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## Perception, perspective and moments of being in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*

"When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life"  
London as a setting in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century literature

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#### 1. Introduction

The more *inner* and the less *outer* life a novel presents, the higher and nobler will be its purpose [...]. Art consists in achieving the maximum of inner motion with the minimum of outer motion; for it is the inner life which is the true object of our interest. (Schopenhauer, quoted in Cohn, 9)

Some might say that *Mrs Dalloway* is an extremely boring novel. Two hundred and thirteen pages deal with just one day of only little action: flowers are bought, a former boyfriend met, a party organized. This already forms the great finale in the book. And a poor, unimportant man commits suicide. Admittedly, there is not much action going on - from a superficial point of view. Virginia Woolf lets the story develop inside her characters. The world could even stand still. What occupies the central position in *Mrs Dalloway* are the facets of reality as perceived by the characters presented. When reality is constructed by the subjective consciousness of the people facing it, truth becomes something internal. But what techniques does Virginia Woolf make use of to create such effects? Of what importance is the narrator of the story, if of any? How do the characters perceive their environment and what events allow the narrator to switch in perspective from one character to the next? These and similar questions are meant to be answered in the course of my paper.

Finally, I will consider Woolf's "moments of being", i.e. moments of intense feeling and consciousness, which could be of a revelatory kind. *Mrs Dalloway* is full of these moments of dense reality. But what exactly are these moments about? How does Woolf bring them into action and what effects does she achieve through them? Can these "moments of being" be related to philosophical theories of the time dealing with the perception of reality

#### 1. Narrative technique

## 1.1 Definitions

**Psycho-narration:** denotes an omniscient narration about the psyche, i.e. the consciousness of a character.<sup>1</sup>

**Quoted interior monologue:** '[...] reproduces verbatim the character's own mental language.' (Cohn, 14)

**Narrated monologue:** It is sometimes referred to as "free indirect speech", "indirect interior monologue", "reported speech" and suchlike.<sup>2</sup> It combines psycho-narration with quoted interior monologue by reproducing 'a character's mental discourse in the guise of the narrator's discourse.' (Cohn, 14)

**Stream-of-consciousness:** 'The total range of awareness and emotive-mental response of an individual from the lowest pre-speech level to the highest articulated level of rational thought. The assumption is that in the mind of an individual at a given moment a stream-of-consciousness (the phrase originated in this sense with William James) is a mixture of all the levels of awareness, an unending flow of sensations, thoughts, memories, associations, and reflections; if the exact content of the mind ("consciousness") is to be described at any moment then these varied, disjointed, and illogical elements must find expression in a flow of words, images and ideas similar to the unorganized flow of the mind.' (Norman, "Stream-of-consciousness")

## 1.2 Narrative voices

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf makes use of the narrated monologue form, by which, though the third-person reference is maintained, the character's own mental language can be expressed. The omniscient third-person narrator more or less exclusively presents the characters' thoughts, and 'the narrative text appears as the adjunct of the narrated monologue, rather than the other way around.' (Cohn, 115)

Often it is difficult to distinguish between the narrator's mere report and the character's "world". The streams-of-consciousness appear modulated by a narrative authority.<sup>3</sup> There is a kind of unity between these two voices suggesting that the character himself may be the silent speaker of the entire passage.<sup>4</sup>

In the following example taken from *Mrs Dalloway* I will italicise the passage in narrated monologue form:

"So you're in a funk," he [Dr. Holmes] said agreeably, sitting down by his patient's side. *He had actually talked of killing himself to his wife, quite a girl, a foreigner, wasn't she? Didn't that give her a very odd idea of English husbands? Didn't one owe perhaps a duty to one's wife? Wouldn't it be better to do something instead of lying in bed? For he had had forty years' experience behind him; and Septimus could take Dr. Holmes's word for it - there was nothing whatever the matter with him.* (102) [My emphasis.]

The narrator is established in the very first sentence of the novel. It begins with a remark by Clarissa Dalloway in the shape of reported speech. The sentence 'Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.' (5) can definitely be classified as reported from an outside perspective. But 'as early as [the] second line' there is a 'move away' from 'an objective position of authorial report' to 'the inner voice of the character' (Stevenson, quoted in Whatmore, 194). For several pages the reader sees London from Clarissa's perspective, gets to know about her past experiences, and shares her perception of Hugh Whitbread, whom she meets in the park. The mere outside report can be encountered again only as soon as page 10, where it says: 'She had reached the Park gates. She stood for a moment, looking at the omnibuses in Piccadilly.' (10)

The free indirect thought or narrated monologue is obviously the predominant mood in the novel. Clarissa's feasting on memories or on - in subjective terms - memorable moments during the day is clearly told from her point of view. The presence of the narrator, however, is emphasized by the use of personal pronouns like "she" and "he" rather than "I" and "me" and by the intermitted tags "thought Clarissa" or "Clarissa thought".<sup>5</sup>

## 1.3 Style and Punctuation

In a continuous flow of narrative time Woolf intermingles the past and future with the present.<sup>6</sup> Narrated memories in *Mrs Dalloway* - though they must begin in the pluperfect if they are to be recognized - may shift to the simple past.<sup>7</sup> The moment already finished in the past becomes present in the memory of the character. The past is presented as something remembered and expressed by the character himself. He might have forgotten some details,

he might mix things up. The past - as well as the present perception of the environment - is something purely subjective.

This flow of the language is mainly achieved through repetition, '[...] the very language and rhythm of the sentences follow a hypnotically overlapping progression of repeated words and images.' (Schröder, 327) In fact, language was of fundamental significance to Virginia Woolf. She once described it as 'beautiful and perfectly enduring substance [...]'. (Woolf, quoted in Crevetti, 103) Through repetition Woolf structures her story spatially. Often sections begin and end with the same sentence. What sounds like a refrain suggests a lack of advancement in understanding. The character does not develop; original thoughts are merely reiterated and not revised. Thoughts fail to lead to new understandings and conclusions.<sup>8</sup>

The rhythm of language becomes especially graspable when Woolf - in passages often filling half a page or more - strings together a whole bunch of short sentences only divided by semi-colons. It is like a not ending stammering out of a person's feelings and thoughts. As Clarissa is in the flower shop (16), she offers an entire list of the flowers she sees. 'The alliterative and lyrical cadences endorse Clarissa's wealth, leisure and consumption, promoting her social position as both valuable and desirable. [...] The shop's own cosseting lull is broken by "the pistol shot in the street outside."' (Schröder, 328)

Another important feature of punctuation in *Mrs Dalloway* is Woolf's use of brackets. They can be encountered, for instance, with Richard Dalloway's inability to express the love for his wife.<sup>9</sup> '(But he could not bring himself to say he loved her; not in so many words.)' (130) '(But he could not tell her he loved her. He held her hand. Happiness is this, he thought.)' (131) And later the brackets are substituted by quotation marks, as it says: 'He had not said "I love you"; but he held her hand. Happiness is this, is this, he thought.' (131)

#### **1.4 Switches of perspective**

Though limited to the perception of the character it "visits", the narrator can be defined as omniscient in the sense that it is able to shift from one consciousness to another. Its omniscience is the total of all characters' perceptions and insights. It is present everywhere, but ultimately does not know more about the person in the car or the words the aeroplane is writing than the character, whose eyes it looks through.<sup>10</sup>

By the reported speech, the narrator can weave in and out of several characters' minds. From Clarissa to her neighbour Scrope Purvis, back to Clarissa, on to Septimus and back and forth between him and his wife Lucrezia, with passages where the perspective belongs to some unimportant passers-by, the viewpoints often change without intervening sentences.<sup>11</sup>

Some 'external objects are introduced as a means of transition from the mind of one character to another.' (Bernhardt) The Royal car and the aeroplane advertising toffee link the different characters' perception and help the narrator to move from one to the next. As everybody looks up to the sky in order to figure out what the plane is writing, the crowd becomes a unity. Each individual becomes a facet of one single whole. Clarissa's theory of the transcendental - I will come back later to - is visualized exactly through the multitudes of selves the narrator has insight of.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, 'Woolf's fiction [...] is characterized by the representation of what has come to be known as 'multiple consciousness'.' (Barrett, 196)

#### **2. Perception**

In *Mrs Dalloway* the story does not develop traditionally in form of simply narrated facts, but is strongly filtered through the different characters' perception. Even the characterization in the novel is not taken out by the narrator, but relies mainly on the characters' thoughts about themselves and each other in particular. 'Even looks and clothing [...] are often described by the characters, rather than the narrator.' (Whatmore, 195)

This emphasis on individual points of view presents experiences as something complex and heterogeneous. 'While there are gaps between perceiver and things as they are perceived [...] neither perceiver nor the perceived exist as things in themselves.' (Schröder, 329-330)

This narrative feature in the text becomes evident in Septimus' way of perceiving his environment. But Virginia Woolf does not restrict the visionary capacity solely to the madman of the novel. Peter Walsh has two very vivid hallucinations, and Clarissa Dalloway's narration often implicates some characteristics of a vision<sup>13</sup>. So, for instance, when she thinks about Sally and Peter, it says: "All this she saw as one sees a landscape in a flash of lightning". (41)

All characters appear to be depending on their perception. The reader therefore cannot assume one subjective vision to be truer than another. Truth is presented as something internal, and madness is just another way to perceive reality.

### 3.1 Madness

Madness deals not so much with truth and the world, as with man and whatever truth about himself he is able to perceive. (Foucault, quoted in Barrett, 190)

Septimus Warren Smith has lost his ability to communicate. 'Communication is health; communication is happiness. Communication, he muttered. "What are you saying, Septimus?" Rezia asked, wild with terror, for he was talking to himself.' (103-104) And as the following passage illustrates, this loss of communication with the world outside of him is often decreed by his inability to distinguish between the voices of the factual world and those in his head:

Was it that she had taken off her wedding ring? "My hand has grown so thin," she said; "I have put it in my purse," she told him. He dropped her hand. Their marriage was over, he thought, with agony, with relief. The rope was cut; he mounted; he was free, as it was decreed that he, Septimus, the lord of men, should be free; alone (since his wife had thrown away her wedding ring; since she had left him), he, Septimus, was alone, called forth in advance of the mass of men to hear the truth, to learn the meaning, which now at last, after all the toils of civilisation - Greeks, Romans, Shakespeare, Darwin, and now himself - was to be given whole to . . . "To whom?" he asked aloud [...]. (75)

Traumatized by his war experiences, Septimus' consciousness appears fragmented. Disconnected bits of memory and images fail to give meaning to these experiences. Though the reader can understand the words he uses, the reality beneath them is inaccessible. 'There is an irreconcilable gap between the intensity of experience and emotion the veteran wishes to convey and the experience and emotion the listener can imagine and feel.' (DeMeester, 655)

Woolf transports her character's shell shock not only through the pieces of information about his war service given by Rezia and some comments by Sir William Bradshaw. Way more effective are Septimus' reactions to the world surrounding him. He is hypersensitive to sound, his 'sudden thunder-claps of fear' (96), and he hears voices that are actually not there.<sup>14</sup>

Another important feature revealing Septimus' insanity is the dissolution of the division between subject and object, i.e. between the perceiver and the thing perceived. Septimus does not look at nature as something surrounding him, he actually feels to be a part of it.

But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement. (26)

Septimus is one with the living world. There is a kind of pantheistic view inherent in Septimus: God, nature, and himself become a unity.<sup>15</sup>

### 3.2 Perception of time

'[A]t half past eleven' Peter Walsh is at 'Trafalgar Square' (58), at a 'quarter to twelve' (79) he passes Lucrezia and Septimus in Regent's Park, and shortly after a quarter to twelve he is 'opposite Regent's Park Tube Station' (90), where he gives a coin to the singing lady tramp. Somewhere in between lies his bench-sleep. During this time nothing exciting - from an exterior perspective - occurs, but Peter's, Rezia's and Septimus' memories, daydreams, associations, and visions fill more than thirty pages and by that thirty pages of narrating time. What on the one hand are moments limited in factual time, on the other become little eternities.<sup>16</sup>

Virginia Woolf 'open[s] a disconcerting dialogue with time and space as *perceived*' ("Discuss Woolf's evocation of time and space in the captured 'moments' of art and consciousness.") In contrast to the flux of subjective time, the bell motif is introduced to structure the story chronologically. Alongside the 'clock-time' plot runs a deeply non-chronological narrative bound to the memories of the characters. Septimus is the one affected most by his past experiences, for he often cannot leave them behind and regard them as something finished in the past. His history is not merely recalled from his past memory, it is haunting him in the present.

For the shell shocked the past traumatic event is ever-present, and 'his memories of the event often exist in the present consciousness as encapsulated images [...] that are juxtaposed

against other nontraumatic memories but do not meaningfully relate to them sequentially or chronologically.' (DeMeester, 651)

### **3. Moments of being**

#### **3.1 Virginia Woolf**

"Moments of being" - what should formerly serve as a title of *The Waves*<sup>17</sup> - is an expression coined by Virginia Woolf, which she defines as "[...] certain moments which break off the mass, in which [...] things come together in a combination of inexplicable significance, to arrest those thoughts which [...] are almost menacing with meaning" (Virginia Woolf, quoted in Schmauder, 11).

Woolf emphasizes that these "moments of being" are not related to a religious way of life. On the contrary, they are focussed on worldly pleasures and primarily bound to a passionate and intense feeling of being alive. Though the emotions described are very personal and inexplicable, the *hic et nunc* is of fundamental importance to them.<sup>18</sup> The condition of the world for Woolf is essentially dialogic. 'By its very nature, dialogism assumes that meaning is constructed relatively: it may originate from a moment in space and time that is unique [...] - but that moment is never unique in itself.' (Schröder, 330)

The dialogue between the characters in *Mrs Dalloway* becomes most notably evident between Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith. Clarissa perceives herself always in relation to others. She feels the need of bringing people together, of creating situations in which people can live simultaneously moments in time and space, in which people can encounter one another. Her party is one such occasion.<sup>19</sup>

In the course of the narration these "moments of being" are often suddenly interrupted either by something happening in the "outside world", which attracts the attention of the character focussed on, or by some unexpected thoughts. One of these breaks can be noticed on the very first page of the novel. Clarissa Dalloway is feasting on memories of the past, thinks about the 'fresh' and 'calm [...] air', which she compares to ' [...] the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave', and immediately after this she remembers ' [...] solemn, feeling as she did [...] that something awful was about to happen'. (5)

"Oh this horror!" she [Clarissa] said to herself, as if she had known all along that something would interrupt, would embitter her moment of happiness. (41)

While the inexplicable "moment of being" can 'lift [...]' Clarissa 'up and up' (16), the moment of revelation, which is not the realization of a person's true nature but rather the making absolute of a single aspect of it, is full of bitterness and cruelty.<sup>20</sup>

#### **3.2 Philosophy**

I must find a truth which is true for me...the idea for which I can live or die. (Kierkegaard, quoted in Brown)

Saint-Exupéry (1900-1944) once said that truth is not discovered but constructed by us.<sup>21</sup> The perception of reality has been a major concern to philosophy since antiquity. The idea that 'humans can never fully experience reality, only a shadow of it', goes back to Plato (427 BC - 347 BC). Linked to Plato's theory, a phenomenological school developed under Husserl, and advanced by Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and Heidegger, who 'put aside the question of "real existence" and stressed the role of the active, involved body in all human knowledge' (Brown). Karl Jaspers (1883-1963) defined the mystical as the dissolution of the division between subject and object.

Wo kein Objekt mehr gegenübersteht, also jeder Inhalt fehlt, darum auch unsagbar ist und wo doch erlebt wird, sprechen wir im allerweitesten Sinne vom Mystischen. (Jaspers, quoted in Wenner, 16)

The striking parallels between Jaspers' mysticism and Woolf's view are on the one hand that the meaning of the moment cannot be transferred by words, and on the other that subject and object cannot be distinguished any more. In *Mrs Dalloway* this feature becomes vivid in Clarissa's transcendental theory, she once explained to Peter Walsh:

[...] she felt herself everywhere; not "here, here, here"; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere. [...] She was all that. So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places. Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to, some woman in the street, some man behind a counter - even trees, or barns. It ended in a 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, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places, after death. Perhaps - perhaps. (168)

Also Septimus Warren Smith has an inherent transcendence about him: most notably in his attitude towards trees.

Woolf's view of the world was closely related to 'the notion of internal truth. Internal truth is particular and momentary: it is a form of what we might call [...] 'inner-wordly mysticism' in Woolf. [...] Internal truth is for Woolf a transitory and evanescent phenomenon; it is also intuitive rather than systematic.' (Barrett, 190)

Psychoanalytically spoken, Woolf's "moments of being" could be related to what Jung defined as the penetration of unconscious contents into the consciousness.<sup>22</sup> For Virginia Woolf "being" was a conscious and memorable experience, the opposite of "non-being", which can be related to habits and a lack of consciousness.<sup>23</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* is a strong example for a novel challenging the frontiers that constitute novelistic fiction.<sup>24</sup> The interest in presenting factual reality declined not only in literature. Also art moved away from it, dealing with abstract forms and emphasizing the internal reality rather than the external. Of course, this matter of concern could fill a paper of its own. The way in which reality is presented in the arts is a very complex subject, but a subject worth dealing with, because it opened a new way of perceiving the world. In this sense, *Mrs Dalloway* offers not merely a dense dialogic interrelation between its characters, but - beyond this - carries a switch of perspective inherent in the society of the time.

Though Woolf maintains the narrator to move from one consciousness to the next, it functions solely as a presenter, not as a narrative authority. It does seldom tell what is going on; it rather passes on the microphone. Woolf renders the character himself important: his/her way of perceiving himself/herself, others, and the environment.

*Mrs Dalloway*, like some philosophical schools, denies the presence of one truth valid for everybody. Truth is subjective; truth is created. Take a walk in the park: it could be a wonderful experience, listening to the birds singing, watching all these people passing, discovering - unexpectedly - to be alive. For Rezia and Septimus the park offers quite a different sight. But everything is temporary; everything changes. The moment of being is broken; the revelation fades away. What lasts is the bitter notion that happiness is just a state of mind, and that madness just another way to perceive reality.

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1 See Cohn, 11.

2 See Cohn, 13.

3 See Schmauder, 1.

4 See Whatmore, 194.

5 See Whatmore, 197.

6 See DeMeester, 651.

7 See Cohn, 128.

8 See DeMeester, 651.

9 See Barrett, 195.

10 See Whatmore, 195.

11 See Cohn, 118.

12 See Schmauder, 10-11. (Page numbers are guessed, because they are not given in the online text.)

13 See „Discuss Woolf's evocation of time and space in the captured 'moments' of art and consciousness." (footnote 13)

14 See Thomas, 50.

15 See Schmauder, 5-6. (Page numbers are guessed, because they are not given in the online text.)

16 See Schmauder, 8-9. (Page numbers are guessed, because they are not given in the online text.)

17 See Wenner, 24.

18 See Schmauder, 11-12. (Page numbers are guessed, because they are not given in the online text.)

19 See Schröder, 332.

20 See Wenner, 55-56.

21 See Watzlawick, 91.

22 See Wenner, 17.

23 See Wenner, 26.

24 See Ferrer, 141.

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