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Life, Death, This Moment of June

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Mrs. Dalloway has the world-defining ambition and scope of every great epic, from Dante's *Commedia* to Goethe's *Faust*.



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Virginia Woolf, London, 1939; photograph by Gisèle Freund

Reviewed:

Mrs. Dalloway

by Virginia Woolf, edited by Anne E. Fernald
Norton, 365 pp., \$12.50 (paper)

The Annotated Mrs. Dalloway

by Virginia Woolf, edited and with an introduction and notes by Merve Emre
Liveright, 242 pp., \$35.00

1.

Mrs. Dalloway is a book that makes modest claims for itself. Virginia Woolf first planned to call it *The Hours* but settled on a title consistent with its story about unimportant people on an ordinary London day. She modeled the book in part on *Ulysses*, as Joyce modeled his on the *Odyssey*, but her characters do not symbolize anything larger than themselves. “Genius it has,” she wrote in her diary about *Ulysses*, but added, “It is brackish. It is pretentious.” A “first-rate writer,” unlike Joyce, “respects writing too much to be tricky; startling; doing stunts.” Joyce titled his book *Ulysses*, not *Mr. Bloom*.

The German critic Erich Auerbach seems to have been the first to recognize Woolf as a writer in the epic tradition, not merely a great novelist. His magisterial survey of European literature, *Mimesis* (1946), begins with the visible outer world of action portrayed in the *Odyssey* and ends—in a triumph of the inner life—with the invisible world of thought portrayed in *To the Lighthouse*. The writer whom Auerbach most loved was Dante, and he saw in *To the Lighthouse* “a similarity to Dante’s *Comedy*.” Woolf’s novel points toward universal meanings through the undramatic and “externally insignificant” events of two days—a mother of eight gives a dinner party at her summer house in Scotland; ten years later one of her sons steers a sailboat to an island while, out on the lawn, an amateur painter struggles to finish her canvas. Auerbach’s insight applies with equal force to *Mrs. Dalloway*.

The *Commedia* tells two quest stories: Dante’s arduous physical journey from Hell through Purgatory to Heaven, and its invisible psychological and spiritual analogue, the journey of Dante’s soul from despair through hope to a beatific vision. In the modern world, where the events that seem to matter most in everyone’s life are inward and invisible, Woolf reduced the physical quests in her books to a few almost trivial actions; all the tension and excitement went into the psychological quests. In “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” her 1924 essay about the present and possible future of fiction, she describes Mrs. Brown as “very frail and very heroic.” *To the Lighthouse* ends with Lily Briscoe making a decisive inward choice to finish her painting, though she knows that no one else will care, though she remembers being told, “Women can’t paint,” and though her only visible act is to draw a line on her canvas and lay down her brush “in extreme fatigue.”

“Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” ends with “one final and surpassingly rash prediction—we are trembling on the verge of one of the great ages of English literature. But it can only be reached if we are determined never, never to desert Mrs. Brown.” At the same time that she made this prediction, Woolf was working to fulfill it by writing *Mrs. Dalloway*. Like Athena disguised as Mentor in the *Odyssey*, she speaks a prayer that will be “granted in every particular by herself.”

Mrs. Dalloway tells the story of two heroic quests, both made by “this soul, or life within us,” as Woolf called it in an essay around the same time. Peter Walsh, Clarissa Dalloway’s disappointed suitor from thirty-three years earlier, makes one such journey while sleeping on a park bench and dreaming that he has ventured into a realm peopled by mythical figures waiting passively for “some august fate...to sweep them into complete annihilation.” On waking, he exclaims to himself, “The death of the soul.” A few hours after his hellish vision, he finds the courage to climb the steps to Clarissa’s party. “The soul,” he thinks, “must brave itself to endure.” The book ends with his ecstatic vision of Clarissa, who has entered the room where he is sitting, when he asks himself:

What is this terror? what is this ecstasy?... What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement?
It is Clarissa, he said.
For there she was.

Clarissa's inner quest begins late in the book, when, like Dante waking in a dark wood, she finds herself alone in a little room ("there was nobody") while her party goes on without her. There she experiences in imagination the descent of the traumatized war veteran Septimus Warren Smith as he leaps to his death, and is provoked by that experience to a purgatorial, repentant sense of all that she had "defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter." Then, as she begins to recover herself, still thinking she is alone, she sees through her window the old lady in the house opposite, staring "straight at her!" The sudden appearance of the old lady startles her out of her isolation, and she returns to her party, to seek out not her famous guests but Peter Walsh, who has always loved her, and Sally Seton, whom she loved in girlhood. Like Beatrice leading Dante's pilgrim soul into Paradise, the old lady's presence sends Clarissa into the realms of love. Like Beatrice, Clarissa herself excites Peter to his concluding vision.

In its unobtrusive way, *Mrs. Dalloway* has the world-defining ambition and scope of Dante's epic of the soul, and of every great epic, from Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid* to Goethe's *Faust*. Like them, it looks outward to distant, contrasting cultures, backward to a remote past, "when the pavement was grass, when it was swamp, through the age of tusk and mammoth," and forward to a remote future, "when London is a grass-grown path and all those hurrying along the pavement this Wednesday morning are but bones with a few wedding rings mixed up in their dust." It has the encyclopedic scope of a great national epic, exploring such matters as statecraft, medicine, crime, technology, and religion. It extends outward to colonial India and inward to secret depths of eroticism.

As it ranges through the breadth and depth of its world, *Mrs. Dalloway* surveys vast realms of time and space while also focusing on something far more local: the social and psychological details of its cultural moment. It connects the inner lives of upper-class Clarissa Dalloway and lower-middle-class Septimus Warren Smith, who, Woolf wrote in an introduction to a 1928 American edition, "is intended to be her double." Septimus volunteered for the army at the start of the Great War. In Italy, just before the armistice, his sergeant was killed and "he congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably." He managed to repress his grief, until "the panic was on him—that he could not feel," and he fought the panic by marrying an Italian innkeeper's daughter. Now, five years later in London, he has a suicidal breakdown, for which the great nerve doctor Sir William Bradshaw orders him confined to an asylum.

Septimus shuts down his feelings after losing his sergeant to sudden death in a war that, as Woolf saw it in her book *Three Guineas*, was the product of patriarchal furies. Clarissa, in a little-noticed parallel, represses her feelings after losing her sister to sudden death caused by their incompetent father. The event occurs far in the background of the novel, almost in passing, in something that Peter remembers Clarissa saying about herself: "To see your own sister killed by a falling tree (all Justin Parry's fault—all his carelessness) before your very eyes,...Clarissa always said, was enough to turn one bitter." She stiffened her upper lip:

Those ruffians, the Gods, shan't have it all their own way—her notion being 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.

As Septimus marries Lucrezia to escape his panic, Clarissa marries Richard Dalloway to gain the distance that Peter Walsh, had she married him, would have prevented. Septimus dies; Clarissa lives. Her class training and her network of family and friends help her to manage her suffering in ways that he, in his personal and social isolation, cannot.

Mrs. Dalloway is a book that reveals new depths with each rereading, partly because it never resolves its disturbing double focus, its double sense of tragedy and triumph. The ending is aesthetically and emotionally exhilarating but leaves unsolved the social and moral dilemmas that the book emphasizes everywhere else.

One of its most heartbreaking moments occurs when Peter Walsh, hearing “the light high bell of the ambulance,” thinks of it as “one of the triumphs of civilisation.... It struck him coming back from the East—the efficiency, the organisation, the communal spirit of London.” Peter is right—the ambulance is a triumph of civilization—but he does not know that it will arrive too late to save an innocent victim of civilization, Septimus, destroyed first by a war fought by those who claimed to be preserving civilization, then by the laws that maintain it by sending him into an asylum, laws that in the service of England “secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair.”

Woolf wrote in her diary about *Mrs. Dalloway*, “I want to criticise the social system, and to show it at work, at its most intense.” The episode of the ambulance is her half-hidden rebuke to her friend E.M. Forster, who had written very differently, in *A Passage to India*, about an Englishman’s return from the East. Forster’s Cyril Fielding, arriving in Venice from “poor India,” where “everything was placed wrong,” feels unironic joy in “the civilization that has escaped muddle, the spirit in reasonable form.” Woolf, like Rhoda listening to a concert in Woolf’s later novel *The Waves*, found “triumph” and “consolation” in her civilized world, but she does not forget that the civilization that escapes muddle and takes a reasonable form also excludes to the point of death the innocent victims whom it is too busy making order to notice.

2.

Scholarship about the great epics began in Athens, with textual commentaries (*scholia*) on Homer. In the thirty years since *Mrs. Dalloway* emerged from copyright in Britain, scholars have produced a dozen annotated editions. The most ambitious and thorough is Anne E. Fernald’s for the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Virginia Woolf (2015), the only edition with a textual apparatus that traces all of Woolf’s revisions in proof. These revisions include the last-minute changes she made for the British edition after sending an earlier set of proofs on a journey across the Atlantic for the American edition. Fernald’s Cambridge edition, with its judicious fifty-eight-page introduction and 136 pages of explanatory notes, is one that everyone who loves the novel would want to own, were it not for Cambridge’s piratical price of \$154, cheap plasticized binding with the pages glued, not sewn, and the distracting line numbers printed in the outer margins, as in every volume of this otherwise splendid series, which now includes seven of Woolf’s ten novels.

Two new editions of *Mrs. Dalloway*, both priced for the real world, approach the book in different but equally valuable ways. The Norton Critical Edition, edited by Fernald, builds on the scholarly authority of her Cambridge edition. *The Annotated Mrs. Dalloway*, edited by Merve Emre, is a recent addition to Liveright’s (formerly Norton’s) series of profusely annotated and illustrated titles ranging from *Frankenstein* through *Dracula* to *Peter Pan*. Like earlier volumes in the series, the book is a feast for the eyes, with hundreds of period illustrations printed in a sumptuous pastel color palette, and explanatory notes set in pale blue type in the outer columns of its two-column pages.

Fernald’s Norton Critical Edition, in contrast, looks cramped and utilitarian, like most volumes in the series. Despite its unpromising appearance, and a cover blurb claiming that its “apparatus...is right for undergraduate readers,” this is perhaps the most useful and illuminating edition for any reader. Its footnotes are compactly informative. Its back matter includes diary entries, letters,

essays, and reviews by Woolf that suggest the process by which the book took shape and what it meant to its author. Fernald includes, as Emre does not, Woolf's 1928 introduction and three stories that she wrote about Clarissa and Richard Dalloway around the same time as the novel. (She published one, "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street"; the others appeared posthumously.)

Fernald also prints excerpts and complete texts of a dozen of the book's literary sources, from Homer through Katherine Mansfield, followed by a well-chosen set of historical documents and critical essays that clarify its treatment of contemporary events and explain the social conventions that Woolf and her readers took for granted. The first of these documents is the report by the great psychologist W.H.R. Rivers on the symptoms and treatment of what he called war neurosis—not shell shock, the shorthand term used by Sir William Bradshaw in *Mrs. Dalloway* when he finds it in Septimus. Fernald reprints Rivers's report from its first publication, in *The Lancet*, but Woolf may have seen (or heard about) the reprinted text in Rivers's *Instinct and the Unconscious* (1920), where he supplements it with a further essay, "War Neurosis and Military Training," on the way that upper-class officers repress their neurosis beneath intense anxiety, while lower-class soldiers act it out. Upper-class Clarissa has "in the depths of her heart an awful fear." The socially inferior Septimus hallucinates, then kills himself.

One merit of Fernald's edition is her reluctance to judge the novel or its characters by today's cultural standards. The one exception is her footnote to an excerpt from H.G. Wells's novel *Ann Veronica*, where a strange middle-aged man speaks to the young Ann "in a curiously wheedling voice," leaving her "disturbed and unwillingly observant." Fernald, in a stern rebuke to Peter Walsh, explains, "Woolf wrote the mirror of this scene into *Mrs. Dalloway*, where Peter delights in stalking a young woman through the same part of London." But Woolf transmutes Wells's scene more than she mirrors it. Peter keeps a careful distance ("To embarrass her was the last thing he wished") while imagining ("for one must invent") her "cool waiting wit." Emre's note on the episode, calling it "funny, poignant, and pathetic," captures its tone.

My only regret about Fernald's Norton edition is that it prints the text of the American first edition and not, as in Fernald's Cambridge edition, the British text. Until recently almost all reprints and annotated editions widely available in North America used the American text, depriving readers of Woolf's final revisions. One exception was the 1993 Everyman's Library edition, imported to America from Britain. It has now been joined by an elegantly printed American reissue of the 1992 British Penguin edition, expertly edited by Stella McNichol, with an introduction by Elaine Showalter that, thirty years later, remains one of the most discerning essays ever written about the book. Emre's edition, unlike all others, combines the British text with an eleven-word sentence from the American text.

3.

Emre's introduction and notes present a fine-grained narrative of the evolution of *Mrs. Dalloway* from Woolf's early sketches through her manuscript drafts to the finished work. Showalter's introduction in the Penguin edition and Fernald's in the Cambridge both describe the book's genesis in comparable detail, but Emre's many full-page facsimiles of Woolf's notebooks and manuscripts add a vivid visual sense of an author at work. Emre's notes to the book, some extending across multiple columns of small type, provide both detailed textual history and convincing critical judgments. One note concludes, "The philosophy of life *Mrs. Dalloway* offers, then, is a powerful vision of life and death not as complete contrasts, but as dependent and dialectical states of being."

Most of Emre's illustrations are not of Woolf's manuscripts but of people and places, and, gorgeous as they are, they provoke mixed feelings. On the one hand, they have the kind of absorbing interest that Woolf alluded to in her 1928 introduction. "Nothing," she wrote, "is more fascinating than to be shown the truth which lies behind these immense façades of fiction"—but Woolf immediately qualified this by adding, "if life is indeed true, and if fiction is indeed fictitious." What is true in a picture may not be true of the book. In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Woolf hoped for "a close and equal alliance between" writer and reader; every reader joins in that alliance in the act of creating mental images of Clarissa, Peter, and the others, images that each reader is convinced are true, though they are almost certainly unlike the images created by anyone else. This private image-making is an essential part of the act of reading, and helps to explain why no impersonal theoretical account of a book can ever be adequate.

Emre includes a full-page photograph of Katharine Maxse, the friend on whom Woolf partly modeled Clarissa. It probably resembles no reader's image of Clarissa and may be more distracting than illuminating. The cumulative effect of the illustrations is that of a social director telling readers what their relation to the writer ought to be, instead of leaving them alone to create the close and equal alliance that Woolf hoped for. When one of her friends complained that the meaning of the lighthouse in *To the Lighthouse* had escaped him, she answered:

I meant *nothing* by The Lighthouse.... [I] trusted that people would make it the deposit for their own emotions.... I can't manage Symbolism except in this vague, generalised way. Whether it's right or wrong I don't know, but directly I'm told what a thing means, it becomes hateful to me.

All of Woolf's novels include moments when someone is repelled by a generalizing symbol, like Bernard in *The Waves*: "So the sincerity of the moment passed; so it became symbolical; and that I could not stand." A reader's private image of Clarissa serves to particularize her. To treat her as a symbol depersonalizes her, just as someone is depersonalized when imagined as an earth mother or the Antichrist. In a parallel way, Clarissa is depersonalized when she is imagined as a version of Katharine Maxse.

Peter Walsh is rewarded with his concluding vision of Clarissa partly because he loves her for herself: "It is Clarissa herself, he thought, with a deep emotion, and an extraordinarily clear, yet puzzling, recollection of her." But in his dream on the park bench, early in the book, he is tempted into dissolving her and himself into archetypes: not Clarissa but "the giant figure at the end of the ride" that his dream "endows...with womanhood," not Peter Walsh but "the solitary traveller, haunter of lanes," like Joseph Campbell's hero with a thousand faces. These archetypes, the narrator continues, are "the visions which ceaselessly float up, pace beside, put their faces in front of the actual thing."

To put one's face in front of the actual thing is a temptation felt by every scholarly editor. (Nabokov wrote a novel about it, *Pale Fire*.) Emre frames her introduction between two narratives from her own life. Near the start of the introduction, she recalls the first time she read *Mrs. Dalloway*, "when I was maybe ten or eleven," and sent her copy to a young friend with a flirtatious letter insisting that he "see something of us reflected in the pages I had annotated." He responded by saying that he and she were not Peter and Clarissa, but Jake Barnes and Lady Brett Ashley from *The Sun Also Rises*. Today, she continues, she feels embarrassed by their younger selves, "yet I confess to feeling some distant admiration for the readers we had been." She ends her introduction by recalling her visit to the museum at Woolf's house, where she and a guide, after listening to a seashell that may or may not have belonged to Woolf, stood side by side looking into a mirror, while "my eyes remained focused and sharper than hers, which never lost their watery, wondering quality."

Annotation is a form of dialogue between an editor and an imagined reader. Like any dialogue, it requires tact. An editor must avoid causing the insult of saying something obvious or the tedium of excessive detail. Early in the novel, as a mysterious official car moves through London, “rumours were at once in circulation from the middle of Bond Street to Oxford Street on one side, to Atkinson’s scent shop on the other.” Any reader can infer that Atkinson’s scent shop sells perfumes, so Fernald’s Norton edition leaves it unannotated. Curious readers may want to know whether the shop is real or imaginary—like the invented Scottish landscape and seascape of *To the Lighthouse*—so Fernald’s more thorough Cambridge edition has this brief note: “J. and E. Atkinson Ltd., purveyors of perfumery and toilet soap, whose retail business was situated at 24 Old Bond Street.” Emre, in contrast, says this:

Atkinson’s of London was founded by James Atkinson, perfumer to the Court of St. James’s, and was housed at 24 Old Bond Street. The shop’s logo, a quizzical-looking bear, with either its legs chained to each other or a pageant sash dangling from his teeth—“Atkinson’s Bear Grease,” the sash read—testified to Atkinson’s successful use of bear grease (made from the fat of the brown bear mixed with beef marrow) in his pomades, perfumes, and balms.

This is illustrated with the firm’s trademark, in the version with the sash in the bear’s teeth.

Annotation is also a dialogue between the editor and the author. Tact requires an editor to listen to what an author meant when using words that mean something different today. Clarissa complains inwardly that Peter Walsh favors “those Indian women . . . silly, pretty, flimsy nincompoops.” She is thinking of Peter’s first wife, “a woman met on the boat going to India” on the way to his job as a colonial administrator. David Bradshaw, in his Oxford World’s Classics edition of the novel (2000), annotates “those Indian women” with “that is, British women in India.” Fernald, equally alert to linguistic and social history, has: “That is, British (and therefore, at this time, white) women living in India, often as wives of soldiers or colonial administrators.” One of those wives is Daisy, a British woman married to a British army major in India; Peter has returned to London to arrange her divorce so that he can marry her. Emre writes, anachronistically, that these “Indian women” are “nonwhite, non-English women,” and quotes at length a postcolonial critic analyzing Woolf’s racism.

Textual editing is another form of dialogue between an editor and an author, and the dead author deserves the same consideration and care that she would have wanted when living. Earlier editors of *Mrs. Dalloway* made discreet, almost unnoticeable textual changes, regularizing verb tenses or restoring words omitted while typing out a manuscript, corrections of the kind that Woolf’s copyeditors at the time overlooked while making corrections of the same kind elsewhere in the book. The best judged of these emendations seem to be Stella McNichol’s in her 1992 Penguin text and Fernald’s in the Cambridge edition.

All editions before Emre’s present a lightly emended text of either the first American or the first British edition. Both versions have their own integrity—each is the product of extensive authorial revision—but the British text reflects Woolf’s final thoughts about her novel, and its changes highlight her sense of its deepest meanings. All but one of the later editions issued by British publishers use the British text; the exception is a 1996 Shakespeare Head Press edition, prepared for a British press by an American editor. All the later editions issued by American publishers, until Emre’s, use the American text.

The most striking difference in the transatlantic versions occurs near the end of the book, when Clarissa is about to return to her party after her purgatorial experience in the little room. Earlier in this episode, alone in the room, she confronted the “thing there was that mattered; a thing wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter.” She recognized the “awful fear” in the depths of her heart. She saw in Septimus’s death an act of heroic defiance: he escaped the indifferent medical and official power embodied in Sir William Bradshaw, “a great doctor,” Clarissa thinks, “yet to her obscurely evil, without sex or lust, extremely polite to women, but capable of some indescribable outrage—forcing your soul, that was it.” Throughout the day Clarissa wished, as she has always wished, to be more like the imperturbable, aristocratic Lady Bexborough. Now, in the little room, she finds in Septimus’s act the courage she needs to defy her own false values and to dismiss them in a quick, contemptuous phrase: “She had schemed; she had pilfered.... She had wanted success, Lady Bexborough and the rest of it.”

A few paragraphs later the episode in the little room comes to an end. This is the American text:

She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun. But she must go back. She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter. And she came in from the little room.

Woolf’s final version in the British text differs in two ways. After the phrase “thrown it away,” the British text continues, “while they went on living.” And the British version entirely omits the sentence “He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun.”

Like every writer, Woolf discovered what she wanted to say in the act of revising. The effect of the final British text is to emphasize that what is at stake, both in this episode and in the novel as a whole, is not beauty and fun, but life and death. The sentence about beauty and fun tempts readers into trivializing the book, and Woolf knew exactly what she was accomplishing when she removed that temptation.

British readers, at least those who are not academic specialists, have never seen the sentence about beauty and fun, and British editors seem never to mention it. Only American readers, who learned to love the book in its American version, seem to favor it. Fernald writes in her Cambridge edition that “a case can be made for preferring” the American reading, although she does no more than argue the case, and leaves the British text unchanged.

Emre goes further by basing her edition on the British text but inserting into it the American edition’s eleven-word sentence about beauty and fun. Virginia Woolf thought in paragraphs as well as in sentences, and Emre’s text, which retains the British-edition phrase “while they went on living” while adding the deleted American-edition sentence, presents a paragraph that the author never wrote or imagined. Having second-guessed Woolf’s revision, Emre writes that she had been obliged to make a decision of her own: “Any editor must choose whether to include the line...or to omit it entirely.”

No other editor of the book has felt obliged to make this choice; none even felt free to make it. Editions based on the American text include the line; editions based on the British text do not. The degree to which an editor is free to shape a text depends entirely on the kinds of sources that an editor works with. An editor of Virginia Woolf—who made her own typescripts and corrected her own proofs, and was joint owner with her husband of her own publishing firm—has different freedoms, and different responsibilities, from those of an editor of almost any earlier writer.

Editors of ancient manuscripts and early printed books are obliged to work from manuscripts and published texts that the original authors never supervised and may never have seen. *King Lear* is a well-known extreme case that exemplifies a common problem. An editor of the play must work from two very different texts: the First Quarto, published without Shakespeare's authorization, and the First Folio, published after his death. No one knows how close either text is to anything that Shakespeare himself wrote; no one knows if any of the differences between them represent his own revisions; so a plausible case can be made for combining—as almost all editors have done—the Quarto and Folio into a single “eclectic” text, with each editor making different choices between conflicting passages in the two versions.

The two published texts of *Mrs. Dalloway* present an entirely different set of alternatives. The American text represents one stage of Woolf's revisions; the British text represents a later one. Editors can speculate about the motives behind Woolf's revisions, and critics can offer reasons why they think one version is better than another, but something that W.H. Auden wrote about readers applies with equal force to editors and critics: “As readers, most of us, to some degree, are like those urchins who pencil mustaches on the faces of girls in advertisements.” The one categorical imperative of textual editing is this: In the absence of some overwhelming and self-evident reason to do otherwise, you must not favor your opinion over an author's judgment. Woolf's judgment produced these spare and morally focused sentences in the British text:

She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. But she must go back. She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter. And she came in from the little room.

4.

Mrs. Dalloway, as Emre writes, presents “a powerful vision of life and death.” Like all of Woolf's great novels, it ends in triumph. Yet in this and her other books, Woolf, like all great writers, insisted on darkening her shining scenes of triumph with a glimpse of the shadow of death, and not merely a natural death, but death chosen or imposed. Even as light a comedy as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* includes a warning to Hermia that, if she refuses an unwanted marriage, she must choose between death and a nunnery. One of the ways Woolf made *Mrs. Dalloway* more profound and more disturbing than its model *Ulysses* was by adding Septimus's chosen death. No one in *Ulysses* is threatened with death; the deaths that occurred in the past were all natural ones; Leopold Bloom's most dangerous moment occurs when someone throws a biscuit tin at him and misses.

Woolf reported in her introduction to *Mrs. Dalloway* that Clarissa “was originally to kill herself, or perhaps merely to die at the end of the party.” The shadow of death is inescapably present when Clarissa in the little room thinks about Septimus, and it remains present, though almost unnoticeably, in Peter Walsh's exhilarating vision on the final page. Earlier, Peter Walsh had remembered Clarissa's

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 [i.e., our bodies], are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us [i.e., “this soul, or life within us”], which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that....

After Clarissa leaves the little room, she seems to disappear from the book until Peter asks, “What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement?” and answers, “It is Clarissa.” What has happened in the real world of the story, though the book never says so explicitly, is that he has seen her

entering the room. But the language of his vision describes exactly what he would have felt had she died and “the unseen” had been “recovered somehow attached” to him. She lives, but the death that she escaped remains in the book as an almost invisible trace of an ending that might have been.

At the end of *The Waves*, Bernard exclaims, inwardly, “Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!” This is what *Mrs. Dalloway* says.

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