

The Fragility of Postwar Shock in *Mrs. Dalloway* and “A Berlin Chronicle”

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Abstract

This essay compares tactics of prolepsis and memory in Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway and Walter Benjamin’s “A Berlin Chronicle,” works that share prophetic encounters with the logic of globalization we so little know how to register in the present. Woolf and Benjamin consistently recorded the active potentiality of secular urban life alongside its reactive manifestations, seeking to guide modern technologies of representation into the service of democracy. They emphasize reminiscence as a way to mobilize the perception of unconscious, often minute details, as well as of valuable elusive moments that constantly threaten to disappear from human consciousness.

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In the beginning of Mrs. Dalloway’s walk through London, a car bearing the royal insignia is stopped on the street. All heads turn and for a moment, habitual life is interrupted by a feeling that strangers are more deeply connected: “something had happened. Something so trifling in single instances that no mathematical instrument, though capable of transmitting shocks in China, could register the vibration; yet in its fullness rather formidable and in its common appeal emotional; for in all the hat shops and tailors’ shops strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of Empire” (18). The narrator acknowledges by noting that “no mathematical instrument . . . could register the vibration” that a fundamental breach has occurred between the perception of a centuries-long affect engendered by national community and the kind of community produced by the prestige of modern science and advertising. The observation of that breach is even stronger in what follows.

Moments later, all heads turn from the permanency of the royal insignia to an airplane that flies overhead to inscribe a much more enigmatic and temporary message in smoke: “The clouds to which the letters E, G, or L had attached themselves moved freely, as if destined to cross from West to East on a mission of the greatest importance which would never be revealed, and yet certainly so it was—a mission of the greatest importance” (20). Despite the airplane’s remarkable determination, the community that forms under its sign remains

puzzled, not quite sure how to read the word, “Kreemo,” that appears and wavers in relation to its referent. This sign does not demand awe, and does not carry with it a vision of a “final mission” to be carried on from generation to generation. It nevertheless trumps the Queen, and requires a different kind of attention.

In this juxtaposition, and in this quintessentially urban moment, Woolf gives us a subtle contemplation of a massive epochal shift. The present of the text, however, by generously accommodating both kinds of reading defers the registering of this very shift. As we know from her other works, Woolf constantly logged shifts in the history of Western consciousness. Orlando, who moves from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, in one continuous lifetime logs these transformations from the position of an always defamiliarizing consciousness. In “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” Woolf declared ironically that “on or about December, 1910, human character changed” (96). And in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Peter Walsh observes that “Those five years—1918 to 1923—had been, he suspected, somehow very important” (71).

Constantly preoccupied with the ways in which modernity demanded ever more complex practices of language, Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* invokes figures who defy, or at least present a formidable challenge to the renewing effects of language. This difficult project of signifying the complexity of modern life calls forth a revolutionary perception of shock. The changes in perception that war, as well as the acceleration and massification of urban life, and other modern disturbances perhaps *should* have effected are goals in Woolf’s writing. Only with these perceptions, she implies, can we begin to reveal other possibilities of modernity. Instead, it has revealed only its most debased possibilities in a nostalgic reverence for the queen, the rooted attachment to a nation-statist form of community, and the acceptance of a disorienting and increasingly commodified life. As we look back at this text nearly a century later, these social features of the West recorded in Woolf’s 1925 *Mrs. Dalloway* amazingly persist, even after the greater shock of World War II. In view of this persistence, it seems we have not yet begun to approach history in a secular manner, i.e. as the effects of human invention as well as human terror. And we have not tactically moved beyond anaesthetizing and sequestering the shock that Europe has produced, i.e. we’ve thought very little of giving to figures of shock anything but a rest cure.

Yet in twentieth-century modernity, the awareness of these shifts, and the response to the shock produced on the mind, is bound to be belated. Changes in modes of production, in the techniques of representation and communication, and the rapidly shifting values that capital engenders create a situation in which art and human consciousness constantly lag behind. That lag, in turn, creates the possibility of continued destructive effects of capital without the perception that might lead to a diagnosis, and an adequate cure.

I am interested here in comparing the observations of shock, as well as tactics of prolepsis and memory, in Woolf as well as Walter Benjamin. They share what I consider to be prophetic encounters with the logic of globalization we so little know how to register in

the present. Woolf and Benjamin consistently recorded the active potentiality of secular urban life alongside its reactive manifestations. They sought to guide modern technologies of representation into the service of freedom, including film for Benjamin, and modernist technologies of representation for Woolf. What they sought was not the fantasy of permanence and endless repetition made possible by these modern technologies, but the arresting of time to invent unexpected, sometimes unconscious, fields of action. Reminiscence is one way of thinking of mechanisms that open these fields up by mobilizing unconscious, often minute details, and the fleeting and elusive moments which threaten to disappear forever from human consciousness.

They also share a curiously similar convergence on the alienated soldier and the urban dweller as figures of shock that demand a better perception of modernity's effects. Note for instance, the corollary between the shell-shocked Septimus Smith and the figure of the soldier in "The Storyteller," an essay in which Benjamin discusses the changes in representation and art that have arisen with large-scale modern transformations in European culture.

With the {First} World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. ("The Storyteller" 86)

For Benjamin, the capacity to "tell" an experience, to represent it, and to assume an audience of listeners or readers is an essential component of tradition. Tradition, Benjamin claims, is experience that implies a carrying on from generation to generation. The soldier's experience, on the other hand, is incommunicable, untranslatable from the stores of a culture's past wisdom and thus stands as a shock to its systems of transmission. Indeed, it is only through his death that Septimus "communicates" to a living soul: "Death was defiance," Clarissa thinks after Lady Bradshaw reveals the shock of Clarissa's evening, "Death was an attempt to communicate" (184). We may read Septimus' fate as a sign of a certain end of tradition, or as the end of translatable and transmittable experience.

The soldier who returns from the experience of World War I amplifies some of the disorientation of the London civilian in *Mrs. Dalloway*. The city dweller too encounters forms of life detached from "experience." Many characters strike us as disconcerted as we walk through the novel's depiction of Regents Park. Maisie Johnson's encounter with the Smiths, for instance, reveals a structure of memory in keeping with the impressions produced by warfare, "Everything seemed very queer . . . so that should she be very old she would still

remember and make it jangle again among her memories how she had walked through Regent's Park on a fine summer's morning fifty years ago" (26). Both the shocked soldier and the urban dweller experience much of their daily life as a conundrum, and cannot "read" the signs that they come upon more and more densely. They keep in their memories shocking and unassimilable impressions that will revisit them as disturbing images. These images, in turn, as they do for Septimus, will perhaps wait in reserve to signal a dire emergency in the otherwise smooth operation of what is called European civilization. Moreover, they cannot rely on culturally accumulated data that comes with tradition in order to solve the problems of everyday living.

The loss of the individual's ability to tap culture's presupposed cache of tradition in order to assimilate the world of data around him or her is the quintessential operation of the modern city, as Benjamin following Baudelaire claims. Benjamin and Woolf, however, frame the necessary registration of these shocks as an initial condition for imagining other, less destructive prospects for human relations than modernity has so far provided.

The city, which gives rise to constant shocks, gives us also the ability to conceive a type of consciousness that does not fetishize totality and that does not shun all shock in order to stabilize and reproduce itself. It appears, in other words, as an active site for re-inventing democracy--not as a decadent sapping of life as many other modernist writers would claim. In fact, Woolf and Benjamin refuse the tactics later taken up by fascism, which attempts to quell the pains and daily shocks of life under capital emblemized and embodied by the city in part by creating an idyllic, anti-modern afterimage.

In "A Berlin Chronicle," Benjamin records Berlin as a city of memories. Accordingly, he imagines humans spatially navigating a labyrinth so that their lives, and namely his own, shatters an apparent temporal continuum.

Reminiscences, even extensive ones, do not always amount to an autobiography . . . For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of a space, of moments, and discontinuities. . . I speak of a labyrinth. I am not concerned here with what is installed in the chamber at its enigmatic center, ego or fate, but all the more with the many entrances leading into the interior. . . Against the background of the city, the people who had surrounded me closed together to form a figure" ("A Berlin Chronicle" 28-31).

He describes here the writer's task as cutting through "the sequence of his experiences," so that the lifetime presented as a proper linear sequence dissolves in order to detect in the images of the past, as well as in the images of the city, "a new and disturbing articulation" ("A Berlin Chronicle," 10). Berlin becomes the fabric of this autobiographical piece by Benjamin and his writing of it cuts through the illusions of bourgeois permanency,

much as London in the lives of *Mrs. Dalloway's* characters. We are given glimpses there of networks in England that make up the pretense of its imperial, commercial, governmental, and psychological durability. But it takes us to the dreams, desires, as well as the vulnerabilities of individuals that make up these bodies to empty out a sense that these *must* be permanent. *Mrs. Dalloway* also takes the shape of proliferating webs, in which the atmosphere of London contributes to a graphic map that replaces linear biographies. Clarissa, for instance, proclaims that she is

not 'here, here, here'. . . but everywhere. She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that. So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places. . . . 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 . . . (Woolf 153)

Especially for Clarissa herself, London, the sites, the place, allow her to conceive of a different kind of human. The spatial form that a life takes, as opposed to a chronological temporal form, mobilizes a different conception of memory that can revisit old places when shock was imminent, when it threatened to disturb the continuity of life experience. Such is Peter Walsh's situation as he once again repeats a confrontation with the crisis of his life—his failed love for Clarissa. He declares that "No! He was not in love with her any more!" (75), but he becomes a screen for memories whose unusual vividness should signal to him otherwise: "it was extraordinary how vividly it all came back to him, things he hadn't thought of for years" (75). He acknowledges that "it was Clarissa one remembered. Not that she was striking; not beautiful at all; there was nothing picturesque about her; she never said anything specially clever; there she was, however; there she was" (76). This memory of Clarissa in a room in which she occupies the center, Peter Walsh will experience later that evening, with the same thought: "for there she was" (194).

The city becomes for the subject an entire network of memories as well as sites in which a future might be brought about through prophesy. In it, earlier associations of place with memory call as if from the future, and its present sites and faces are opportunities to record shocks for the consciousness to explore later. It is as if, as Benjamin explains, the future acts as an echo in the present. By recording a place in the present, we transform it into a prophesying place.

While the category of shock gains a much wider scope in *Mrs. Dalloway* than in "A Berlin Chronicle" (taking form in moments of sexual awakening as well as moments of ruin), the reservoirs of memory depicted in both reveal a human ability to disengage from the illusion of a stable ego and to invent oneself in relation to city space. Chance encounters enable the self to disengage and invent, and to layer moments together in unexpected

combinations. In these encounters and layerings, the sudden memory of a place achieves a renewed importance in the present. In this sense, the task for the consciousness becomes an exploration of why a particular image of the past has arisen, and why it seems to resonate so well with a present situation. Woolf creates an inventory of responses and distinctive exercises of memory in the novel, and these occupy an entire spectrum of dispositions, from enfolding or protecting shocks on one hand, and resisting or parrying them on the other. Woolf goes further than Benjamin to consider the sexual politics of such responses.

One set of responses fall dangerously close to an alignment with tyranny, and is clearly associated with a phallic bearing. Sir Bradshaw who, we are told, goes through “a curious exercise with the arms, which he shot out, and brought sharply back to his hip” to prove that he was “master of his actions” (101) attempts to seclude the shock embodied in such patients as Septimus. Septimus threatens to unveil the violence of civilization as its own product rather than as its antithesis, and thus is neurotically sequestered. Bradshaw’s reaction allows him to dissociate the “civilised forces” that produce shell shock from the ones that support his own way of life. Lest we associate the phallic with men exclusively, the novel includes a more widely historical approach to the horror of war in Lady Bruton. She bears up to assert and pass on the martial projects of civilization. The “imaginary baton such as her grandfathers might have held,” and with which she imagines herself to be “commanding battalions” (112) allows her to ward off an awareness that the radical nature of technical warfare has crushed any possibility of glory.

In contrast, Clarissa constantly invokes sudden illuminations of shock that appear as enfolded within infinitely fragile, protective veils. When she receives a kiss from Sally Seton, she imagines that “she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it—a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up” (35). And sudden epiphanies occur in similar forms: “Then, for that moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed. But the close withdrew; the hard softened” (32). Her revisitations of the past are akin to a remembering or reconstitution of shock without collapsing the integrity of her life.

Septimus, however, is unable to retain such composure as “time splits its husk” (69) and forms constellations with moments in the past. While he is able to erode the presentation of England as a logical end to a linear progression of bourgeois history, his consciousness is more an oscillating combination of exposed nerve fibres and complete apathy. Like Benjamin’s “Angel of History” in his essay, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Septimus sees the sorrow and ruins of civilization, sees time rushing toward its own destruction despite its own illusion of progress, but he remains in a state of paralysis. His only recourse in the face of this shock, it seems, is suicide.

It is only through their combination that Clarissa’s and Septimus’ approaches to shock evoke a more active structure of memory. As a combined figure, they yield a type of remembering that preserves shock without disintegrating, in addition to mobilizing shock to

critique civilization's self representation as the culmination of a progressive history. While their contemporary Sigmund Freud regarded this tendency of civilization to progress and regress simultaneously as the manifestation of eternal and inevitable forces, Woolf and Benjamin represent civilization's truly non-linear time in order to bring to the present a different response than the narcotica of civilization. Woolf lays out the structure of memory in what Benjamin describes as the task of the materialist historiographer. To bring about a state of emergency, the historiographer approaches history akin to the way the city is lived in "A Berlin Chronicle" and *Mrs. Dalloway*, i.e. one excavates moments of shock that have been protected and call forth prophesy in order to bring about the conditions for a just future.

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