"MY TUNNELLING PROCESS": THE METHOD OF "MRS. DALLOWAY"
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tion are much more healthy and vigorous. He approaches boldly all the various externals of American life—grotesque though they be, and ugly, and irritating, and distressing—which so often cause us to quail before the gaze of our European censors, and subdues them instead of letting them subdue him. He can print the word "buggy" without the help of quotation marks, and writes "guess" with an unconscious freedom that Mr. James has never attained.

Howells, in fine, has come to the mountain: James seems to expect that he can bring the mountain to him. A few loose stones and boulders, it is true, have rolled his way; but the general form and outline of the mountain have not been materially changed, and its firm base is probably quite as immovable as it ever was. There is a strong probability that Mr. James, notwithstanding his very exceptional gifts and his score of delightful qualities, will sometime come to find himself a "thing apart" in a sense and to an extent that he does not now foresee. From his isolated position he may come to regard, with a feeling approximating envy, the comfortable position of a competitor who, believing that there's no place like home, has made himself the leader and centre of a school whose members, working in fields however scattered, have an aim and a method that should render them worthy of an appreciative hearing and the objects of an affectionate pride.

Edited by DARREL ABEL

"MY TUNNELLING PROCESS": THE METHOD OF "MRS. DALLOWAY"

Virginia Woolf did not herself use the term "stream of consciousness" to describe the characteristic style of her best-known novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. If we search her *Diary*, we find a great many allusions to her own style—or styles, for she had, as Ben Ray Redman long ago observed, several styles rather than a single manner to which she constantly returned. The term which she does apply to her method of composition for *Mrs. Dalloway* should consequently be carefully observed.

Mrs. Woolf was writing at her most intensive pace in the summer of 1923 while she had still conceived of *Mrs. Dalloway* as *The Hours*. While thus engaged, she cut down on the amount of literary criticism or reviewing which had been one of the bulwarks of her finances before she achieved fame. And it was during this period of intensive creative activity that she came upon a "discovery" as she terms it in the *Diary*. In the entry for August 30, 1923, she casually inserted this comment: "I have no time to describe my plans. I should say a good deal about *The Hours* and my discovery: how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters: I think that

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[19] Probably Fuller had in mind the famous paragraphs in James's *Hawthorne* (New York, 1879) remarking the "thinness" of "the crude and simple society" of America, as material for a novelist, in contrast to "the denser, richer, warmer European spectacle," (pp. 41-43).

gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect and each comes to daylight at the present moment" (*Diary,* p. 59).

Later in the same year she clarified this entry slightly as she discussed her work on "the mad scene in Regent's Park." It is interesting to note that she here credits her real beginning of *Mrs. Dalloway* from August, 1923, though she had worked on it for more than a year previously. And then: "It took me a year's groping to discover what I call my tunnelling process, by which I tell the past by installments, as I have need of it. This is my prime discovery so far; and the fact that I've been so long finding it proves, I think, how false Percy Lubbock's doctrine is—that you can do this sort of thing consciously" (*Diary,* p. 60).

Her words, "my prime discovery so far," suggest that the metaphorical term, "my tunnelling process," was intended to suggest a style that transcended earlier techniques of fiction—especially her own methods in *The Voyage Out, Night and Day, Jacob's Room,* and the short stories, but also perhaps the experiments of other novelists. Although she had felt moderate success with "Kew Gardens" and "The Mark on the Wall," and then had put her new-found technical experiments into fuller play in *Jacob's Room* (1922), she continued to search for newer ways of conveying her perceptions. Thus to see in the "caves" of past time and the "tunnelling process" merely an indication of the influence of Proust as Frank Baldanza does (*MFS,* February, 1956), is to miss the point of the uniqueness of her discovery.

Those who wish to distinguish among her several styles and who have found the generic term "stream of consciousness" a mere starting-point would do well to adopt the author's own metaphor, the tunnelling process, as a descriptive term for the style of *Mrs. Dalloway.* Although it is a shorthand term, the metaphor is carefully chosen. The term recurred to Mrs. Woolf at other times and explained much that seemed on the verge of being lost through the inadequacies of language—its general fuzziness—as two of her later utterances will illustrate.

In an introductory "Foreword" to a brief descriptive catalogue of "Recent Paintings by Vanessa Bell" (London, 1930), Mrs. Woolf attempts to explore the psychology of the painter. She finds herself baffled on all sides because she can learn nothing of the artist (who incidentally was her sister)—that is, nothing of the artist's state of mind as she produced the painting. Nothing of the artist's past can be deduced by the spectator. This amusing paradox puzzles the novelist: "Mrs. Bell is as silent as the grave. Her pictures do not betray her. Their reticence is inviolable." Yet Virginia Woolf must explore a step beyond; for their reticence itself presents an intellectual problem. "That is why," she continues, "they intrigue and draw us on; that is why, if it be true that they yield their full meaning only to those who can tunnel their way behind the canvas into masses and passages and relations and values of which we know nothing—if it be true that she is a painter's painter—still her pictures claim us and make us stop. They give us an emotion. They offer a puzzle."

The personal sensibility of those viewers who can "tunnel their way

behind the canvas" may be compared to the sensibility of those perceptive readers (or writers) who can tunnel their way behind the printed page. In literary terms, the metaphor might be further extended. The novelist uses a "tunnelling process" which is his technique. This very technique, involving "masses and passages and relations and values [of words, not paint] of which we [the readers] know nothing" may at first seem puzzling. But as Virginia Woolf hoped, the difficult technical labor will sometimes be rewarded: "The idea is that the caves shall connect and each comes to daylight at the present moment." The present moment in *Mrs. Dalloway,* then, is the moment of revelation. It is the moment when Clarissa identifies herself with Septimus Warren Smith and sees that his death is related to her life: "She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself." And the moment of revelation comes finally to Peter Walsh, filled with extraordinary excitement by the mere fact of seeing Clarissa at the last few moments of her party. By *being,* rather than by acting, Clarissa Dalloway gives Peter his moment of vision. This moment (the present moment, for that novel) had been arrived at only after all the caves, carefully tunnelled out behind the characters in the earlier part of the book, had interconnected. The past relationships, when fully revealed, illuminated the present for Peter Walsh and continue to illuminate that moment for readers today.

In addition to the statement in Mrs. Woolf's "Foreword," where the image of tunnelling behind the canvas of a painting is found, a still more explicit statement concerning the method of "digging out beautiful caves" occurs in an essay which she wrote in 1925 for *The New Republic.* This essay, "Pictures," as later reprinted in *The Moment and other Essays* (London, 1947), also, significantly, concerns itself with the attitudes and impressions to be gained from looking at modern paintings. Here, furthermore, she discusses her impressions specifically from the standpoint of the novelist's art. The visual image, she says, has for many modern writers (Proust, Hardy, Flaubert, Conrad) stimulated the other senses to creative activity. "The whole scene, however solidly and pictorially built up, is always dominated by an emotion which has nothing to do with the eye. But it is the eye that has fertilised their thought; it is the eye, in Proust above all, that has come to the help of the other senses, combined with them, and produced effects of extreme beauty, and of a subtlery hitherto unknown" (*The Moment,* p. 141).

After this suggestive statement, Mrs. Woolf develops the connected idea which resembles her earlier statement in the *Diary* about her "tunnelling process":

> Here is a scene in a theatre, for example. We have to understand the emotions of a young man for a lady in a box below. With an abundance of images and comparisons we are made to appreciate the forms, the colours, the very fibre and texture of the plush seats and the ladies' dresses and the dullness or glow, sparkle or colour, of the light. At the same time that our senses drink in all this our minds are tunnelling logically and intellectually into the obscurity of the young man's emotions, which as they ramify and modulate and stretch further and further, at last penetrate too far, peter out into such a shred of meaning that we can scarcely follow any more, were it not that suddenly in flash after flash, metaphor after metaphor, the eye lights up that cave of darkness and we are shown the hard tangible material shapes of bodiless thoughts hanging like bats in the primeval darkness where light has never visited them before. (p. 141)

The hints in her *Diary* have here been expanded and clarified still more than, perhaps, was possible for her in 1923. The tunnelling metaphor and the cave metaphor, so obviously inter-related in her understanding of how *Mrs. Dalloway* was being written, now have taken more definite shape. We find several important insights about her style combined in this passage. First, the visual impressions of the young man are given, in as subtle detail as possible, not through narration and description of a conventional sort, but rather through "an abundance of images and comparisons." The quality of the light, its dullness or glow, is important. When the tunnelling begins, it is a logical and intellectual process for getting at the young man's emotions.

But the logical and intellectual analysis after refining to a certain point will at last "penetrate too far, peter out into such a shred of meaning that we can scarcely follow . . . "; and here the poet's art takes over from the novelist's in order to penetrate the unconscious mind of the young man. Is not this process precisely what Mrs. Woolf has used to give us the insane consciousness of Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*? Shift the background scenery from the theatre box to Regent's Park, and the explanation fits her method perfectly. As Baldanza has suggested, and as her *Diary* reveals, "her own experience with nervous derangement" enabled her to tunnel behind the facade of objective appearance and to give a convincing picture of the insane consciousness. Unlike Wordsworth's "Idiot Boy," however, Septimus appears to us a far from ludicrous person. His thoughts have "hard tangible material shapes," which hang "like bats in the primeval darkness where light has never visited them before."

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A FURTHER NOTE ON THE FUNCTION OF THE FRAME IN "HEART OF DARKNESS"

Despite the frequency with which Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" has been discussed, the function of the frame in the novelette—the four men who sit on the deck of the *Nellie* and listen to Marlow's tale—has either been ignored or somewhat misconstrued. For example, Robert O. Evans in his "Conrad's Underworld" (*MFS,* May 1956), asserts that "actually Marlow [Conrad] has little space to devote to the directors. They serve as Marlow's audience, but they are not the audience the author is trying to convince. The *Heart of Darkness* is not their story. They are really incapable of understanding it, as Conrad suggests when he puts in the narrator's mouth the insipid remark, 'We knew we were fated . . . to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences.' "

Similarly, William Bysshe Stein, in his "The Lotus Posture and 'The Heart of Darkness' " (*MFS,* Winter, 1956-1957), recognizes the moral importance of the structure of the story and interestingly explicates the Buddha imagery in the frame, but nevertheless agrees with Mr. Evans that Marlow's