

DECENTRING DISCOURSE, SELF-CENTRED POLITICS:
RADICALISM AND THE SELF IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *MRS*
DALLOWAY

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The present article analyses the narrative devices by which the Woolfian, anti-essentialist notion of subjectivity is produced in *Mrs Dalloway*. This analysis aims to critically assess the novel's decentring discourse on selfhood in a political light. Focusing on the self-definition of the characters at the time of the fiction, the first section examines the discursive production of Clarissa Dalloway's diffused and connective self. The second section of this article considers the politics of memory within the production of identity in the novel, taking the Bergsonian notions of *élan vital* and *open morality* as a theoretical framework. The analysis of the production of selfhood in *Mrs Dalloway* at a synchronic (self-definition in the diegetic present time) and diachronic level (definition through memory) uncovers strong phallogocentric and conservative tensions in the novel, tensions that may have been overlooked as a result of Virginia Woolf's own progressive politics.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf; *Mrs Dalloway*; radicalism; selfhood; language; Henri Bergson

DISCURSO DESCENTRALIZADOR, POLITICA EGOCÉNTRICA: RADICALISMO E
INDIVIDUALIDAD EN *MRS DALLOWAY*, DE VIRGINIA WOOLF

Este artículo analiza las estrategias narrativas a través de las cuales Virginia Woolf elabora su noción anti-esencialista del sujeto en Mrs Dalloway. Este estudio tiene como objeto valorar el discurso descentralizador que la novela construye sobre la idea del sujeto desde un ángulo político. La primera sección examina la auto-definición de los personajes en el momento en que se desarrolla la acción de la novela, centrándose sobre todo en la producción discursiva de la identidad difusa e interconectiva de Clarissa Dalloway. La segunda sección considera la política de la memoria en la producción de identidad en la novela, tomando como marco teórico los conceptos Bergsonianos de élan vital y moralidad abierta. Este análisis sincrónico (auto-definición en el presente) y diacrónico (definición a través de la memoria) revela tensiones fallogocéntricas y conservadoras en la novela, tensiones que han podido quedar eclipsadas en la crítica debido a la política progresista de la escritora.

Palabras clave: Virginia Woolf; *Mrs Dalloway*; radicalismo; individualidad del sujeto; lenguaje; Henri Bergson

1. Introduction: Questioning the Weapons of a ‘Guerrilla Fighter in a Victorian Skirt’

Virginia Woolf’s persona has been construed as a controversial “guerrilla fighter in a Victorian skirt” (qtd. in Helal 2005: 79) whose *oeuvre* more or less explicitly, but invariably, is allied with the progressive politics of feminism, socialism and pacifism. However subtle it may be, Woolf’s “radical critique of ‘the fabric of things’” (Bradshaw 2000: 191) is rarely contested in relation to her fiction. Woolf’s anti-didacticism, as expressed in her attacks on D. H. Lawrence and George Meredith (Zwerdling 1997: 69), has often been used to explain why her radicalism is less explicit in her novels than in *A Room of One’s Own* or *Three Guineas* (Bradshaw 2000: 191; Zwerdling 1997: 69). Such contention poses the question of whether the critic could be imposing already-made ideological assumptions on authorship and intentionality, which may have been retrieved from other texts and construed as truth and as reading guidelines. Focusing on *Mrs Dalloway*, Margaret Blanchard’s account on the novel’s “glimpse into the effects of socialization” (1972: 295) acknowledged but failed to incorporate two crucial features of the text. The first is Clarissa’s passivity; the second is the decisive admission that “what ‘unites’ Clarissa, Septimus and Peter is not shared activity but how they perceive each other and themselves in relation to the other” (1972: 305). Whilst Blanchard acknowledges that their union is perceptual rather than factual, this is not held as an argument against considering Woolf’s text as a portrait of socialisation.

As regards gender relations, Woolf’s fictional narration of female experience and foregrounding of the complexities of feminine identity, sexuality and creativity have been heralded as feminist statements, despite their “inconsistencies” (Marcus 2000: 211). Woolf’s celebration of “the domestic woman as a version of the artist” (Mullin 2006: 144), and her elitist concern with the upper classes are the two most frequent sources of controversy regarding her feminism. Bang Wang and Toril Moi have recently readdressed the debate on Woolf’s radicalism and feminism by focusing on questions of identity and the liberal-humanist subject. For Wang, *Mrs Dalloway* conveys a “psychic resistance to the symbolic order” (1992: 190), a resistance that is highly political in the sense that it expresses the social creation and imposition of identity on a consciousness that is fluid. Moi attempts to restore Woolf’s feminism from Elaine Showalter’s criticism by pointing out that Woolf’s “non-essentialist form of writing” (2002: 10) represents a revolt against “God, the Father or the phallus as its transcendental signified” (2002: 9). However, Moi’s account is tangentially interested in Woolf, as her main focus is feminist literary theory, and this calls for a re-evaluation of the issue from a textual perspective.

It is within the debate on the self and radicalism that this article will approach *Mrs Dalloway*, addressing issues on the subject raised by Wang and Moi whilst redirecting the attention to the text. This article aims to critically discuss whether Woolf’s aesthetics regarding the self in *Mrs Dalloway* is accompanied by a parallel engagement with radical politics. More specifically, this article will question whether the Woolfian self allows or hinders a progressive positioning of the text, and will consider to what extent unperformed dissidence can be read as radically-compelled. Essential to this article is to

position the use of the term *radical*. It will be used throughout in its broad sense, namely “believing or expressing the belief that there should be great or extreme social or political change” (‘Radical’, def. 1a), and not in reference to an alliance with any particular political party or organisation. Likewise, *conservative* will refer to a tendency “not to like or trust change, especially sudden change” (‘Conservative’, def. 1a). Thus, this article does not intend to analyse whether *Mrs Dalloway* advocates the necessity of governmental change in the post-war, conservative-ruled and still imperialist Great Britain of 1923. Instead, it will assess the ways in which Woolf’s devices to create character either allow or disallow a socially aware, non-masculinist envisioning of the self and of otherness which may epitomise the possibility of social challenge and change in the characters’ past, in their 1923 present time of the fiction or in an alleged future.

This article will analyse the devices by which the anti-essentialist self is produced in *Mrs Dalloway* and their implications in terms of radicalism. It will be argued that the main characters are created in relation to two axes – synchronically, by seeking self-definition while expressing a desire to communicate with other individuals; diachronically, by oscillating between the time of the diegesis and a past recalled by constant memories. The discussion on these axes on representation will constitute the two main sections of this article. The first part will begin by examining how Clarissa’s diffused and connective self is created in the novel and what its relationship to phallogocentrism and conservatism is. The second part will question the relationship between radicalism and the constant reference to past memories, not only from the point of view of the lack of an alternative future but also as a mechanism to suffocate the *élan vital* and the open morality that would allow progressive politics. This will lead to the conclusion that Woolf’s techniques to construct the self promote subtle but strong conservative tensions in the novel.

This examination will allow for the incorporation of aspects of the novel that were overlooked in previous critical analyses, such as the purely narrative validity of the connections between characters. It will also prevent the use of Woolf’s personal sympathies as a pre-assumed and biased interpretative basis. Finally, this debate will prove useful to open alternative readings of the politics of the self in the novel, such as that on the Bergsonian *élan vital* and the incorporation of a close morality.

2. Untangling the fiction of connectedness: alienation, self-centredness and phallogocentrism

Woolf’s technique to construct the self can be read through Saussure’s synchronic and diachronic axes. In relation to the synchronic, *Mrs Dalloway* claims to receive meaning from her relation to coexisting selves, exactly as the linguistic sign is given value on the synchronic axis “from the simultaneous presence of other terms” without considering here “the intervention of time” (Saussure 2004: 64). Indeed, Woolf’s protagonist rejects the closure and definiteness of an essentialist understanding of identity and refuses to ever affirm of anybody “that they were this or were that” (Woolf 2000: 7). Mrs Dalloway’s reluctance to self-definition relies on her connection to those “coexisting things” (Saussure 2004: 64) unfurled on the synchronic level:

Somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself. (Woolf 2000: 8)

The passage above illustrates how Clarissa views her selfhood not as a non-transferable, inherent essence, but as a ubiquitous relation between her and immediate places, objects and animate beings that are “here, now, in front of her” (2000: 8). Jean M. Wyatt has compared Clarissa’s views on a merging identity to Kristeva’s idea of the semiotic self and to Lacan’s pre-mirror and mirror stages of development (1986: 119-23). Bringing this into the realm of politics, Moi has interpreted Woolf’s use of a non self-contained subjectivity as a radical feminist position since it challenges “the male-humanist concept of an essential human identity” (2002: 7), allowing for a re-reading Woolf from a feminist perspective.

However, the subversive possibilities of Clarissa’s anti-humanist disintegration can actually be contested, since her challenge remains subjected to male-centred dichotomies. Clarissa’s choice of habitable spaces – the streets of London, a derelict house – as partial recipients and preservers of her subjectivity suggests that her self is perceived as yet another receiver awaiting to be occupied, walked on or possessed. Later in the text she describes herself again as being “a meeting point, . . . a refuge for the lonely to come to” (Woolf 2000: 32). In addition, the comparison of her life to a mist that is lifted by her relations not only conveys the idea of Clarissa’s self being incorporeal, boundless and rootless, but it also highlights the lack of agency already announced by the previous images of herself as a habitable space. As such, she identifies with nature as opposed to culture, with habitable receptacles versus its inhabitants and, finally, with an inanimate object rather than an active agent – the old male-centred dichotomies. This is further reinforced by Clarissa’s fantasies of self-creation and the description of her homosexual desire. When imagining a hypothetically alternative identity, she chooses to select, on the one hand, the physical features of Lady Bexborough and, on the other, to be “interested in politics *like a man*” (2000: 9; emphasis mine). The description of her same-sex desires is still dominated by the masculinist language of erection, penetration, ejaculation and deflation; she describes it as a “a match burning in a crocus”, a revelation that “rushed to the farthest verge”, that “felt . . . the world swollen”, that “poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores” and, when the excitation is over, “the hard softened” (2000: 27). Again, this expresses the problematic nature of a feminist reading of Clarissa’s anti-essentialism, since the nature of her fragmentation and connection relies on the integration of phallogocentrism.

Clarissa’s discourse on the intensity of a relational self has been interpreted as a synecdoche of the whole novel, as if in *Mrs Dalloway* “Woolf . . . suggests the uncanniness of connection, between words, things and people” (Marcus 2004: 74). However, a close analysis of the text reveals that both the ‘uncanniness’ and the ‘connection’ are an effect of certain narrative strategies since, in the diegesis, all characters except for Mrs Dalloway are portrayed as isolated selves, unable to

communicate and connect with those around them. Richard Dalloway struggles and subsequently fails to verbalise his romantic feelings for his wife, despite acknowledging that “it is a thousand pities never to say what one feels” (Woolf 2000: 98). Likewise, Peter Walsh also fails to realise Clarissa’s discourse on connective identity. His is a double alienation: that of the outsider who, newly arrived from India, is overwhelmed by the “strangeness of standing alone, alive, unknown, at half-past eleven in Trafalgar Square” (2000: 44); and also by the “impenetrability” (2000: 52) of a Mrs Dalloway who ironically believes herself in everyone, and with whom he feels he once shared a “queer power of communicating without words” (2000: 51). Peter’s disconnection is reduplicated in the figure of “the solitary traveller” of his dreams in Regent’s Park, an alter-ego for whom “nothing exists outside us except a state of mind . . . ; a desire for solace, for relief, for something outside these miserable pigmies, these feeble, these ugly, these craven men and women” (2000: 48). Thus, Peter’s symptomatic dream is actually the photographic negative of Clarissa’s envisionings: for him there is no unifying and uplifting mist between subjects, but rather atomisation and yearning for an impossible human contact. Lucrezia’s isolation in dealing with her husband’s post-traumatic stress disorder is repeatedly expressed, for instance: “I am alone; I am alone! she cried” (2000: 20), and: “she was very lonely, she was very unhappy!” (2000: 76). Lucrezia’s feelings rule out the feminist argument that has interpreted Clarissa’s anti-essentialism as a voice of universal female experience.

The most acute lack of connection with other selves is found in Septimus. Clarissa interprets his suicide through her own ideological framework, construing it as “an attempt to communicate” (2000: 156) and a vehicle for their connection despite their being strangers. However, the text portrays Septimus’s death as the result of a repeated failure to communicate. Suffering from shell-shock, the addressee of his musings is more often than not either himself or his dead friend Evans. Septimus’s redemptive message about trees and universal love is coded in such a way as to prove incomprehensible for any recipient. Like the words written in the sky by the advertising aeroplane, Septimus’s message blurs in his mind and fades away as he is trying to convey it to Dr Bradshaw. *Mrs Dalloway* thus shows the impossibility of communicating, of connecting. Clarissa’s overarching and all-absorbing view of subjectivity is actually not applicable to any of the other characters in the novel, whose isolation and lack of connection is overtly expressed in the text.

Nevertheless, the text creates the illusion that an underlying link exists between these alienated selves that coexist on this day. Gillian Beer has suggested that the readers, like Clarissa, make these connections “partly through our assumed familiarity with these same places and history, partly through the lateral entwining of the narrative and its easy recourse to the personal pasts of memory, the communal past of an imagined prehistory” (1996: 53). Certainly, the collective memory of the First World War, being in London on a summer day in 1923 or witnessing the royal car constitute experiences that the characters share, and the news of Septimus’s death at Clarissa’s party indeed brings their existences closer together despite their being strangers. However, Beer’s account fails to consider the use of intertextual red herrings as the most important device to create links at the level of the *narration*, while individuals remain unconnected at the level of the *story*.

With this particular connecting function, two intertexts are drawn upon in order to establish these links in the narration. The first intertext is external, that is, the dirge from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*: "Fear no more the heat o' the sun,/Nor the furious winter's rages" (Woolf 2000: 8). Wyatt has noted the structural role of the allusions to *Cymbeline*, which provide "the most important death and rebirth symbols [that] Clarissa and Septimus share" (1973: 445). This argument could be expanded beyond the overarching symbolic motifs it generates. It can be argued that the use of allusions to *Cymbeline* generates and supports Clarissa's discourse on the relational self. By repeatedly quoting and modifying Shakespeare's lines (2000: 8, 25, 34, 158), Clarissa appropriates them to the extent that they become an indicator of her subjectivity, rather than of the Shakespearean intertext. Thus, by incorporating among Peter's thoughts the sentence "still, the sun was hot" (2000: 55); and by using it again amid Septimus's suicidal musings (2000: 127), the narration is providing scattered signs of Clarissa's identity for the reader to retrieve and create these uncanny links between characters.

The second intertext that creates such connections is internal, since it draws upon Septimus's undelivered message: "Men must not cut down trees. There is a God. . . . Change the world. No one kills from hatred" (2000: 21). The uncanny repetition of the tree-motif throughout the novel works in this case to scatter Septimus's subjectivity. If the readers are the only actual recipients of his message, they are the only ones who can identify the traces in the narration that justify Mrs Dalloway's discourse on the relational self. Given this knowledge, the "curious pattern like a tree" (2000: 13) that Clarissa spots on the motor-car blinds, or her comparison of some moments to "buds on the tree of life" (2000: 25), it all brings the reader back to Septimus's ideas. In short, these two intertexts allow the narration to fragment and disperse Clarissa's and Septimus's identities throughout the novel in such a way that their identification by the readers creates a net of connections between the characters that is inexistent in the diegesis.

It can be argued therefore that the fragmented, ubiquitous and relational self is an illusion created by two narratives: that of Clarissa's inner discourse about identity, and that of the novel and its connective devices. Uncovering this narrative artifice compromises the political radicalism of the novel and the space left for endorsing social reform. As regards gender politics in particular, this article has already shown how Mrs Dalloway's discourse on the dissolving self proves problematic as a fictional feminist alternative to masculinist essentialism, since its rewriting of identity is still embedded in patriarchal dichotomies and it fails to represent any other experience beyond that of Clarissa. With regards to social politics, this twofold narrative has lead scholars to claim that the novel is a celebration of communal bounds beyond social barriers, so that "instead of isolated individuals there is the convergence of one person's conscious moment with another's through simultaneity of experience" (Blanchard 1972: 299). However, this can hardly be so when the 'simultaneity of experience' provided by living in London or attending Clarissa's party does not prevent characters from being isolated, as the representation of their thoughts reveals. I would argue that the effect of these two narratives is precisely an illusion of connection between individuals which conceals the existence of social alienation, inequality and tension, and consequently naturalises the

existent order instead of promoting change. Clarissa's narration of connectedness has the counter effect of turning her identity into a totality from which she cannot step out and fully recognise other people's needs and wants in their own right, without drawing them back to herself. For instance, Clarissa's cathartic identification with Septimus when she hears of his suicide highlights her sheer renewal through his death, but their connection is purely unidirectional and narrative. More importantly, Clarissa's narration obscures the fact that the state is ultimately responsible for Septimus's participation in the war and his resulting shell-shock, as well as his social isolation and suicide, given that the stranger cannot be integrated coherently and productively into the social fabric.

The illusion of connectedness activated by narrative devices also eclipses the existence of a society where there are alienating, reifying and oppressive forces in operation, specifically controlled by Clarissa's social group. From this perspective, there are untold links between characters which the narration obviates. The untold parallelism between Clarissa and Sir Bradshaw is an example. Both share a careless alienating stance towards those outside their immediate high-societal circle. Sir Bradshaw "made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, . . . made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views" (Woolf 2000: 84) without considering those "lunatics" as individuals. Likewise, Clarissa "cared much more for her roses than for the Armenians" (2000: 102) or Albanians whose suffering is known to her through her husband, and she is able to rejoice in the news that Septimus had "thrown [his life] away while they went on living" (2000: 158). If "the disclosure of some such patriarchal narrative of femininity is the sine qua non of feminist agitation" (Rooney 2006: 73), it can be argued that, by extension, the exposure of the narratives that naturalise social exploitation and alienation is another condition for social radicalism. In this respect, Woolf's double narrative of the relational self works by concealing alienation, the lack of social ethics within the centres of power, and the pervasiveness of masculinist discourses and practices, and does so under a guise of common experience and unconscious connections.

3. Memory, Radicalism and Social Ethics: a Bergsonian reading of *Mrs Dalloway*

The second section of this article will focus on Woolf's construction of characters on the diachronic axis and the possibilities this construction allows in terms of radicalism and social ethics. Parallel to its relation to coexisting selves in the novel, the subject is also defined upon the diachronic axis or "the axis of successions" (Saussure 2004: 64), in the sense that the past experiences of Clarissa, Sally, Peter, Septimus and Lucrezia are brought into the present by means of what Woolf described in her diaries as her "tunnelling process": "I tell the past by instalments, as I have need of it" (qtd. in Dick 2000: 51). The novel starts *in media res*, interrupting in the midst of a June morning in 1923 when the decisive turning points in the lives of the main characters have already taken place. When the narrator reports that "Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself" (Woolf 2000: 4), Clarissa has rejected Peter and married Richard

Dalloway, she has not pursued the fulfilment of the homoerotic desires that she experienced in her youth, her rebellious friend Sally has married, and Septimus has fought a war that has shattered his academic aspirations, his relationship with Evans, his marriage and, above all, his mental health. It is only Septimus's suicide that still awaits the reader in terms of plotline. Thus, the novel chronologically covers a short-spanned but linear forward movement, from the morning preparations to the party that will physically reunite all the characters that are present in Clarissa's emotional, inner life. At the same time, the novel enacts a long-spanned backward glance – that of the analepses that are necessary for the reader to understand the characters' evolution and their relationship in the present of the narration.

This continuous but selective 'tunnelling process' has a detrimental effect on the envisioning of othernesses, of alternative selves and interrelations which would epitomise the possibility of social change or challenge in the future. Whereas the exploration of memory proves to be inexhaustible for Clarissa, Peter, Septimus or Lucrezia, the chronological movement forward finds the Dalloways' party as its furthest limit. Only Lady Bruton's ideas about migration, Miss Kilman's political and religious indoctrination of Elizabeth, and Elizabeth's dreams about her future all confront the novel's closed temporality and hint at the self's capability of manipulating the present and building the future. However, these three characters occupy a marginal space in the narrative. The narration remains centred in the consciousness of Clarissa's closest circle, a social circle that lives in a perpetual state of past recollection in order to reassess their present. Therefore, one of the unspoken conservative tensions of the narrative stems from its strong centripetal nature concerning the creation of the self in the diachronic axis. The constant recourse to memory forces the narrative to develop toward its already-lived centre, as opposed to stretching towards the characters' outward, yet-to-be-discovered possibilities. A narration anchored in past events may be argued as dwelling on the characters' past shortcomings in order to criticise their performance. However, by closing the temporal limits on that June day the novel obscures the imagining of a future, and along with it, of a possible alternative future.

Surprising as it may seem, it is the blockage of the future time in the novel, and not Woolf's recourse to memory, that brings Bergson's philosophy into this study. Parallelisms have already been drawn between Henri Bergson's *durée réelle* and Woolf's 'moments of being', her representation and understanding of temporality, as well as her emphasis on instinct versus intellect (Burwick and Douglass 1992; Gillies 1996; Kumar 1979). However, the Bergson-Woolf debate has overlooked other possible political or ethical connections that go beyond discerning intertextual references from what could just be "a manifestation . . . of the *Zeitgeist*" (Kumar 1979: 68) in the early twentieth-century philosophy and literature. This section will propose an alternative Bergsonian examination of *Mrs Dalloway's* characters in the light of the *élan vital* and the distinction between closed and open morality as posed in the French writer and philosopher's *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932), a work that can retrospectively provide a new insight of politics in Woolf's novel.

Framed within the late nineteenth century vitalist philosophy which stood against the faith of the times in positivist and mechanistic discourses, Bergson's idea of the *élan*

vital arises in *Creative Evolution* (1907). However, at this stage the idea of the vital impulse was not fully defined but just outlined as a kind of consciousness that exists beyond matter and which works as evolution's propelling force. The vital impulse is vaguely sketched as a finite force which is "sustained right along the lines of evolution among which it gets divided, [and] is the fundamental cause of variations" (Bergson 1984: 254). It is in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* that "the primal energy at the heart of the universe is affirmed to be love" (Goudge 1999: 19). The publication date of Bergson's last work does not allow it to be an influence on Woolf's novel. Yet, its view on the *élan vital* and questions of morality allow an alternative Bergsonian reading of *Mrs Dalloways*'s characters that may bring together the diachronic aspect of character construction and the unspoken political tensions in the novel. This idea of love as a powerful and creative force that generates dynamism and evolution will be used henceforth in order to reveal the status quo in the novel.

Accordingly, from the perspective of the *élan vital*, Clarissa and Sally seem to have lost the vital force that they once had in their youth and which would have naturally thrust them into an evolutionary contestation of social constraints regarding class and gender. Instead, the passing away of their youthful sheer vitality and loving feelings is reflected in their mimicry and perpetuation of restrictive, status quo patterns which further suffocate their vitalism. In this sense, it is revealing the recurrent use of verbs in perfective aspect when referring to Clarissa's former manifestations of the *élan vital* in her. When Clarissa remembers that "to dance, to ride, she *had adored* all that" or that "*having cared* for people" (Woolf 2000: 6; emphasis mine) was rewarded in the present by a lack of bitterness, she is signalling the completion of these actions or emotional states by means of the perfect tenses, as if the liveliness, passion and unrestricted affections that she experienced in Bourton were not applicable to her present self, in London.

Shannon Forbes's argument that "the city environment provides for Clarissa a sense of the order, vitality and stability she lacks within her self" (2005: 40) encompasses the Bergsonian reading of Clarissa's loss of her youthful *élan vital*. Having lost the creative impulse of her life in Bourton, Clarissa's deflated self vampirises the vital energy of the urban, hectic flow of London. However, this vital energy cannot be fully incorporated into her identity, leaving her mourning for an acknowledged inner absence: "she could see what she lacked. It was not beauty; it was not mind. It was something central which permeated; something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman, of woman together" (Woolf 2000: 27). This lacking could be interpreted as the vacuum left by the loss of her vital impetus. Since, according to Bergson, "love . . . seems to be at the very essence of the creative effort" (1935: 78), Clarissa's inability to establish a real, warm human connection as she did with Peter and Sally in Bourton signals the loss of her former *élan vital*.

The Dalloways' country-house is also the locus of Sally Seton's vital impetus. Her overflowing liveliness was expressed there in countless ways: running naked along corridors, being untidy, smoking, reading and writing, kissing Clarissa, speaking about marriage as "a catastrophe" or wanting to "abolish private property" – significantly, by freeing flowers from "stiff little vases" and letting them "swim on the top of water in

bowls” (Woolf 2000: 28, 29). Her overt contravening of the rules of expected female behaviour within the heterosexual matrix was to be her overflowing vital impulse. Sally’s loss of her *élan vital* is realised through her compliance with the regulations of patriarchy and materialism that she had overtly questioned, which results in her marriage with “a bald man with a large buttonhole who owned, it was said, cotton mills in Manchester” (2000: 154) and her becoming the proud mother of five. In all, the vital energy that impulsively leads Clarissa and Sally to challenge all types of social constraints has to be sacrificed in their passage to adulthood. It is, echoing Peter’s words, “the death of the soul” (2000: 51).

The degeneration of vital impulse from a young creative energy to middle-aged deflation and inertia can be further interpreted in Bergsonian terms as a movement from an open to a closed morality, which in the novel encompasses the characters’ ageing. In *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Bergson establishes a distinction between these two kinds of morality, a distinction that is based on individuals being both social and human beings. Using the visual metaphor of circles, Bergson envisions the individual at the centre of various concentric rings which represent the different social groups, stretching up to the wider circle of humanity. From this point of view, open morality is that of the great prophets or saints, “exceptional souls . . . who sensed their kinship with the soul of Everyman”; this morality stems from their bearers’ “love towards humanity in general” (Bergson 1935: 77-78), a type of love which corresponds to the *élan vital*. Conversely, closed morality aims to safeguard not humanity but the social group. It is “a quasi-instinctual function that maintains the cohesion of a community and protects it against the threat of others” (Schwartz 1992: 300). Linked to this second type of morality is social duty. Since the purpose of this morality is social cohesion, “as the circles grow smaller, obligations are added to obligations” (Bergson 1935: 9-10). From this perspective, it is possible to interpret the characters’ loss of their *élan vital* not just as a result of ageing, but also as a shrivelling of their love and their morality, and a further burdening of social duties.

Although they are far from being the great prophets or saints of Bergson’s open morality, young Clarissa and Sally share a wider type of love and morality in their Bourton period. Their “talking about life, how they were to reform the world” (Woolf 2000: 28), bound up with Sally’s irreverent and attractive lack of acknowledgement of adults’ social obligations, expresses their concern with society beyond the dictations of the upper-class circle to which they belong. As a consequence of their focusing on a narrower, social rather than human circle, both Clarissa and Sally have to meet obligations aimed both at the definition and the survival of their elitist social group from otherness.

The consciousness of middle-aged Clarissa is punctuated by interiorised, self-preserving social obligations to keep her status: to marry a well-established member of the governing-class, although not a Prime Minister as Peter predicts, to allow and expect “a little independence” (2000: 7) within marriage, to display a “gentle, generous-hearted” (2000: 33) self and to be thankful to those who allow such performance with their gaze, and to refrain from showing “vulgar jealousy” (2000: 26). The duty of Mrs Dalloway is to be “the perfect hostess” (2000: 6) not to humanity but to a restricted

group of guests, that is, the close circle of her old friends and her husband's acquaintances. The narrowing of her morality is also expressed in her contempt towards Miss Kilman's ideological influence over Elizabeth: "love and religion would destroy . . . the privacy of the soul. The odious Kilman would destroy it" (2000: 107). Mrs Dalloway's identification of love and Christianity with a threat to the self reveals the shrivelling of her morals, which once were preoccupied with social issues. In her mature years, the need for preserving one's personal space is felt stronger than that of creating bonds of love with humanity, something posed by religion and its correlative open morality.

Mr Dalloway's position as a Conservative Member of Parliament could promote his engagement with social politics; a politics not easily labelled as *progressive* but nevertheless compelled to enhance the condition of England. Even Lady Bruton thinks that "Richard's first duty was to his country" (2000: 94). This statement would seem to point to Mr Dalloway being the bearer of an open morality, although it is important to note that the notion of *country* refers both to the state and to its people, and here may refer to either of the two. In any case, the human circle that concerns Richard is even narrower than that. He "didn't care a straw what became of Emigration" (2000: 96), "he had no illusions about the London police" and thought that the fault of all this malfunctioning was "in [England's] detestable social system" (2000: 98). Coming from a politician, this contempt towards the entire social body and its institutions seems to express the loss of a political idealism and a will to affect the whole of society. Like Mrs Dalloway, Richard seems to have shifted towards the search for an inward, personal fulfilment that is more attached to closed moralities.

Conversely, Clarissa's daughter, Elizabeth, is portrayed as still maintaining the *élan vital* and the radical spirit that the older generation has abandoned. Like Sally in Bourton, Elizabeth is consciously unobservant of the rules of behaviour and etiquette: Clarissa notes how "[Elizabeth] did not care a bit" about "how she dressed, how she treated people who came to lunch" (2000: 10), which is a reflection on her feeling dutyless towards the maintenance of her parents' social status. The homoerotic desire between young Clarissa and Sally is replicated in the relationship between Elizabeth and Miss Kilman. The bond between the latter pair is described as a "falling in love" (2000: 10) by Clarissa, who also acknowledges her feelings towards Sally as having been, "after all, love" (2000: 28). Likewise, Miss Kilman and Elizabeth re-enact the roles of radical mentor and learning *protégée* that Sally and Clarissa played in Bourton. It is because of Miss Kilman that Elizabeth is aware that "law, medicine, politics, all professions are open to women of [her] generation" (2000: 111), and that allows for daydream of being a "doctor, a farmer, [or] possibly go into Parliament if she found it necessary" (2000: 116). Elizabeth is portrayed as being in a stage of her life when her *élan vital* and an open morality are still alive. Peter foresees a future levelling of Elizabeth's feelings with those of the older guests in the party when he says: "She feels not half what we feel, not yet" (2000: 164). Unlike *To The Lighthouse*, this novel does not provide a future time in which Elizabeth may be revisited so as for the reader to witness the evolution of her radical impulses.

Overall, the novel seems to epitomise the vital impulse that Bergson identifies with love, flux, creation and an open morality with the young characters in the novel, and as such, the novel can be seen as progressive. On the other hand, the middle-aged commitment to those duties that perpetuate and safeguard narrower social circles gives evidence of a lack of *élan vital*. By closing the chronological span of the novel at the end of that summer party, *Mrs Dalloway* prevents the fiction from revealing whether the movement from an open to a closed morality is a generational question that will also affect Elizabeth's vital impetus.

4. Conclusion: decentred discourse, self-centred politics.

By studying the construction of the self upon a synchronic and diachronic axis, this article has unveiled conservative tensions that underlie *Mrs Dalloway* and which have been hitherto overlooked in the scholarly debate, possibly as a result of assumptions of intentionality based on Woolf's personal progressive politics. Analysed from this dual perspective, the free-flowing and relational self in *Mrs Dalloway* turns out to be a construct of language. Far from being the lauded precocious feminist dissent that the literature would have us believe, Woolf's alleged anti-essentialism and connectedness of the self is shown to be a fiction created both by Clarissa Dalloway and the narration. Once these devices are dismantled, the boundless and relational self proves to be more conservative than its seductive discourse claims: it remains steeped in phallogocentrism, conceals characters' alienation under a narrative of communion and veils unacknowledged bonds such as the common lack of social ethics between Mrs Dalloway and Sir Bradshaw, which can be extended to Clarissa's closest circle.

Moreover, further essential conditions for the generation of social change are obliterated from the diegesis in the configuration of the self upon the diachronic axis. Rather than unfurling towards the future, the present time cyclically recurs to an untold past, so that the reader is able to construe and refigure the here and now. However, by framing the recurrent analepsis within the contained temporality of a single June day in 1923, the narrative prevents the present time from being portrayed as the raw matter of a future time that is malleable, still to be created, and whose makers can only be the individuals themselves. The present time in *Mrs Dalloway* is then void of its potential as a trigger for activism. It could be argued that, by limiting temporality within the confines of the characters' lifetime up to that very June day, Woolf is presenting their failures as an obsolete past which can no longer reproduce itself and, therefore, requires change. However, this hypothesis of the unspoken radicalism of the text is problematic, since it forces the reader to stretch the radicalism of the text to the realm of unexpressed dissidence on the basis of authorial intentionality. From a Bergsonian point of view, change is further prevented by the characters' lack of a *vital impetus* that would have propelled creation, rather than involution. Bound up with the adoption of a narrower social ethics that perpetuates their belonging to an elitist social circle, this results in a final celebration of individualistic ethics – of which, the allegedly fragmented self turns out to be central.

In all, the conservative tensions that stem from the construction of the self in *Mrs Dalloway* cannot be said to encapsulate the politics of the entire novel, but they surely interplay with other aspects of the text and should be taken into account. That Clarissa claims the loss of the centredness of the self through her discourse on a disperse, relational and boundless identity should not overshadow the fact that subjects may have been connected in the past, but that they remain unattached to each other in the novel's present and disengaged from altering the future – in short, that behind a decentring discourse on the self lies a conservative, self-centred politics.

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