

The Averted Face: The Trauma of Marriage in *Mrs. Dalloway*

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For better or worse, the figure of Emmanuel Levinas, “the avatar of traumatized denigration of the self” (Moyn 21) has become an inescapable one in the field of trauma studies. Yet, as Thomas Trieze has noted, “[he] would not have achieved his current status and influence were it not that the ethical relational to ‘the other,’ to which he ascribes preeminence in his philosophy of subjectivity, continues to raise more questions than answers” (1). Almost from its inception, feminist philosophers have challenged the conceptualization of the female “other.” Perhaps the first to do so, Simone de Beauvoir flatly stated in *The Second Sex* that, “As a matter of fact, wars, festivals, trading, treaties, and contests among tribes, nations, and classes tend to deprive the concept of *Other* of its absolute sense.” To her catalogue of male social activity and dysfunction—so similar to Woolf’s concerns in *Three Guineas*—one could add rape, domestic violence, and sexual abuse. “No subject,” de Beauvoir states, “will readily volunteer to become the object” (xxix-xxx). As bluntly, Luce Irigaray observes that “Levinas thinks starting only from himself, a man, and not in two or the reciprocity between them” [cite: *To Be Two*]. While neither Levinas nor his critics adequately take into account the consequences of sexual trauma on a woman’s ability to experience her self in relation to the “other,” the concept of the “Face” allows us to locate and query the disturbance of human relationship that is the inevitable result of trauma. In seeking out the “face of the other” in Virginia Woolf’s texts, we are able to trace the impact of trauma embodied in both her life and her work, which cannot be unequivocally separated, but remain, instead, in a state of constant dialogue.

The concept of the face of the other is undoubtedly the most familiar one in the work of the Levinas. “In my philosophical essays,” he writes, “I have spoken a great deal about the face

of the other man [sic] as being the original locus of the meaningful” (*EN* 145). It is in our face-to-face encounters that we are able to experience our separate realities and so relate to each other ethically, to discover the uniqueness of “the ‘I’ called and elected to responsibility for others” (*History* 130). In a comment that would have resonated with Woolf, who explored the porous nature of human subjects in relationship with each other throughout her novels, Levinas remarks that “the human ‘I’ is not a self-enclosed unit like the unit of the atom; it is an opening, the opening of responsibility that is the true beginning of the human and of spirituality” (*History* 130). The face *presents* the Other for our response.

“All encounter,” Levinas writes, “begins with a benediction, contained in the word ‘hello’ I therefore insist on the primacy of the well-intentioned relation toward the other. Even where there may be ill will on the other’s part, the attention, the receiving of the other, like his recognition, mark the priority of good in relation to evil” (*AT* 98). “How much she wanted it,” Clarissa Dalloway thinks to herself, “that people should look pleased as she came in” (10). Understood in this context, Clarissa’s thoughts about her face as she composes herself in front of her mirror seem less about her vanity and self-regard than about her preparation to greet and be greeted. “How many million times she had seen her face, and always with the same contradiction. . . . That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting point” (37).

Mrs. Dalloway is a novel of greeting. In a nation recovering from the trauma of war—that ultimate failure of the face-to-face-encounter—its characters are in a continual state of greeting, as they cross and recross through the day, culminating in the receiving line of Clarissa’s

party where, engaged in a great act of social repair, Clarissa welcomes each guest: “‘How delightful to see you!’ said Clarissa. She said it to everyone. How delightful to see you!” (167). (Even the novel’s minor characters like Hugh Whitbread, for example, display an extraordinary complexity of meeting not only in their external activity, but also in their interior discourse as they continually step back and forth between the present and the past to remember and reclaim the initial greetings of their youth in an edenic prewar Bourton.) Thus, seen from this perspective, “the shock of Lady Bruton asking Richard to lunch without [Clarissa]” is not a simply a social slight, but a traumatic failure to greet the other, that “made the moment in which she stood shiver” and threatens her composure at its deepest experiential level. Clarissa reads on Lady Bruton’s averted face, “as if it had been a dial cut in impassive stone, the dwindling of life; how year by year her share was sliced; how little the margin that remained was capable any longer of stretching” (30). Lady Bruton’s later attendance of her party will repair Clarissa’s breach of self and reestablish her sense of personal continuity that was temporarily lost earlier: “‘How awfully good of you to come!’ she said, and she meant it—it was odd how standing there one felt them going on, going on . . .” (171). Lady Bruton also greets Clarissa in an unspoken interior response which, however, is a more ambivalent one: “She could never think of anything to say to Clarissa, though she liked her. She had lots of fine qualities; but they had nothing in common. It might have been better if Richard had married a woman with less charm, who would have helped him in his work” (179). In her gendered and ambivalent acceptance of Clarissa that places her within in the context of her marriage, Lady Bruton points to the ultimate tragedy of the novel. For the failure to greet the novel’s two homosexual characters, Doris Kilman and Septimus Smith, leads to the hateful rejection of the one, and the death of the other.

If, as Levinas states, “the most spontaneous *lived experience* splits in to in order to become intimate with itself” (*AT* 92), then marriage becomes a privileged site in which the face-to-face encounter manifests itself. But, as Irigaray points out, “In Levinas’s argument, “an intersubjective dialectic between the two existents, masculine and feminine, is lacking” (*YFS* 70). As she argues, “there can in fact be no real recognition of the other as other unless the feminine subject is recognized as radically other with respect to the masculine subject” (*YFS* 68). Or, as Mrs. Dempster thinks, observing Masie Johnson, “Get married . . . and then you’ll know.” Then, in an interior gesture she offers an extraordinary greeting that anticipates the kiss between Clarissa and Sally Seaton, and in doing so underscores Irigaray’s project to recognize a truly female other: Mrs. Dempster “could not help wishing to whisper a word to Masie Johnson; to feel on the creased pouch of her worn face the kiss of pity” (27). For Clarissa, Sally’s kiss on her lips would become “the most exquisite moment of her whole life . . . The whole world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally” (35). This kiss or “caress,” as Irigaray describes it, is “a reawakening to the life of my body: to its skin, senses, muscles, nerves, and organs. It exceeds the right to exist as a subject with one’s own gender: thus a male or a female subject” [cite: *To Be Two*]. “The caress,” she continues, “is a gift of safety, a call to return to yourself through the possible rediscovery of your virginity, here and now, thanks to me, and us.” Irigaray’s idea of the caress can be found in Clarissa’s understanding of it: “The strange thing, on looking back, was the purity, the integrity, of her feeling for Sally. It was not like one’s feeling for a man. It was completely disinterested, and besides, it had the quality which could only exist between women, between women just grown up. It was protective on her side . . .” (34). This kiss is suddenly and violently interrupted by the intrusion of her suitor, Peter Walsh, in what must be the most unwelcome greeting of the

novel: “It was like running one’s face against a granite wall in the darkness! It was shocking; it was horrible!” (36).

Eileen Barrett has pointed out that *Mrs. Dalloway* offers a “critique of marriage [that] uncovers how this institution buries women’s spirits under the domination of men” (154). The relation between Clarissa and Sally, who agree that marriage is a “catastrophe for women,” “contains a criticism of marriage that Woolf explores throughout the novel” (152). This catastrophe is not just the institutional and social one that Barrett describes. While the adjustment to marriage is a difficult one for any women in a society that privileges masculine authority, it is even more so for the survivor of childhood sexual trauma. Survivors report an inability to trust, hostility towards men, emotional detachment, and sexual difficulties. Those who have been severely traumatized are also more likely to be separated or divorced (Schetky 44). Approximately 85 percent of sisters abused by their brothers reported serious problems with orgasmic response as adults (Meiselman 281). Woolf’s own sexual dysfunction, specifically her failure to achieve orgasm in her marriage, has been noted by a number of her biographers. While Hermione Lee warns that “All marriages are inexplicable” (316), Quentin Bell, for one, notes the “placid conversational ease,” with which Woolf “alludes to her frigidity,” and goes on to observe that “Vanessa, Leonard and, I think, Virginia herself were inclined to blame George Duckworth” [who] “certainly had left Virginia with a deep aversion to lust” (II, 5-6).

Contemplating her marriage, Clarissa recognizes its dysfunction—“Narrower and narrower her bed must be” (31). Sexual relations between Clarissa and her husband have ended: “Richard insisted, after her illness, that she must sleep undisturbed. And really she preferred to read of the retreat from Moscow. He knew it.” (31) Clarissa, not without self awareness, attributes her sexual withdrawal to something other than her illness. “She could not dispel a

virginity preserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet . . . She could see what she lacked. It was not beauty; it was not mind. It was something central which permeated; something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman, or of women together” (31). Not solely a withdrawal from her husband, Clarissa’s marital situation signals a profound relational dissociation in her character, one commented on throughout the novel by all who know her, and carries within its fictional characterization the trace of Woolf’s own sexual abuse.

One must be cautious, however, not to conceive of Clarissa’s virginity solely as a negative or traumatized state of being; Irigaray, remember, suggested the “possible recovery” of virginity in the “caress.” Virginity is not, she argues, “a simply physical or phantasmic thing which is lost or preserved.” Instead, it is “the repose of up with yourself, in yourself, you irreducible to me, irreducible to what is common in community [The] caress is a gesture which gives the other to himself, to herself, thanks to the presence of an attentive witness, thanks to a guardian of incarnate subjectivity” [cite: *To Be Two*]. Peter Walsh, repetitively intruding in both the past and present with his gesture of opening and closing his (phallic) pocket knife, could never have offered Clarissa the guardianship she required, and so as a consequence was rejected by her. Arguably, Richard has become such a guardian in his acceptance of the marriage that Clarissa has created, free of sexual desire. And certainly Sally Seaton is. Forever held in Clarissa’s memory, her kiss preserves “the invitation to rest, to relax, to perceive, to think and to be in a different way” [cite: *Two Be Two*] that Irigaray finds in the caress.

Clarissa’s desire to maintain her state of virginity may explain in part her sudden and seemingly inexplicable rage at Doris Kilman, triggered as she watches the Prime Minister go down the stairs from her party: “the gilt rim of the Sir Joshua picture of the little girl with a muff

brought back Kilman with a rush; Kilman her enemy Ah, how she hated her—hot, hypocritical corrupt; with all that power; Elizabeth’s seducer; the woman who crept in to steal and defile She hated her; she loved her” (174-175). Clarissa, I suggest, is not only attacking a lesbian Doris who threatens her self-perception as being different from the homosexual “other.” She is also preserving a virginity she finds in the memory of Sally and the actuality of her daughter Elizabeth—both wearing pink, I should note, as I suspect the young girl in the Reynolds may be—from Kilman’s masculine-identified power to intrude, persuade, and seduce—to act, as Clarissa perceives it, as a “Peter.”

As Barrett notes, there is a strong congruence among Woolf critics to see Kilman as “Clarissa’s alter ego.” Collectively, they argue that “Kilman represents “Clarissa’s “sexual alter ego,”” reveals “her self-destructive rejection of her own lesbianism,” and reflects “her culture’s abhorrence of spinsters” (159). In her lesbianism, Kilman represents the Other to Clarissa, and thus *should* elicit from her the benediction that Levinas defines as the ethical response to the Other. But it is this welcome that Clarissa denies Kilman from the traumatized position of her marriage. Thinking about Doris early in her day, Clarissa experiences “this hatred . . . which had the power to make her feel scraped; hurt in the spine; gave her physical pain, and made all pleasure in beauty, in friendship, in being well . . . rock, quiver, and bend as if indeed there were a monster grubbing at the roots” (12). Later, after confronting her in the hallway, Clarissa recognizes that when “the body of Kilman was not before her, it overwhelmed her” (126), and conflating Kilman’s presence with that of love and religion, sees them as “clumsy, hot, domineering, hypocritical, eavesdropping, jealous, infinitely cruel and unscrupulous, dressed in a mackintosh coat, on the landing” (126). Kilman, too, traumatized in so many ways in her otherness—her German heritage, her female sex, her lesbianism, her

poverty, her obesity—, fails to greet Clarissa: “Turning her large gooseberry-colored eyes upon [her], observing her small pink face . . . Miss Kilman felt Fool! Simpleton!” (125). (“The best way to encounter the Other,” Levinas has suggested. “is not even to notice the color of [the] eyes” (*EI* 85)). If Woolf fails to understand or convey the trauma that accounts for Clarissa’s failure to welcome the Other in Kilman, she is more certain of the reason for Doris’s: religious belief. Praying in Westminster, Woolf writes, Miss Kilman held her tent before her face” (133), obscuring it, and thus preventing any greeting, even by Mr. Fletcher who, like Clarissa we are told, notices her “largeness, robustness, and power” and her knees (134).

The failure to greet Doris Kilman stands in stark contrast to those that surround it in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and represents not only the limitations of its main character, but also the traumatized position of her author. Woolf’s description of Kilman at tea is arguably one of the most unpleasant in her fiction, matched only by passages to be found in her diary, where one can read the effects her trauma more clearly: “Miss Kilman opened her mouth, slightly projected her chin, and swallowed down the last inches of the chocolate éclair, then wiped her fingers, and washed the tea round in her cup” (132). Kilman recognizes the effect of her desire on the young girl she desires: “But to sit here . . . to see Elizabeth turning against her, to be felt repulsive even by her—it was too much; she could not stand it.” In her distress, she offers Elizabeth the opportunity to meet her, to face her in her humanness. “‘Don’t quite forget me,’ said Doris Kilman; her voice quivered . . . Elizabeth turned her head” (132).

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