

First draft: Dancing Memories: Generativity, Embodied Cognition, and the Lullian Analogy in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*

From the beginning of *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf represents London through motion and rhythm. Clarissa perceives the city in movement: “galloping ponies, tapping of cricket bats; ... the whirling young men, and laughing girls in their transparent muslins who, even now, after dancing all night, were taking their absurd woolly dogs for a run”.¹ Motion integrates human, animal, and urban rhythms into a single perceptual field, providing a primary mode of apprehending activity and relational interaction. The narrative emphasises the simultaneous presence of multiple kinetic streams, suggesting that insight into relational and social dynamics can emerge through embodied perception rather than through discourse alone. Dance and movement are not merely decorative; they are generative. Language mediates these experiences, but it does not fully capture their immediacy or combinatory potential. The early London scene presents motion as a substrate for memory and reflection, a principle which Woolf extends in the novel's later sequences.

Clarissa's recollections of dance recur throughout the text, linking past experience with present reflection. The Bourton episodes, in particular, show her engagement with rhythmic and relational activity: she remembers youthful games, the energy of her friends' bodies, and the affective intensity of her own gestures. These memories are not merely nostalgic; they recombine in consciousness to produce emergent knowledge about intimacy, social interrelation, and the fragility of life. Woolf emphasises the combinatory character of such recollections, as details of movement, sound, and interaction intersect across temporal and spatial registers. The kinetic and relational qualities of past dance are preserved in memory, producing a form of generativity unavailable to static or purely linguistic modes of reflection.

At the novel's culmination, Clarissa's wish for dancing is frustrated: “But talk of dancing! The rooms were packed”.² The party is dominated by hierarchy and protocol: elderly guests such as Miss Parry are physically constrained — “She ascended staircases slowly with a stick. She was placed in a chair (Richard had seen to it)”.³ The parenthetical remark can be read satirically, signalling the social management of bodies by authority figures and contrasting stasis in the present moment with the continued mobility of memory (slightly more on this?). While Clarissa's recollections evoke whirling young men, galloping ponies, and dancing girls, the social environment imposes spatial and behavioral constraints that prevent physical enactment. Yet the memories themselves can remain generative. Recalling Bourton's dances, Sally's impulsive gestures, and her own embodied rhythm, Clarissa recombines these recollections in consciousness, producing insight into relationality, mortality, and social coordination (pg. no?). In this sense, memory functions as an epistemic and embodied mechanism, preserving the generative potential of movement even when actual dance is impossible.

The generative aspect of Clarissa's memories can be conceptualised through analogy with Ramon Lull's combinatory system in the *Ars Magna* (c. 1299–c. 1315).⁴ Lull proposed that a finite set of conceptual elements could be systematically rotated and intersected to generate

¹ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1925), p. 6, cited as *MD* from this point forward.

² Virginia Woolf, *MD*, p. 270.

³ Virginia Woolf, *MD*, p. 271.

⁴ Ramon Lull, *Ars Magna*, c. 1299–c. 1315; see Anthony Bonner, *The Art and Logic of Ramon Lull: A Universal System of Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 45–67.

new relations or propositions. His method employed circular diagrams or “wheels” in which combinations of attributes and concepts were recombined to produce insight beyond the initial elements. Heuristically, Woolf’s depiction of Clarissa’s consciousness can be read in similar terms. Her memories of dance — distinct gestures, relational movements, and rhythms — recombine spontaneously in her mind, generating emergent understanding of intimacy, vitality, and social interaction. Just as Lull’s wheels allow abstract principles to intersect in new configurations, Clarissa’s memories allow past embodied experience to produce knowledge about the present and its social dynamics. While the present discussion treats Lull’s method heuristically, further analysis might explore in greater depth the formal parallels between Woolf’s narrative structures and the logical operations of the *Ars Magna*, potentially illuminating additional dimensions of generativity in modernist consciousness.

Woolf’s attention to memory as generative is further illuminated by the contrast between elderly guest Miss Parry’s physical immobility and the continued activity of her consciousness. Though Miss Parry ascends staircases slowly with a stick (direct quote needed and embedded) and is seated in a chair, her recollections of India and botanical exploration demonstrate that embodied cognition and generative insight do not depend on current mobility.⁵ Similarly, the young people at Clarissa’s party “could not talk. And why should they? Shout, embrace, swing ... plunge and swim. But the enormous resources of the English language ... was not for them”⁵. Here, Woolf suggests that language is secondary to embodied experience; the generative potential of dance and movement is not fully translatable into discourse, yet it persists in memory. The interplay of past and present, motion and stasis, shows how generativity arises from recollection even in environments dominated by social hierarchy and spatial constraint (too much on Mrs Parry - delete?)

Woolf’s focus on movement, memory, and consciousness reflects broader modernist concerns with temporality, subjectivity, and embodiment. By representing recollection as a combinatorial, dynamic system, Woolf demonstrates that memories of embodied action can produce knowledge independently of immediate physical activity. The heuristic analogy (need to mention heuristic again?) with Lull underscores the systematic, intersecting potential of memory in structuring insight, and the crowded, hierarchical space of the party highlights how generative recollection can persist even when physical movement is constrained. The Lullian comparison also gestures toward the possibility of further scholarly exploration, suggesting that more detailed study of the formal correspondences between Woolf’s narrative and combinatorial logic could yield new perspectives on modernist conceptions of consciousness, movement, and social relations (need to mention this point in the conclusion again (just mention once, here, at the end of the article?)).

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⁵ Virginia Woolf, *MD*, p. 271.