ease and convenience but also great cruelty and indifference. As Edward Mendelson points out, Peter is right to admire the way a large and anonymous city has managed to ensure care for the dead and dying (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 112), but the scale involved encourages the living to treat each other as mere integers in some equation.²⁷

27. Edward Mendelson, *The Things That Matter: What Seven Classic Novels Have to Say about the Stages of Life* (New York: Pantheon, 2006), 185.

Yet letting him break away from communal life is no solution, either. This is a point that Woolf underscores, showing Septimus breaking off ties with others as his illness progresses. Private and public are each alone without value. On the one hand, social relations give life value (so much so that Clarissa's gift for them comes across as a kind of artistic genius); on the other hand, social processes can easily be hijacked for the purposes of subjugation. The socialites who replace personality with propriety; the bullying doctors who make a fetish of normalcy, trimming their patients to fit the bed of "proportion": such forces add up to an image of modern civilization as a machine whose function is not merely to keep outliers from going over the edge, but to make everyone lifelessly alike. (One gets the sense that Sir William, who does not like Shakespeare, would cure poetry along with madness if he could.) If the church, an institution that once claimed jurisdiction over the inner life, has receded before a new era in which people have privatized the search for meaning, the world around it still seems to be in significant ways the same. It has changed its rituals, but it still worships the domineering impulse that calls itself civilization, which, in pursuit of order and convenience, urges members to break open the privacy of the soul and put the world within at risk.

All of this helps to explain Clarissa's complicated response when the news of Septimus's death interrupts her party. For what she assumes when she hears it was suicide is not that he had depression or money troubles but rather that he had genius: "Or there were poets and thinkers. Suppose he had that passion, and he had gone to Sir William Bradshaw, a great doctor, to her obscurely evil . . . capable of some indescribable outrage—forcing your soul, that was it" (137). Her diagnosis of the patient is not exactly right, but her analysis of the case is not entirely wrong. Everyone with an inner life is vulnerable to the threat whose representative Clarissa makes Sir William. Still, the scene has a special intensity because just a moment before, Clarissa pictured the final moments of Septimus's life with an uncanny accuracy in some of the details—notably, the spikes of the railing running through. Assuming that nobody mentioned the manner of death, the reader is left to consider the possibility that some extraordinary connection might have passed after all between the hostess and the suicide. This is a hint of mystical possibility that the novel is willing to leave unresolved: like private moments of intense feeling, it changes nothing yet enchants the world we have come to know. The mystical vision, when it comes, comes not to Miss Kilman in the pews of Westminster Abbey but to Clarissa, standing alone, after a day of meditating on privacy and the soul.

Then again, the plausibility of a connection seems to fade rapidly after that. Warming to the thought that this stranger shares her concerns, that he has died to communicate life's secret—which seems to have something to do with breaking through now and then to a fresh awareness of the

vibrancy of existence—and she has caught the signal, she tells herself that “she did not pity him.” Then comes her startling final remark: “She felt somehow like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away.” In the American edition, she adds the most controversial line in the novel: “He made her feel the beauty; feel the fun” (186). (Woolf retained the line in the proofs for the American first edition, which she edited simultaneously with the proofs for her British publisher, but removed it from subsequent British editions of the book.)²⁸

It is hard to know what to do with this monologue. Perhaps Clarissa finds the event easier to process through the device of turning the dead into guides for the living. Perhaps the sudden destruction of some counterpart to herself reminds her of how easily the inner life can be threatened, a thought that reassures her that she has been right to follow a lonelier path through existence. Perhaps she feels a fresh sense of animal vitality after the vicarious experience of the other person’s death or identifies with the defiance of his gesture. Although her final line is almost deliberately abrasive, the turns leading up to it are so subtle that it is hard to tell where a given reader would break off sympathy. Yet there is something about the transaction that most readers probably find disturbing; somehow we have gotten from shock and sympathy over a man’s death to a sense of transcendence, even triumph, in it. And upon this wave of triumph Clarissa returns to her party—which has already been made to seem ridiculous, with reverential glances toward the prints left by the buttocks of the prime minister, and so on. If the famous final line of *Mrs. Dalloway* means in part to suggest that Clarissa, having encountered in Septimus’s death some modern version of the Christian myth of sacrifice and redemption, returns to this company as a figure of the Eucharist, then Woolf is gathering rather a lot of doubt around her picture of the Christian myth and its workings.

This dimension emerged only gradually in the writing process. As Woolf recounts in the Modern Library preface to *Mrs. Dalloway*, written two years after the novel’s publication, she originally thought of Septimus’s death as a substitution for Clarissa’s. One of her early drafts, which Garrett Stewart quotes, calls the windowsill from which the veteran throws himself an “altar.”²⁹ Yet successive changes to the manuscript afterward indicate that Woolf saw something that she wanted to reject in the idea that someone can die for someone else. In the finished novel, although the closing movement clearly proposes this sort of sacrificial-redemptive logic—that Septimus will die for Clarissa—the conclusion does not clearly reinforce it, and may even undermine it. Clarissa feels the stranger’s death and makes it part

28. Briggs, *Woolf: An Inner Life*, 154–55.

29. Garrett Stewart, *Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 283.

of her own life, but it is not at all clear that this makes sense of his death; and in the end, it may be a mistake to think that his death makes sense at all. One might describe the effect as that of a failed attempt at redemption. Ultimately, Septimus's death has no metaphysical power; it can only grant a very passing kind of comfort, and the comfort it does grant Clarissa has something ghoulish about it.

Possibly one could say the failure is Woolf's: that she wants redemption from Septimus but does not achieve it. But it seems more accurate to say that the failure is in the notion of redemption, and that Woolf means to expose it. Although Woolf leaves open the possibility of Septimus's death as redemptive, perhaps the novel suggests in the final accounting that, in fact, there is nothing redemptive about it, and we are just prone to telling ourselves stories that will make us feel that there is. After all, Septimus does not take his death upon himself in a rational frame of mind or as part of a bargain with God. Even from a traditional Christian point of view, the suicide of a mentally ill veteran can hardly be easily equated with Christ's death and resurrection. If the novel imagines the possibility that Septimus might redeem Mrs. Dalloway, in the end it rejects the promise of redemptive violence.

There is truth, of course, to the idea that someone can die for his country. The deaths of soldiers in the war were real deaths, on behalf of the nation. The problem that Woolf singles out—a practice the novel teaches us throughout to view skeptically, from the early scene where the Bond Street crowds wax sentimental over thoughts of "the dead; of the flag; of Empire"—is turning these real deaths into a myth. If such stories give the British public an easier sense of consolation and renewal, the moral burden of Britain's part in the brutality of warfare, and its sacrifice of young men like Evans, falls all the more heavily onto those like Septimus, an individual soldier, who confesses to a sense of having committed "an appalling crime" (96). To the extent that this problem projects the need for an alternative, there might be something more honest in the suspension of consolation and closure, which would allow for the longer working out of grief in those private spaces the novel dreams about protecting. Or at least, Woolf seems to suggest, such suspension would allow us to engage with the problems of loss and of debts toward the dead in a way that these grand public narratives do not allow.