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Unconditional Looking

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THE INNER LIFE OF 'MRS DALLOWAY'

by Edward Mendelson.

Columbia, 137 pp., £20, September, 978 0 231 22171 9

'MRS DALLOWAY': BIOGRAPHY OF A NOVEL

by Mark Hussey.

Manchester, 222 pp., £18.99, May, 978 1 5261 7681 3

MRS DALLOWAY

by Virginia Woolf, edited by Edward Mendelson.

NYRB, 208 pp., £15.99, September, 978 1 68137 998 2

There's no shortage of advice for anyone who wishes to sample the work of one of the most widely admired 20th-century writers. The literary genres Virginia Woolf mastered during a career cut brutally short include the novel, short story, essay, biography, memoir, letter and diary. Authoritative texts of everything she wrote have been assembled with (for the most part) exemplary dedication and care. The novels, stories and essays are available in a wide variety of formats and the commentary surrounding them is correspondingly vast. The centenary of *Mrs Dalloway*'s publication has done nothing to dampen the enthusiasm. New editions appear on what has begun to feel like a weekly basis. More striking still, perhaps, are the new forms of support act. Edward Mendelson describes his critical study of *Mrs Dalloway* as a guide to the novel's 'inner life'. Mark Hussey's is subtitled 'Biography of a Novel'. What next for the literary masterpiece, one wonders. Birthday cards? A retirement gong?

Daunted by the hullabaloo, I was relieved to come across the wispy voice of Leonard Woolf, asked in an interview broadcast by the BBC on 23 May

1964 to define his wife's 'genius' or 'special attributes'. 'Normally,' he responded,

she was extremely happy and enjoyed all the usual things of life, but every now and then in conversation, for instance, she would do what I call leave the ground and give the most fantastic account, say, of a perfectly ordinary thing which had happened to her or which she'd seen – which was like what she does, I think, when she's at her best in her novels.

Leonard's observation scarcely amounts to the key to all Woolfian mythologies. But it does very usefully tie the processes of Woolf's fiction into everyday practices such as conversation or the keeping of a diary. And there's an exactness to the metaphor of leaving the ground. It encourages us to think about the moment at which, or the movement by means of which, an understanding of the world starts to take shape.

Woolf's most vivid description of the experience of leaving the ground occurs in the posthumously published 'Sketch of the Past', written in 1939, which evokes in absorbing detail the early life of a child of well-to-do parents, 'born into a very communicative, literate, letter-writing, visiting, articulate late-19th-century world'. Most of the time, Woolf maintains, we exist enveloped in a kind of 'nondescript cotton wool'. 'One walks, eats, sees things, deals with what has to be done' – the 'broken vacuum cleaner', or clothes to be washed, or, all in a day's work for the owners of the Hogarth Press, books to be bound. Arising unpredictably out of the cotton wool, however, are 'exceptional moments' during which some aspect of the world appears to us in what might feel like its essence. 'Sketch of the Past' dwells on a moment of utter captivation experienced by the young Woolf as she took in the sweep of gardens stretching down the slope below Talland House, the family's holiday home in St Ives. 'The buzz, the croon, the smell, all seemed to press voluptuously against some membrane; not to burst it; but to hum round one such a complete rapture of pleasure that I stopped, smelt; looked.' Woolf was a virtuoso of the semicolon. The last one in this sentence gives us a split second in which to consider what the look in question might have involved. It is, I think, above all unconditional. It has no agenda. In Woolf's experience, unconditional looking constituted, if not rapture as such, then its precondition.

It wasn't always like that. Cotton wool can protect as well as muffle. To be rapt is to have been seized: the term shares a root with rape, and it isn't surprising that 'Sketch of the Past' should also have plenty to say about the fear induced by the sort of 'violent shock' to which Woolf was on occasion subjected as a child: most dramatically, perhaps, during the tedium of the twice-daily walk in Kensington Gardens 'when the idiot boy sprang up with his hand outstretched mewing, slit-eyed, red-rimmed; and without saying a word, with a sense of horror in me, I poured into his hand a bag of Russian toffee.'

Mrs Dalloway began as 'Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street', a short story drafted by the end of August 1922, which she at once began to imagine as an episode in a novel. By December 1924, she had a final draft. *Mrs Dalloway* was published the following May by the Hogarth Press in Britain and by Harcourt, Brace in the United States. Mendelson's new edition takes its copy text from the first Hogarth Press version. He believes, as Woolf herself did, that books have to take their chance in the world, like everything else; but that their author should nonetheless have the final say, insofar as their intentions can be ascertained, as to what we actually end up reading. He has accordingly incorporated the nine minor corrections and revisions that Woolf made in a second impression of September 1925 and in a third of September 1929. Of the various errors which have in his view 'disfigured' almost all of the many editions published since 1929, the most significant by far is the omission of some of the section breaks Woolf introduced in order to clarify the work's intricate design. In her Cambridge edition from 2014, Anne Fernald established that, as befits a work originally known as 'The Hours', there were meant to be twelve sections. Mendelson provides an extensive note on the text which sifts the evidence for his choices. It's hard to imagine that any future editor will want to do a great deal more than to thank him for his labours.

Mendelson, most spartan of enablers, has denied himself the editorial perk of a reflective introduction and an apparatus of explanatory notes. *The Inner Life of 'Mrs Dalloway'* breaks that vow of silence with a rip-roaring tribute to a canonical work forged from diverse literary and philosophical traditions. In it, he argues that the ultimate purpose of the

modern tale the novel tells about a society hostess and her traumatised war-veteran double is to reanimate a story of 'ancient and religious' origin – a myth, in fact – concerning 'one person's sacrifice for the sake of another person's redemption'. Hussey, more curatorial in tone, proves a thoughtful and observant guide to the intricacies of a work he clearly knows inside out.

If there is a shared motif, it derives from the diary entry of 19 June 1923, which contains Woolf's most forthright declaration of purpose: 'I want to give life & death, sanity & insanity; I want to criticise the social system, & to show it at work, at its most intense.' Hussey invokes the gist of the statement – 'I want to criticise the social system' – several times in different contexts. It launches Mendelson's preface, too, and subsequently works its way into his exploration of the 'cold fury' Woolf felt at the treatment meted out by the medical profession to the young shell-shock victim Septimus Warren Smith, Clarissa's dark double: insanity to her sanity, death to her life. In the novel, the cold fury climaxes in a lengthy denunciation of the will-to-power manifest in the Harley Street specialist Sir William Bradshaw's worship of the twin 'goddesses' of 'Proportion' – in effect, compliance with the status quo – and 'Conversion', a desire to subdue and control. As Hussey points out, this passage constitutes a rare intrusion on the part of the impersonal narrator into the novel's customary free indirect style.

Woolf's declaration that she meant to 'criticise the social system' has long been ubiquitous both in studies of *Mrs Dalloway* and in benchmark commentaries such as Elaine Showalter's introduction to the 1992 Penguin volume. It headlines the measured account Trudi Tate provides of the novel's politics in her new edition for Oxford. But I have yet to see the sentence which incorporates the phrase quoted in full. 'I want to give life & death, sanity & insanity; I want to criticise the social system, & to show it at work, at its most intense – But here I may be posing.' The afterthought's most interesting implication may lie in its acknowledgment that a critical act of any kind is, if not necessarily a pose, then at the very least a performance.

Woolf's most complete critical performance during this period was *The Common Reader*, a collection of essays put together while she was at work on *Mrs Dalloway* and published a month before it. 'Modern Fiction',

the collection's centrepiece, takes an axe to frowsty Edwardian sagas in which all the 'figures' are 'dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour', recommending with lyrical urgency that writers should instead 'look within', as James Joyce had begun to do in *Ulysses*, in an attempt to render the 'myriad impressions' received by 'an ordinary mind on an ordinary day'. But 'Modern Fiction' is rarely read in context. On either side of it in *The Common Reader*, like the cladding on a nuclear reactor, are essays about 19th-century women novelists: Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot. The tribute paid to Austen, in particular, is remarkable both for its warmth and for its acuity. Woolf admired Austen above all for her ability to grasp the exceptional moment – 'in which all the happiness of life is collected' – as it arises out of and then subsides back into the 'ebb and flow of ordinary existence'. She has in mind the scene in *Mansfield Park* in which Edmund Bertram and Fanny Price meet on the stairs 'as they go up to dress for dinner, with housemaids passing'. There is more Austen than Joyce in *Mrs Dalloway*.

Woolf's biographer Hermione Lee notes that throughout her adult life 'the lure of solitude, anonymity, countryside, reading, creating, pulled against the desire for fame, society, money, gossip, parties and involvements.' This insistent rhythm of venturing out and withdrawal was to serve a crucial narrative function in a novel which, like *Ulysses*, chronicles a single day in the lives of its main protagonists. Clarissa Dalloway ventures out on a bright morning in June 1923 to buy the flowers for the party she will throw later that day in her role as the wife of an industrious if scarcely pre-eminent Conservative MP (the prime minister himself has been invited). An equally pressing if less explicit task is to remind herself of the person she is when not just being Mrs Richard Dalloway: 'What she loved was this, here, now, in front of her; the fat lady in the cab.' For a moment, wrapped in the sound and scent of the Bond Street flower shop, like the young Woolf caught up in the buzz and croon outside Talland House, she seems to stand on the threshold of

a rapture which promises to 'surmount' the underlying anxieties she can't altogether quell ('it lifted her up and up'). Then a car backfiring like a pistol shot in the street outside punctures the mood. So ends the first of the novel's twelve sections.

In its second section, Clarissa's is just one voice among several in a chorus of observations on the metropolitan scene. We don't catch up with her again fully until the rhythm of venturing out and withdrawal has carried her home at the beginning of the third. Re-entering a house 'cool as a vault', Clarissa feels 'like a nun who has left the world'. Here she will remain, Mendelson remarks, 'moving only between different floors and different rooms, until the end'. Several stories by Woolf's close friend and fierce rival Katherine Mansfield turn on the movement between relatively private and relatively public spaces within a building. That, too, will happen in *Mrs Dalloway*. Woolf, however, unlike Mansfield, took as great an interest in vertical – the ground left behind – as in horizontal movement. It mattered to her, I think, that Edmund Bertram and Fanny Price should have met on the stairs. Clarissa, like 'a nun withdrawing, or a child exploring a tower', ascends at once to her attic bedroom. Here, at the top of the house, in its most private space, rapture does finally seize her as she recalls the intense arousal she has in the past experienced in the presence of other women (for 'she did undoubtedly then feel what men felt'). These reflections bring back the almost unbearably sharp memory of events which took place a long time ago at Bourton, the family home, when she was eighteen, and her friend Sally Seton kissed her on the lips. But why does it take a withdrawal into memory to achieve what arriving at the Bond Street florist's bower of bliss could not? Clarissa has lived with the 'repression' of such excitements, as Mendelson puts it, 'all her adult life'.

There's a precedent in Austen for Clarissa's absorption in the fat lady in the cab. Emma Woodhouse, stationed at the door of the fashionable haberdasher's shop in the main street of Highbury while her protégée, Harriet Smith, hesitates among the muslins, seems perfectly happy scanning the most mundane of urban scenes. 'A mind lively and at ease,' she reflects, 'can do with seeing nothing, and can see nothing that does not answer.' It's as pithy a definition of unconditional looking as you could hope for. Austen's use of free indirect style ensures that the

thought, like Clarissa's absorption in the fat lady in the cab, belongs as much to Emma as it does to an impersonal narrator. But there's a problem. So convinced is Emma of her own ability as a matchmaker that this expert observer of everyday life fails on more than one occasion to notice what is going on under her own nose, with damaging consequences for those concerned.

Austen said that she had chosen 'a heroine whom no one but myself will much like'. Woolf, too, takes the considerable risk of adopting the point of view of a protagonist whose sense of entitlement makes her hard to warm to. In both cases, the entitlement stems from the privileges bestowed by wealth and status (Emma is the only one of Austen's heroines to be guaranteed financial security from the outset). Austen allows us to imagine that unconditional looking, in itself the expression of an admirable lust for life, may at the same time induce or strengthen complacency. Emma, of course, has by her side that most tactful of scourges, Mr Knightley, whose gentle admonishing will pave the way for her redemption from entitlement. Woolf seems to have felt that Clarissa would merit sterner measures. She duly appointed a pair of harpies to do the job. For in *Mrs Dalloway* she meant not only to give voice to the spirit of criticism, but to dwell in detail on its embodiment: its atmospheres, its methods and mannerisms.

The first of these harpies, already vividly in Clarissa's thoughts on the novel's opening page, is her old friend and admirer Peter Walsh. In their youth, Peter, too, had been at Bourton, where on a particularly fraught occasion he proposed to her. He's always felt that she betrayed her best self by settling instead for a cosseted life as Mrs Richard Dalloway. It is Peter who has held her feet most relentlessly to the fire, and now he's back in London after three decades as a colonial administrator in India, mannerisms intact – notably the habit of opening and closing the pocket knife he always carries with him whenever he feels agitated. And there's an even harsher challenge to Clarissa's self-esteem in the offing, in the shape of Doris Kilman, history teacher and constant companion to her daughter, Elizabeth. Elizabeth, it seems, doesn't care for anything very much apart from her dog, Grizzle. The whole house stinks of the tar used to treat the animal's distemper. 'Still, better poor Grizzle,' Clarissa

reflects. 'Better distemper and tar and all the rest of it than sitting mewed in a stuffy bedroom with a prayer book.' The stuffy bedroom is where Elizabeth and the ostentatiously pious Miss Kilman spend rather more time than Clarissa considers healthy. It's her 'experience' that 'religious ecstasy ... made people callous (so did causes); dulled their feelings, for Miss Kilman would do anything for the Russians, starved herself for the Austrians, but in private inflicted positive torture, so insensitive was she, dressed in a green mackintosh coat. Year in year out she wore that coat; she perspired.' Miss Kilman does not merely exist in an atmosphere of what H.G. Wells once termed 'mackintoshiness'. She brandishes it as a weapon in the war of ideas. She is a fierce critic of a social system designed for the benefit of 'the most worthless of all classes – the rich, with a smattering of culture'. Her criticisms are by no means misplaced. But that is not in itself a justification for all the posing in the stuffy bedroom.

The 'obvious source' for Miss Kilman, as Hussey puts it, was Louise Ernestine Matthaei, Leonard's assistant as editor of the *International Review*, who like her supposed fictional avatar had been dismissed from a teaching post because of her German heritage (Kilman is an anglicised version of Kiehlman). But there is, I think, another candidate, one who arrived on the scene at precisely the moment when Woolf was beginning to think that 'Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street', in which Miss Kilman does not feature, might form the basis for a novel. In the summer of 1919, she and Leonard had bought a house in Rodmell, East Sussex. Writing to Lytton Strachey on 24 August 1922, she announced that their old Cambridge acquaintance Charlie Sanger and his wife, Dora, would be staying for a while in nearby Southease. Charlie, an Apostle (like Strachey and Leonard) and friend of Bertrand Russell, was now an eminent barrister and economist. Dora, from a Quaker family (Richard Dalloway hires Miss Kilman as Elizabeth's tutor when he comes across her working for the Friends), had taken up philanthropy. Woolf found her high-mindedness insufferable. 'How wretched she always makes me feel!' she once complained to Ottoline Morrell. 'If one has anything tender, morbid, uneasy about one she always comes down with her heel and gives it a good squirming.' She didn't hasten to Southease to greet the new arrivals. A diary entry of 3 September reveals that the inevitable

encounter eventually took place in the churchyard at Rodmell, where Woolf came across Dora in the company of her daughter, Daphne, 'aged sixteen: a nice, sleek-headed, brown-eyed girl; in a mackintosh'. The slight pause created by the semi-colon casts a quizzical eye on a garment felt to be ever so slightly peculiar.

What Woolf needed, at this juncture, was the kind of character who could be relied on to give her protagonist's various tendernesses a good squirming. The conversation in the churchyard revealed that Daphne 'is at Bedales; goes to Newnham; then proposes to reform the world, by a moderate kind of revolution, so far as I understand her ... She will write pamphlets, as a beginning.' Here, then, was a question about the extent of the influence wielded by a maternal or quasi-maternal figure on an impressionable teenager. What's more, the Sangers seemed keen to advertise their ungainliness. 'The three of them stalk in,' Woolf reported on 7 September. 'Dora at least stumps.' On 30 October she wrote inviting Dora to call in at Hogarth House in Richmond, the London home to which she and Leonard had by now returned. The obligatory teasing carries a definite edge. 'I suppose you'll say you haven't time for frivolity, and make off with my matches again, having first said all the disagreeable things you can think of, because you are upset about the Chinese rice pickers and their famines and earthquakes.' Woolf wasn't making it up about China. In the summer of 1919 severe drought caused a famine which was to result over the next two years in half a million deaths. On 16 December 1920 a massive earthquake struck Gansu province. She wasn't making it up about Russia and Austria, either, where starvation was prevalent throughout 1922, much to Doris Kilman's distress (Tate's Oxford introduction has the details). Doris is about as close as a name could get to Dora. 'Elizabeth was closeted with Dora Kilman,' Woolf wrote in one of the drafts for a passage in the novel's ninth section – a prospect Clarissa finds 'nauseating'. Lurking somewhere in that confusion of names, I suspect, is Daphne's mackintosh.

The ninth section of *Mrs Dalloway*, detailing the afternoon's main events, is by far the longest. It's packed with narrative cotton wool: a dismal lunch, a desultory encounter in a hotel dining room, neither of which would have been entirely out of place in an Edwardian saga. Woolf had once been quite ready to forgive 'masterly' Walter Scott for the 'dull

sermons' in *Old Mortality* because everything in that book is 'so much in keeping'. Boredom, after all, is woven into the ebb and flow of non-being out of which moments of being arise. One duly does, about halfway through the section, just after Miss Kilman, 'standing formidable upon the landing in her mackintosh', has swept in to collect Elizabeth. Clarissa watches rapt as the old lady who lives in the house opposite climbs the stairs to her bedroom, parts the curtains, turns away from the window and disappears, though she can still just about see a white cap moving at the back of the room. This oddly intimate encounter with someone else's non-being has led her, she thinks, to the brink of the sort of 'supreme mystery' about which neither of her tormentors is likely to have anything worthwhile to say: 'Here was one room; there another. Did religion solve that, or love?' Supreme mystery is laying it on a bit thick. But the detail of the white cap might just create the precondition, if not for rapture, then for a self-awareness no longer fearful of being out-performed. Meanwhile the narrative emphasis has shifted dramatically. The ninth section begins with Septimus Smith's arrival at the Harley Street consulting room of Sir William Bradshaw, to whom he's been referred by his landlady's GP, Dr Holmes, and ends with his leap from a window. Sir William, the medical profession's will-to-power incarnate, seeks to control his patients by classification in terms of an abstract symptomatology rather than to cure them by the exhaustive investigation of a unique personal history. He subscribes, as Mendelson puts it, to the 'neurobiological fallacy' that mental illness is best explained by genetics. Madness, Sir William declares, is the result of 'unsocial impulses, bred more than anything by the lack of good blood'. Keen that Septimus should not be classified as a 'degenerate', Woolf supplies him with an extensive personal history: that of a talented young man in a steady if unrewarding job who enlists in 1914 in a patriotic fever, but loses all capacity to feel when the officer to whom he is devoted dies in battle. (Lee notes that Woolf frequently described herself as mad, but never as unintelligible: that is, an 'idiot' or 'imbecile'.) Septimus is no mere victim. In a note written in August 1923, Woolf said of him that he 'must somehow see through human nature – see its hypocrisy & insincerity'. His defiance, his utter refusal to be browbeaten, makes him one of the book's critics of the social system. If he is a victim,

it's of a very particular kind, subjected to relentless persecution because, as the prophet of an insurrectionary 'religion', he conveys in his person the 'greatest message in the world'. Sir William regards him as the sort of man who 'comes into your room and says he is Christ (a common delusion)'. This is the point at which Mendelson's argument about the novel's reanimation of a myth of sacrifice and redemption comes into focus. Sanity and insanity, life and death: Septimus dies so that Clarissa, who learns about his leap from the window as her party reaches its climax, and who has yet to confront the implications of what happened at Bourton all those years ago, may live.

It isn't just the strength of Woolf's avowed atheism, which Mendelson acknowledges, that makes me wonder how far such claims can be pressed. Septimus is very well read. 'There was Swift too,' Woolf noted in a draft of a scene in which Septimus reflects on the uncompromising 'message' he has found in the works of other writers who in his view have also seen through human hypocrisy and insincerity: Aeschylus, Dante, Shakespeare. Jonathan Swift, driven mad by too much truth-telling (or so someone with Septimus's experience of life might have supposed), doesn't make it into the novel's final version. But there's a remnant, nonetheless, of his celebrated inclination to detest 'that animal called man' while heartily loving 'John, Peter, Thomas and so forth'. One of the experiences which finally persuades Septimus to seek professional help ('He gave in') is a hazardous stroll down Tottenham Court Road:

In the street, vans roared past him; brutality blared out on placards; men were trapped in mines; women burnt alive; and once a maimed file of lunatics being exercised or displayed for the diversion of the populace (who laughed aloud), ambled and nodded and grinned past him, in the Tottenham Court Road, each half apologetically, yet triumphantly, inflicting his hopeless woe. And would *he* go mad?

These men are not shell-shocked war veterans. They are, rather, or so the neurobiological fallacy might decree, the hapless inheritors of bad blood. The feeling they provoke in Septimus is sheer fury. How dare such people inflict on him their 'hopeless woe'? They should be made to wipe that triumphant grin off their faces. There is certainly an explanation for the fury ('And would *he* go mad?'). But the thought has been sown, in his

mind and in ours, that there may be something in the very constitution of 'that animal called man' unredeemable even by a saviour as benevolent and all-powerful as himself.

The more fully annotated editions of *Mrs Dalloway* – such as Anne Fernald's for Cambridge or Merve Emre's for Norton in 2021 – draw attention at this juncture to an incident recorded in Woolf's diary on 9 January 1915. She and Leonard had decided to walk along the Thames from Richmond to Kingston. The entry consists for the most part of a low-key description of a few hours of thoroughly congenial non-being ('We bought a pineapple for 9d'). Halfway through, however, we encounter some of the most vicious sentences Woolf ever wrote:

On the towpath we met & had to pass a long line of imbeciles. The first was a very tall young man, just queer enough to look twice at, but no more; the second shuffled, & looked aside; & then one realised that everyone in that long line was a miserable ineffective shuffling idiotic creature, with no forehead, or no chin, & an imbecile grin, or a wild suspicious stare. It was perfectly horrible. They should certainly be killed.

When she met and had to pass the long line on the towpath, Woolf was in the middle of a prolonged bout of mental illness which lasted, off and on, from the summer of 1913 until well into 1915. As Lee points out, we should never underestimate the 'awful fear' which accompanied each of these breakdowns and the 'possibility of their recurrence'. Septimus Smith on Tottenham Court Road could be said to articulate that awful fear on her behalf. But it nonetheless remains a fact that the lack of compassion shown towards the straggle of men on the towpath is absolute. I couldn't get them out of my head. Might it be possible to discover, if not who they were, then at least where they came from?

There were at the time several mental hospitals, public and private, in the Richmond area: none within easy walking distance of that particular stretch of towpath. The men's most likely place of origin is the Middlesex County Lunatic Asylum, as it was then known, at Wandsworth, a short journey by train from Richmond and Kingston. Open the relevant volume of the institution's medical journal and the names of patients admitted to it during this period pour out. Each was tagged on arrival with a designation of 'bodily disorder' (melancholia, mania, grand paralysis,

epilepsy, phthisis, debility, 'carbuncle on the neck'). You'd have to dig deeper into the archive than I could to find out anything more about what was done to these men's minds. It's clear, however, that their bodies were by no means uncared for. Next to the column in the medical journal in which admissions are entered is another listing any injuries recently suffered by patients – down to the most inconsequential cut, graze or bruise – and the occasion of its occurrence ('fell in fit', 'while working with the coal gang'). Many of them worked on the asylum farm, from which one or two duly legged it. Recreation wasn't out of the question, either. An entry in the minutes for a meeting of the general committee held on 28 December 1912 records that 'a bioscope company were anxious to give an exhibition in the asylum and it was resolved that the same be allowed.' If the men Woolf encountered were indeed from the Wandsworth asylum, they were there, harmlessly, for the purposes of exercise and a change of scene.

Clarissa's party has placed her at the summit of the social ambitions to which Mrs Richard Dalloway might plausibly aspire. But she's not having a good time: she 'felt herself a stake driven in at the top of her stairs'. The subsequent arrival of Sir William Bradshaw and his wife, bearing with them the news of Septimus's suicide, provides sufficient reason to withdraw into a small and mercifully uninhabited side room. A couple of complicated pages ensue as she ponders the implications of what seems to her to have been an 'attempt' on the young man's part to 'communicate' – even 'embrace'. Mendelson argues that Clarissa 'finds through him, although she had never heard of him before, a psychological new life that until this moment had seemed to her impossible'. What finally overcomes all her 'evasions' is not the performances of her critics, or her husband's enduring kindness, but 'someone else's death'. It's a compelling account, admirably alert to the nuances of the writing. But we might nonetheless wonder about the nature, scope and function of this instantaneous (and distinctly one-

sided) rapport. The best Mendelson can do is to describe it, on five separate occasions, as 'uncanny'.

'But why,' Clarissa wonders, 'had he done it?' Good question. From what Lady Bradshaw has told her, she's able to reconstruct vividly – to see as if with her own eyes – the dramatic plunge from a window down onto the area railings: 'Through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes' (the rust seems a rather Gothic touch). But that's about all she does know, which is nothing like as much as we do. We know about the nightmare vision on Tottenham Court Road. We know that it was not the Harley Street sophisticate but the utterly commonplace GP ('Human nature, in short, was on him – the repulsive brute, with the blood-red nostrils. Holmes was on him') whose bullying ultimately hounded him to his death. Septimus will have no truck with human nature. There's a limit to his generosity – to his defiance, even, since Sir William himself would scarcely disown the verdict he had once delivered on the men he met on Tottenham Court Road – of which Clarissa remains ignorant. Before leaving the side room, Clarissa once again catches sight of the old lady opposite, who returns her stare. Unconditional looking has in this instance yielded an intimate encounter of a kind. The re-establishment of an alternative stimulus to self-reflection – one involving life rather than death – frees us to speculate as to what her 'psychological new life' might amount to. My money is on neighbourliness. The next time she passes the old lady in the street when setting out to buy flowers, Clarissa will at least acknowledge her, by a nod, smile or jocular remark about late nights. But Woolf, I think, wants us to understand that fiercer challenges await. What if the person one encounters on the street is not an elderly neighbour but the haplessly nodding and grinning leader of a 'maimed file'?

The novel's twelfth and final section plunges us back into the ebb and flow of ordinary existence that moments of being arise out of and gently subside back into. Peter Walsh has spent most of the evening in conversation with the once rebellious Sally Seton, now married to a Manchester plutocrat and determined to bore him to death with stories about her five sons at Eton and her prize collection of 'very very rare hibiscus lilies that never grow north of the Suez Canal'. But he, too, will experience a decisive moment, as he waits to say goodnight to host and

hostess. 'What is this terror? What is this ecstasy? he thought to himself. What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement?' He has been 'caught up', Mendelson observes, in a vision of Clarissa, 'with all the terror and ecstasy of any sudden recognition of another self in its depth and fullness'. Maybe Peter Walsh is Mr Knightley, after all, with added pocket knife. Many readers will hope so. But Woolf, true to what she had learned from Austen, renders Peter's rapturous ascent, rather wonderfully, as already a settling back down to earth or reversion to non-being. The novel's final sentence is its least declamatory, pure cotton wool. 'For there she was.'