MRS DALLOWAY

14 May 1925

48. Richard Hughes, 'A Day in London Life', *Saturday Review of Literature* (New York)

16 May 1925, 755

Richard Hughes (b. 1900). British novelist.

Hughes makes an interesting comparison with Cézanne (see Introduction, p. 18).

To the poet the visible world exists: it shines with an intense brilliance, not only to the eye but to the touch, ear, smell, inward vision. (To the man-of-the-world, the visible world is unreal: his reality is a spiritual one: the only things which exist for him are his desires, and—in a lesser degree—his beliefs.) In Mrs Woolf's new novel, *Mrs Dalloway*, the visible world exists with a brilliance, a luminous clarity. In particular, it is London: to the reader, London is made, for the first time (this will probably surprise him) to exist. It emerges, shining like crystal, out of the fog in which all the merely material universe is ordinarily enveloped in his mind: it emerges, and stays. The present writer has 'known' London all his life: but Mrs Woolf's evocation of it is of a very different quality from his own memories: a quality which answers the farmer's question, when he was puzzled as to why folk should pay five hundred guineas for a painting of his farm, when they could have the house itself for two hundred. To Mrs Woolf London exists, and to Mrs Woolf's readers anywhere and at any time London will exist with a reality it can never have for those who merely live there.

Majumdar, Robin (Editor); McLauren, Aden (Editor). Virginia Woolf.
London, GBR: Routledge, 1997. p 158.
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Vividness alone, of course, is not art: it is only the material of art. But Mrs Woolf has, I think, a finer sense of form than any but the oldest living English novelist. As well as the power of brilliant evocation she has that creative faculty of form which differs from what is ordinarily called construction in the same way that life differs from mechanism: the same quality as Cézanne. In the case of the painter, of course, this 'form' is purely visual; the synthesis–relation–rhythm–whatever you call it, is created on this side of the eye; while in the case of the poet the pattern is a mental one, created behind the eye of the reader, composed directly of mental processes, ideas, sensory evocation–not of external agents (not of the words used, I mean). So, in the case of Mrs Woolf, and of the present novel, it is not by its vividness that her writing ultimately stays in the mind, but by the coherent and processional form which is composed of, and transcends, that vividness.

Philosophy as much as smell of violets is grist to the artist's mill: in actual practice it is generally more so. Here, Mrs Woolf touches all the time the verge of the problem of reality: not directly, like Pirandello, but by implication. (She is not so prone to emphasis as Pirandello.) In contrast to the solidity of her visible world there rises throughout the book in a delicate crescendo *fear*. The most notable feature of contemporary thought is the wide recognition by the human mind of its own limitation; i.e., that it is itself not a microcosm (as men used to think) but the macrocosm: that it cannot 'find out' anything about the universe because the terms both of question and answer are terms purely relative to itself: that even the key-words, *being* and *not-being*, bear no relation to anything except the mind which formulates them. (This is at least as old as Tao Tse, but until now has seldom been recognised by ordinary man.) In short, that logical and associative thinking do not differ in ultimate value–or even perhaps in kind. So, in this book each of the very different characters–Clarissa Dalloway herself, the slightly more speculative Peter, the Blakeian 'lunatic', Septimus Warren Smith, each with their own more or less formulated hypothesis of the meaning of life–together are an unanswerable illustration of that bottomlessness on which all spiritual values are based. This is what I mean by fear.

To come to the matter of chronicle, this novel is an account of a single day in London life; its sole principal event is the return from India of Mrs Dalloway's rejected suitor; the other characters are in many cases not even acquainted with the principals–sometimes simply

Majumdar, Robin (Editor); McLauren, Aden (Editor). Virginia Woolf.
London, GBR: Routledge, 1997. p 159.
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people they pass in the street, or even people who merely see the same aeroplane in the sky. Towards the end, one of these strangers flings himself from a window; and Mrs Dalloway, after spending most of the morning wandering about Bond Street, gives a party in the evening. But then, Chronicle is an ass; this is an unusually coherent, lucid, and enthralling book, whatever he may suggest to the contrary.

49. Unsigned review, 'A Novelist's Experiment', *Times Literary Supplement*

21 May 1925

All Mrs Woolf's fiction shows such an instinct for experiment that we may have to show cause why this new book should be called peculiarly experimental. *Jacob's Room*, too, was an adventure. But there is one obvious difference between that novel and *Mrs Dalloway*. While the other, however innovating in its method, observed the usual time-span of a novel, this one describes the passage of a single day. The idea, though new enough to be called an experiment, may not be unique in modern fiction. There was a precedent in *Ulysses*. But Mrs Woolf's vision escapes disaster and produces something of her own. People and events here have a peculiar, almost ethereal transparency, as though bathed in a medium where one thing permeates another. Undoubtedly our world is less solid than it was, and our novels may have to shake themselves a little free of matter. Here, Mrs Woolf seems to say, is the stream of life, but reflected always in a mental vision.

Life itself, with the first cool radiance of a June morning in London, is wafted to Clarissa Dalloway as she goes out to buy flowers for her party in the evening—the same Clarissa who made a brief irruption into *The Voyage Out*, so exquisite there and brightly, almost excessively, interested; and now, at fifty-one, a little wiser, more pensive, but adoring life. An hour or two later, and Peter Walsh, whimsically sympathetic,

Majumdar, Robin (Editor); McLauren, Aden (Editor). Virginia Woolf.
London, GBR: Routledge, 1997. p 160.
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who had been Clarissa's suitor years ago and has just returned from India, is falling asleep on a bench in Regent's Park to dream of memories, and will awake to think them out. Near him is a young couple who seem to be having a grim quarrel; but the man is a war victim who has gone out of his mind, and we shall read the last page of his tragedy before dusk falls. We shall be also at luncheon with Lady Bruton, at tea in the Army and Navy Stores, where Miss Kilman is making her last tense effort to snatch Clarissa's lovely daughter from her mother. But how often these lives and doings seem to distil themselves in something as immaterial as the passing of sunlight or the sound of a clock striking the hour. Distances gleam in the liquid clearness of that drop or bubble. For Mrs Woolf's sensitiveness can retain those wayward flashes as well as the whole chain of mixed images and feelings that unwinds from some tiny coil of memory. If in *Jacob's Room* she suggested the simultaneousness of life, here she paints not only this but its stream-like continuity.

Outwardly, however, the book is a cross-section of life. It does not simplify and concentrate as a play would do, nor does it thread everything on a single mind's experience. On the contrary, Mrs Woolf expands her view with the fullest freedom of a novelist, although she has the briefest limit as regards time; and the fusion of these opposing tendencies into one is a thrilling and hazardous enterprise. Only through sheer vision can it have form and life; and here the finely imaginative substance into which Mrs Woolf has woven it all is certainly reassuring. Moreover, while delineating processes she does not efface persons; on them all the threads depend, and theirs are the values. Theirs too, that final riddle of separateness, of otherness in the midst of the continuous, thinks Clarissa, watching an old lady in the house opposite:

> The supreme mystery which Kilman might say she had solved, or Peter might say he had solved, but Clarissa didn't believe either of them had the ghost of an idea of solving, was simply this: here was one room; there another. Did religion solve that, or love?

Watching Mrs Woolf's experiment, certainly one of the hardest and very subtly planned, one reckons up its cost. To get the whole value of the present you must enhance it, perhaps, with the past. And with her two chief figures, Clarissa and Peter, meeting after a long severance, Mrs Woolf has a full scope for the use of memories. They are amusing and they illuminate; yet either because of the rest of the design, or one's sense of the probable, or both, one fancies that sometimes these

remembrances stretch almost too far. And the tragedy of poor Septimus, the war victim, although poignant in contrast, makes a block in the tideway now and then.

Although there is a surprising characterization in the process, characters must necessarily be shown with the tantalising fluidness of life itself Lesser figures like Richard Dalloway or Lady Bruton or Miss Kilman, that grimly pathetic vampire, do well enough in outline; but as soon as we are shown more of a character, like Clarissa's or Peter's, we want more still, craving a further dimension that we cannot get. Also the cinema-like speed of the picture robs us of a great deal of the delight in Mrs Woolf's style. It has to be a little clipped, a little breathless; and the reading of her book is not so easy as it seems. Her wit is irresistible when it can escape a little way, as in the vision of those rival goddesses, Proportion and Conversion. In the end no one will complain of her for using all the freedom that she can. All her technical suppleness is needed to cope with the new form. It remains experimental in so far as we are uncertain what more can be done with it, and whether it can give the author's rare gifts full play. But something real has been achieved; for, having the courage of her theme and setting free her vision, Mrs Woolf steeps it in an emotion and irony and delicate imagination which enhance the consciousness and the zest of living.

50. Gerald Bullett, from a review, *Saturday Review*

30 May 1925, 558

Gerald Bullett (1893–1958), English poet and novelist, reviewed Edith Wharton's *The Mother Recompense* in the same article.

These two novels, each good in its own way, offer an interesting study in contrast. Mrs Woolf is a brilliant experimentalist, while Mrs Wharton, having emerged from her Henry James period, is now content to practise the craft of fiction without attempting to enlarge its technical scope.

Mrs Dalloway resembles Jacob's Room in essentials, its chief obvious difference from that remarkable book being that it records the life of a single day.

[Plot summary omitted]

The searchlight of Mrs Woolf's suggestive art passes zigzag over the minds of men and women, illuminating those dark interiors with the light of an extraordinarily subtle vision. It rests, this penetrating ray, longest upon Peter Walsh himself, who is just returned from long exile in India.

Peter calls on Clarissa in the morning; he attends her party at night. With this second meeting the book closes. In the interval we have watched minutely the quivering activity of his cerebrum. And not his alone, but Clarissa's and Septimus Smith's and Miss Kilman's and Elizabeth's, to name but a few others. It is to be noted that we watch these intimate experiences rather than share them, that the emotions which we know, by inference, must accompany this cerebral activity do not always communicate themselves to us; we remain a little more than usually detached. We are moved, when we are moved at all, less by the particular emotions of these people than by the poetry of thought and

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phrase (seldom of rhythm), and by that curious sensation which is the book's continuous effect: the sensation of seeing and feeling the very stream of life, the undeviating tide of time, flowing luminously by, with all the material phenomena, streets and stars, bicycles and human bodies, floating like straws upon its surface. Whether to communicate this sense of the incessant flux was part of Mrs Woolf 's intention I cannot undertake to say: I can only record my own reaction to her book. To add that there are very definite limitations to the scope of this curious technique is hardly necessary, for there is no form of writing to which the same remark would not in some degree apply. Highly impressionistic work such as this lacks external drama, for its intellectual and technical bias provides that the most startling action—a young man's throwing himself out of the window, for example—shall seem trivial compared with the bright ferment of consciousness. Mrs Woolf's is an inversion of the ordinary method of narration, the method of which Mrs Wharton offers us a very respectable example. The fact that the life of the mind is more significant than the movement of the body is reflected in the very texture of the narrative, action being treated as a mere parenthesis:

[Quotes pp. 12–13 'How much she wanted' to 'could have looked even differently!']

And even when the action is not apparently subordinate it is actually so. One part of this method's general effect on the reader is to make him feel that he is observing, from a great height, a world of disembodied spirits. It is not so much that the picture lacks definition as that it lacks stability; its outlines are incessantly flowing into new, bright patterns. Nothing for a moment stands still; the flying landscape daubs across our vision a myriad bright streaks of changing colour; shapes are perpetually disintegrating and resolving into new shapes. To those who desire a static universe, in which they can examine things at their leisure, this speed, this insubstantiality, this exhilarating deluge of impressions, will be perhaps unpleasing.

51. P.C.Kennedy, from a review, *New Statesman*

6 June 1925, 229

Mrs Dalloway is in many ways beautiful; but I think it sets out to be, and continues until the end to pretend to be, what it is not. I think it quite sincerely claims to employ a new method, and I think it employs an old one. Personally, I see no reason for trying to escape the old one, which I believe will still answer all purposes of subtlety and excitement; but, if one sets out to escape, one should succeed in escaping. People will tell you, with a face of praise, that the whole action of *Mrs Dalloway* passes in one day. But it doesn't pass in one day. In order to create that impression, Mrs Woolf makes her characters move about London, and, when two of them come into purely fortuitous and external contact, she gives you the history of each backwards. She might just as well–better–have given it forwards. The novelty in not a novelty. It is a device that is used constantly, especially on the 'pictures', where the hero closes his eyes, a blur crawls across the screen, and the heroine is seen in short skirts and ringlets, as he knew her in the old home-village before she was betrayed. Seven years elapse between Parts I and II; and the hero is still dreaming; but no one would say that the action of the film passes in one day. Mrs Woolf has really imposed on several quite different stories a purely artificial unity. But, it may be said, the threads are knit at the close. They are indeed–the more's the pity. Peter Walsh, home from India, has all his life loved Clarissa, who has married Richard Dalloway and borne a daughter, Elizabeth. Clarissa goes for a walk, and sees a motor-car containing a Personage. A crowd gathers outside Buckingham Palace; it sees an aeroplane writing on the sky; the same portent is seen by Lucrezia Warren Smith, sitting with her husband in Regent's Park. First connection. A slender one, you will admit; those smoky tendrils might bind anything to anything; an eye sufficiently remote could see everything at once. Peter calls upon Clarissa. They are still, after all these years, uncomfortable. They are middle-aged, reminiscent, critical, resentful; they part. Peter goes for a

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walk; he is still reminiscent; he hears an old woman singing opposite Regent's Park Tube Station; the same old woman is heard by the Warren Smiths; connection number two. Smith is a 'shell-shocked' soldier; he has moments of vision, of certainty, of the kind that is called illusion; he goes to a specialist; he kills himself; the specialist attends Clarissa Dalloway's party in the evening and talks about the death. Connection number three! One sees the significance of it. Clarissa's apprehension of the tragedy is to interpret Clarissa's character:

> Somehow it was her disaster—her disgrace. It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced to stand here in her evening dress. She had schemed; she had pilfered. She was never wholly admirable.

But any tragedy would have served for that contrast; the artificial link is purely redundant, purely improbable, purely pointless. It is the sort of coincidence which mars the conventional novel; but it is less distracting there, because there it at any rate serves a purpose.

Mrs Woolf, too, has—or so it seems to me—a purpose: and a genuinely splendid one. The whole trouble is the incongruity between the apparent purpose and the distracting method. I take it (and, though there is always a certain impertinence in attempting to say, or even to see, what anybody else means, the critic cannot avoid it)—I take it that Mrs Woolf means to show us the kaleidoscope of life shaken into a momentary plan; the vagueness, the casualness, the chaos, suffering the compulsion which gives orders and makes order. And that, I repeat, is splendid. All art aims, consciously or unconsciously, at that. But all the novelty of Mrs Woolf's technique simply distracts from it. And if, as I suspect, she has the subsidiary but still vital purpose of stressing the incoherence, of catching the bubble, the spark, the half-dream, the inexplicable memory, the doubt, the snare, the joke, the dread, the come-and-go of the moment on the wing—then again the needless links, the coincidences, distract.

Mrs Woolf has extraordinary gifts; the only doubt is whether they are the specific gifts of the novelists. She excels in description of mood or sudden scene; but the mood might always be anybody's; anybody might occupy the scene. In all this brilliant novel (and the brilliance is at times quite dazzling) there are no people. It is like that ghostly world of Mr Bertrand Russell's philosophy, in which there are lots of sensations but no one to have them. If Mrs Woolf had created a single character, I cannot conceive that she would have *wanted* to deviate from

the ordinary manner of the novelist; who, after all, could want a better or a bigger job than to tell us about a real person, about what happened to him or her? But Mrs Woolf's masterly and masterful intellect is critical (I don't use the word in opposition to 'creative'—there is, of course, creation in criticism, in page after page of Mrs Woolf's delicately hurrying prose). She understands a mood; she analyses it; she presents it; she catches its finer implications; but she never moves me with it, because she never makes me feel that the person credited with it is other than an object of the keenest and most skilful study. She uses the words 'terror', 'ecstasy', 'excitement', with perfect justice; but it isn't justice they want. I hope I have made it clear that my admiration for what Mrs Woolf has achieved outweighs my dislike of the fetters she has put on her achievement. Call *Mrs Dalloway* an intellectual triumph, and I agree. I could quote scores of fine and profound things from it—here is a typical one: 'Conversion, fastidious Goddess, loves blood better than brick, and feasts most subtly on the human will.' But I want to weep with Peter Walsh and leap to death with poor Septimus Warren Smith; and my trouble is that I can't.

52. Lytton Strachey, 'You have not yet mastered your method'

18 June 1925

Virginia Woolf was very sensitive to criticism, but this extract indicates that she was receptive when it came from a source which she respected. Her comments at the end give us a glimpse of her own self-criticism in the course of composing the novel.

Strachey's comments were recorded by Virginia Woolf in *A Writer's Diary*, pp. 78–9.

No, Lytton does not like *Mrs Dalloway*, and, what is odd, I like him all the better for saying so, and don't much mind. What he says is that there is a discordancy between the ornament (extremely beautiful) and what happens (rather ordinary—or unimportant). This is caused, he thinks, by some discrepancy in Clarissa herself: he thinks she is disagreeable and limited, but that I alternately laugh at her and cover her, very remarkably, with myself. So that I think as a whole, the book does not ring solid; yet, he says, it is a whole; and he says sometimes the writing is of extreme beauty. What can one call it but genius? he said! Coming when, one never can tell. Fuller of genius, he said, than anything I had done. Perhaps, he said, you have not yet mastered your method. You should take something wilder and more fantastic, a framework that admits of anything, like *Tristram Shandy*. But then I should lose touch with emotions, I said. Yes, he agreed, there must be reality for you to start from. Heaven knows how you're to do it. But he thought me at the beginning, not at the end. And he said the *C.R.* was divine, a classic, *Mrs D.* being, I fear, a flawed stone. This is very personal, he said, and old fashioned perhaps; yet I think there is some truth in it, for I remember the night at Rodmell when I decided to give it up, because I found Clarissa in some way tinselly. Then I invented her memories. But I think some distaste for her persisted. Yet, again,

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that was true to my feeling for Kitty and one must dislike people in art without its mattering, unless indeed it is true that certain characters detract from the importance of what happens to them. None of this hurts me, or depresses me. It's odd that when Clive and others (several of them) say it is a masterpiece, I am not much exalted; when Lytton picks holes, I get back into my working fighting mood, which is natural to me. I don't see myself a success. I like the sense of effort better. The sales collapsed completely for three days; now a little dribble begins again. I shall be more than pleased if we sell 1500. It's now 1250.

53. J.F.Holms, review, *Calendar of Modern Letters*

July 1925, 404–5

The *Calendar* published some excellent criticism during its short life (1925–7). It had a 'conviction about literature as a field worthy of close exegetical study and yet open to larger issues about its social background and its moral content'. The *Calendar* had praised *The Common Reader* (No. 46) but this review was more critical.

Mrs Woolf has culture and intelligence; she writes from a strong and genuine productive impulse; her sensibility, when she does not force it, is fresh, individual and admirable in its kind; for its expression she has developed a fastidious and accomplished technique; and finally, in *Mrs Dalloway* it is clear that what she intended to do, she has done, in the sense in which this statement holds truth. These are uncommon merits, they have gained Mrs Woolf the reputation of what is called a distinguished writer, and their possession entitles her to criticism on her own standards.

VIRGINIA WOOLF

Mrs Dalloway is considerably the best book she has written; in it her gifts achieve their full effect, and her capacity to say what she wants to is almost complete. How then, one asks, as the tide rises through her pages, can such talent co-exist with a sentimentality that would be remarkable in a stockbroker, and inconceivable among educated people? Sentimentality is an interesting term, more liable to misconstruction than most; and it is perhaps clearer to say of this novel that it is impossible to believe that if its author were asked directly whether the thoughts that pass during an hour through the head of any man of fifty bear any resemblance whatever to the soliloquies of Peter Walsh and other characters that fill her pages, her answer could differ from our own. This, however, is what we have to believe, with the result that in spite of, or on account of Mrs Woolf's talent, her writing conveys an effect of automatism that is curious, and aesthetically corrupt. *Mrs Dalloway* has the design, apparent intensity, and immediate aspect of a work of art, and it is an interesting problem of aesthetic psychology to explain so self-subsistent a mirage entirely unconnected with reality. This is not to say that falsity is inherent throughout Mrs Woolf's writing. Her natural and unvitiated talent springs immediately from sensation, and her sensibility of this kind is rare and valuable. When she resists the virtuoso's temptation to expanded bravura pieces, her transcriptions of immediate sensation have the freshness, delicacy and vitality of direct perception, a quality that is not relative, and is sufficient in itself to distinguish her work from intelligent novel-writing. But here Mrs Woolf s talent stops, in more senses than one. For this quality of direct sensational perception is precisely that of a child's, undisturbed by thought, feeling and other functions to be acquired in the course of its development as a social organism. And Mrs Woolf is by no means entirely a child; she is thoroughly involved in human relationships, which form moreover her subject matter as a novelist. But her essential reactions to them are a child's automatic reactions, who believes what he reads in a book, who believes life is what he is told it is, that some people are good and others bad—though bad ones are not to be found among persons he knows—who believes, in short, in the absoluteness of his first social impressions as a group member. Together with this more essential Mrs Woolf exists an intelligent, experienced and sensitive adult, whose business it is to justify her to the world. But these are unhallowed partnerships whose offspring, as I have said, are sentimentality and aesthetic corruption. When she leaves immediate impressions of experience, Mrs Woolf's treatment of

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character and human relations is almost ludicrously devoid of psychological and aesthetic truth; as soon as she touches them she is as false as her rendering of impressions is true. The motives, thoughts and emotions she attributes to her characters have precisely as much and as little relation to the truth of life as the motives, thoughts and emotions postulated of the ideal person who forms its public by the daily paper. There are one or two exceptions to this, in particular the character of Septimus Warren Smith, where Mrs Woolf rather shakily approaches imaginative truths; but most of the book, despite its pure and brilliant impressionism, is sentimental in conception and texture, and is accordingly aesthetically worthless. Such judgements, as is evident in this review, cannot be expressed in terms of purely literary criticism, which, indeed, is an instrument not applicable to the valuation of contemporary literature, as should be clear from experience and history.

54. E.M.Forster, a survey of Virginia Woolf's work

1926

From 'The Novels of Virginia Woolf, *New Criterion*, April 1926, 277–86.

It is profoundly characteristic of the art of Virginia Woolf that when I decided to write about it and had planned a suitable opening paragraph, my fountain pen should disappear. Tiresome creature! It slipped through a pocket into a seam. I could pinch it, chivy it about, make holes in the coat lining, but a layer of tailor's stuffing prevented recovery. So near, and yet so far! Which is what one feels about her art. The pen is extricated in time, but during the struggle the opening

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