

'FOR THERE THEY WERE': *MRS. DALLOWAY*, CLARISSA AND *MRS. DALLOWAY*

José Luís Araújo Lima - Faculdade de Letras
da Universidade do Porto

"What is this terror? what is this ecstasy? he thought to himself. What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement? - It is Clarissa, he said. For there she was."¹

This is the way the novel *Mrs Dalloway* comes to its conclusion. The title is precisely "Mrs. Dalloway" and not "Clarissa". This choice by the author seems to mean that Mrs. Dalloway shades, if not darkens, the Clarissa that lies inside her. Not only in its relationship with time, but also from a psychological, emotional and social point of view, this inner dialogue between two characters who are one, is one of the most interesting aspects of this novel, suggesting, from the discourse level to the level of the text's reception, the more or less unbearable fluidity of our perception of life, of its presence in us, of the diluting of what we are into what we think we are; always in transformation, in metamorphosis.

It is obvious that this is closely related with the perception of time, with its course, with chronological time, and also, and above all, with inner time, with the experience of time within. But, in Virginia Woolf's novel, it is also related with the skilful way of dealing with point of view, point of view being a crucial issue in literature and in life, which are almost the same thing when we want to look into the depths of the self and what we see transforms itself from aspect into identity.

What Peter yearns for, at the end of the novel, and what he finally sees, what finally approaches him, is Clarissa, and it is this name he uses to refer to the woman who inflamed his life at the age of 18. But what the reader sees, although what he/she sees goes through the filter of Peter Walsh's viewpoint, is Mrs. Dalloway, the hostess, Richard's wife and Elizabeth's mother, a 52 year

old woman who saw death in the shape of a salmon² and felt it come and go from her party in the shape of Septimus, in a quest for identity, the identity Septimus felt lost and she felt threatened. This is also the reason why she looks for Peter, as if she could find in him a little of her former self, of the Clarissa of Bourton, with the thrill, the flavour, the excitement of over thirty years before.

The perception of this division of a woman in two, which happens, significantly, both within and without, is verbally announced at a decisive moment in the narrative:

But often now this body she wore (she stopped to look at a Dutch picture), this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing – nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway (9).

It is, in fact, the discovery of a change, of a metamorphosis, that determines in this woman the definite inexorable separation between past and present. Either because of her marriage and/or her age, or even in consequence of her attitude to life, marked now by successive impressions of decay and death, Clarissa is lost in Mrs. Dalloway.

This woman's self-defense is precisely the flux of life; it is only this stream that grabs her and holds her - "only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them", "astonishing" because it still surprises and fascinates, "solemn" because in it the elementary fight between life and death takes place, a fight in which it is still possible for life to withstand its losses.

This stream that beguiles her, this stream made of little things, of subtle flavours, is essentially represented in two different ways: Mrs. Dalloway's walk through the streets of London, and the party she offers at her home. Both situations stimulate, they are little splendours of living; and the party further conveys an impression of self-control which Mrs. Dalloway is psychologically in need of.³ On the other hand, we must not forget the place where her house opens itself to the outside, allowing the entrance of the magical particles of life - the window; the window that opens to the outside and to the inside. To the inside to the vistas of Bourton, to Clarissa (and to Peter Walsh and Sally Seton), enlightening, from the past, that part of it where the present finds nourishment -

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air (3).

To the outside to the other side of the street, where the front door neighbour, appearing and disappearing, triggers the imagination of Mrs. Dalloway, in an exercise of curiosity and visual extension that chases the "old lady" in the unseen sequences of her movements. And this is also necessary to Mrs. Dalloway so that life can resist and go on. At the window are, in fact, Mrs. Dalloway and Clarissa, two women in one. And if Bourton is essential so that Mrs. Dalloway, because of Clarissa, goes on standing on her feet, the front door neighbour is to Mrs Dalloway also an important part of reality and of the way, perceptible to the reader as well, that enables reality to impose its flavours. This happens because, in fact, from window to window, a contact is established, though superficial as many others in life, between two presences in it. Mrs. Dalloway and the "old lady" in front hardly know each other; however, each one in her room,⁴ by opening the window, switches on the ignition, opens up to the stardust of life and blends with it - it is a myriad of impressions, of perceptions, of movements, of colours, of smells, a rumour that prevails, engine, aeroplane, race - the flux of life. Virginia Woolf at her best - the idea she had conveyed in "Modern Fiction" (CE-II 103-10) materializes again in this novel. When she criticizes in her essay the novelists she called "materialists", because they didn't deal with life as it is, she asks: "Is life like this? Must novels be like this?" -

Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being like this. Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions - trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; [...] Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged: life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.⁵

The walking in the streets of London allows Virginia Woolf, in the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, to explore the process that materializes the intentions theoretically presented in "Modern Fiction". Following Mrs. Dalloway or Peter, Richard or Elizabeth, and epitomized in a characteristically lively way

by Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf makes us feel, in the street, the stream of life that dissolves each being in it and that, however, nourishes each of them as a vital element:

In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor 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 (4).

The walks through the streets of London, in their main occurrences, express this stream of life, also in the stream of consciousness, in which the characters appear and disappear, appear and disappear, like particles that come up to the surface of the waves and then sink and soon after show up again. This process transmits such a strong impression of flux that some critical opinions argue that maybe there are no "main" characters in this novel; they maintain that there is only life, its manifestation and its expression as a force that creates, that drags and consumes:

There is a point of view from which the subject of the book no longer appears to be the life story of Clarissa Dalloway nor of Septimus Warren Smith, but human life itself, its tension between misery and happiness and its inevitable consummation in death.⁶

One of the main ideas in Woolf's novel, suggested by this process of a stream that carries everything along, is that all of us live through and in each other, through things and in them, and that therefore we survive, thus making death irrelevant:

Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself (8).

Life and death seem to emerge, in that flow, like alternating occurrences of a single strength, which might lead to the opinion of some critics who tend to bring together Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, characters who do not even come to know each other and who, indeed, do not need to know each other, if we follow the point of view of Virginia Woolf and her interesting and consistent way of expressing it in this novel. Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus operate as the positive and the negative poles of one of the faces of reality. Mrs. Dalloway's identification with Septimus, which occurs in her party in Victoria Street, causing a moment of awareness, happens in defense of each other's identity. However, the processes of this quest are rather different, as well as their results. Mrs. Dalloway is sunk in the flux of life, suicide is not worth it, from it she cannot expect the salvation of her identity. Since the flux of life transports everything, from life as from death, suicide ceases to be relevant; Mrs. Dalloway blends herself in with this flux, thus finding a nourishment and a way of preserving her always fragile and threatened identity. In Septimus, on the contrary, suicide is worth it as a way of preserving identity because his egocentric life (with an important value in itself by the isolation it has reached and by the perception that his vision, as well as Lazarus's, is superior) distinguishes itself from everything. His interior journey is a matter of self-worth, and his mental disturbance, caused by the war, collided with his lifelong efforts at promoting his image; therefore, suicide was in fact worthwhile as identification with himself, in an escape from the depersonalization that would arise from Dr. Bradshaw's torpid method of "conversion". The great irony in this novel is exactly the fact that it is the death of Septimus that most sticks Clarissa Dalloway to life, precisely in the middle of a party she organized and that, in her own view, was losing its meaning. The effect of awareness arises from the recognition that the distance between life and death is almost imperceptible, but that you'd better grab life by an act of will, thus helping maintain one or other of its splendours on the surface. Because in fact the splendours of life, even if they are charming, are also fragile and small; they appear and disappear in the tide; the faces of the others are ours, our faces the mirrors of theirs. The reader of this novel understands this notion better because it materializes in the narrative strategies. It is as if the flow of life would work as an engine with valves, allowing to emerge, in successive ignitions, various elements in swift formations, like passing birds in their flight, and an observer in constant expectation would never know what might show up in his visual horizon, nor how much in it would last. This process has the consequence that the spectator occasionally sees something

more or something less than the images offered to him, there resulting an impression of uncertainty that demands the checking of what is real and what is not. On the level of the reception, it is as if the reader would stand at the window with Mrs. Dalloway, looking at the other side of the street at the front door neighbour, trying to see her and her room, following her movements that suddenly you cease to see but whose sequences you are able to imagine. The reader, in fact, must sometimes check how accurate his/her own perspective and range of vision are, he/she must pay attention to the text itself, to the narrative strategies. The process of Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* is, on the one hand, interiorizing enough to require the reader's attention to the fluctuations of the "stream of consciousness", even if the "stream of consciousness" in Woolf's novel is less radical than in some of Joyce's treatments; on the other hand, the expression of life as a flux, remarkably materialized in the characters' progress through the streets that could, from Elizabeth's point of view, be called "the stream of the Strand" (116), implies almost imperceptible changes of viewpoint and particularly subtle occurrences of the free indirect style that will not stand any kind of distraction on the reader's part.⁷ In fact, the reader cannot let him/herself be carried away only by the narrative process and/or by the thematic development. He/she must pay close attention to how the textual building works; sometimes he/she is taken by surprise, interrupts the course of the reading, comes back and corrects an impression.

If we take it for granted that the act of reading takes place under the condition of absolute concentration, we can state that there are novels in which the illusion of reality is so intense that the reader seems to detach him/herself from his/her circumstance to become a part of the fictional situation. In those cases we could say that the power of the text is absolute but, oddly enough, it is in those cases that the reader is not aware of it, i.e., he/she is not aware of the text as "construction". On the other hand, in the novels that stimulate the reader to be aware of aspects of the textual construction, the illusion of reality diminishes, the reader is at times "dis-illusioned"; in compensation, he/she becomes more perceptive and starts a process of discovery of the textual architecture. The widening of the point of view is one of the possible consequences of this reading situation. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, due to the textual strategies, the reader begins to build a point of view that does not mingle with the one of the narrator or the one of the characters; he/she is then forced to interrupt the reading process, to break the rhythm that so often grips him/her, to deliberate and to question: how does Virginia Woolf do this? How does she do that? A new point of view emerges that does not

necessarily coincide with any of the others, but which still takes in all of them and surpasses them, because all of the others reveal people, and the reader's viewpoint confirms them to be 'real', credible human beings; but, on top of that, cognitive awareness of the text does not allow him/her to forget that those people are characters in a novel, characters in a book. In this novel the reader realizes that the end approaches because the party in the house in Victoria Street is coming to an end and from it there remain only the people from within, Richard and Elizabeth, and the two people from without who had been the most important to Clarissa: Peter and Sally. Being used to seeing everything on two levels, the reader notes the absence of the hostess, as a person. This absence is exacerbated by the anxiety felt by Peter Walsh; and he/she reflects, in expectation, upon the way the curtain is going to fall. The hostess shows up and it is Clarissa that Peter sees. But the reader sees Mrs. Dalloway; and above all he/she sees the book, the novel, the title of which is the name of one half of the main character; and when the book comes to a close, in a flash of light from the stream, it allows us to glimpse this woman as Clarissa Dalloway, two in one, bringing past and present together in their exclusive but fleeting reality, which is about to disappear - "For there they were".

NOTES

- ¹ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, Oxford University Press, Oxford World's Classics, 1998, p. 165. The quotations and references to the novel are all from this edition.
- ² "That is all," she said, looking at the fishmonger's. "That is all," she repeated [...] (9)
- ³ Even though we should not forget that during the party the hostess's excitement gives way to a moment of awareness of strong depression. Once again, Virginia Woolf confirms the psychological acuteness of her view.
- ⁴ The importance of the front door neighbour to Mrs Dalloway is overtly asserted on p. 108, in which we find one of the clearest expressions of the main character's concept of life.
- ⁵ Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction". *Collected Essays*, Vol. 2, pp.103-10.
- ⁶ Joan Bennett, "The Form of the Novels", in Mark Schorer (ed.), *Modern British Fiction: Essays in Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press (A Galaxy Book), 1961, p.425.
- ⁷ Cf., for example, p.24 from "Then, while a seedy-looking nondescript man" to "Ludgate Circus"; and pp.114 -115 from "Buses swooped" to "it proves she has a heart".