



“Modern Heroes, Heroines, and Antiheroes: The External and Internal in Mrs. Dalloway”

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Modernity is a concept, period, idea, etc., that has been explored ad nauseam. Defining it seems to be an impossible task; scholars have been debating when it began and when it ended (if it even ended at all) for at least 100 years. The term itself first appeared in the mid-nineteenth century in the writings of Baudelaire (Childs 16). He defined modernity as “a way of living and of experiencing life which has arisen with the changes wrought by industrialization, urbanization and secularization” that involves “new understandings of time and space: speed, mobility, communication, travel, dynamism, chaos and cultural revolution” (Childs 16). His definition, for the most part, has persisted over the years.

In this essay, I would like to explore the way that Baudelaire’s conception of modernity manifests in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*. In the novel, Woolf shows that to live in modernity requires one to embrace the new features of the modern city, even if it comes at the cost of one’s internal life. I will draw from Walter Benjamin’s theory about the modern hero, as seen in the flâneur in Baudelaire to think about the relationship between modernity and Woolf’s characters. Clarissa Dalloway, Peter Walsh, and the other characters who successfully engage with London’s

modern features, such as the cosmopolitan crowd and new technology, are the heroes of modernity in the Benjaminian sense. Septimus Warren Smith, in contrast, is the antihero of modernity. He stands apart from the crowd while out in the city, grappling with meaning that is not actually there, and struggles to understand the new technology that the other characters marvel over. Yet Septimus’s lack of engagement with the modern world is more than made up for by his thoughts. He is overly emotional and in tune with his own perceptions, which marks his rich inner life. Unfortunately for him, modernity is primarily concerned with the external, not the internal, which is why his suicide is not an act of cowardice but an act of defiance against the pressure that modernity places on him to give up his inner life and engage with the modern world. Although Woolf is an avid proponent of modernity, she is also aware of its costs. Her ambivalence highlights the complexities that modernity brings to the individuals living through it.

Benjamin’s conception of the hero in Baudelaire is a crucial component of my reading. The immediate problem though is that Benjamin is unclear about what exactly his conception of the hero is. In “Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” Benjamin



explains the hero in several ways, which suggests that the hero manifests in a number of forms. He provides an array of figures whom he considers the hero: “Baudelaire patterned his image of the artist after an image of the hero,” the flâneur’s fragile existence “displays the structure which is in every way characteristic of Baudelaire’s conception of the hero,” “the fencing slave in the proletarian” has a “heroic constitution,” “the ragpicker” is akin to the heroic poet, “the lesbian is the heroine of la modernité,” “the hero appears as a dandy,” and so on (Benjamin, “Paris of the Second Empire” 39, 42, 44, 48, 56, 59). The definition of the hero emerges from what these figures have in common. As Angeliki Spiropoulou put it in her book on Benjamin’s conception of history and modernity in Woolf’s works, these figures are the “certain representative human types” that “become emblems of the dialectical tension between what is new and what is lost in modernity” (29). That is, Benjamin’s “hero” is a person who represents the pressure between the gains and the losses of modernity. The flâneur/ flâneuse, who appears as Peter and Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway*, is one variation of this hero.

Although the relationship between Benjamin’s flâneur and Virginia Woolf has been discussed by previous

scholars, the significance of the flâneur as a hero (or, in Septimus’s case, the antihero) remains unexplored. Michael H. Whitworth, in his discussion on historical approaches to *Mrs. Dalloway*, notes that “thinking about the urban space of *Mrs. Dalloway* and Woolf’s other London novels has developed through extensive dialogue with the writings of Walter Benjamin” (141). He argues that Benjamin’s flâneur, who is “a detached observer of city life who enjoys the anonymity of the crowd,” has become an increasingly important concept in the scholarship on modernity. Janet Wolff, Rachel Bowlby, and Raphael Ingelbien’s studies on the modern flâneur support this claim. Their works on the concept of flânerie form the theoretical groundwork for understanding its manifestation in *Mrs. Dalloway*; however, the connection between the flâneur and the hero, as well as the implications of a hero and antihero in the text, are barely addressed.

Wolff’s article “The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity” deals specifically with the relationship between the flâneur and gender roles. She asserts that “the flâneur is the modern hero” but does not delve further into a definition or theory about the role of the hero in modern literature (Wolff 146). Wolff’s central



argument is that Benjamin's understanding of Baudelaire's flâneur, although an important and interesting concept in modernity, only applies to men (146). Women as flâneuses are inevitably left out because "such a character would be rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century" (Wolff 154). In other words, social conditions in the nineteenth century made it impossible for the flâneuse to exist, which is why it is absent from mid-century modern literature. Since Wolff somewhat problematically equates the hero with the flâneur, it is presumable that she believes the heroine is inevitably left out as well.

Although Woolf does not apply her theory to any works beyond Baudelaire in her essay, Bowlby picks up where she left off. Bowlby applies Wolff's ideas about the flâneuse to her reading of *Mrs. Dalloway* in the article "Walking, Women, and Writing." Although she primarily focuses on "Street Haunting" in modern literature in her article, Bowlby argues that Woolf presents the flâneuse and subverts the flâneur in the novel. She argues that Woolf may be "readjusting the dominant narratives of the street" to "make way for something like a female flânerie" (Whitworth 142). Her reading of Peter Walsh's city escapade as a parody and

Clarissa Dalloway's wanderings as that of the flâneuse show that Woolf may have been subverting Benjamin's masculine conception of the flâneur in her novel.

However, it is really Ingelbien who thinks about the flâneur and flâneuse within the larger framework of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Ingelbien's article "They Saw One They Knew: Baudelaire and the Ghosts of London Modernism" primarily focuses on the similarities between ghosts, modern London, and Baudelaire's Paris, but nonetheless argues that the characters who thrive in *Mrs. Dalloway* are flâneurs and flâneuses, while the struggling Septimus is the anti-flâneur. Like Bowlby, he recognizes that for the women in the novel, "London is a place of opportunity, and an alternative to domesticity" (Ingelbien 55). While Clarissa, Peter, and others flourish as flâneurs and flâneuses, "Septimus remains the anti-flâneur from whom the surface of London is deceptive" (Ingelbien 56). Ingelbien notes that Woolf "could...recoil from her beloved London," which suggests that Septimus "is the doppelgänger who voices her repulsion, and who exposes the fragility or even the vacuousness of the flâneurs and flâneuses' response to the city" (56). Put another way, Septimus represents Woolf's criticism of



modern city experience: the mindless wandering, the emphasis on the external, the shallow response to experience. This is similar to Childs's depiction of Septimus as "unable to bring the internal and external aspects of his experience together" (173). While Childs argues that Woolf is critical of Septimus's inability to bring these elements together to form a unified self, Ingelbien reads Septimus's resistance to the external as Woolf criticizing the external elements of modernity itself. Indeed, he asserts that Septimus's character suggests "a rejection of the modernity that Benjamin located at the heart of Baudelaire's experience of the city" (Ingelbien 56).

Although Ingelbien's argument is compelling, it does not factor in the function of the flâneur as the hero. For the rest of this paper, I would like to shift from Ingelbien's emphasis on the flâneur, flâneuse, and anti-flâneur to the manifestation of Benjamin's hero in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Although the two are closely linked for Benjamin, it is the hero who is "the true subject of la modernité ("Paris of the Second Empire" 44). The flâneur/flâneuse, when read as representative of the hero/heroine, represents more than just an observer who is at home in the crowd: he/she represents the tension between the gains and

losses of modernity. The antihero, therefore, lacks this tension. Instead of striking a balance between the pros and cons of the modern world, the antihero finds himself lost in one or the other. Bowlby and Ingelbien demonstrate in their analyses of flânerie that Clarissa and Peter function as a flâneuse and a flâneur, so with Benjamin's conception in mind, I will argue that they function as a hero and a heroine. Septimus, as the anti-flâneur, is the antihero who shows only the losses that modernity brings.

When read in this light, Clarissa, Peter, and Septimus demonstrate Woolf's ambivalent feelings about the gains and losses of modernity. Randall Stevenson details Woolf's comprehensive understanding of modernity as both fascinating and problematic. In his reading of *To the Lighthouse*, he discusses how the novel is often read as "modernist resistance to modernity" but this does "not do full justice...to Woolf's view of modernity" (Stevenson 156). He says that "any view of modernism's relations to modernity needs to acknowledge that these were almost invariably complicitous" (Stevenson 157). In other words, Woolf is fascinated with motor cars, aviation, film, and other new technologies but also wary of their implications (Stevenson 156-157). Her presentation of the modern self "may



have resulted as much from the new thrills as from the new threats modernity provided” (Stevenson 157). Woolf’s ambivalent feelings towards the modern world help explain her presentation of Clarissa, Peter, and Septimus. Although Woolf was fascinated with new technology and science, she also saw the ills of these gains (Stevenson 157, 159). Amongst other things, she was concerned about the lack of connection in modern times, which she explores throughout *Mrs. Dalloway*. Her wariness becomes particularly vivid when she aligns the heroine Clarissa with the antihero Septimus after his suicide. Her representation of modernity in the novel is overall a complex and ambivalent depiction—surely one that Benjamin, with his cryptic and often contradictory ideas, would have approved of.

From the beginning of the novel, Woolf presents Clarissa as the hero of modernity. The gains of modernity are clearly represented in her thoughts. As a flâneuse, “the street becomes a dwelling place” for Clarissa (Benjamin, “Paris of the Second Empire” 19). That is, Clarissa feels at home while out and about in the city, which is new to modernity and wonderful to Clarissa. She describes what she loves about London:

“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 in June.” (Woolf 4)

Clarissa is describing a distinctly modern scene. Her warm depiction of the people of the crowd “in the swing, tramp, and trudge” suggests that she finds “the spectacle offered by the crowds in big-city streets intoxicating,” much like Benjamin’s flâneur (“Paris of the Second Empire” 33). Airplanes and cars, which were not yet present in Baudelaire’s Paris, are modern as well: Clarissa marvels at the “motor cars” and “the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead.” For her, “the cabs passing” are “absolutely absorbing” and “Bond street fascinated her” with “its shops...one roll of tweed...a few pearls; salmon on an iceblock” (Woolf 8, 11). Clarissa takes in her surroundings “at a glance,” much as storefronts in the arcades of Baudelaire’s mid-19th century Paris provided the hero with a visual array of commodities (Benjamin, “Arcades Project” 40). In the London of the early 20th century, though, the visual



display of the arcades has shifted to a street known for its shopping. Clarissa's joy whilst absorbing all of this testifies to her success as a modern hero. Additionally, unlike nineteenth-century Paris, new technologies become an increasingly important component of the modern experience in the twentieth century. Clarissa embraces the cars and modern technologies that are part of the flâneuse experience in the 1920s. Altogether, her depiction of "what she loved; life; London" represents the gains of modernity; she is able to experience the crowd and new technology as a gleeful observer.

However, Clarissa's position as a heroine reflects not only the newness of modernity but also the tension between the gains and the losses. Her experience with the losses become evident when she returns home after her morning out and about in London. According to Benjamin, the crowd is "the latest narcotic for people who have been abandoned" ("Paris of the Second Empire" 31). This is true for Clarissa, who hopes to connect with others throughout the novel but repeatedly to make the connection. Her difficulty marks the internal loss of modernity; the sense of connection, or of the feeling that "an unseen part of us...be recovered somehow attached to this person or that" (Woolf

153), that was prevalent in pre-modern life has given way to "the obliteration of the individual's traces in the big-city crowd" (Benjamin, "Paris of the Second Empire" 23). As a flâneuse in the streets, Clarissa is intoxicated by the external modern experience, but the tension between the gains of external experience and the loss of internal experience becomes evident when she returns home. Clarissa has a message that Mr. Dalloway has been asked to lunch with Lady Bruton. Immediately, the thrill of being in the crowd vanishes. Clarissa feels "suddenly shrivelled, aged, breastless, the grinding, blowing, flowering of the day, out of the doors, out of the window, out of her body and brain which now failed" (Woolf 31). In other words, the pleasure that comes from being alone in the crowd, an observer of modernity, dissipates when she is presented with the loss of connectivity that accompanies the modern. The isolation that is central to her experience in the street makes her felt disconnected from her husband. When she says that she is "alone forever," Clarissa is relaying the idea that she feels disconnected from Mr. Dalloway (Woolf 47). Her sense of loss, which follows her joy in being a part of a new modernity, highlights the tension that exists within the modern heroine.

Peter Walsh also functions as a hero in *Mrs. Dalloway*. The “leisurely” flâneur/modern hero “strolls about everywhere in the city” (Benjamin, “Paris of the Second Empire” 19). Peter embodies this hero when he submits “to the monotonous, fascinating, constantly unrolling band of asphalt” that defines the new modern city (Benjamin, “Arcades Project” 519). Peter’s relationship to London is specifically defined in these terms when he leaves Clarissa’s house. He feels that “he had escaped!” and that he is free “from being precisely what he was” as he stands “at the opening of endless avenues, down which if he chose he might wander” (Woolf 52). In other words, he sees the possibility of being a part of the new modern city and the modern crowd as he observes London. Peter’s joyful, poetic language suggests that modernity offers “a refuge for the hero” (Benjamin, “Paris of the Second Empire” 39). Its externalities, including the crowd, provide Peter with a sense of freedom that he warmly embraces.

Peter’s heroism is exemplified when he pursues the unknown woman. In the modern crowd, “antiquity [springs] suddenly from an intact modernity” (Benjamin, “Paris of the Second Empire” 53). During Peter’s escapade, the ancient conception of the

hero as the “adventurer” arises from the modern scene. Curiously, Peter follows the woman even as “other people got between them in the street” and imagines himself as “an adventurer, reckless...swift, daring, indeed a romantic buccaneer” (Woolf 53). Here, Peter has reimagined the modern crowd as an ocean to be navigated by a “buccaneer” like himself as he seeks his treasure in the woman he is following. His fantasy reveals the parallel between the “task” of the modern hero—“to give shape to modernity”—and that of the ancient hero, who gave shape to antiquity (“Paris of the Second Empire” 49). That is, Peter gives shape to the function of the crowd as a flâneur; his presence, as a wanderer of the city, transforms the crowd into a significant feature of modernity that provides refuge and freedom. The way that the ancient “springs” from modernity in Peter’s escapade, therefore, posits Peter as the modern hero, a flâneur giving shape to modern London, who inherits the heroic form from antiquity.

Although Peter marvels at and gives shape to London as a modern hero, the external features that he relates are in tension with the internal features that are lost in modernity. Fascinating as the city is, Peter senses the loss of internal connection that accompanies



it. He reflects on this when he reaches his hotel after strolling through the city. Peter remembers him and Clarissa “going on top of an omnibus” through London, “spotting queer little scenes, names, people” (Woolf 152). He recalls how they “had a theory in those days...to explain the feeling they had of dissatisfaction; not knowing people; not being known” (Woolf 152). Here, Peter faces the tension of the modern hero: on one hand, modern London, with its buses and crowds, is fascinating, but on the other, there is the sense that connection is lost. The juxtaposition between Peter watching the “scene, names, people” of London and thinking about failed connection between individuals suggest that modernity gave rise to those thoughts. Similarly, Peter’s thoughts turn to the loss of interpersonal connection when he enters Clarissa’s party. After happily observing the crowds and cars of London as a flâneur on the walk over, Peter braces himself for an attempt to connect with Clarissa at the party. He notes that “the cold stream of visual impressions failed him” as he enters her home (Woolf 164). In other words, his fascination with the external visuals of modernity dissipates as he braces himself for the struggle to connect. He thinks that “the brain must wake,” “the body must contract,” and

“the soul must brave itself to endure” (Woolf 164-165). His cold, focused language suggests that connection is difficult for him as the modern hero. The tension between the modern technology and crowds versus the struggle to connect, the gains and losses of modernity, is manifest in this scene.

While Clarissa and Peter thrive as modern heroes, Septimus Warren Smith functions as the antihero. Septimus is ironically an actual hero: he fought in World War I, “had won crosses,” and was promoted “to a post of considerable responsibility” (Woolf 88). In the modern city, though, his shell-shock posits him as the antihero. The war, which in many ways was a product of modern nationalistic ideas and new modern technologies, has left Septimus mentally ill and thus resistant to modern London. While the modern hero finds himself caught between the gains and the losses of modernity, Septimus is horrified by the external newness of the modern. The shell-shocked soldier is unable to deal with the London crowd, which contrasts with the modern hero who finds “a place of refuge” in the city streets (Benjamin, “Paris of the Second Empire” 42). As he walks through London, he feels that he is “blocking the way” and “being looked at and pointed at” (Woolf 15). Here, Septimus feels that

he is apart from the crowd, unlike the heroic flâneur who marvels at this new phenomenon. When a crowd gathers to watch the car, Septimus sees the “gradual drawing together” of the crowd and perceives it “as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames” (Woolf 15). This suggests that Septimus is terrified by the appearance of the crowd. Further, Ingelbien points to the fact that “every noise or sight conceals a hidden meaning” for Septimus (56). The shell-shocked soldier hears “a child [cry]” and “far away a horn [sound]” and believes that “all taken together [they mean] the birth of a new religion” (Woolf 23). Septimus, thus, is not fascinated with and drawn in by the modern crowd as Clarissa and Peter are. Instead, he feels apart from it and perceives it as “deceptive” (Ingelbien 56). Modernity is terrifying for Septimus; he believes it is full of meaning that is not actually there, feels disconnected from it, and cannot properly relate to its features.

In addition to his lack of engagement with the crowd, Septimus also fails to connect with new technologies. Whereas Clarissa and Peter are fascinated by the technology that they see and experience, Septimus does not properly understand modern

technology. Ingelbien points out that “starting motor-cars are pistols firing or shells exploding” for Septimus (56). In other words, technology represents horror or deception to him. Septimus thinks that “the throb of the motor engines sounded like a pulse irregularly drumming through an entire body” (Woolf 14-15). His cold, mechanical language points out the fact that technology is far from marvelous to him. Septimus also struggles to understand the place of technology in the modern world. Septimus believes that “they are signaling to me” when he sees the writing from the airplane and randomly remarks that “the upkeep of that motor car alone must cost him quite a lot” after his visit with Sir William (Woolf 21, 98-99). His paranoid misread of the airplane and his disengaged comment about the car signifies that Septimus is unable to comprehend modern technology, which further emphasizes his role as the antihero.

While Septimus is at odds with the modern city and modern technologies, he is deeply submerged in his internal feelings and thoughts. Unlike the other characters, who sense that their ability to connect has diminished in the face of the externalities of modernity, Septimus feels overwhelmingly connected to the world but cannot relay it



to others. His connection to the world is exemplified throughout the novel. Septimus has received “revelations” from the world, such as “men must not cut down trees,” “there is a God,” “there is no crime,” “there is not death” (Woolf 24-25). In the daily scene, he finds that “all of this, calm and reasonable as it was, made out of ordinary things as it was, was the truth now; beauty, that was the truth now. Beauty was everywhere” (Woolf 69). In these passages, Septimus believes that the world is transmitting meaning to him. He feels overwhelmingly connected and wishes to communicate this to others. Septimus thinks that he has been “called forth in advance of the mass of men to hear the truth, to learn the meaning” and must relay “the supreme secret” to others (Woolf 67). However, the loss of connectivity that accompanies modernity makes this impossible. During his meeting with Sir William, he feels that “human nature is remorseless” and wonders whether Sir William will “let him off” if “he communicated,” but finds himself unable to share his vivid internal life with the doctor (Woolf 98). His failure to communicate is a symptom of the modern: as the antihero, Septimus is filled with internal connections, but modernity, with its emphasis on the

external, turns connecting with others into a challenge.

Septimus feels out of place in the modern world as the antihero, where the external dominates and its heroes can balance both the gains and the losses. His suicide, read in this light, was a heroic act in that he took a stand against the “resistance that modernity offers” to one’s will (Benjamin, “Paris of the Second Empire” 45). That is, Septimus was acting in defiance of the conditions of modernity that hinder him from expressing his connectivity to the world and prevent him from reaching others. Although Benjamin is reflecting on the suicides of factory workers in mid-nineteenth century Paris in his essay, the overwhelming loss that they experience in modernity is akin to the sense of loss that Septimus feels in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Like the workers, his suicide is “not resignation but heroic passion” (Benjamin, “Paris of the Second Empire” 45). Septimus, as seen in earlier paragraphs, is full of passion for the world. His death can thus be read as “the achievement of modernity in the realm of the passions” (Benjamin, “Paris of the Second Empire” 45) In other words, Septimus preserves his rich internal life by committing suicide. Right before Septimus jumps out of the window, he reflects on how the “tiresome, the

troublesome, and rather melodramatic business of opening the window and throwing himself out” was the doctors’ “idea of tragedy, not his” (Woolf 149). His thoughts suggest that he does not view his suicide as a tragedy as the modern doctors do; rather, it is an act of heroism. Septimus feels that he does “not want to die” (Woolf 149). This thought aligns him with the Baudelarian conception of suicide, for whom suicide was not about dying but about performing “the only heroic act still available” in modernity (Benjamin, “Paris of the Second Empire” 45). Thus, although Septimus is the antihero of modernity in *Mrs. Dalloway*, his suicide gives him a heroic quality. It is particularly ironic that Holmes cries “the coward!” as Septimus jumps, because the suicide is not an act of cowardice for Septimus but an act of heroic defiance against the way modernity—with the emphasis on crowds, technology, and other external features—diminishes the internal life of connectivity that Septimus cherishes.

Although modernity is depicted throughout the novel for both the positives and the negatives it brings, Woolf’s ambivalence towards the period becomes most vivid when Clarissa learns about Septimus’s death. Clarissa, the heroine who balances the new and the old, ultimately feels “very like”

Septimus (Woolf 186), signaling that Woolf might have more sympathy with the antihero, who is submerged in the losses of modernity, than the hero and heroine. Clarissa reflects on Septimus’s death and how there was “a thing...defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter” (Woolf 184). Here, Clarissa is thinking about what is hidden in her life. As a hero, she stands on the threshold of modernity, able to observe what is there and what it lost with a sense of wonder. However, she senses that there is a certain tragic element in failing to connect due to the “corruption, lies, chatter” of the period. She thinks that “death was defiance” and “an attempt to communicate” (Woolf 184). Indeed, Septimus was acting in defiance against the internal losses of modernity and trying to communicate his resistance to the period through his suicide. Clarissa’s ability to understand this aligns her with Septimus: she “does not pity him” and feels “somehow very like him” (Woolf 186). In bringing them together in this way, Woolf hints at her own ambivalence about modernity. She was fascinated with the modern external world but sensed that it came with its own costs. Septimus represents those costs, and Clarissa’s alignment with him shows that Woolf was as concerned about the



losses as she was fascinated with the gains.

Thus, modernity, to put it lightly, is presented as a complex concept throughout *Mrs. Dalloway*. The characters who represent the hero, heroine, and anti-hero give shape to both the characteristics of the period and to the novel's depiction of the modern, much as the hero gave shape to modernity in Baudelaire's poems. However, it is worth noting that although Benjamin identifies the flâneur as one of the many significant heroic figures that Baudelaire depicts and embodies, his interest is really in Baudelaire as an artist. It is Baudelaire who "patterned his image of the artist after an image of the hero" and "imposed upon him as his very own" the task of giving shape to modernity (Benjamin, "Paris of the Second Empire" 39). That being said, it is reasonable to assume that Benjamin would have read Woolf herself, as the artist and chronicler of modernity, as a heroine of modernity. Her depiction of the modern, with all its gains and losses, is masterfully done in this novel. Woolf attempted to show "an ordinary mind on an ordinary day" (Woolf 474), but specifically situated that mind in modernity, a fact that should not be overlooked when reading the text. *Mrs. Dalloway* is a rich portrait of the

complexities that accompany the individual in modernity. In creating this work, Woolf demonstrates that she too is a heroine, "for the modern hero is no hero; he is a portrayer of heroes" (Benjamin, "Paris of the Second Empire" 60).

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