

# Forum

*Forum Policy:* Members of the Association are invited to submit letters commenting on any article published in *PMLA*, or on matters of scholarly and critical interest to readers generally. Such letters, if accepted by the Editor, will be sent to the author of the work commented on, who will be invited to reply. The usual rules regarding courtesy and avoidance of personalities will be enforced, and the Editor reserves complete discretion in deciding whether or not to publish any letter. Letters should not exceed 1,000 words of text. Footnotes are discouraged and should be included only when absolutely necessary.

## *Mrs. Dalloway Revisited*

To the Editor:

When a critical essay reduces the complex and paradoxical ambiguities of its subject to simple oppositions, ignores major scenes in the work under discussion, and misrepresents the text, it is time to protest. Jean M. Wyatt's "*Mrs. Dalloway: Literary Allusion as Structural Metaphor*" (*PMLA*, 88, 1973, 440–51) commits all three of these errors in pursuit of its thesis and in the process sacrifices the novel to the argument.

Repeatedly, Wyatt misrepresents or intentionally distorts the text of Virginia Woolf's novel to make a point. In demonstrating "the two polar images of Clarissa's existence" (p. 443), she writes: "Her 'plunge' into the open air signifies her immersion in the whole of life, represented by the ocean; when she is thus submerged life appears benevolent, 'kissing' her as it envelops her. But the opposite emotion, the fear of 'something awful about to happen,' holds her back. *Dread of life's dangers leads her to take refuge within the house, separated from life by the window*" (pp. 443–44; my italics). The scene thus analyzed simply does not exist in the novel. Virginia Woolf wrote:

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. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, "Musing among the vegetables?"—was that it?—"I prefer men to cauliflowers"—was that it? He must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone out on to the terrace. (pp. 3–4)<sup>1</sup>

Clarissa does experience fear, but it does not drive her back into the house to be separated from life by the window; rather, she fears but remains on the terrace.

Supposedly, she retreats from life again when she enters the flower shop and half-closes her eyes to life outside. She does half-close her eyes, but while doing so, she revels in the flowers "as if this beauty, this scent, this colour, and Miss Pym liking her, trusting her, were a wave which she let flow over her and surmount that hatred, that monster, surmount it all; and it lifted her up and up when—oh! a pistol shot in the street outside!" (p. 19). Flowers and waves, two major symbols of life and involvement in life, permeate the scene. It is difficult to see how Clarissa shuts out life when so surrounded by life symbols and so obviously enjoying them. Similar distortions, equally serious, occur when, through injudicious use of ellipses, six paragraphs of text are treated as one (p. 447). The peregrinations of Clarissa's response to Doris Kilman are thus grossly misrepresented.

Even more disturbing is Wyatt's analysis of Lady Bruton and Sally Seton who purportedly "typify the two sides of Clarissa's experience" (p. 441). We are told that Sally "repudiates the aristocratic code" (p. 441), is "the only bourgeois among Clarissa's friends" (p. 441), is the only fertile friend of Clarissa (p. 441), and is a "source of vitality and passion" (p. 442); whereas, Lady Bruton, who comes from "a former generation that does not meet the demands of modern life" (p. 441), represents "the deadening aristocratic society" (p. 442), rigidity, "death of the soul," and the life-denying forces of social existence. The two ladies have been reduced to caricatures in order to meet the demands of Wyatt's argument. Sally may have scandalized the Parrys by running naked to her bath and by marrying a miner's son, but is she bourgeois and anti-aristocratic? She is Lady Rosseter (p. 260); her French ancestor was executed along with Marie Antoinette, who had given him a ruby ring (pp. 48, 286), and her husband's money and title have brought her "myriads of servants and miles of conservatories" (p. 286). Five sons she may have, but as Peter Walsh emphasizes, "Everybody in the room [at Clarissa's party] has six sons at Eton" (p. 289). Even when young, Clarissa

sensed the egotism of Sally's "melodramatic love of being the centre of everything and creating scenes" (pp. 276–77). Now "very solitary" among her hothouse flowers, Sally is isolated from involvement in life far more than Clarissa ever was.

Nor is Lady Bruton a flat character. Aged, imperceptive, and snobbish, she still manages to embody the involved fervor with which Sally once toyed. She may not have read Plato, Shelley, and Morris, but she is actively concerned with schemes to better the lives of "young people of both sexes" (p. 164) and has lived in "the forefront of her time" (p. 169). When describing the emigration project as being "inevitably prismatic, lustrous, half looking-glass, half precious stone" (p. 165), Virginia Woolf captures the ambiguous complexities of Millicent Bruton. Though never as likable a character as Sally Seton, Millicent Bruton remains capable of waving the helmet, leading the troops, and ruling "with indomitable justice barbarian hordes" (p. 274). She remains actively involved in public service as did Lady Bexborough and Helena Parry and as Elizabeth Dalloway plans to do (pp. 207, 209).

The heat-cold, passion-frigidity, republican-aristocrat, life-death, Sally-Millicent oppositions exist in the essay but parody the novel. Sally is no more a life force than are Helena Parry, Elizabeth Dalloway, and Rezia Smith. Her passion must be qualified by the passions of Peter Walsh and Doris Kilman, and when so qualified, can scarcely remain a positive force. That such a life-denying character as Septimus Smith can be discussed as an evocation of dying vegetation gods illustrates how far Wyatt is willing to go in pursuing her argument. Septimus refuses to father a child; sex sickens him; human nature nauseates him. That such a life-denier intensifies Clarissa's love of life and frees her from fear of death is one of the major ironies of the novel.

My quarrel could continue, but its theme would remain the same—the absolute necessity for scholarly accuracy and thoroughness. Where does Septimus yearn for an idyllic past (p. 440)? How does one know that the word "pit" alludes to Dante's *Inferno* (p. 440)? Is not plucking heads from flowers a castration image (p. 441) rather than a quaint folk image? Considering Doris Kilman's clothing and attitude toward Clarissa, can her passion be remotely related to that of Sally? Does the sun in the *Cymbeline* quotation not refer to the passage of time rather than to the vitality of life (p. 442)? How can the image of "woodenness being warmed" be negative in one column and positive in the next (p. 447)? How can Doris Kilman become another of Clarissa's alter egos when the argument's logic is fallacious (pp. 447–48)? How can Septimus and Rezia achieve "perfect unity" after his suicide (p. 449)?

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*—any work of literature for that matter—deserves to be treated with factual accuracy, rigorous logic, and perceptive consideration of all evidence. "Someone has blundered," and *Mrs. Dalloway* and the readers of *PMLA* must suffer the blunders.

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#### Note

<sup>1</sup> *Mrs. Dalloway*, Harvest Book Ed. (New York: Harcourt, 1953). All subsequent citations are from this text.

#### *Ms. Wyatt replies:*

No *PMLA* reader can fail to be grateful to David Higdon for defending the critical virtues of accuracy, logic, and evidence. But, I would suggest, he has picked the wrong article to dramatize his zeal. Since, however, he has chronicled my putative sins at some length, *PMLA* readers will, I hope, excuse a reply of equally tedious detail.

Higdon is perhaps right in correcting my interpretation of "at the window" on the first page of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Although the phrase usually implies a position inside a house and certainly prefigures the later scenes where Clarissa stands looking out the window, he may be right in locating her just outside the window. Happily, the distinction does not affect my argument: Clarissa's frozen immobility at the window represents the opposite state of mind from her initial plunge into life.

As to his disagreement with my reading of the flower shop scene, Higdon is certainly entitled to his interpretation of flowers and waves as life symbols. But the text supports my main argument that the "exquisite coolness" of the flower shop offers a retreat from "the street uproar" (p. 19),<sup>1</sup> the heat of life outside.

Although I did not, it is true, quote two entire pages of text to present Clarissa's confrontation with Miss Kilman on the stairs, the ellipses were not diabolical in intent. The passages I chose do illustrate Miss Kilman's hatred and Clarissa's triumph over hatred and thus over Miss Kilman.

Septimus' disgust with sex is indeed paradoxical, but it is consistent with the paradoxical nature of the fertility god who in dying seems to deny life, yet gives life. (See p. 443 of my article.) And Septimus' literary predecessors often share his rejection of sex. (See, for example, Shakespeare's Adonis in *Venus and Adonis*.) That Septimus and Rezia achieve union after his suicide is not my mystery, but Virginia Woolf's. (Terence feels a similar unity with Rachel after her death in *The Voyage Out*.)