

The Literary London Journal



Politicising Cityscape: London in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*

**Petar Penda
(University of Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina)**

The Literary London Journal, Volume 10 Number 1 (Spring 2013)

Virginia Woolf has often been labelled an apolitical writer who, from her upper-class ivory tower, occasionally and condescendingly referred to the lower classes without real understanding of their problems and the conditions in which they lived (Dalsimer 101; Zwerdling 9). Even her feminism, though highly praised, has sometimes been regarded as lacking critical perspective and depth of political insight (Dalgarno 15-16). In this respect, she has been criticised as a materialist who propagates financial independence as the only means of realising one's artistic inclinations and avoiding any kind of relentless censorship (Latham 12; Lee 505-522; Whitworth 91; Zwerdling 43). Although to some extent concurring and convincing, these statements seem to be far from the absolute truth and advance positions that should not be taken for granted. Politics and its criticism, however tacit they may seem, represent important parts of Woolf's art and are indistinguishable from her literary discourse. Yet, her works do not represent social criticism only; they also reflect and defend some upper-class principles seen as values and ideals which should not be given up. It is behind those 'valuable principles' that conscious and unconscious, willing and imposed, ideologies lie. This ambiguity of being simultaneously both critical of and acquiescent to the same social system is not an irresolvable opposition in itself; rather, it leads to an indeterminacy that contributes to the polysemy and tensions in Woolf's novels.

However, the alleged 'materialism' that Woolf has been accused of has two aspects in her novels: the materialism of many physical *-scapes* (landscape, cityscape, seascape, streetscape, etc.) and the materialism of spiritual selves, *mindscapes*. Materialism in this regard denotes both descriptions of edifices, objects and characters' physical appearances on the one hand, and characters' consciousness and spiritual lives on the other. The *-scapes* in question are indistinguishable and permeate one another in numerous and complex ways. Moreover, they are reflected in one another in a rather peculiar way. Being entangled and oftentimes united, different aspects of materialism continually shape one another, thus having no firm and definite boundaries. This fluidity and constant fluctuation of both the spiritual and the physical make panoptic vision and otherwise irreconcilable dichotomies possible. It is the reconciliation and union of dichotomies and oppositions that tacit ideologies hide behind.

Criticising Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy in her essay 'Modern Fiction', Virginia Woolf identifies the three writers as materialists, 'because they are concerned not with the spirit, but with the body' (147). She accuses them of focusing often only on physical descriptions, while the thing that matters most is left out. For her, it is *life* that matters most and nothing else is worthwhile. Life at the same time represents spirit, truth and reality, and having the characters 'dressed down to the last button of their coats' (149), or giving a detailed description of houses and cities they live in is not helpful in the endeavour to represent *life*. The artificiality of reality in novel writing is to be avoided by evading materialism of this sort. It is implied that the only sort of 'materialism' that can contribute to the reality of life is that which is registered in the minds of characters, in which case 'material' descriptions stop being merely material and take on a spiritual dimension. This sort of transcendence of the material into immaterial, without losing any of the qualities of its materiality, is achievable by means of making the 'material' perceivable in characters' minds, as well as by giving it fluidity and indeterminacy, all the qualities of human minds. In this way 'materialism' becomes part of their spiritual selves, itself being spiritualised, and comes to be personified to a certain extent.

Having been dematerialised on the one hand, and personified on the other, the 'material', as seen above, in Woolf's opus becomes political. To have human qualities and a life of sorts implies a certain unavoidable degree of political nature. This feature of immaterial 'materialism' is inherent to descriptions of all sorts of *-scapes*, no matter how apolitical they seem to be. Various representations of the cityscape in *Mrs Dalloway*, in this respect, stand for, among other things, political perceptions of both the narrator and the characters. Moreover, London itself grows into a political being seemingly independent of its inhabitants at times. This, again, demonstrates the ability of the author to give life to her work and make it relevant in the sphere of the public. The entanglements of the cityscapes and the mindscapes also point out the inseparability of the private and the public as they often reflect each other. This implies that there is no such a thing as the private, and Clarissa's reflection on the necessity of the 'privacy of soul' is futile. Taking into account the inseparability of the private and the public, as well as the fact that most of the novel's plot (if we can speak of a plot at all) occurs on the streets of London, the city and its dwellers become one inseparable political being. This insistence on unity masks certain ideologies.

In her book *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, Julia Briggs observes that *Mrs Dalloway* focuses on the relationship of an individual and the group, adding that characters influence each other strongly, sometimes being oppressive, and that 'all respond to shared experiences – an explosion in Bond Street as a car backfires, an aeroplane sky-writing, an old woman singing in Regent's Park, the striking of clocks, the heat of the day, the excitement of the London season [...]' (134). Though superbly summed up and related to the central theme of the novel, the role of the cityscape is here reduced to that of a chronotope. However, it is much more significant and has not only the role of the spatio-temporal matrix (Fowler 162) in which different viewpoints are focalised through the characters. More to the point, the cityscape itself serves as a means of focalisation of these relationships, and, among other things, adds a new plane – an ideological point of view (Fowler 162).

This focalisation of the political through the characters' perception and internalisation of the materiality of the cityscape is realised by their constant shifts of thought from aspects of the city to their inmost thoughts and vice versa. Thus the cityscape and mindscape merge together and form unity in which both the political and the ideological are reflected: 'As a cloud crosses the sun, silence falls on London and falls on the mind. Effort ceases. Time flaps on the mast. There we stop; there we stand. Rigid, the skeleton of habit alone upholds the human frame' (Woolf 55). The very subtle image of a cloud obstructing the sun and imposing silence both on the human mind and on London represents an ambiguous and indeterminate metaphor. Its indeterminacy and ambiguity

are emphasised by the use of the indefinite article before the noun *cloud*, as well as by not defining which 'effort ceases'. Not stating why we are unable to go on 'There we stop', unable to move 'there we stand', adds to this indeterminacy. On the other hand, the image of the body, 'the human frame' being upheld by the skeleton by habit alone, implies the unwanted life lived only by routine. The generic use of the definite article before the noun phrase 'human frame' and noun 'skeleton' generalises the experience of imposed silence and the feeling of helplessness and enables the whole passage to be read in political and ideological terms. The generalised experience and feelings become personal by shifting them to Peter Walsh, the social outcast with a profound sense of nothingness and emptiness that hinder his ability to become accomplished and to progress in his life. The fragmented sentence ascribed to him represents the continuation of the previous sentence: 'Where there is nothing, Peter Walsh said to himself; feeling hollowed out, utterly empty within' (Woolf 55). This again makes it uncertain whether previous sentences are his perceptions of London, or whether the narrator's 'objective' views flow into Peter's. In any case, the individual and public, as well as the mindscape and cityscape, merge on both the political and ideological plane.

When ostensibly apolitical Clarissa Dalloway thinks of the 'late age of world's experience [which] had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears' (Woolf 12), the narration constantly shifts from her thoughts to Bond Street. Although the streetscape is reduced to a minimum, Bond Street still becomes the location associated with 'tears and sorrows; courage and endurance; a perfectly upright and stoical bearing' (Woolf 12). The contrast of Clarissa's fascination with Bond Street, its radiance and vivacity on one hand, and her own feeling of non-being and invisibility on the other, imply a difference between the city and its dwellers, and again between the individual and the group. Clarissa feels almost bereft of her own personality, as one with the others, devoid of any prospects for the future: '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' (Woolf 13). Her depersonalisation and depoliticisation, also imposed on the rest of the Bond Street walkers, is interrelated with the street itself as a symbol of power that oppresses and silences its pedestrians.

The way power and oppression are exerted is quite subtle and inconspicuous. It is related to the feelings of non-being and emptiness that Clarissa and the rest have. According to Terry Eagleton in *After Theory*, human beings cannot ever possess the sense of meaning, 'since neither can those who fashion it' (212). Its fashioning implies that it has been created as an artifice for a certain purpose and that it does not exist as something within us, but is either imposed or accepted through free will. Eagleton later adds that 'our present political order is based upon the non-being of human deprivation' (221) and suggests that this spiritual void and our desire for meaning enable those in power to rule by giving us something to fill the fissures of our lives. As human beings desire something tangible, our materialistic nature craves the material. If we generalise this statement and take it as universal for any political order, then it can be well applied to *Mrs Dalloway*. The streetscape of Bond Street with its shops, flying flags and radiance offers a vague possibility of bridging the gap between the emptiness and its fulfilment, a prospect that the characters' desires may be quenched. In this case, Bond Street, as well as the city of London, is a construct, which gives meaning to an otherwise meaningless existence. After World War I, which caused devastation and casualties exceeding three million people, unemployment, damaged economies and welfare systems, the political 'action' of giving sense and meaning to life seemed more than necessary and justified. However, the reasons for this were not only philanthropic, but with the aim of introducing a certain political order. It was 'the voice of authority' and 'the spirit of religion', also embodied in a car with a mysterious passenger, that falls 'with something of a cloud's sobriety and stillness upon faces which a second before had been utterly disorderly' (Woolf 17). Order itself is both political and ideological, let alone when it is imposed by those in power and embodied in the structures that symbolise authority.

The relation between authority and the cityscape represented by certain structures is best portrayed by the image of Buckingham Palace. The solemn and respectful atmosphere of a small crowd gathered before the Palace highlights the crowd's consciousness of the importance of the royal house. However, by introducing certain details such as 'the Queen's old doll's house' and the Prince who took after King Edward but was 'ever so slimmer', Woolf diminishes and to some extent subtly ridicules the royal house and its members. That the crowd was increased 'by men without occupation' adds a trace of the political. Constant oppositions in the account of the cityscape also emphasise the political consciousness of the narrator: 'thin trees' are opposed to the sculptures of 'bronze heroes', while the crowd is contrasted with the highly revered royal house individuals (Woolf 22-23). On the other hand, these feelings are perceived through the individualised members of the crowd (Moll Pratt, Sarah Bletchley, Emily Coates, Mr Bowley) and though minimal, there is some insight into their consciousness, while the members of the royal family remain mysterious and are mentioned either by their titles or names but with no insight into their psychological identities.

As for the ideology, it is related both to belonging to a certain class and to the state of non-being. Being a member of a class, gender, religious or political group, one expresses certain beliefs and views associated with one's class position whether consciously, subconsciously or unconsciously. Ideology is also a convenient means of fulfilling the hollow of our non-being. According to Althusser, every work of art consists of both an aesthetic and ideological level. The ideological exists on two parallel planes: one being the ideology that the work of art depicts and thus reveals and another being the ideology promoted by the artist himself. In this way artistic discourse overlaps with ideological discourse. Ideology here represents wider social and historical aspects of life and in this paper, regarding the novel *Mrs Dalloway*, it is restricted to some aspects of political ideologies and related to both the cityscape and mindscapes.

The idea of the mindscape and the cityscape being promoters of ideologies is based on Louis Althusser's thesis that ideology has a material existence. Expounding on the nature of ideology, he refers to the ideological State apparatuses, that is the idea that 'an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material' (Walder 1500). Reflection, perception or observation of an ideology by a character, whether straightforwardly or symbolically expressed, is often related to some 'material' structure, such as the family (Clarissa's thinking of the Whitbreads, for example), or to some cultural or political institution (Parliament, Buckingham Palace, St Paul's Cathedral). In this way the physical structure also becomes the *ideologeme*, defined by Frederic Jameson as 'the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes' (Leitch 1942). In this respect, at times London is represented as threatening and devastating for it 'has swallowed up many millions of young men called Smith' (Woolf 1996: 94), while at times it is shown as promising and joyous.

By depicting Septimus' disintegrating personality, that is, his mindscape, Woolf depicts the disintegration of post-war London and its inhabitants. This is in line with George Lukács' idea that 'the disintegration of personality is matched by a disintegration of the outer world' (179), which could be interpreted as a severe criticism of the society of the period. Discussing the writing of *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf stated that she was 'going to have a man and a woman – show them growing up – never meeting – not knowing each other – but all the time you'll feel them come closer and closer' (Nicolson and Trautmann 60). Woolf seems to eradicate the class difference between them as she portrays two characters that share common suffering and the impossibility to adapt socially. However, by functioning as a reminder of war atrocities and suffering, Septimus is undesirable and removed from the London streets, while Clarissa's upper class status spares her. Septimus' suicide and Clarissa's restored internal peace lead to a balance of sorts, which could be interpreted as Woolf's imposition of a unity which effaces the negative aspects

of London's and England's social life in general. Here again, public and private lives, like those of Septimus and Clarissa, are inseparable. This contradiction is aestheticised as it offers plurality of viewpoints which create a complex artistic unity.

A similar situation presents itself with Doris Kilman, a social outcast because of her stern principles and defiant personality. Being fired from her previous job because she refuses to say that all Germans are bad, she is forced to seek help from those who are not as rigid as her former employers. This she finds in the Dalloways' home, tutoring their daughter Elizabeth. However, embittered and indignant because of her previous experience, she constantly reminds Clarissa of the social difference between them, thus arousing the feeling of guilt in her. The defence mechanism creates mutual hostility and the final exclusion of Doris Kilman as socially inferior. In this way, both the private lives of Clarissa Dalloway and Doris Kilman outgrow their privacy and become marked by their social status.

However, no matter whether the characters belong to upper or lower class, they are still lonely and isolated. As Raymond Williams remarks in *Politics of Modernism*, alienation in the city is social rather than psychological (41). It is the post-war social system that forces people to be estranged from each other, not their psychological selves. Thus the feelings of alienation and estrangement are all-pervasive regardless of one's social position and power, and they enable Clarissa to understand and feel compassion for Septimus. Yet, she is the one who lives while Septimus is doomed to die despite the feelings of loneliness and isolation they have in common. Finally, both the cityscape and mindscapes in *Mrs Dalloway* are represented in the mode of modernist vision as fragmented, chaotic and disorderly, caused by the effect of war devastations and post-World War I crisis. When it comes to the physical *-scapes*, the above vision is accentuated by constant shifts from one *-scape* to another, as well as by different perceptions of them. Peter Walsh, for instance, at one time sees London and its streets as enchanting, admiring its richness and greenness: 'Never had he seen London so enchanting – the softness of the distances; the richness; the greenness; the civilisation, after India, he thought, strolling across grass' (Woolf 79). Later on, the city inarticulately chants 'the ancient song' issued by a rude and muddy mouth and follows the picture of what lies beneath Regent's Park 'with root fibres and tangled grasses [...] and skeletons' (Woolf 91). Thus the same character perceives Regent's Park both as the epitome of civilisation and as ominous and primordial, which emphasises the fragmented and incoherent nature of Peter's mindscape. Its shifts and frequent changes of foci, along with opposite views, relate to the same focus that adds up to the picture of discontinuous and chaotic consciousness.

Peter Nichols observes that 'one of the first moves of this [high] modernism had been to reconstitute the self as closed, autonomous and antagonistic'. In contradiction to this picture of the individual self, he adds the self's 'embeddedness in a complex cultural tradition' (274). The reconciliation of the self being at the same time 'closed, autonomous and antagonistic' and embedded in a cultural tradition seems impossible. The self either surrenders, as is the case with Sally Seton and Clarissa Dalloway, or becomes a social outcast as Doris Kilman and Peter Walsh to a certain extent; or, in extreme cases, it is eradicated by the social system, as is the case with Septimus. Observing the social position and status of the characters in question, it can be seen that the process of exclusion and eradication becomes more severe with the characters' belonging to a lower social position.

Nevertheless, fragmented, conflicting and disorderly, *-scapes* are eventually insistently united in aesthetic unity. Although the ideas of emptiness and non-being, often embodied in the phrases 'death of soul' and lack of 'something central that permeated', are heightened by multifarious images of the cityscape, they are intermittently given their opposites represented with the very same cityscapes. This duality is accordingly

brought together, which is also an ideology of sorts. Reconciliation of cityscapes and mindscapes by entangling and depicting them both as spiritual and material in this way represents the sacrifice of political criticism for the sake of artistic unity and aestheticism. The political and ideological are to some extent diminished by bringing together the multiplicity of discordant and diverse perceptions in the same cityscapes. Recurrent reconciliation is also demonstrated at the level of the mindscape at the end of the novel when, faced with the death of her double and thinking of suicide herself, Clarissa achieves a sense of personal unity and affirmation. This, however, does not deny the fact of political awareness in *Mrs Dalloway*, let alone its artistic value.

Works Cited

- Briggs, Julia. *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*. London and New York: Penguin/Allen Lane, 2005.
- Dalgarno, Emily. *Virginia Woolf and the Visible World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Dalsimer, Katherine. *Virginia Woolf Becoming a Writer*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*. London and New York: Verso, 2006.
- . *After Theory*. London and New York: Penguin / Allen Lane, 2004.
- Fowler, Roger. *Linguistic Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Latham, Jacqueline E. M., ed. *Critics on Virginia Woolf*. Florida: University of Miami Press, 1970.
- Lee, Hermione. *Virginia Woolf*. New York: Vintage Books, 1999.
- Leitch, Vincent B. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001.
- Lukács, George. 'The Ideology of Modernism' in *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents*, ed. Dennis Walder. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004: 175-180.
- Nichols, Peter. *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009.
- Nicolson, Nigel and Joanne Trautmann, eds. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Volume One 1888-1912*. London and New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1975.
- Williams, Raymond. *Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*. London and New York: Verso, 2007.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway*. London and New York: Penguin, 1996.
- . *The Common Reader*. San Diego: Harcourt, 1986.

Zwerdling, Alex. *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986.

To Cite This Article:

Petar Penda, 'Politicising Cityscape: London in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*'. *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 10 Number 1 (Spring 2013). Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/spring2013/penda.pdf>.

About *The Literary London Journal*

The Literary London Journal is the free, online, open-access journal of the Literary London Society. Founded in 2003 by Lawrence Phillips, who edited the journal between 2003 and 2011, it is the first and only journal to provide a common forum for scholars and students engaged specifically in the study of London and literature. From the start, *The Literary London Journal* has aimed to publish the best new research relating to London and literature.

The journal is online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/>

The Literary London Journal is fully peer-reviewed. It is published twice a year, in spring and autumn, and is indexed by the MLA International Bibliography. For past issues and information about submissions, please visit the journal home page.

ISSN: 1744-0807 | <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/>
