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Timed: 2 hours.

Spaces and boundaries in *Mrs Dalloway*

Mrs Dalloway begins as, her doors having been 'taken off their hinges, Clarissa 'bursts open the French windows' to 'plunge' back into her countryside memories of Bourton, and dive out of her house onto the bustling London streets. The excitement with which Clarissa 'bursts' out is indicative of a general inclination for expansion, movement and spatial freedom in Woolf's novels, and of the exuberance of her text itself – she claimed in her essay *Character in Fiction* that she attempted to capture 'the spirit we live by, life itself'. The rhythms of *Mrs Dalloway*, like many of Woolf's works, can be understood in the bilateral terms of movement and constraint. In *Character in Fiction* she describes her ideal character as one of 'unlimited capacity'; the sense of the limitless is ever present in *Mrs Dalloway*, though always working in counterpoint to its narrative and linguistic boundaries and constraints.

As Clarissa ascends 'Like a nun' up to her attic room, she muses that 'narrower and narrower would her bed be' – 'the sheets stretched tight'. Sleeping separately from her husband, the lack of sexual intimacy between the Dalloways pervades the space with a sense of deathly, sterile suffocation ('stretched tight'), Clarissa also vaguely referencing some sexual failure on her part in 'Constantinople' which is not elaborated upon. Clarissa's sexual incapacitation in her marriage with Richard Dalloway is evoked in terms of constraint – both in this suggested psychological repression, and in the claustrophobic attic space. The entrapment becomes a specifically female problem when Clarissa explains that Richard 'insisted' that she sleep separately from him to recover 'undisturbed' after an illness. Victoria Rosner draws from this passage a key allusion to the Victorian 'rest cure': prescribed bed rest to women who were said to be 'hysterical' in the 19th and early 20th century, often leading only to exacerbations of the psychosis. Indeed, Richard also insists that Clarissa take 'An hours complete rest after luncheon'. Woolf having suffered from this practise herself numerous times during episodes of depression here gestures to the treatment as a literal and figurative depiction of a specifically female incarceration, at the hands of men – we are reminded of Rachel's doctor Rodriguez in *The Voyage Out*, who completely dismisses the reality of her 'anxiety'. The earliest and clearest elucidation of the rest cure practise in fiction is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1890s short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, in which the protagonist Jane is driven to madness after being forced into the rest cure by her husband, also in an attic room. In both *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *Mrs Dalloway*, though more subtly in the latter, we see the female protagonists accept the treatments with a tragic naivety, having full faith in their husband's orders – Richard 'insistences'.

Clarissa's occasional elaborations of her marital oppression come to the fore once again in terms of domestic spatial entrapment. Considering the life she could have had with Peter Walsh she muses, 'It was all over… The sheet was stretched and the bed narrow', returning to the previous attic imagery, and continues 'The door had shut'. The shutting of doors and being trapped inside a domestic house figuratively evokes the dissolution of possibilities for a woman after marriage. Woolf who desired to write about the 'spirit of life' here presents it 'shut' off inside the married home, against which fleeting jaunts around nearby London streets become 'a lark!... a plunge!' We are reminded of Woolf's earliest short story Phyllis and Rosamund, in which two sisters are doomed forever to be 'daughters at home', 'craving room and freedom' – again 'freedom' becomes synonymous with a desire for more literal 'room' outside the 'home'.

Clarissa's constraint in her marriage with Richard contrasts her previous relations with Sally Seaton in Bourton; Sally who craved the 'outside', whose kiss Clarissa received as the most 'exquisite moment' of her life. In this contrast the liberating nature of homosexual relationships shines light on the crucially patriarchal nature of Clarissa's present feelings of entrapment – for she also shared a house with Sally, though describes her relish of this homosocial cohabitation. She remembers shouting in fervour, 'She is beneath this roof!', and nostalgically reminisces upon 'talking…hour after hour' with Sally 'in her bedroom at the top of the house' – it is a positive, intellectually stimulating attic experience. The rest cure, indicative of Clarissa's heterosexual marriage, usually prescribed extremely restricted intellectual activity. Indeed Clarissa claims no longer to read, despite having constantly read Plato and Shelley with Sally in the past. Clarissa's musings about whether she 'loved' Sally, and her lamentations upon her potential life with Peter represent what could have been had she not followed the matrimonial path laid out for her – upon initially meeting Richard her peers immediately expected that they 'must' marry. In *Mrs Dalloway* Woolf presents both Clarissa and Sally (who goes on to have five 'enormous boys' at Eton) as having been sucked thoroughly into the framework of the patriarchal fabric around them – something which could have been mitigated had they dare indulged more fully in the unconventional, 'exquisite' relations they previously shared, a phenomenon which Clarissa does not even have the vocabulary to describe. Clarissa can only explain her desire for women as 'yielding' to an 'expansion' – something 'swollen', a desire which 'split its skin and gushed and poured'. Thus a sense of explosive limitlessness can be granted by homosexual desire and female intimacy – that sense of 'unlimited capacity' which Woolf sought to evoke in her writing. In contrast, she feels an emotional distance from Richard which she ironically calls 'independence'. One may intimate in the suggestions of frigidity and the curiosity in lesbian desire a parallel to Woolf's own sexless (though loving) marriage, and her relationship with Vita Sackville-West.

The rest cure, as well as evoking the constraints of conventional heterosexual matrimony, also depicts through Septimus the consequences of corrupt societal institutions in general- specifically the medical profession. Sir William Bradshaw, a doctor whom Clarissa describes as 'obscurely evil' – prescribes for Septimus 'rest, rest, rest; a long rest in bed', 'rest in solitude; silence and rest; rest without friends, without books', locked away in one of Bradshaw's own 'country home's. The repetition of 'rest' throughout these passages, with Bradshaw's words recounted through the interior discourse of Septimus and Razia, indicate in its oppressive rhythms the aggressive enforcement of this unpleasant method upon the patient. The repeated reworkings of the word 'rest' in asyndetonic clauses to emphasise different elements of the treatment – 'solitude', 'silence', lack of 'books' – ironises the concept of its calming effects by infecting the description with a feverish frustration. Leonard Woolf described its effect on Woolf, stating how 'eating and resting made her worse'. The specifically constraining elements of the rest cure are even invoked in the social attitudes of the novel – specifically Rezia's own embarrassment of her husband's condition (now typically understood to be shell shock or PTSD). She describes her shame when Septimus talks to himself 'out of doors' – declaring that to be 'concealed' he must be taken 'away' to 'some park'. Concerns for constraint in the novel thus also centre on social pressures when one does not have the capacity to be acceptably social; the necessity to shut away abnormal people who just like woman, may not express themselves freely in public.

Septimus devolves, predictably, further into his psychosis. He ultimately expresses an almost euphoric indulgence in his condition – describing an 'isolation… of sublimity' which is reminiscent of Jane in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, who in a full embrace of madness believes she has become part of the attic's wallpaper. Septimus' suicide – 'throwing himself out' of the window – is perhaps the novel's ultimate self-expulsion from constraints; he in a sense 'bursts out' just as Clarissa herself does at the beginning of the novel. Bradshaw, even after Septimus' death, keeps Rezia from her husband – ordering 'Let her sleep', and thus relentlessly continuing the enforcement of the rest cure despite the death of his original patient. Rezia must thus suffer her own entrapment – she previously claims she is 'nothing' without him. Perhaps in consideration of this, and of Mrs Dalloway lamentations that whilst he has 'flung' his life away, 'she would have to go back; the rooms were still crowded', Woolf suggests that even Septimus unlike the women wields some liberating masculine power in his ability to choose his own fate. He is warned by the doctors that staying alive is his 'duty to [his] wife' – yet defies this duty in a way which the women cannot defy theirs. The image of domestic constraint reoccurs as Clarissa knows she is obligated ('would have to') 'go back' to the 'rooms'.

Woolf's own struggles against oppressive patriarchal and psychological forces were described in terms of movement and constraint. Biographer Hermione Lee notes Woof's specific descriptions of her anxious episodes as 'uncontrollable fits of the fidgets' when she lived under her father's rule in their Kensington house. Woolf's mental traumas are thus expressed as a frustrated need for movement – 'fidgeting' – potentially symptomatic of manic depression and what Leonard Woolf described as Woolf's 'manic euphoria'. It is this sense of fervour which comes alive in her novels, fighting against suppression by other forces. Lee describes how the 'fidgets' euphemism indicates Woolf's keeping 'to a family language for depression and stress'. Like in Mrs Dalloway's doctors and protagonists, there is a sense of lacking in the correct vocabulary to describe psychological phenomena; linguistic 'bounds' as well as physical 'bounds' must also be contended with.

In a BBC broadcast, Woolf declared that words 'live in the mind'… 'are full of echoes… memories… associations'. *Mrs Dalloway* is an example of Woolf's attempt at formal experimentation in order to, in her words, 'allow words their liberty'. The narrative is filled with long and involved sentences including endless numbers of short successive clauses, as in this typical string of present participles on the first page: 'rising, falling; standing and looking'. Woolf's characteristic free indirect discourse sees the narrative perspective shift without warning between numerous characters in the novel. Shared experiences like the motorcar and the airplane sighting bring the characters together, transcending the boundaries of gender and individuality. Perspectival changes are indicated stylistically rather than explicitly; interruptions of flow and exclamations ('Incredible!') which pattern Clarissa's interior consciousness contrast with Septimus' static interior discourse: 'Change the world. No one kills from hatred. Make it known'. The action suggested by Septimus' imperatives in this sequence is undermined by the static stagnancy of the nonsequiturs, eluding any clear meaning. Septimus himself 'stammer[s]' repeatedly in trying to express himself, just as how despite his determination Richard is unable to say 'I love you' to his wife. The failure of language experienced by both the characters and the narrative itself is indicative of Woolf's awareness and embracing of the unreliability of words and the linguistic boundary which this asserts – Beer comments upon how Woolf's work leaves one wondering of what 'gets left out'. It is the necessary elusiveness of the fictional character, Woolf says in *Character in Fiction*, which allows for the reader to complete the impression. The text's tissue of 'echoes… memories… [and] associations' becomes complete upon its reading, after being processed in the reader's 'mind'. Julia Briggs uses Woolf's own phrasing to describe how she wished her readers to corroborate the 'signs supplied by the text in order to 'make a whole''.

Woolf is understood to be a preeminent contester of conventions in her time – declaring this explicitly as her creative quest in her essay 'Modern Fiction'. However, her ability to do so relied on a fundamental preoccupation on these boundaries themselves. Moving out of her own domestic space was arguably the most influential factor in Woolf's literary career – Maria DiBattista describes how unlike 'the sedate Victorian confines' of Hyde Park Gate, Bloomsbury represented a more 'irregular, informal, experimental… mode of thinking… in a word, modern'. Woolf's writing style and her desired experience of life was anything but 'sedate', her passion for creation thus incompatible with enforced constrains and 'rest cures'. In the novel's bustling London – which Woolf describes as 'enchanting' in her diaries when she is writing *Mrs Dalloway* – we first find a sense of excitement in terms of spatial exploration. This excitement is developed as Woolf challenges the physical boundaries of the domestic space for women – we are reminded of Woolf's wonder at what women could achieve 'if we escape a little from the common sitting room' in *A Room of One's Own*. More crucially, however, Woolf produces in the text a vibrant psychological space which through 'echoes' and endlessly shifting perspectives also figuratively breaks what Beer refers to as 'the bounds of fiction'. Woolf leaves *Mrs Dalloway* structurally unbound by chapters, characteristic of a generic boundlessness typical of her work; she called *The Waves* a 'play-poem', and includes an entire play and excerpts of poetry within her final novel *Between the Acts*. In *Character in Fiction* Woolf appeals to contemporary writers to join her in the 'smashing and crashing' of 19th century conventions. This almost physical engagement in the breaking of boundaries is fundamental to our understanding of Woolf as a challenger of the Victorian restrains which latently haunted not only the literature of her time but also the society in which she lived. The text, like the window through which Clarissa and Septimus both 'burst', provides a new perspective into life and writing, 'smashing and crashing' the 'bounds of fiction' which preceded it.