

Mrs Dalloway

V. Woolf

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I remember how I as a child played with the idea of writing about life as it appears in real time. All those ephemeral impressions that crowd onto your mind only to be forgotten when replaced by others. The fascination being to present a real slice of life as it appears, as it is felt, without any underlying rhyme or reason, because life does not flow according to a plot. Related to this fascination was to make a faithful copy of reality, say in a diorama which you often can find in a museum of Natural History, showing say everything there is in a square meter haphazardly selected. High and low. Reality existing on so many scales. The closest you can come to this is the photograph which records everything without any discrimination. In particular many things that the photographer is not aware of. This is the reason that the documentary aspect of photography has served forensic purposes, at least before the advent of the digital era with its unprecedented methods of modification, not to say forgery, of the image. Now this apparent and indiscriminating objectivity of the image has served as an inspirations for writers. Christopher Isherwood's slogan 'I am a camera' may be the most explicit example. By that he meant that he was a mere recorder, making no judgments, no choices (however illusory such an ambition may be), just letting life itself be imprinted. Isherwood died before the advent of the ubiquitous CVVS camera which merely records, just like the black box of an aircraft, for the remote possibility that the images may serve some useful, maybe even crucial, role in the future.

Now what you can literally do in a photo you cannot do in a written account. The written word is more abstract and depends on the imagination of the reader to fill in and let the scenery come to life. There is an art to that, namely the art of selecting the useful, if seemingly inconsequential detail, to guide and stimulate the imagination of the reader. Chekov was a master of the craft, along with many others, a craft when successful is felt, if felt at all, as effortless. The written word also have qualities that the picture, and by implication the film, lacks. It can explain, it can suggest, it can involve the imagination that the literal methods of a picture or a film cannot manage. A picture may say more than a thousand words, but a text can also suggest a thousand pictures.

This novel by Virginia Woolf should be thought as experimental fiction. Not her first attempt but rather a more mature one coming later in life. As such it fits into the context of the problem I have just sketched. It also fits beautifully with the Zetgeist of the early 20th century which produced a lot of experimental painting. Reading it one is reminded of the impressionists of course, but even more so their later followers, say painters such as Bonnard. The style is impressionistic, at first you may not make head or tail of it, it is only when you relax, let it all flow over you, that it starts to make sense as you submit yourself to its rules. There is no plot, there are no stretches of mere transportation. Everything is as important as anything else, and thus nothing is important, a suicide no more momentous than a party. The one impression after the other being thrown at you. Just as in life, when you deal with a steady stream of impressions which you try to make sense of by a sense of

filtering. The classical novel does exactly that, meaning filtering, this one tries to avoid it. It tries but does not of course succeed, because had it succeeded the account would have been unreadable, just as literal translation of speech is tedious not to say intolerable. The point of art is artifice, to create the illusion of reality not to present it to you as it is, only giving you the illusion that this is what is being done. Woolf was an obsessive writer of letters and she did also keep a journal, but I doubt that there is a record, at least not a detailed one, of her efforts of writing this, or any other of her works. But of course you cannot both work and at the same time observe and write down your work, just as little as you can at the same time think and observe your thinking making a running commentary¹. Thus in writing and trying to present something as unstructured there is actual a lot of effort to structure it in order for it to as convincingly as possible appear unstructured.

We have talking about streams of impressions. But an impression requires a consciousness, which leads to the notion of a stream of consciousness, the term coined by William James in his efforts to lay bare the workings of psychology. And this method has often been viewed of as the signum of Woolf. But we are not just treated to one stream of consciousness, say as that of the writer who is consciously trying to write the book which we are just in the process of reading. It is not the consciousness of the solitary, almost solipsistic individual, whose entire world is just his consciousness and what is beyond it has no real meaning, no real existence, the world is constructed by a conscious will. In the novel we have several consciousnesses that intertwine and which seamlessly seem to flow from one to another. From the point of the solitary individual, the world is limited, and death annihilates it altogether. As the Swedish poet Lagerqvist writes. Everything is mine, the trees, the sky, the earth, the sea, this wonderful mystery of mere existence, and it will all be taken away from me. But from the point of view of the world, the universe, the cosmos, consciousness is a phenomenon, and each consciousness exists independently of others, seemingly at their exclusion, but taken together they transcend individual limitations. The solitary view of life, posits an individual as existing from time immemorial to time immemorial and the darkness of the vast past is connected to the darkness of the future between the brief flash of consciousness being the bridge. But really it does not make sense to talk about individuals existing independent of consciousness, it is the consciousness that is primary that creates the individual, whose existence has as little to do with its future as its past. Whenever there is a flash of consciousness an individual is briefly created only to be extinguished with its consciousness. Consciousnesses as such will

¹ Some retroactive attempts have been done by great mathematicians such as Poincaré and Hadamard to do so when it comes to mathematical creation. Such efforts, laudable and intriguing as they may be, are not very instructive. The crucial ideas seem to come out of the blue, all you are aware of as a mathematician is being stuck, doing the same thing over and over again, while somehow something is stirring unconsciously. Of course there are activities which are easy, such as programming, when you follow and implement some rather straightforward ideas and never seem to get stuck. In mathematics you are not doing anything really worthwhile if you do not get stuck, if you do not feel the desperation of turning every stone and clutching at straws. I suspect that something similar goes on when writing a novel or composing music, with the important difference that in mathematics you run into unforgiving obstacles, and when you get stuck, it is not so much out of exhaustion or running out of ideas, as actually encountering an almost physical palpable barrier frustrating you.

not cease with the passing of any of its manifestation. Thus nothing is taken away from you when you die, because that would presuppose the preposterous idea of you continuing to exist, if in an unending limbo of eternal deprivation.

Thus this cactonomy of conscia no one of which to be for the reader to be identified with. There is Mrs Dalloway, there is her husband, her former admirer, her daughter, her friend, the unfortunate young man who is hearing the birds speak in Greek, just as the author herself heard in her frightening confusion of mental breakdowns (no serious author can write anything but autobiography concomitantly trying to escape from the prison of the individual self). Not much happens of any importance during the day of action. Mrs Dalloway has her party in the evening, her former lover desperately trying to attach himself to another woman, a much younger one, yet much more shadowy than his memories of his youthful love Clarissa, the latter Mrs Dalloway, in spite of himself and his efforts of liberation. And of course the sudden impulse of the unfortunate man, which sends him to his death when he seems on the threshold of recovery and rediscovery of his lovely young Italian wife making her hats. All those conscia being intertwined as if it would be impossible to say where one takes off and another one resumes, as if there really just being one consciousness, consciousness as a universal phenomenon connecting everyone to everyone else, with a myriad of manifestations twinkling like the lights on a Christmas tree. All existing all being extinguished and replaced. Just at each moment of your consciousness being obliterated by the subsequent one. As Hume famously hailed, there is but a bundle of perceptions, which made such an impact on me when I first heard of it, thinking that finally there was a kindred soul. How do we make sense of all those impressions that are hurled at us, which ones are ours, which ones are others, how do we even make a sense of an individual identity? Maybe it is but an illusion. In a sense even out most private moments are public, for anyone to appropriate.

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