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The Leaf-encumbered Forest: Mrs Dalloway's Ego

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Many Critics, if not most, take up for discussion the vision of life presented by Virginia Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway* and regard the characters including the heroine, Clarissa Dalloway, as reflectors of the author's views.¹⁾ It is true that Virginia Woolf kept pursuing a clearer vision of existence throughout her life as a novelist, and that her work shows a deep and penetrating insight into life. Again true that *Mrs Dalloway* does not deliver any clear-cut image of Clarissa Dalloway. But the reader cannot deny that behind a hazy image of the heroine there is a solid core, which makes her a substantial entity. Howard Harper may be right in assuming that Mrs Dalloway is the "subject" of the novel.²⁾

In seeking the image of Mrs Dalloway, we are puzzled by some discordance which is mostly due to the vacillation of and discrepancy in Mrs Dalloway's feelings and thoughts. In this thesis we shall throw light on the nature of the discrepancy in Mrs Dalloway and explicate the way this novel consolidates the inconsistent aspects of the heroine.

I

Clarissa once rejected Peter Walsh and chose to marry Richard Dalloway. Walking in St James's Park, Clarissa finds herself arguing that her decision not to marry Peter was right and necessary. She explains the reason for her decision to herself:

For in marriage a little licence, a little independence there must be between people living together day in day out in the same house; ... But with Peter everything had to be shared; everything gone into. And it was intolerable, (p. 9)³⁾

These words reveal both her tendency to respect "licence"⁴⁾ and "independence" and her notion of Peter depriving her of them, though her inner argument implies that she has some doubt about her decision. The

fact is that she was far from disliking him and that it was quite difficult for her to refuse his proposal. We see how dear Clarissa holds "licence" and "independence".

Clarissa regards a fanatic spinster, Miss Kilman, as another invader of her "licence" and "independence". Clarissa is deeply annoyed at the mere thought of Miss Kilman. In her mind's eye Clarissa sees that an incarnated monster outrageously steps into the sanctuary of her mind. With hatred and reproach for Miss Kilman, Clarissa says to herself: "Had she ever tried to convert any one herself? Did she not wish everybody merely to be themselves?" (p. 112). This shows that Clarissa has an impression that Miss Kilman forces her ideas on her.

Clarissa's notion of "licence" and "independence" can be summed up by her phrase "the privacy of the soul". Looking through the window at the old lady opposite, Clarissa reflects:

Somehow one respected that — that old woman looking out of the window, quite unconscious that she was being watched. There was something solemn in it — but love and religion would destroy that, whatever it was, *the privacy of the soul*. Yet it was a sight that made her want to cry.

.....

And the supreme mystery which Kilman might say she had solved, or Peter might say he had solved, but Clarissa didn't believe either of them had the ghost of an idea of solving, was simply this: here was one room; there another. Did religion solve that, or love?

(pp. 112-4) [*Italics mine*]

Clarissa must mean by "the privacy of the soul" the freedom and independence of the soul undisturbed by other people's interference. The "room" is symbolic of "the soul".⁵⁾ To Clarissa the old woman embodies "the privacy of the soul", while Peter and Miss Kilman incarnate "love" and "religion" which destroy "the privacy of the soul". Her emotion tells that "the privacy of the soul" is an essential principle she has to live up to.

Clarissa values "the privacy of the soul" more than anything else, and therefore, she abhors being interfered with. This disposition of hers is symbolically described through the scene of Peter's unexpected visit. The

drawing room, which has not been prepared for the party yet, and in which Clarissa is occupied with her private affairs, symbolizes the sanctuary of her inner world, or her soul, while Peter, who opens the door abruptly without permission, symbolizes an invader of “the privacy of the soul”. Clarissa’s attempt at hiding the dress she has been mending shows her instinct to protect “the privacy of the soul”. The expression “like a virgin protecting chastity” suggests that her respect for privacy is combined with her sexual disinclination.⁶⁾

Clarissa’s sexual disinclination is more plainly shown in the description of an attic, her solitary bedroom. The clean sheets, half-burnt candle, and narrow bed are all symbolic of her sexual failure. The desolate atmosphere of the room compels Clarissa to face “a virginity preserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet” and reminds her that she failed Richard more than once “through some contraction of [the] cold spirit” (p. 29).

The “contraction”, which causes Clarissa’s sexual failure, has another function of composing “her self”.⁷⁾ Looking into the mirror, Clarissa sees “the face of the woman who was that very night to give a party”:

How many million times she had seen her face, and always with the same imperceptible *contraction!* ... That was *her self* – pointed; dart-like; definite. That was *her self* when some effort, some call on her to be *her self*, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and *composed* so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who set in her drawing-room (pp. 34-5)
[*Italics mine*]

This passage shows Clarissa’s notion that she “composes” “her self” with some “contraction”. What she calls “her self” is not her real self but her social self intended for the world.

Then the “contraction” caused in Clarissa is a step both to protect “the privacy of the soul” and to express herself in society. This shows distinctly Clarissa’s contradictory dispositions: she shuns very close contact with others, but, at the same time, is fond of society.

Interestingly Virginia Woolf refers to “the image of oneself” in society in her essay-like short story, “The Mark on the Wall”.

Indeed, it is curious how instinctively one protects the image of oneself from idolatry or any other handling that could make it ridiculous, or too unlike the original to be believed in any longer Supposing the looking-glass smashes, the image disappears, and the romantic figure with the green of forest depths all about it is there no longer, but, only that shell of a person which is seen by other people — what an airless, shallow, bald, prominent world it becomes!⁸⁾

As in *Mrs Dalloway*, the looking glass serves as a metaphor of “the image of oneself” and implies that “the image” is fictitious in a way. And it is hinted here that composing “the image of oneself” is usual and necessary in our society. “The romantic figure with the green of forest depths all about it” in the quoted passage reminds us of Clarissa’s notion of “a brutal monster” tramping “the depths of [the] leaf-encumbered forest” (p. 13). Considering that “the depths of the forest” is defined as “the soul”, we can say that “the forest” symbolizes the whole of Clarissa’s inner world, or her ego. Then “her self” may be compared to the leaves in this metaphor. “The leaves” (her self) both conceal “the depths of the forest” (her soul) and adorn or express “the forest” (her ego).

Throughout the novel the image of leaves trembling in the air is merged exquisitely with that of rising and falling waves by the similarity in colour and movement, and these images often contribute to form the concept of composing “her self”. Clarissa’s green dress plays a significant role in this respect. In her attic Clarissa takes her green dress out of a cupboard, holds it up to the window, and sees that it “lost its colour now in the sun”, though “by artificial light the green shone” (p. 35). Clarissa must be comparing the dress as seen at the moment with that as she wears at parties. The dual looks of her green dress suggest two aspects of her life: the dreary private life and the successful social one. Practically the party scene exhibits a striking contrast to the description of her bedroom. Clarissa’s elegant manner of walking with the green folds of her mermaid’s dress trembling about her is described with the image of a mermaid among the waves. When she feels that “every one was unreal in one way; much more real in another” partly because of “their clothes” (p. 151), she must be half conscious that her dress serves both to protect “the privacy of the soul” and to express herself in public.

II

Clarissa composes "her self" to go into society. It is a step to protect "the privacy of the soul", or the freedom of the soul, in society as well as a means of expressing herself. Yet, in a way, it is an act to abridge "the privacy of the soul", since laws and rules should govern the composition of "her self". In fact, society will demand some patient resignation and restraint from everyone who belongs to it by laying laws and rules which are indispensable for adjusting relations among individuals and groups.

A group of characters centering on Septimus affords a conspicuous example of the relation between an individual and society. Septimus, who suffers from shell shock, completely shuts himself off from the external world. The boundary line between his ego and the external world is no more, so the physical world has lost its objective existence and has merged into a part of his inner world. Dr Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw embody the intrusive power of society. The picture of Bradshaw especially is a caricature of a prosperous hypocrite. Bradshaw, a faithful worshiper of the "Goddess" of "proportion", esteems common sense and social rules highly. But in the depths of his heart dwells secretly the "Goddess" of "Conversion" "whose lust is to override opposition, to stamp indelibly in the sanctuaries of others the image of herself" (p. 91). Bradshaw and Holmes differ in their diagnoses but both try to incorporate Septimus into the social system of their own. Assuming that the social system is meaningless to Septimus as he is completely secluded from society, we are sure that their treatment of him is not only an infernal coercion but also an unjust intrusion. As a matter of fact, Septimus calls them "Human nature" and regards their deeds as "human cruelty" (p. 125). It suggests that the intrusive deeds they have exercised on Septimus manifest one aspect of human society.

The relation of society to Septimus is summed up symbolically by Holmes' forcible entry into Septimus' lodging. As Clarissa's room symbolizes her soul, so Septimus' lodging symbolizes his soul. Septimus' suicide is his last repudiation of the intrusion on "the privacy of the soul". It is

possible to say that Septimus has dared to defy all violation of "the privacy of the soul" by secluding himself from society, and as a last resort removing himself from it.

When Clarissa wants her success in society, it goes against her principle of respecting "the privacy of the soul". When she looks into Hatchards' shop window, thinking of purchasing some book as a present, she turns her eye inwards and discerns her own desire to be loved by other people. The thought that "half the time she did things not simply, not for themselves; but to make people think this or that" provokes her to reproach herself. We see that Clarissa suspects that her social activities are nothing but an imposition of her own will on others irrespective of "the privacy of the soul".

Clarissa's doubt about her successful social life can be detected in her hatred for Miss Kilman. Although Clarissa regards Miss Kilman as an embodiment of religion which will "destroy" "the privacy of the soul" (p. 113), Miss Kilman neither does nor utters anything aggressive against Clarissa, except that she deals with Clarissa in a brusque manner and perhaps with a look of intense hostility. Clarissa is conscious that the object of her own hatred is not Miss Kilman but "the idea of her which ... had gathered in to itself a great deal that was not Miss Kilman" (p. 13). In fact, the idea of Miss Kilman is dwindling in Clarissa's mind just when Clarissa faces her. This shows that Clarissa's notion of Miss Kilman is ascribable to her own inner conflicts rather than to any specific actions on the part of Miss Kilman. In Clarissa's mind, Miss Kilman is always associated with a mackintosh which she wears "year in year out" (p. 12). It must seem to Clarissa as if the plain mackintosh were reproaching her comfortable life, displaying Miss Kilman's poverty and sacrificial devotion to charitable work. Clarissa complains that "the brute [the idea of Miss Kilman] ... made all pleasure in beauty, in friendship, in being well, in being loved and making her home delightful, rock, quiver, and bend ... as if the whole panoply of content were nothing but self love" (p. 13). Self-love is the same thing as the "Goddess" of "Conversion" Septimus must have intuitively detected in Bradshaw's heart.

Although Clarissa detests religion, there is a close analogy between "her

self" that she composes for the world and St Paul's Cathedral which "a seedy-looking non-descript man" looks at. The former is described as "a meeting point, a radiancy ... in some dull lives, a refuge for the lonely to come to" (p. 35), and the latter as something which "offers company" and which "invites you to membership of a society" (p. 27). This reveals the fundamental self-contradiction Clarissa holds: she hates religion in that it invades "the privacy of the soul" by controlling individual thinking, whereas her social activities produce the very same effect as religion does.

Now we must note that Clarissa, when a girl, cried over Peter's remark that "she had the makings of the perfect hostess", whereas she "[does] a little admire" that (p. 151), and actually plays the perfect hostess that night. We cannot help noticing that there is some discontinuity between her past self and present self.⁹⁾

The dissociation of her past self and present self is suggestively manifested by the transition in Clarissa's personal relationships. In the past she formed closer relationships with Peter and Sally than with Richard and Hugh. But she is now married to Richard and on very easy terms with Hugh, while Peter and Sally are estranged from her. Sally's words Peter recollects express well the basic pattern of the relationships of these four persons to Clarissa:

... She [Sally] implored him [Peter], half laughing of course, to carry off Clarissa, to save her from the Hughs and the Dalloways and all the other 'perfect gentlemen' who would 'stifle her soul' ..., make a mere hostess of her, encourage her worldliness. (p. 68)

To hazard a rough classification, we can say that Peter and Sally are of a Bohemian type, while Richard and Hugh are of a conventional type. As Sally implies, Clarissa is on the conventional side by nature. The fact that Clarissa's father disliked both Peter and Sally suggests that they were, as it were, deviants in Clarissa's family; in fact, Sally "made her [Clarissa] feel ... how sheltered the life at Bourton was" (p. 31). Clarissa "admired and envied" "a sort of abandonment" which Sally had. Moreover Clarissa "owed" (p. 34) much to Peter, who "had been sent down from Oxford", and who loved "abstract principles", "science", and "philosophy" (p. 46). It may be possible to say that her relationships with Peter and Sally serve

to subdue her worldly-mindedness and keep her mind in equilibrium. She now leads an easy life as the wife of a successful statesman, while she has a paralyzing doubt about her social life at the bottom of her heart. When we think that her doubt arises from the incompatibility between "the privacy of the soul" and sociality, it is symbolical that while her past life unfolded in the countryside of Bourton, the stage of her present life is the city of London.¹⁰⁾

We can say that her refusal to marry Peter which drove him to leave England marks a turning point in Clarissa's life. It must be noted, however, that it was not her "worldliness" but her adherence to "the privacy of the soul" that prevented her from accepting Peter's proposal. In a love relationship laws and rules do not apply, and therefore love destroys the independence of the soul too often, for laws and rules defend "the privacy of the soul" as well as suppress it. Clarissa chose to take "the privacy of the soul" instead of a life of love.

Clarissa's inward argument about her decision in the past reveals that she still has some doubt about its propriety. We suppose that her doubt is due to her dissatisfaction with her present private life and her deep-seated desire for a love union. These problems of hers are brought to the surface by Peter's unexpected intrusion. The moment she sees him, the heart-rending pain she experienced when she refused Peter's proposal comes back to her. She even wonders why she had made up her mind not to marry him. Peter's confession that he is in love gives such impetus to her desire for love as to provoke her jealousy. The incident of Peter's dissolving into tears suggests their intimacy. The rapturous moment makes Clarissa glance at her dreary private life and drives her to cry inwardly, "Take me with you" (p. 43), although she recovers herself in a moment. She feels "as if the five acts of a play ... were now over and she had lived a lifetime in them and had run away, had lived with Peter, and it was now over". Peter's sudden visit has enabled Clarissa to have an illusory experience of having lived with Peter. Clarissa as returning from the illusory world to reality is compared to a woman who "gathers her things together, her cloak, her gloves, her opera-glass, and gets up to go out of the theatre into the street" (pp. 43-4). We see that Clarissa, who has dismantled "her self" and nearly

renounced the independence of the soul, is composing "her self" again. Thus Peter's entrance into Clarissa's room represents his intrusion on her privacy, not only in a literal sense, but also in a more highly metaphorical sense that he treads into the sanctuary of her mind where her inner troubles are hidden.

III

In the midst of the buzzing traffic in a London street, Clarissa feels her love of life so keenly as to project her own gratification even upon frumps sitting by the street.

For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh; but the veriest frumps ... do the same; ... they love life. In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June. (p. 6)

Clarissa's delightful soliloquy shows that society provides her with vigour and vitality. To Clarissa a sense of being alive is inseparable from a feeling of being involved in society.

If to have a share in society is to live, to seek "the privacy of the soul" to extremity is to die, since society inevitably disturbs "the privacy of the soul" as we saw earlier. Septimus' destiny shows it well. Death was the inevitable destiny for Septimus, as long as he could not in the least give up "the privacy of the soul". Like Septimus, Clarissa tends to isolate herself as the dreariness of her private room suggests; besides, she has a subconscious bent for death.

Even now, quite often if Richard had not been there reading *The Times*, so that she could crouch like a bird and gradually revive, send roaring up that immeasurable delight, rubbing stick to stick, one thing with another, she must have perished. (p. 164)

"*The Times*" implies society or civilization. An aural image of "roaring up" and a visual image of "rubbing stick to stick" suggest that she is recovering her vitality. We see that Richard serves to connect her with society and

prevents her from being drawn to death. Therefore "the shock of Lady Bruton asking Richard to lunch without her made the moment in which she had stood shiver" and made her feel "the dwindling of life" (p. 28).

Thus love of society and adherence to "the privacy of the soul" cause in Clarissa contradictory inclinations: a love of life and a latent desire for death. The result is that she is haunted by an intense fear of death.

Clarissa's fear of death is in part ascribable to her age and the illness she suffered not long ago, and more profoundly is increased by the loss of stability in social thought and wide-spread doubt about the perpetuity of civilization which have resulted from the World War. The London of *Mrs Dalloway* retains the trail of the war, though it presents on the surface "the triumph of civilization" (p. 134): with the telegram informing her of her son's fall in the war, Lady Bexborough opens a bazaar; a spinster Miss Kilman, who missed a chance of a lifetime because of the war, leads a miserable life; Septimus' alienation is ascribable to the war. Although the characters entertain a sense of succession, the implication of the end of civilization and the image of primitiveness are found here and there in the novel. Just as Clarissa's illness made her face death, so the World War must have made Londoners including Clarissa realize that the city of London could be destroyed to return to the primitive world.

Clarissa's party, which is one of the most significant social activities for her, is an occasion to give herself up entirely to the joy of life, taking her mind off the fear of death. Reflecting on Peter's and Richard's tacit criticism of her passion for a party, Clarissa explains inwardly that "what she liked was simple life" (p. 109). Considering that she calls her party "an offering", we can say that to Clarissa it is ritual for the worship of life.

But Clarissa's party is an attempt to recover the integrity of "the privacy of the soul" at the same time. We know that when a party reaches its climax, the people present are united in a cordial atmosphere permeating the room. They can relax and communicate with each other fully. A sense of concord creates an illusion that each person's soul is released to merge into a larger and integrated spirit.¹¹⁾ Though such a concord depends on a hostess's discretion, it is no more than an illusion anyway. We must say that Clarissa's attempt is in vain.

In her ritual for the worship of life Clarissa seeks the integrity of "the privacy of the soul" which can be attained only by death. Here lies her self-contradiction. It may be possible to say that her party is charged with her essential problem. Clarissa is aware that her attempt is in vain, but it is not until she hears of Septimus' death that she notices her fallacy. The story of Septimus' suicide gives Clarissa a tremendous shock. It must have compelled Clarissa absorbed in the joy of life to confront death. As her exclamatory soliloquy — "Oh! ... in the middle of my party, here's death" (p. 162) implies, she has intuited that "the center" (p. 163), or the integrity of "the privacy of the soul", can be found only in death. The shock leads her to withdraw to a little room, where she experiences Septimus' death in imagination and grasps the meaning of the revelation.¹²⁾

Having recognized her own fallacy, Clarissa sheds her fear of death while watching the old woman opposite go to bed. A symbolic combination of the sound of Big Ben and the silence of the opposite room suggests the old woman's way of life as seen by Clarissa: to live in contentment, resigning herself to the flow of time, retaining the fullest possible spiritual freedom. Clarissa must have learnt the way to reconcile her contradictory inclinations. The Shakespearian phrase she chants now — "Fear no more the heat of the sun" — indicates her resolution to stand against the stern reality of life. It is true that the phrase is quoted from a dirge in *Cymbeline* and that it came to Clarissa several times as her subconscious bent for death was coming up to the surface: in the light of these facts we can say that the phrase serves in part to console Septimus' soul. But we must note that Septimus chanted the same phrase when he came to his senses and recovered his vitality. It is also suggestive that the dirge is originally chanted for the assumed death of a princess who comes to life later.

When Clarissa returns to the drawing room, the shadow of death Peter caught behind her radiance a while ago seems to have disappeared, for she produces an extraordinary effect in Peter's heart. This ending of the novel suggests the exquisite equilibrium Clarissa has attained. The closing phrase "there she was" affirms both her existence in this world or in society where "the privacy of the soul" is inevitably disturbed and her identity which depends on the preservation of "the privacy of the soul". The

dramatic ending — Clarissa's reappearance being delivered through Peter's emotion — is so effective that a unified picture of the heroine is branded in the reader's mind.

Thus the novel implies that Clarissa's inner problem has come to an end. But as long as she has dual incompatible inclinations within, Clarissa will again experience such a purgatory as she has experienced that day.

NOTES

- 1) James Hafley says "in *Mrs. Dalloway* emphasis is placed not so much upon Mrs. Dalloway the individual person as upon Mrs. Dalloway's ability to mirror 'life itself'". See James Hafley, *The Glass Roof: Virginia Woolf as Novelist* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), pp. 61-2.
- 2) Howard Harper, *Between Language and Silence: The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1982), p. 130.
- 3) Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Panther Books, 1985), p. 9. All subsequent references are to this edition.
- 4) Obviously "licence" here means "freedom of action, speech, thought, etc." [Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English].
- 5) Hafley writes that "the 'room' concept is pervasive in Virginia Woolf's writing" (Hafley, *op. cit.*, p. 59). But its interpretation somewhat differs with critics.
- 6) Peter's paper knife is symbolic of both mental and sexual intrusion of the masculine. Harper observes that "from a psychological standpoint, he embodies a consuming male desire" (Harper, *op. cit.*, p. 123).
- 7) cf. Maria DiBattista, *Virginia Woolf's Major Novels: The Fables of Anon* (New Haven & London: Yale Univ. Press, 1980), p. 39.
- 8) Woolf, "The Mark on the Wall", in *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories* (London: Crafton Books, 1985), p. 44.
- 9) Jeremy Hawthorn, citing Clarissa's soliloquy "she felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged", observes that "she seems to see within her self aspects of her youth and her maturity which do not necessarily combine to produce a unified or unambiguous identity". See Jeremy Hawthorn, *Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway: A Study in Alienation* (London: Sussex Univ. Press, 1975), p. 10.
- 10) Interestingly Peter's images of Clarissa in Bourton — "cool, lady-like, critical: or ravishing, romantic, recalling some field of English harvest" (p. 136) — demonstrate the coexistence of urbanity and rurality in Clarissa's past self.
- 11) Such a concord is quite similar to the unique feeling Clarissa had when a girl as she explored London with Peter; she said to him that she felt herself everywhere. This feeling of Clarissa's may be said to be the same thing as what Freud calls "the oceanic feeling", which he describes as "a feeling of

being one with the external world as a whole” and regards as the persistence of the primary ego feeling. cf. James Strachey, ed., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. XXI: *The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents and Other Works* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978), p. 68.

- 12) We can say that her withdrawal to the little room indicates her submergence into the inner world.