

Mrs. Dalloway, Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway—Or, Writing for the Hell of It

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The following is from Virginia Woolf's 1925 novel *Mrs. Dalloway*:

The hall of the house was cool as a vault. Mrs. Dalloway raised her hand to her eyes, and, as the maid shut the door to, and she heard the swish of Lucy's skirts, she felt like a nun who has left the world and feels fold round her the familiar veils and the response to old devotions. The cook whistled in the kitchen. She heard the click of the typewriter. It was her life, and bending her head over the hall table, she bowed beneath the influence, felt blessed and purified, saying to herself, as she took the pad with the telephone message on it, how moments like this are buds on the tree of life, flowers of darkness they are, she thought (as if some lovely rose had blossomed for her eyes only); not for a moment did she believe in God; but all the more, she thought, taking up the pad, must one repay in daily life to servants, yes to dogs and canaries, above all to Richard her husband, who was the foundation of it—of the gay sounds, of the green lights, of the cook even whistling, for Mrs. Walker was Irish and whistled all day long—one must pay back from this sacred deposit of exquisite moments, lifting up the pad, while Lucy stood by her, trying to explain how

“Mr. Dalloway, ma'am” —

Clarissa read on the telephone pad, “Lady Bruton wishes to know if Mr. Dalloway will lunch with her to-day.”

“Mr. Dalloway, ma'am told me to tell you he would be lunching out.”

“Dear!” said Clarissa, and Lucy shared as she meant her to her disappointment (but not the pang); felt the concord between them; took the hint; thought how the gentry love; gilded her own future with calm; and, taking Mrs. Dalloway's parasol, handled it like a sacred weapon which a Goddess, having acquitted herself honourably in the field of battle, sheds, and placed it in the umbrella stand.

I've been captivated by this passage for some time now, captured by its opacity, its visibility, its thickness, keeping me afloat, and I'm wondering: how in the hell did Virginia Woolf do that? and what's going on here? Let's look.

The hall of the house was cool as a vault.

If you haven't read *Mrs. Dalloway*, it's one of those one-day-in-the-life-of stories—like Joyce's *Ulysses*, only readable—of one Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway, an upper class English woman, married, as the passage makes clear, to Richard, Richard “who was the foundation of it,” *it* being the house “cool as a

vault” and all that went with the house: the wealth (Richard’s), the servants to maintain the house (thanks to Richard), and the social status (compliments of Richard) to which the house speaks. Indeed, without Richard Dalloway there would be no Mrs. Dalloway, only Clarissa—and no party, for which Mrs. Dalloway will be busy getting us all ready and needing to attend. The *plot* of the story is of course something else.

Let me say something about how I understand plot, because for a long time I didn’t. People who purport to know will talk endlessly about plot, but to be honest I rarely understood what they were talking about—until I came across E.M. Foster’s famous one-liner: “The king died, then the queen died *of grief*” (my italics). Drop “of grief” and all you have is *story*—events ordered chronologically: first A, then B, then C, then D, etc. Plot, on the other hand, twists, and turns, demanding the reader figure out not only the sequence of events but also what *caused* the events. But is plot what *really* happens? Does the *writer* even know? There’s a famous story about Tolstoy rushing home through the streets of Moscow one evening when someone accosted him and asked, Master Tolstoy, where are you going in such a hurry? Tolstoy answered back, I’ve got to get home, to see what my characters are going to do next. So maybe plot is what’s ‘neath the sea: those unseen forces pulling and tugging and rising to form, reform, form and reform, the (storied) surface. It may be the case that the writer simply records and arranges things as they come, whereas the reader has a choice: to remain on the surface, enjoy the ride, or put on tanks, dive, and try to figure out what’s *really* happening. For example, there has been something of a cottage industry trying to decided why Frost repeated the line “And miles to go before I sleep” in his poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”. Frost himself either couldn’t or wouldn’t (I’m suspecting couldn’t) come up with a reason. But I digress.

Let’s look at the second sentence. Parsing the rhythm:

*Mrs. Dalloway raised her hand to her eyes,
and,
as the maid shut the door to,
and she heard the swish of Lucy’s skirts,
she **felt** like a nun who has **left** the world and **feels fold** round her the **familiar** veils
and the response to old devotions.*

Felt...left...feels fold...familiar—do these words not suggest the *sound* of cloth rubbing?—fe-fo-fa—swish-swish. Is this not the most beautiful sentence! It *is*! But it’s also a difficult sentence. ‘Fold’ rattled me. I couldn’t quite place it syntactically, grammatically. At first I read it as a noun, but it’s a verb. This happens occasionally when I read Woolf. I remember a linguist once commenting that language drifts. This may be an instance of drift, where time and space have created a gulf between

language now and language then (and why Shakespeare is hard and Chaucer impossible to read). And notice how Woolf uses metaphor here, morphing Lucy's skirt into an expansive symbol of protection—and softening the vault-like walls of the house in the process.

To widen the context a bit, Mrs. Dalloway had just come in from shopping, for flowers, for her party. It had been a beautiful morning: "...a morning—fresh as if issued to children on a beach..." An unusually beautiful morning for London apparently, a day to open up the senses, a bright, sunny, fresh-air morning, and something to contrast not only with London as usual but also with the closeness, the closed-in feeling of the house. Here's what I'm thinking: Mrs. Dalloway's party-giving may be a way to open the vault, bring in the day, people up the place, and still minimize the risk of the streets, where one can too easily encounter the unexpected. Keep the riff-raff out. Invites only.

The cook whistled in the kitchen... for Mrs. Walker was Irish and whistled all day long...

Ah, the happy Irish. So gay. Marvelous creatures they. Maybe. Or maybe Mrs. Walker whistles because she's taught herself, like Thoreau, to "travel light" (although I'm not so sure about Thoreau. Yes, he invented Walden, but he also hiked in each evening to eat his mother's cooking—and only one night in jail? please). Whatever the case, Mrs. Walker's presence seems to lighten up the place for ma'am. And Mrs. Walker must have been a master at her craft, or she couldn't have been trusted to make those compliments-to-the-cook racks of lamb and raspberry tarts. Maybe that's why she whistled, because she'd made something of herself—and Mrs. Dalloway hadn't, and wouldn't, because she had Richard.

She heard the click of the typewriter.

Where did *that* come from? Is someone there besides Lucy and Mrs. Walker? Richard? Has Richard not left the house, to have lunch (should we say *dine!*) with that beautiful, that engaging—*that bitch?*

*It was her life, and bending her head over the hall table, she bowed beneath the influence, felt blessed and purified, saying to herself, as she **took the pad** with the telephone message on it, how moments like this are buds on the tree of life, flowers of darkness they are, she thought (as if some lovely rose had blossomed for her eyes only); not for a moment did she believe in God; but all the more, she thought, **taking up the pad**, must one repay in daily life to servants, yes to dogs and canaries, above all to Richard her husband, who was the foundation of it—of the gay sounds, of the green lights, of the cook even whistling...—one must pay back from this sacred deposit of exquisite moments, **lifting up the pad**, while Lucy stood by her, trying to explain how...*

Where does one begin with such a huge sentence?—so huge in fact that it popped its period off the page. I can see my fifth grade teacher, the doctrinal Mrs. Barber, leaning over the desk of a ten year old Virginia Woolf, berating this too-smart-for-her-own-britches English miss for breaking with orthodoxy.

But to the sentence. At that moment, for a moment, Mrs. Dalloway experiences, as she bends over the hall table to check the phone messages, bowing “beneath the influence” of the house, realizing her life as “blessed and purified,” in such a moment of grace Mrs. Dalloway reminds herself to be kind to the servants, and to other, lesser creatures—dogs and canaries in this instance—but above all to her dear Richard. And in that moment, for a moment, she wouldn’t change a thing, realizing “...how moments like this are buds on the tree of life, flowers of darkness they are....” Flowers of darkness you say?

What is happening here? What is *about* to happen here? Let’s see, Mrs. Dalloway is bending over, she’s picking up the pad, she’s going to read the messages. So far so good. But then there’s that bowing beneath the influence...of what? the house? her life? Richard? We’ll have to read on. And then Woolf plants a seed, three seeds in fact: “she took up the pad,” [she is] taking up the pad,” and finally, [she is] “lifting up the pad.” Being thus slapped across the face so persistently—so gently!—Woolf must be wanting something from us here. What?

Perhaps this: that every action carries risks, and we would never do anything—not even pick up a telephone pad!—if we were aware of all those risks—like the proverbial centipede that couldn’t walk after the frog asked him how he did it—all those legs! No, we need, at some level, not to know, to be blind to the next moment in order to *have* the next moment. Here, Mrs. Dalloway, picking up the pad to read the messages, is about to step out of her moment of Zen. Buds on the tree of life indeed! Maybe the roses *don’t* bloom for us. And forget that bit about repaying the servants, much less dogs and canaries.

“*Mr. Dalloway, ma’am*”—

Here, Lucy, bless her heart, would, if she could, take Mrs. Dalloway into her arms and remind her that ...*ma’am, we are women!* (assuming Lucy wrote the note). So in spite of the fact that Lucy may be from another planet, and probably never dreamed the roses bloom for her, her knowledge runs deep. Lucy waits as...

Clarissa read on the telephone pad, "Lady Bruton wishes to know if Mr. Dalloway will lunch with her to-day..."

and not knowing what else to do, Lucy states the obvious:

Mr. Dalloway, ma'am told me to tell you he would be lunching out."
Dear!" said Clarissa...

"Dear"? Really? Why not: *Good God woman, don't you think I can read!* for Mrs. Dalloway *knows* her situation is untenable; she *knows* the hand that giveth also taketh away; she *knows* her number is up, and has been for some time now—she's sleeping in the attic for Christ sake (a fact brought out later). But then...

...and Lucy shared as she [Mrs. Dalloway] meant her [Lucy] to her [Mrs. Dalloway's] disappointment (but not the pang); felt [Lucy felt? Mrs. Dalloway?] the concord between them; took the hint [Lucy took the hint]; thought how the gentry love; gilded her [Lucy's] own future with calm...

I drop in the proper names here because the pronouns seem to loose their way. I think I have it right, except in that one instance. And in doing so I see there isn't such a wide gulf between Mrs. Dalloway and Lucy after all, that I'm not being fair to Mrs. Dalloway. Of *course* she knows Lucy knows. Women know. Woolf makes this explicit in...

...and, taking Mrs. Dalloway's parasol, handled it like a sacred weapon which a Goddess, having acquitted herself honourably in the field of battle, sheds, and placed it in the umbrella stand.

Why the mock heroic here? What's begging to be exploited? Let's see. First of all, a sword *can* be a weapon—I give you the sword *Excalibur*—a parasol only one comically, and "low" comedy at that, a la Buster Keeton or Charlie Chaplin, both playing, if not out and out effeminate characters, powerless ones, where veiled intelligence—stealth—is called for. In addition, a sword is a simple instrument, with few parts, an umbrella (sorry, parasol) comparatively complex, and commonly breaking down as a result, like women—so temperamental. And unlike umbrellas, you don't hear about swords being misplaced, forgotten, left hanging, say, on the back of restaurant chairs. And lest we forget, men take to swords naturally, parasols never, umbrellas only reluctantly (I've never seen a cowboy hold an umbrella, not even for his lady, rain *or* shine; maybe for his wife, but that's the funny part). Maybe Woolf knew the story of Jonas Hanway, a Persian who dared to carry an umbrella whilst visiting rainy 'ole England

in the 1700s, and got rocks and mud thrown at him in the process, because God meant the rain to fall on the just *and* the unjust.

And the book goes on.

I find I learn a lot from these little exercises, much more than from a simple reading—even a close reading. I suspect because writing requires more of us. Give it a try. Be spontaneous. But don't be tempted to go to The Books, the cannon of literary criticism, for guidance. Leave this to the professionals. They live in their own world and would only be amused to find one of us stumbling around in it. Write from your own experiences, and for your own pleasure. You may be surprised what can come of it. Diaries and journals may accomplish the same, but they've never worked for me. (Although for those who *do* take to journaling, I recommend an invaluable resource: James Pennebaker's *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*. The title suggests an emotional catharsis results from "opening up," which is what you want, but Professor Pennebaker found an additional benefit: improved health. Self-expression, whether through journaling, drawing, music—the medium doesn't seem to matter (Pennebaker concentrates on writing)—strengthens the immune system, evidenced by increased numbers of T-lymphocyte (disease fighting) cells in those who dare to try. This is my theory: with no external threats, the body relaxes; when it relaxes, it has time to repair itself; and repair results in a more efficient organism. Don't you find writing relaxing? I do. In psychology there is a well established relationship between anxiety and performance. Graphically, this relationship looks something like an inverted 'u', with anxiety running along the x-axis and performance up the y-axis: as anxiety increases, performance actually improves, but only to a point, at the arch of the inverted 'u'. From that point on (moving to the right along the x-axis), performance degrades. Thus, a certain amount of stress is beneficial, too much and we lose focus. But even a low level of stress can have a detrimental effect, something like what happens to a car engine with a high idle, shortening the life of the engine.

Engaging in a writing exercise like this also helps me with *voice*, which, like *plot*, I've struggled with. I'm amazed—startled would not be an exaggeration—when a voice (I seem to have several) begins to emerge as I write. What's going on here? a repressed self? a more socially problematic self? (thus repressed?). Sometime back I happened to catch a radio interview with Stephen King as he tried to convince the host he was just a guy, a normal guy, a normal guy with a wife and kids, kids to get

through college, a mortgage to pay off (shouldn't be a problem). He offered evidence: his and his wife liked shopping for antiques on weekends; maybe he liked to cook, I can't remember. But he didn't seem to think the normalcy of his life and the abnormal life of his characters meant much. Creating these characters was his job, he enjoyed it, no big whoops. Maybe.

I'm wondering if voice is not imbedded in the deep brain, just waiting to be released through the writing process. Here's an idea. Back in the late seventies, two Harvard researchers, J. Allan Hobson and Robert McCarley, developed what they called the activation-synthesis model of dreaming, concluding that dreams result from simple (simple?) physiological processes, nothing as mysterious as Freud's disguised and forbidden wishes, wishes so disturbing they only surface when our defenses are down. Hobson and McCarley argue that, during REM sleep, the deep brain sends up an disorganized array of signals to the neocortex, and the neocortex does its best to make sense of them. But best is never quite good enough, and the weirdly fragmented dream narratives may be the result.

It's not a giant leap to think that creative writing, including creative nonfiction, finds common ground with dreaming, but because the writer is awake the narrative is more coherent. In fact, coherent narrative may be so much the norm that the so-called Language poets have to make something of a concerted effort to maintain a certain level of *incoherence* in their work to make their approach to narrative possible. So the writer may be in something of an intermediate stage between waking and dreaming, where uncharacteristic characters (voices) rise to the surface, causing the writer to sometimes exclaim, "Where in the hell did *that* come from?"

I went back to reading Woolf because...well, who can resist rereading Woolf? No? Then go back to one of *your* favorite authors, but this time for the language, not the story (you know the story) and focus on how the writer created those sentences, structured them into paragraphs, and molded the paragraphs into scenes. To begin this process, don't read *through* the words on the page; rather, stop *at* the words, become *conscious* of them, and use the sentence itself as a frame. Then, adjust your focus as you will: from individual words, word order, phrases, clauses, tropes, schemes, etc. To get an idea how this is done, I recommend Richard Lanham's *Analyzing Prose*. If this is too much of a book for you right now, try Lanham's *Style: An Anti-Textbook* (second edition). It's shorter, and covers much of the same material. If you like listening to lectures but can't stand the thought of sitting in a classroom, order the Teaching Company's *Building Great Sentences: Exploring the Writer's Craft*, lectures by Brooks Landon, and maybe supplement these with Virginia Tufte's *Artful Sentences*. Wondering where to place a comma? start a new paragraph? try Edgar Schuster's *Breaking the Rules: Liberating Writers Through Innovative Grammar Instruction*, where you'll be surprised to learn, as was Schuster, that the great

writers *don't* follow the rules—which of course is not to say you shouldn't *learn* the rules, for as Eliot admonishes us, “No verse is truly free for the man [sic] who wants to do a good job.” And this is going to sound crazy, but if you truly want to learn grammar—and who doesn't!—two books by Eugene Moutoux: *Drawing Sentences: A Guide To Diagramming*, and (are you ready?) *Analyzing the Grammar of Literature: Diagrams of 130 Long Sentences from British and American Writers*. I've read lots of grammars (my life, so sad), but nothing like Moutoux's visual approach. Maybe I'm a visual learner.

Finally, I recommend an exploration of the personal essay. A good place to start is Phillip Lopate's “Introduction” in *The Art of the Personal Essay*. Lopate writes that the personal essay is characterized by self-revelation, personal experiences, humor, and *an incomplete treatment of topic* (my italics). It is a struggle for honesty, which is rarely achieved, because we are “self-deceiving, rationalizing animals.” It has a “rambling structure” and is replete with a “taste for littleness.” It is most profitably indulged in by loafers or retirees—those of no significance to the world. And it violates the number one rule of the short story workshop of “show, don't tell,” for the personal essayist is a tell-all fool, leaving little in his wake, all of this exemplified in this little nugget by Max Beerbohm: “M. Bergson, in his well-known essay on the theme, says...well, he says many things; but none of these, though I have just read them, do I clearly remember, nor am I sure that in the act of reading them, do I understand any of them.”

