

**NIGHTMARES AND VISIONS: THE SEXUAL/TEXTUAL POLITICS OF SUBJECTIVITY
AND RESISTANCE IN JEAN RHYS'S *GOOD MORNING, MIDNIGHT*, AND VIRGINIA
WOOLF'S *MRS. DALLOWAY***

by

Patricia Anne Elizabeth Matson

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APPROVAL

NAME: Patricia Anne E. Matson
DEGREE: Master of Arts (English)
TITLE OF THESIS: Nightmares and Visions: The Sexual/Textual
Politics of Subjectivity and Resistance in
Jean Rhys's Good Morning, Midnight, and
Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway

Kathy Mezei
Senior Supervisor
Associate Professor of English

Daphne Marlatt
Sessional Lecturer, Creative Writing
University of British Columbia

Valerie Raoul
External Examiner
Associate Professor of French
University of B.C.

Date Approved: November 22, 1989

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Nightmares and Visions: The Sexual/Textual Politics of Subjectivity
and Resistance in Jean Rhys's Good Morning, Midnight, and Virginia Woolf's
Mrs. Dalloway.

Author:

(signature)

Patricia Anne E. Matson

(name)

Dec. 4/85

(date)

ABSTRACT

Written during the turbulent years between the World Wars, Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, different though they may be, can be discussed in terms of their exploration of subjectivity and the sexual/textual politics of cultural resistance. Both writers envision female subjectivity as fundamentally alienated. Defined by the traditions of patriarchy as the masculine subject's object/other, woman, a cultural commodity, is presented as other even to her self. But beyond this point of shared concern, the texts articulate a divergent understanding of oppression and the possibilities of resistance.

In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Rhys traces the struggle of a woman to locate herself as a subject within an oppressive and objectifying social order. While there is an implied criticism of the ideologies which frame the narrator Sasha Jensen's experience, the expression of anger in the novel is undercut by Rhys's manipulation of the narrative structure, and consequently the voice of cultural resistance is silenced. Rhys relies on the techniques of modernism to represent Sasha's inability to position herself as a speaking/desiring subject. Truly *subjected* to a system which occludes her claim to speak/act as a subject in her own right, Sasha speaks from her position as alienated other. Her fragmentary, disjointed narration signals chaos, hysteria and the threat of madness. The novel moves toward a final acquiescence which affirms Sasha's loss of subjectivity at the hands of the Father's silencing Law.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, on the other hand, Woolf confronts woman's place as object/other with the suggestion that resistance is possible. Through the character, memory and experience of Clarissa Dalloway, Woolf creates an alternative vision/version of woman's subjectivity, one that implies a way out of the oppressive order within which Rhys's narrator is trapped. The convergence (and divergence) of different voices in *Mrs. Dalloway* enables Woolf to deconstruct the unified masculine subject and inscribe the novel with a heterogeneous vision. For Woolf, modernist technique is not simply the vehicle of story but essential to the story itself. Her writing inaugurates a

deconstruction of the phallogocentrism of traditional realist conventions and celebrates the possibilities of making a space for the feminine. While in *Good Morning, Midnight* madness is contextualized as the anguished but passive fate of the objectified female subject, in *Mrs. Dalloway* it signifies the very processes of marginalization and is used to question patriarchal values and authority. Where Rhys sculpts a nightmare of entrapment, Woolf conceives strategies of sexual/textual resistance.

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INTRODUCTION

The king commanded General Sun Tse: “You who are a great strategist and claim to be able to train anybody in the arts of war....take my wives (all one hundred and eighty of them!) and make soldiers out of them.”

So Sun Tse had the women arranged in two rows, each headed by one of the two favorite wives, and then taught them the language of the drumbeat. It was very simple: two beats—right, three beats—left, four beats—about turn or backward march. But instead of learning the code very quickly, the ladies started laughing and chattering and paying no attention to the lesson, and Sun Tse, the master, repeated the lesson several times over. But the more he spoke, the more the women fell about laughing, upon which Sun Tse put his code to the test. It is said in this code that should women fall about laughing instead of becoming soldiers, their actions might be deemed mutinous, and the code has ordained that cases of mutiny call for the death penalty. So the women were condemned to death. . . . Sun Tse was a man of absolute principle. And in any case there’s an order even more “royal” than that of the king himself: the Absolute Law....One does not go back on an order. He therefore acted according to the code and with his saber beheaded the two women commanders. They were replaced and the exercise started again, and as if they had never done anything except practice the art of war, the women turned right, left, and about in silence and with never a single mistake. (Cixous in “Castration” 42)¹

In her essay “Castration or Decapitation?” H el ene Cixous relates this anecdote—borrowed, she claims, “from a very serious text, Sun Tse’s manual of strategy, which is a kind of handbook for the warrior”—in order to illuminate “a particular relationship between two economies: a masculine economy and a feminine economy.” Cixous’s analysis of (and challenge to) patriarchy hinges on her understanding of these “two economies.” The masculine, she argues, “is governed by a rule that keeps time with two beats, three beats, four beats, with pipe and drum, exactly as it should be”; the feminine, in contrast, is characterized by disorder, laughter, and an “inability to take the drumbeats seriously” (42-43). The history of patriarchy is a history of the feminine’s subordination to the masculine; for women, it is a history of (symbolic) decapitation.

Different though they may be, both Jean Rhys’s *Good Morning, Midnight* and Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* can be read in light of this story of General Sun Tse. Both novels address the thematics of patriarchal oppression, and articulate an understanding of women’s position

¹Regarding ellipses: because so many of the writers quoted (including Rhys and Woolf) use ellipses often, and because I will not always be quoting passages in their entirety, rather than parenthetically indicating which ellipses are mine and which belong to the original, I will use a different format to distinguish between the two. Whenever the ellipses belong to the original, they will be tightly spaced(...); when they are mine, they will be loosely spaced (. . . .).

within a (symbolically) life-denying regime. While Woolf's text involves, I think, an exploration of the subversive potential of the feminine to resist the code, Rhys's succumbs to the dictates of Cixous's "masculine economy." There is in *Good Morning, Midnight* an acceptance that women "have no choice other than to be decapitated, and in any case the moral is that if they don't actually lose their heads by the sword, *they only keep them on condition that they lose them—lose them, that is, to complete silence, turned into automatons*" (Cixous 42-43).² I will show that this constitutes the painful plot of Sasha Jensen's "little story of misery" in *Good Morning, Midnight*. My discussion of *Mrs. Dalloway*, in contrast, will focus on the ways in which Woolf refuses to succumb to the dictates of an oppressive and life-denying code. Where Rhys's writing bows to silence, Woolf's demands to be heard.

The masculine economy described by Cixous is both incurred and supported by the patriarchal Symbolic Order. Throughout my discussion I will make references to a body of theory, initiated by Freud and elaborated by Jacques Lacan, which pivots on the connections between subjectivity, psychoanalysis and language. For Lacan, the subject is born with its³ entry into the (patriarchal) Symbolic Order. This symbolic birth coincides with the acquisition of language; at this time, posits Lacan, the subject represses its pre-Oedipal experience of identification and unity (simultaneously, the unconscious is born). Lacan suggests that this process is initiated by the mirror stage, where the child first perceives itself as a distinct being; the infant's earlier lack of ego boundaries is transformed into an understanding of the self as separate from the rest of the world. The acquisition of symbolic language, which privileges a separation between signifier and signified, depends first on a recognition of self and other, subject and object. Within patriarchy, the Symbolic Order is presided over by the father/Phallus: his is the authority to which all subjects must

²Regarding the use of italics: because many of the writers whom I will be quoting are as fond of italics as I am, I will indicate when the emphasis is mine, not when it belongs to the original.

³In the writing of those fathers of psychoanalysis, Freud and Lacan, the subject is always masculine. Women are only referred to in terms of how they differ from what is standard (ie, for the male). I have chosen to refer, at this point, to the subject as "it," by-passing the relevance of gender (for the time being) and also with the intent of drawing attention to the subject as a psychoanalytic construction, a formula or model to which individual experience may or may not conform.

acquiesce. This is where gender becomes significant: for boys, the father/Phallus is a model for their own identity as *active, present, speaking, desiring* subjects. Girls, on the other hand, lacking the phallus, are not entitled to its cultural privileges. As such, their sense of self identity becomes defined as *other* to what is masculine. Within this patriarchal scheme of things, their desire can only be realized through their attachment to the possessor of the P(p)hallus.

Because the “dual *hierarchized* oppositions” which structure the language (and psyche) of patriarchy implicitly relegate woman to a position of passive, objectified other, deconstructing/displacing the terms of these oppositions (which always come down to the one: man/woman) becomes, for theorists like Hélène Cixous, the necessary crux of a feminist sexual/textual politics (in Marks 91). In “a culture where the speaking subjects are conceived of as masters of their speech,” claims Julia Kristeva in “Oscillation du ‘pouvoir’ au ‘refus’ [Oscillation between power and denial],” “they have what is called a ‘phallic’ position” (in Marks 165). Traditional narrative thus belongs to this masterful (and masculine) subject. Virginia Woolf confronts this “posture of mastery,” in *A Room of One’s Own*, while contemplating the writing of a popular (unnamed) male novelist. She recognizes the textual dominance (presence) of the masculine subject as a phallogocentric construct, designed to obscure the presence of women (the feminine?); that is, designed to place/define woman as absent/absence:

. . . it was delightful to read a man’s writing again. . . . It indicated such freedom of mind, such liberty of person, such confidence in himself. One had a sense of this well-nourished, well-educated, free mind. . . . but after reading a chapter or two a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter ‘I.’ One began dodging this way and that to catch a glimpse of the landscape behind it. Whether that was indeed a tree or a woman walking I was not quite sure. Back one was always hailed to the letter ‘I.’ One began to be tired of ‘I.’ (95)

From a (feminist) psychoanalytic perspective, Nancy Chodorow’s discussion of gender and difference sheds light on the creation of this masculine “I.” Chodorow claims that because the primary caretaker of infants is usually a woman (the mother), while the “core gender identity” of little girls is affirmed, that of little boys is fraught with conflict:

Underlying. . . core male gender identity is an early, nonverbal, unconscious, almost somatic sense of primary oneness with the mother. . . . a boy must learn his gender

identity as being not-female, not-mother. . . .learning what it is to be masculine comes to mean learning to be not-feminine, or not-womanly. . . . The male's self becomes based on a more fixed 'me'-'not-me' distinction. Separateness and difference as a component of differentiation become more salient. (in Eisenstein 13)

Not only does Chodorow's perspective refer to the consistent masculine devalorization of (so-called) feminine values or traits, suggesting that a dynamic of insecurity is at the root of the patriarchal dyad, but it also sheds light on the need of male subjects to seek shelter in the uniform(ed) "I" described by Woolf.

For Woolf, this rigid masculine "I" co-incides with the oppression inherent to the patriarchal dyad.⁴ If women are going to begin to foreground their desire, to write their stories, then narrative form and the construction of the subject—the treatment of “this shadow shaped something like the letter ‘I’”—becomes crucial to their enterprise. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the “freedom of mind” and “liberty of person” brandished in “a man’s writing” is shown to be an illusion, a (self) fabrication, because each of the novel’s subjects is subjected to the dictates of the dominant discourses of the patriarchal status quo. Woolf further deconstructs the monolithic “I” through her creation of multiple viewpoints; *Mrs. Dalloway* is not dictated by one point of view, but is etched with a heterogeneous vision. *Good Morning, Midnight*, in contrast, is a first-person narration and we are thus confined to Sasha’s nightmare perspective. Rhys’s narrator attempts to speak with the authority of “I,” but her failure to cast that particular “shape of a shadow” is contextualized as a failure of her desire to position herself as subject. The notion of what this subject is—in terms of the ideological, political and social network which Woolf deconstructs—goes unchallenged in *Good Morning, Midnight*.

Although *Good Morning, Midnight* was published fourteen years after *Mrs. Dalloway* (1939 and 1925, respectively), both novels are set in the early twenties, the years immediately following

⁴That women and men are culturally relegated to different positions in relation to the letter “I” is humourously depicted in *The Years* when Peggy encounters an “egotist” at a party: “I, I, I” he went on. It was like a vulture’s beak pecking, or a vacuum-cleaner sucking. . . . I, I, I. . . . He noted her lack of sympathy. . . . ‘I’m tired,’ she apologized. ‘I’ve been up all night,’ she explained. ‘I’m a doctor—’ The fire went out of his face when she said ‘I.’ That’s done it—now he’ll go, she thought. He can’t be ‘you’—he must be ‘I’” (275-276).

World War I. Yet there is virtually no mention of the war in *Good Morning, Midnight*, and this points to a crucial difference between the two novels. While Woolf explores the effects of General Sun Tse's code in relation not only to the individual subject but as it supports and is supported by the greater social, political and ideological context of the Symbolic Order,⁵ Rhys almost obsessively censors any reference to the world beyond that which is immediately relevant to her narrator's experience. Pre-occupied with the inner lives of her heroines, her artistic "business," according to Ford Madox Ford, "was with passion, hardship, emotions" (*Left Bank* 26). While I would suggest that in many ways this is Woolf's "business" too, unlike Rhys she is more explicitly concerned with exploring—and critiquing—the 'outside world,' the Symbolic Order which thwarts and imprisons the lives and minds of its subjects.⁶

However, I do not agree with critic Linda Bamber's claim that "Notably absent from Rhys's account of her heroine is any analysis of her plight in political terms. The Rhys heroine is a natural victim, not a victim of sexual politics or class oppression" (94). Sasha, in *Good Morning, Midnight*, is certainly the victim of both sexual politics and class oppression.⁷ Yet it is interesting that Bamber arrives at this conclusion. Is there something about Rhys's novels which leads her down this particular garden path? I would suggest that there is, and that it has to do with what I have chosen to call the *writing of resistance*—the narrative strategies in a text which in some way disrupt or subvert the patriarchal code which defines woman as object/other and relegates her to a position of silence. This is elucidated by Teresa de Lauretis, who claims that "Strategies of writing and of reading are forms of cultural resistance":

⁵This is examined by Woolf in *Three Guineas* (1938), where she posits that patriarchal ideology is at the root of military aggression and fascism. Jane Marcus, in *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*, claims that all of Woolf's writing is, in effect, an attack on the patriarchal family, that bastion of phallographic ideology.

⁶Of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf wrote: "I want to criticize the social system, and to show it at work, at its most intense" (*Diary* II, 248).

⁷As I will discuss further in Chapter I, sex and class oppression are anything but unrelated in Rhys's fiction: she implies time and again that her heroines are victimized sexually *because* they are poor.

Not only can they work to turn dominant discourses inside out. . . . to undercut their enunciation and address, to unearth the archaeological stratifications on which they are built; but in affirming the historical existence of irreducible contradictions for women in discourse, they also challenge theory in its terms, the terms of a semiotic space constructed in language, its power based on social validation and well-established modes of enunciation and address. So well-established that, paradoxically, the only way to position oneself outside that discourse is to displace oneself within it—to refuse the question as formulated, or to answer deviously (though in its words), even to quote (but against the grain). (7)

If Bamber fails to apprehend Rhys's social or ideological critique, it is because this critique is marginalized by the almost claustrophobic nightmare world of her heroine(s). Resistance to the patriarchal code is not entirely absent from the text (as Bamber implies), but Rhys's critique of oppression in *Good Morning, Midnight* is granted expression only to be denied within (and by) the narrative context. Rhys's narrative strategies ultimately affirm the power of patriarchal oppression and the futility of resistance. In contrast, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the writing of resistance is foregrounded, encountered at every turn. Woolf's narrative strategies do "work to turn dominant discourses inside out" and to "unearth the archaeological stratifications on which they are built." They involve, that is, a deconstruction of the patriarchal code.

Challenging the patriarchal code is only possible, however, if we recognize that the Symbolic Order is itself an *effect* of patriarchal culture. This is argued by Kaja Silverman, at the conclusion of her discussion of "the Freudian and Lacanian models of the subject":

It would thus seem imperative to understand both the Freudian and the Lacanian models of the subject in relation to the dominant discursive practices which defined their immediate context, and which still largely prevail. It would also seem important to challenge any attempt made by either author to predicate the cultural system on something outside of and prior to it such as the instinctual, the natural, or the real; these categories are culturally fabricated, and they function to seal off criticism and change. (192)

In De Lauretis's terms, the deconstructive narrative strategies used by Woolf challenge Lacanian "theory in its own terms, the terms of a semiotic space constructed in language, its power based on social validation and well-established modes of enunciation and address." If, on the other hand, we accept (the Lacanian implication) that the Symbolic Order (the Law of the Father) is both a "universal or absolute" state of affairs, not itself a semiotic construct, then the feminist

sexual/textual politics I am suggesting is doomed to fail before it even begins.

The crucial difference between *Good Morning, Midnight* and *Mrs. Dalloway* is rooted, I think, in Rhys's and Woolf's respective understanding of the Symbolic Order. For Woolf, the Symbolic Order belongs to "a semiotic space constructed in language, its power based on social validation and well-established modes of enunciation and address." It is, in other words, a construction which can be challenged, questioned, and *deconstructed*. Thus Woolf's narrative strategies suggest that it is possible to resist the oppressive Law of the Father and all that it dictates. This is the essence of her sexual/textual politics. For Rhys, on the other hand, the Symbolic Order is not a semiotic construction but exists outside of language, as a cultural given. It is a prisonhouse, and although she can pound her fists on the wall, it cannot be broken. The Law of the Father reigns.

This symbolic entrapment is elucidated near the beginning of *Good Morning, Midnight*, when Sasha has a dream which suggests the text's most pervasive metaphor:

I am in the passage of a tube station in London. . . . Everywhere there are placards printed in red letters: This Way to the Exhibition, This Way to the Exhibition. But I don't want the way to the exhibition—I want the way out. There are passages to the right and passages to the left, but no exit sign. Everywhere the fingers point and the placards read: This Way to the Exhibition. . . . I touch the shoulder of the man walking in front of me. I say: 'I want the way out.' But he points to the placards and his hand is made of steel. I walk along with my head bent, very ashamed, thinking: 'Just like me—always wanting to be different from other people.' The steel finger points along a long stone passage. This Way—This Way—This Way to the Exhibition. (12)

The tube station, with its mysterious signs and labyrinthine passages, is an incisive metaphor for the patriarchal Symbolic Order within which Sasha is entrapped and imprisoned. Unable to realize her own desire as a subject (the desire for a way out of the system which confines and oppresses her), she guiltily acquiesces to the pointing steel finger, the dictates of the automaton. Doing so, she becomes caught in the "catch-22 dilemma" which frames the experience of women within patriarchal culture:

if 'woman' should choose to accede to the position of desiring subject, she has two options: either she adorns herself in the feathered accoutrements of femininity, playing with this masquerade as. . . . a fetish; or she becomes a transvestite—a phallic woman—and adopts 'masculine' systems of language. (Longfellow 27)

Throughout *Good Morning, Midnight*, Rhys traces Sasha's struggle to navigate these choices. Ultimately unable to achieve either stance, however, Sasha relinquishes her claim to subjectivity and plummets into the world of her nightmare.

This is not the case in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Although Woolf's text too is concerned with "the relationship between two economies: a masculine economy and a feminine economy," her depiction of the patriarchal Symbolic Order is implicitly critical. The code of General Sun Tse is repeatedly challenged. With her creation of a group of soldiers who march through Mrs. Dalloway's London, Woolf levies an incisive judgement against the (patriarchal) system that dictates the uniform rhythm of their footfall:

Boys in uniform, carrying guns, marched with their eyes ahead of them, marched, their arms stiff, and on their faces an expression like the letters of a legend written round the base of a statue praising duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of England. . . . But they did not look robust. They were weedy for the most part, boys of sixteen, who might, to-morrow, stand behind bowls of rice, cakes of soap on counters.⁸

The expression on the faces of these marching young men point us in the direction of Woolf's critique of the "dominant discursive practices" which support patriarchal ideology and render this ideology natural. (What is hidden beneath the cloak of these patriotic and patriarchal catch-phrases? At what expense are duty, gratitude and the love of one's country espoused?) Not only do these "boys of sixteen" march toward literal death, but the code which dictates the insistent march of their footfall is—like the code of General Sun Tse—symbolically life-denying: "on they marched. . . . in their steady way, as if one will worked legs and arms uniformly, and life, with its varieties, its irreticences, had been laid under a pavement of monuments and wreaths and drugged into a stiff yet staring corpse by discipline" (76-77). And so the text suggests a particular reading of Cixous's "two economies." While the drumbeat of patriarchy demands repression of the joy of life initially embraced by the women in Cixous's tale, who laughed and chattered and scoffed at the code that would deny their multiplicity and force them into a silent reiteration of the Same, Woolf's text continually resists this code. Against the drugged corpse of the soldier's discipline there

⁸*Mrs. Dalloway* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, [c. 1981]), p. 76. All subsequent references to this edition.

resounds throughout *Mrs. Dalloway* a different rhythm—a rhythm of difference, the possibilities and joys of (a feminine?) disorder. Where Rhys’s text is ultimately the narrative of a painful acquiescence, Woolf’s is inscribed with a celebratory resistance. The code of General Sun Tse is not granted victory.

While Rhys’s narrator is caught within the paradigmatic patriarchal trap, Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* illuminates the possibilities of writing a way out. The key word is *writing*. As “modernist” writers, both Rhys and Woolf reject “the traditional (Victorian and Edwardian) framework of narrative, description, and rational exposition in poetry and prose, in favour of a stream-of-consciousness presentation of personality” (Drabble 658). Both *Good Morning, Midnight* and *Mrs. Dalloway* reveal a concern with words and meaning and involve abrupt and often incongruous changes in point of view, disruptions in sequence and an a-chronological ordering of time. Form—the style and structure of their writing—is vital to both texts. But here too there is a difference, and a difference which hinges on my concern with the writing of subjectivity and resistance.

Rhys’s form is perfectly sculpted to fit the story. Disruptions in voice, a-chronological presentation, the emergence of non-referential and fragmented language all contribute to our understanding of Sasha’s character and experience. We trace the pattern of her alienation, objectification and fear of madness through the structure and style of the text. Although the formal conventions of literary realism are broken, Rhys uses modernist technique to refer us to her narrator’s experience and (unstable) identity. The ideological implications of the traditional realist narrative remain intact.⁹ Although, according to Julia Kristeva, the “fragmentation of language in a text” can potentially call into question the mastery of the (phallic) “I” who marches through the pages of the conventional text, in *Good Morning, Midnight* such fragmentation refers us, instead, to the narrator’s inability to attain (or maintain) this position herself (Kristeva in Marks 165). The

⁹I will discuss the politics of realist form further in my discussion of *Mrs. Dalloway*, particularly in Chapter V.

masculine subject goes unchallenged; the (patriarchal) cultural premise that “speaking subjects [are]. . . . masters of their speech” is not questioned by Rhys’s play with language and form (ibid). Rather, the ‘window on the world’ of traditional realist narrative remains, if framed in a different way. We are still intended to comprehend Sasha’s reality as a subject who is defined within and by the patriarchal Symbolic Order.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, however, the nature of reality itself is questioned, and the fragmentation of Woolf’s language is a sexual/textual strategy. Modernist technique becomes not simply the vehicle of story but a vital aspect of the story itself. Woolf’s narrative strategies entail a deconstruction of the privileged masculine subject and, by implication, his feminine other/object. Whereas Rhys’s writing is aligned with an “either/or, dichotomized” vision of the world, dependent on “a dualism pernicious because it valorizes one side above another, and makes a hierarchy where there were simply twain,” Woolf’s is inscribed with a “both/and” vision (Blau DuPlessis in Eisenstein 132). Woolf’s narrative strategies deconstruct the patriarchal dyad, with the subject (/object) positions it connotes for man/woman. The phallogocentrism¹⁰ of patriarchal thought and culture is *textually* undermined in *Mrs. Dalloway*; resistance is articulated not only within the narrative but is also inscribed at the level of form, the heterogeneous fabric of Woolf’s writing.

My enterprise, then, will be two-fold: I am concerned with tracing the writing of subjectivity and resistance both in terms of content and form, though given the importance of form to a reading of content in both novels, this distinction is a somewhat arbitrary one. First, I will discuss how Woolf’s writing of Clarissa Dalloway explores the possibilities of resistance for the female subject in/of a patriarchal regime—her illumination of a way out of the patriarchal trap within which Rhys’s protagonist is imprisoned. I will focus also on the writing of subjectivity in each text; how

¹⁰A term first coined by Jacques Derrida, combining his concept of *logocentrism*, concisely defined by Terry Eagleton as “a belief in some ultimate ‘word,’ presence, essence, truth or reality which will act as the foundation of all our thought, language and experience” (Eagleton 131), with a recognition that this enterprise is specifically tied to phallic power and the masculine ego, that masterful “I” who rides through the pages of the (masculine) text described by Woolf. For Derrida, the term phallogocentrism suggests “the complicity of Western metaphysics with a notion of male firstness” (“Choreographies” 69).

each writer envisions that “shadow shaped something like the letter ‘I.’” While Sasha continually attempts to narrate with a ‘phallic’ mastery, Woolf’s writing inaugurates what Julia Kristeva calls a *traversal* of this position (in Marks 165). Ultimately, therefore, I will be concerned with the subject of writing itself: the ways in which modernist technique contributes to the conflict of acquiescence and resistance with which both Rhys and Woolf are concerned.

In Part I, “No Way Out: The Nightmare World of *Good Morning, Midnight*,” I discuss Jean Rhys’s *Good Morning, Midnight*. In Chapter I, “The Patriarchal Trap,” I explore Rhys’s creation of her narrator’s experience as objectified, alienated other; in Sasha Jensen’s own words, she is a woman who has “no pride, no name, no face, no country” (*GMM* 38). She is unable to perceive and to create herself as a subject. While there is, throughout the narrative, the expression of a shrewd and insightful anger which some feminist critics have chosen to read as the voicing of resistance, I argue that here resistance is written only to be unwritten, voiced only to be silenced. In Chapter II, “Modernism or Madness?,” my concern is with the narratorial inscription of Sasha’s nightmare. Through Rhys’s writing of her narrator’s voice we witness not only her pathetic sense of alienation but also her inability to “imitate ‘masculine’ systems of language,” to assume the stance of “I”—an inability which ultimately succumbs to hysteria and madness. Chapter III, “A Final Acquiescence,” presents my reading of the novel’s conclusion. Responding to the numerous critics who applaud Sasha’s last embrace as a moral and/or sexual victory, I argue that it is nothing of the kind, but rather entails a final acquiescence to the decapitating code upheld by General Sun Tse.

Part II, “Writing A Way Out: The Poetics of *Mrs. Dalloway*” is intended—in part—as a response to the nightmare world of *Good Morning, Midnight*. In Chapter IV, “The Subject of Sexuality: Conflict and Resistance,” I argue that Woolf’s discursive and psychoanalytical deconstruction of the subject infuses her discussion of sexuality and gender relations with a critical awareness. Where Rhys flounders in the trauma of woman’s alienation and objectification, Woolf deconstructs. Her creation of Clarissa Dalloway acknowledges what it is to be a cultural object but suggests that there are possibilities of resistance for the female subject of patriarchy. In Chapter

V, "The Subject of Writing: Subversions and New Versions," I explore what Toril Moi calls Woolf's "textual practice"—her "use of mobile, pluralistic viewpoints" and deconstructive, modernist style—to focus on how the writing of *Mrs. Dalloway* triumphs against the life-denying language of the drumbeat (Moi 8-9). If we accept, with numerous French feminist theorists, that patriarchal ideology is deeply rooted in our philosophy and language (that is not to say that it is absolute or universal, however!), then Woolf's refusal to tow the phallogocentric line must be read as a vital form of sexual/textual politics. In Chapter VI, "The Subject of Madness," I discuss Woolf's writing of psychotic vision, the ways in which she resists, questions and deconstructs phallogocentric values and discourse through a query of sense and nonsense, sanity and insanity. While I think that the character of Septimus Warren Smith indicates the dangers of revolt against the patriarchal regime, his vision also involves what Julia Kristeva terms "poetic language" with its (again, textually political) potential to disrupt the oppressive complacency of patriarchy. My final chapter, "Clarissa Dalloway," summarizes the thematics of subjectivity and resistance through an exploration of the character of Clarissa Dalloway and her (textual) relationship with Septimus Warren Smith. It entails a final look at the "both/and vision" which shapes the novel and, I believe, the philosophy of Virginia Woolf. If "Strategies of writing *and* of reading are forms of cultural resistance," then I hope that my reading of these two texts will not only reveal the strategies of their writing, but will begin to "unearth the archaeological stratifications" on which rests the code of General Sun Tse.

PART I

NO WAY OUT: THE NIGHTMARE WORLD OF *GOOD MORNING, MIDNIGHT*

CHAPTER I

THE PATRIARCHAL TRAP

Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight* is the story of Sasha Jensen, a woman who has come to Paris to recuperate from some form of nervous breakdown. But the novel does not trace her march along the road to psychic recovery; rather, as she wanders through the streets of Montparnasse, she moves progressively into the claustrophobic world of her nightmare, suggested by the maze-like tube station in her dream. The text combines narration of her present experience, a state of psychological limbo interrupted by a series of estranged encounters, and narration of her past, vignettes of an alienated life.

In this chapter, I investigate the various passages through which Rhys's narrator walks, read the signs which direct her, and acknowledge her desire for a way out. Caught as she is in the "catch-22 dilemma" which frames woman's position within patriarchal culture, Sasha oscillates between the two options available to her: in order to "accede to the position of desiring subject," she can either adorn "herself in the feathered accoutrements of femininity" or become a linguistic transvestite, a phallic woman (Longfellow 27). First I discuss her struggle to play "the *masquerade of femininity*," her failure to find herself as subject by positioning herself as the object of masculine gaze and desire (Irigaray 134). In Chapter II, I turn to her attempt to adopt "'masculine' systems of language."

Sasha's masquerading quest is not without its ambivalence; when we enter the novel, she is at a stage (an age) in life where she recognizes that presenting herself as a desirable object is ultimately no way to "accede to the position of desiring subject," but is part of the trap, another passage which leads nowhere. As I discuss in this chapter, throughout her narrative are intimations of a critical awareness, a whispering voice of resistance. However, within the repressive schema which frames the text Sasha has no choice but to march to the drumbeat of masculine objectification. Having acquiesced for so long, she is unable to escape from "those

atrocious voices, these abominable eyes” which haunt both her recollections of the past and her story of the present (*GMM* 22). As angry (and justified) as her narrator is, Rhys manipulates the narrative structure in such a way that resistance is silenced. These narrative strategies entail what I call the *unwriting* of resistance, and suggest that there is no way out for the woman in Sasha’s position. She is trapped in her helpless “little story of misery.”

Those Damn Dolls: Playing the Masquerade

How can a woman make sense out of herself as a subject when she is defined, by the prevailing hegemonic discourse(s), as the object of masculine desire? Where does woman’s value lie? For Sasha, the answer is sadly clear; when watching the “damned dolls” used to display dresses in the fancy shop where she works, she observes “what a success they would have made out of their lives if they’d been women. Satin skin, silk hair, velvet eyes, sawdust heart—all complete” (16). Such is the paradigmatic role of woman in patriarchy, as described by Luce Irigaray in *This Sex Which Is Not One*: “Participation in society requires that the body submit itself to a specularization, a speculation, that transforms it into a value-bearing object, a standardized sign, an exchangeable signifier” (Irigaray 179).¹¹ The (lifeless, life-denied) receptacle and mirror (the object of his *specularizations*) of masculine desire, woman¹² is the doll, the mannequin, the automaton: images which recur throughout the work of Jean Rhys. In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha reveals an ambivalence toward this position: the faces of “those damned dolls” are both

¹¹ While Luce Irigaray’s analysis is placed within a feminist framework, the definition of woman as commodity is not new to feminist discourse, as is explicated by Teresa de Lauretis’s summary of the argument of one of the forefathers of structuralism, Claude Lévi-Strauss: “women are both like men and unlike men: they are human beings (like men), but their special function in culture and society is to be exchanged and circulated among men (unlike men). His theory stands on the premise that, because of their ‘value’ as means of sexual reproduction, women are the means, objects, and signs, of social communication (among human beings)” (160).

¹²I would like to clarify the difference between *woman*, a cultural construct which is represented by the discourses of patriarchal desire, and *women*, who are “social beings. . . . constructed through effects of language and representation” but who are also able to query and resist the modes of representation to which they are subject (de Lauretis14).

“charming and malicious,” both appealing and repelling. They are damned, but they are “complete.” Throughout her own narrative, Sasha articulates this ambivalence in relation to herself: she desires both to be seen and not seen, to appeal and repel.

The doll or mannequin aptly represents the woman who, according to Luce Irigaray, plays “the masquerade of femininity,” cloaking herself in the accoutrements of masculine desire as a means of gleaning a sense of herself as subject (paradoxically) through the reflection of an objectifying gaze:

I think the masquerade has to be understood as what women do in order to recuperate some element of desire, to participate in man’s desire, but at the price of renouncing their own. In the masquerade, they submit to the dominant economy of desire in an attempt to remain “on the market” in spite of everything. But they are there as objects for sexual enjoyment, not as those who enjoy. (Irigaray 133-134)

In Rhys’s first four novels, the class-position of her heroines is a literal expression of their (symbolic) positions as patriarchy’s objects: the only way they can survive is through the marketing of themselves as (usually sexual) commodities, whether chorus girl, store mannequin, or mistress. Like theirs, Sasha’s story is fraught with her desire to “recuperate some element of desire,” to “remain ‘on the market’ in spite of everything.” But a kind of claustrophobic panic encompasses *Good Morning, Midnight* (the last in the series of four novels) because, unlike Rhys’s earlier heroines,¹³ Sasha is past the age of easy marketability. She thus invests a great deal of energy in “the transformation act”—buying clothes, having her hair done—in the hope of (re)making herself into a more desirable object (53).

According to John Berger, in his well-known *Ways of Seeing*, while a man’s presence is active, suggesting “what he is capable of doing to you or for you,” a woman’s presence is passive, defining “what can and cannot be done to her” (46). Her “presence” is inextricably tied to her appearance, her self as a body (an object); it is “manifest in her gestures, voice, opinions, expressions, clothes, chosen surroundings, taste” Thus, says Sasha of a dress she wishes to

¹³Marya in *Quartet*, Anna in *Voyage in the Dark* and Julia in *After Leaving Mr. MacKenzie*.

buy but can't afford,¹⁴ "It is my dress. If I had been wearing it I should never have stammered or been stupid. . . . If I could get it everything would be different" (25, 28). If she could only wear this black dress, she feels, then her presence would be redefined and she would be treated (done to) differently.

Sasha's anxiety about her appearance/presence also becomes the locus of her dissatisfaction with the postures of the masquerade. Conflicting images and parody create discord, intimating a subtext of resistance to her position as a woman within an objectifying regime. While in one of her flashbacks, for example, the black dress is imaged as her salvation, near the end of the novel she constructs in her "film-mind" a different (sub)version of its significance: "I am wearing a black dress, very short, and heel-less slippers. My legs are bare. I am watching for the expression on the man's face when he turns around. Now he ill-treats me, now he betrays me. . . ." (147). In this dream/fantasy, Sasha's presence, which connotes extreme vulnerability, is confirmed both by her vision of self as object in the gaze of the (male) other and by his cruel treatment of her (his ability to *do to* her). There is a painful awareness of what the masquerade entails for the female object of the male gaze and desire; her "own sense of being in herself [ie, as an active/acting subject] is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another" (or, in Sasha's case, *depreciated*) (Berger 46). But what follows is yet another expression of ambivalence, the voicing of a masochistic dependency upon this dynamic of objectification: "as long as he is alive and near me I am not unhappy. If he were to die I should kill myself." For the woman who seeks to "recuperate some element of desire at the price of renouncing" her own, her sense of self as subject threatens to become completely subsumed by man's. Her existence is dependent on the confirmation—even if brutal—of his objectifying gaze. There is no explicit deconstruction or criticism of this dynamic; the possibilities of resistance are whispered between the lines of Sasha's revision/version of a black dress.

¹⁴Again, her financial position is continually seen as constitutive of her position as a woman in patriarchy. She is a commodity both within a capitalist and a sexist framework—the two are seen, in Rhys's work, as inseparable.

Sasha's ambivalence, her resistance to placing herself as an object (even as she does so) is framed by her conflicting desire to be seen a certain way or not to be seen at all. As disclosed by her fantasy of the man who ill-treats her, to be seen may mean to be hurt. Invisibility has its benefits. Thus she assesses the effect of a new hat in terms of its *lack* of effect: "I go to a restaurant near by and eat a large meal, at the same time carefully watching the effect of the hat on the other people in the room, *comme ça*. Nobody stares at me, which I think is a good sign" (60). Her "presence" often solicits unwanted attention; she doesn't blame the hotel patron for giving her old hat a "gloomy, disapproving look" because it "shouts 'Anglaise'" (it is this disapproval which prompts her desire for a new and unnoticable hat). She realizes that it is because of her incongruous fur coat that a young gigolo tries to pick her up: "Do I really look like a wealthy dame trotting round Montparnasse in the hope of—? After all the trouble I've gone to, is that what I look like? I suppose I do" (61). And after going into a restaurant against her better judgement—because the owner might recognize her, think she's changed (ie, is less attractive), tell her so—her worst fears are realized when another woman asks the apparently reminiscent proprietor what Sasha is doing there: "Et qu'est-ce qu'elle fout ici, maintenant?" . . . Now everybody in the room is staring at me; all the eyes in the room are fixed on me. It has happened" (43). The only way she can avoid breaking down completely (thus drawing even more attention to herself) is to think about the possibilities of the transformation act: "I try to decide what colour I shall have my hair dyed, and hang on to that thought as you hang on to something when you are drowning" (44).¹⁵ The answer to an unwanted objectification which threatens to destroy oneself (as subject) is to objectify the self in another way. She is caught in the trap of the masquerade, and there is no way out.

Although Sasha acquiesces, her narrative does intimate the possibilities of resistance. Parodying the trap, she displaces her position within it. While considering her need of a new and improved hair-do, she discloses another (critical) awareness:

¹⁵Because the woman who insults her has red hair, it is in fact ironic that the first colour Sasha considers for herself is red. The implication, I think, is that she wants to mimic the self-assured presence of this woman. Yet as I will discuss in more detail later, she is unable to do so.

Shall I have [my hair] blond cendré? But blond cendré, madame, is the most difficult of colours. It is very, very rarely, madame, that hair can be successfully dyed blond cendré. . . . First it must be bleached, that is to say, its own colour must be taken out of it—and then it must be dyed, that is to say, another colour must be imposed on it. (Educated hair. ...And then, what?) (44)

Not only does she parody beauty salon discourse, but she makes an implicit connection between what is done to one's hair and what is done to oneself: women, too, must be educated; standards of femininity are imposed upon them. Sasha's bitter recognition of this perversity is bolstered by her parenthetical question: what, afterall, will playing the masquerade achieve? Will anything really change?

A critical awareness emerges again when Sasha recalls an old lady who came into the shop where she worked and tried various "pretty things" on her bald head. Because women's hair signifies (within a scheme of masculine desire) their sexuality, this bald woman's presence not only parodies the rules of the masquerade but defies the definition of woman as passive object: "She tried on a hair-band, a Spanish comb, a flower. A green feather waves over her bald head. She is calm and unconcerned. She was like a Roman emperor in that last thing she tried on" (20). Despite her age and her baldness, this "sturdy old lady with gay, bold eyes" has a dignity all her own; she is a subject in her own right. Sasha admires her simple enjoyment of herself and refuses to laugh at her (objectify her in a manner with which she is all too familiar), although this response is solicited: "The daughter's eyes met mine in the mirror. Damned old hag, isn't she funny? ...I stare at her coldly." Yet while this incident again suggests resistance, it is suppressed. The patriarchal version of woman's subjectivity reigns. The old lady doesn't leave the shop with the bold air of a Roman emperor but is led out by her castigating daughter who, having accepted the rules of the masquerade, can only see her mother in a ludicrous light: "Well, you made a perfect fool of yourself, as usual. You've had everybody in the shop sniggering'. . . . The old lady does not answer. I can see her face reflected in the mirror, her eyes still undaunted but something about her mouth and chin collapsing" (20). In Sasha's world, the oppressors always win. After they leave, she erases all signs of the old woman's bold and gay presence when she puts "the ornaments back in

the cases slowly, carefully, *just as they were*" (my emphasis). Order is restored; it's as if the old woman with the air of a Roman emperor had never been there.

Mirror, Mirror: Reflections of an Alienated Self

As Sasha's (albeit ambivalent) adoption of the masquerade reveals, a "woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself" (Berger 46). Given a system where women are defined first and foremost by their appearance, it is no surprise that we are traditionally associated with mirrors (the irony, of course, is that women are criticized for being narcissistic while in fact the mirror was not made by our own hands, but by the hands of those who look at us). Sasha's relationship with mirrors is not, however, an affirming one. Mirrors have the horrible magic power of telling her what she no longer is, not unlike that mirror mirror on the wall in the fairy tale *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*:

This is another lavatory that I know very well, another of the well-known mirrors.

'Well, well,' it says, 'last time you looked in here you were a bit different, weren't you? Would you believe that, of all the faces I see, I remember each one, that I keep a ghost to throw back at each one—lightly, like an echo—when it looks into me again?' All glasses in all lavabos do this. (142)

No private vanity table in a room of her own for Sasha; she finds her reflection in public washrooms.

According to French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the subject discovers and re-confirms her sense of identity through her reflection:

We have only to understand the mirror stage as *an identification* namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he [sic] assumes an image. . . . the important point is that this form [the "Ideal-I"] situates the agency of the ego. . . . in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being (*le devenir*) of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as *I* his discordance with his own reality. (2)

The subject's "discordance with his own reality" speaks of the impossibility of bridging the gap

between self and image; she finds herself in her image but she is not her image. Because the Lacanian subject finds herself in an image outside of herself, she is self-alienated. For Sasha, this self-alienation is compounded because the mirror images with which she most often identifies are not even her own. This (mis)recognition of the self through (a reflected image of) the other is suggested when she does not look directly at the old lady who leaves the shop in her daughter's tow, but sees instead "her face reflected in a mirror." What Sasha most often finds reflected in the mirror of another's eyes (in the mirror) is not the confirming illusion of an integrated self but of an objectified, alienated self. This twice-removed alienation is painfully enacted when she watches, through the window, another woman looking at herself in the mirror and it is in this reflection that Sasha sees *herself*:

I look at the window of the first shop. There is a customer inside. Her hair, half-dyed, half-grey, is very dishevelled. As I watch she puts on a hat, makes a face at herself in the glass, and takes it off very quickly. She tries another—then another. Her expression is terrible—hungry, despairing, hopeful, quite crazy

I stand outside, watching. I can't move. Hat after hat she puts on, makes that face at herself in the glass and throws it off again. Watching her, am I watching myself as I shall become? In five years' time, in six years' time, shall I be like that? (57-58)

Later, when trying on hats herself, Sasha again identifies her reflection with that of this woman: "In the glass it seems to me that I have the same demented expression as the woman up the street" (58). Her self-alienation is not grounded in the illusion of self-recognition but is a (mis-)recognition of self in the other.

The image of this woman with her dishevelled, half-dyed, half-grey hair, like that of the old bald lady, suggests the inevitable failure of the masquerade. Like the mirror on the lavatory wall, she reminds Sasha that a woman cannot play this game for ever. And if she can no longer accede to the position of desiring subject through the submission of herself as the object of masculine desire, then what choices are left her?

Who are You?: Object of the (Masculine) Voice

Object of the gaze, Sasha is also the object of that other auspice of masculine desire, what Hélène Cixous calls “masculine interrogation”:

I say “masculine interrogation”: as we say so-and-so was interrogated by the police. And this interrogation precisely involves the work of signification: ‘What is it? Where is it?’ A work of meaning, “This means that,” the predicative distribution that always at the same time orders the constitution of meaning. And while meaning is being constituted, it only gets constituted in a movement in which one of the terms of the couple is destroyed in favor of the other. (“Castration” 45)

For Sasha, the voices which haunt her and objectify her are “like uniforms” and are brandished “like weapons” (44), suggesting Cixous’s reference to a police interrogation:

That’s the way they look when they are saying: ‘What’s this story?’ Peering at you. Who are you, anyway? Who’s your father and have you got any money, and if not, why not? Are you one of us? Will you think what you’re told to think and say what you ought to say? Are you red, white or blue—jelly, suet pudding or ersatz caviare? (76-77)

Again, in Rhys’s texts, “masculine interrogation” becomes more specifically a class-based interrogation; who one’s father is and whether or not one has money are inextricably connected. Her sense of objectification as a woman is compounded by her poverty.

While playing the masquerade necessitates the submission of one’s body to the specula(riza)tions of the (masculine) gaze, Sasha finds that as a woman/commodity she is also required to submit her autonomy, her right to declare her desire as a subject, to an objectifying (masculine) voice. Her encounters with men are dominated by their self-proclaimed right to define her. Although Rhys aligns the privileges of class and money with men, her depiction of these encounters indicates that this kind of objectification is practiced not just by the “extremely respectable” but belongs more specifically to a man-woman dynamic: two of the men who define Sasha and deny her the right to express herself are, in a class and economic sense, as marginal as she herself. Rhys implies that no matter how low one might be on the social ladder, a woman will always be one rung below her male counterpart.

Sasha's relationship with the gigolo René involves a repeated display of his self-proclaimed right to tell her who she is and what she thinks and feels:

He takes my hand in both of his . . . 'But what's the matter? Why are you looking so frightened?'

'I'm not. I'm looking vexed.'

'Oh, no, you're looking frightened. Who are you frightened of? Me? But how flattering!' (125)

This game of definitions is really a game of domination: just as he takes Sasha's hand in both of his, he attempts to envelop her personality. Wrapping his ego around her, he denies her right to think and speak for herself:

'Oh, all women hate bordels,' he says.

'Oh yeah? Well, you wouldn't think so to hear some of them talk. Besides, don't tell me that I'm like other women—I'm not.'

'Yes, but all women say that too,' he says. (135)

Deploying the ultimate comeback, René fits no matter what she says into his own framework. She is denied the right to speak even as she speaks.

With the painter Serge, who is also alienated from the privileges of class and money, we witness another instance of the masculine strategy to deny women's voice. When Sasha's manner of speech does not co-incide with Serge's sense of propriety, he simply ignores her. Thus when she asks him, in a "loud, aggressive" voice, to take some of her own money to buy brandy, he balks at her linguistic transgression by refusing to acknowledge her request: "He blots out what I have said and the way I said it. He ignores it as if it had never been, and I know that, for him, it has never been" (78). She is, after all, imitating so-called masculine speech and transgressing social mores, since the woman should never pay. He does not want to hear this woman declare her desire (as a subject). He turns the tables of their exchange when he tells her: "'Don't drink just now,' he says. 'Later, I'll get some, if you like. I'll make you some tea now.'" When she identifies with the mulatto woman whose extreme sense of (cultural and, implicitly, sexual) alienation left her drunk and crying at Serge's door, he again denies Sasha's voice: "'Exactly like me,' I say. 'I cried, and I asked for a drink' . . . 'No, no,' he says. 'Not like you at all'" (79). Serge intuitively perhaps that Sasha's declaration of a common bond between herself and this other woman is threatening to his own

position as a (masculine) subject in control; for the phallocracy to remain impervious to challenge, it must keep women separate from one another, class-bound, and prevent them from locating the oppressive source of their common misery.

Although Sasha recalls two women friends (Lise and Paulette) from her past, and while it is a woman who has given her the money to escape to Paris, she has no female friends in the present narrative context, and her contacts with women are invariably negative. It is worth noting too that Paulette is more her husband Enno's friend than Sasha's, and her attachment to the brodeuse Lise, while sympathetic, is cut short by the intrusion of masculine authority and voice. When sitting together, "arms round each other's waists, crying" at their shared sadness, they are interrupted by the appearance of Sasha's husband: "'Poor little Lise,' Enno says, 'she's a nice little girl, but too sentimental'" (112). This is the last we hear of their friendship. Female friendships are impossible when women can't "relate to each other except in terms of what they represent in men's desire. . . . Among themselves, they are separated by his speculations" (Irigaray 188). We also witness this separation in the present narrative context when Sasha watches a girl "making up at an open window immediately opposite." The possibilities of reciprocity and exchange cannot be realized because, as the very act of making up suggests, the two women are divided by the rules of the masquerade: "She averts her eyes, her expression hardens. I realize that if I watch her making up she will retaliate by staring at me when I do the same thing" (30).

No scene in *Good Morning, Midnight* sheds light on the way in which men use discourse to objectify women and dismiss their subjectivity more than Sasha's recollected encounter with the appropriately-named Mr. Blank. While Serge and René symbolically silence her by denying the validity of her voice, Mr. Blank literally silences her. He is, as his name suggests, able to wipe clean the slate of Sasha's autonomy, to 'blank her out': "everything is a blank in my head—years, days, hours, everything is a blank in my head" (18). His name may also be read as an indictment against his worth as a human being. Having defined her as "the biggest fool" he's ever met, as "half-witted" and "hopeless," he turns her into a rather hopeless nervous wreck, incapable of

explaining herself, scarcely capable of coherent speech. Like the proverbial vicious circle, this ironically bolsters his sense of superiority and justifies (in his mind) his treatment of her.

From the first moment she sees him, Sasha recognizes Mr. Blank's power. The "real English type, le businessman," his presence (like that of any man) is "dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies" (Berger 45). With his "Bowler hat, majestic trousers, oh-my-God expression, ha-ha eyes," Mr. Blank has a striking presence, and Sasha recognizes in these signs of his self-assurance the promise of what he will be able to do to her. Her immediate response is the desire to avoid his gaze, to make her own presence as innocuous as possible. In this instance, as in others, she recognizes the disadvantages of being seen: "Don't let him notice me, don't let him look at me. Isn't there something you can do so that nobody looks at you or sees you?" (17).

Unfortunately for Sasha, her wish for invisibility isn't granted, and Mr. Blank fulfills all that his presence promises. While Serge and René may frustrate and annoy her, this "real English type" poses more of a threat because he belongs to the ruling class. He is in control of what linguist Deborah Cameron calls the (linguistic or social) "register," defining what are considered appropriate modes of interaction (145). Thus to challenge him would be to disrupt the rules of exchange between employer and employee, man and woman; in Sasha's words, it would simply "seem rude." This (self-)silencing coincides with what Cameron and other feminist linguists have called "muting." A "situationally determined constraint placed by women on their own self-expression as a survival tactic," muting occurs as the result of "coercion, some means of inculcating female constraint and negative value judgements on women's talk, available to dominant groups by virtue of their position of power" (Cameron 106). When Mr. Blank suspiciously demands that Sasha prove her fluency in French and German, he turns her into the babbling fool he thinks she is. She is effectively silenced by his authority.

The frustration which infuses the narrative of Sasha's encounter with Mr. Blank is exacerbated by the fact that his "negative value judgements" on her verbal abilities are not

supported by his linguistic superiority; in fact, it is *his* mispronunciation of “La caisse” as “kise” that confuses Sasha and sends her wandering desperately in search of she knows not what. Although the fault is entirely his, she honours the rules of the game and does not demand to know what he means by “kise” (to do so would, after all, “seem rude”). She is caught in the nightmare world of her own helplessness; the labyrinthine passages of the shop become indicative of her state of mind. It is this scene which appears to provoke her nightmare of the tube station, and there is, apparently, no way out. The encounter culminates with her humiliating acquiescence to his “masculine interrogation”: “‘Just a hopeless, helpless little fool, aren’t you?’ he says. . . . ‘Yes, yes, yes, yes. Oh, yes.’ I burst into tears. I haven’t even got a handkerchief” (24).

As all of Sasha’s encounters suggest, she is continually unable to voice her own desire, to speak as a subject in her own right. Caught within the patriarchal trap which defines her as object/other, she is able to articulate an awareness of her position but is unable to change it. In Chapter II, I will focus on how Sasha’s own narrative voice is inscribed with the marks of her objectification. First, however, I will look at Sasha’s anger, the voice she uses against her oppressors. It is this voice which has prompted some feminist critics to view *Good Morning, Midnight* as a rebellious tract. Although I recognize its appeal, the narrative structure impedes the possibility of such a reading. It is this manipulation of the text which I call the *unwriting* of resistance.

A Silent Rebuttal: (Un)Writing Resistance

Every word I say has chains round its ankles; every thought I think is weighted with heavy weights. Since I was born, hasn’t every word I’ve said, every thought I’ve thought, everything I’ve done, been tied up, weighted, chained? (88)

While Sasha may feel that “every word” and “every thought” is “tied up, weighted, chained,” the words of her narration often ring with a vibrant and shrewd insight. The novel is filled with the poetic voicing of her outrage. It could thus be suggested that although she is silenced *contextually* (in her story), *textually* (in her narration) she speaks; thus her narratological discourse

might be seen to contradict her claim that she is silent or speaks with difficulty.¹⁶ Although it has its appeal, I think that this approach is problematic; in fact, the text (narration) ultimately supports the context (of Sasha's silence). While time and again we encounter Sasha's (narrating) outrage, we are not able to read these passages as the voicing of a triumphant resistance. A woman who knows what it is to be silenced by others, Rhys's narrator silences herself (even as she speaks); she is unable to position herself as speaking subject. While Sasha's narration repeatedly reveals that she is intelligent and articulate, full of an angry wit, seldom does this voice speak within the world of her story/life. We hear her anger, but the object of her anger goes unchallenged. Thus her story undercuts her narration; resistance is expressed only to be denied, written, in a sense, only to be un-written.

Although all of the significant encounters in Sasha's narrative are framed by the *unwriting* of resistance, her experience with Mr. Blank provides the most trenchant example. While Sasha may stammer and fumble and scuff her shabby shoes in his presence, she also reveals the desire and ability to cut this larger-than-life "le businessman" down to size. Rhys shows us that her narrator is anything but oblivious to the dynamic of this encounter:

Well, let's argue this out, Mr. Blank. You, who represent Society, have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month. That's my market value. . . . So you have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month, to lodge me in a small, dark room, to clothe me shabbily, to harass me with worry and monotony and unsatisfied longings till you get me to the point when I blush at a look, cry at a word. We can't all be happy, we can't all be rich, we can't all be lucky—and it would be so much less fun if we were. Isn't it so, Mr. Blank? . . . Let's say that you have this mystical right to cut my legs off. But the right to ridicule me afterwards because I am a cripple—no, that I think you haven't got. And that's what you hold most dearly, isn't it? You must be able to despise the people you exploit. (25-26)

With his "mystical right" to cut her legs off, Mr. Blank is aligned with the decapitating General Sun Tse. Sasha questions not only this sadism but, implicitly, the social code which supports it. As critic Judith Kegan Gardiner points out, her angry rebuttal reveals that "she is . . . more intelligent, perceptive, and articulate than her persecutor" (241). This is also picked up by Nancy

¹⁶By *context* I mean that which happens within Sasha's story, the experience that she relates; *text* refers to the level of her narration, the voice with which she tells her story.

Harrison, when she refers to this passage as “talking back,” an instance of Rhys’s “initiation of dialogue, her mapping of the terrain upon which we may *begin* to argue” (64-65). Although Sasha is articulate and provides the reader with insight, directing us toward the possibilities of resistance, what neither of these critics consider is the narrative structure which frames her rebuttal. Sasha is not talking back; in fact, she ‘takes it all back’: “Did I say all this. Of course I didn’t. I didn’t even think it” (26). Thus the angry voice of resistance is expressed only to be denied.

Gardiner does, in fact, refer to Sasha’s disclaimer, reading it as evidence that the older Sasha “can only assert control over her language and destiny by a fictional recreation of the younger Sasha,” and thus she views the passage as evidence for “the recuperative power of fiction” (241). Yet Sasha’s narrating self does not let herself use her position vis-à-vis the past to reframe the experience—she creates this “fictional recreation” of her experiencing self only to deny it. This crucial difference between Sasha’s narrating self and experiencing self is elucidated by Dorrit Cohn in *Transparent Minds*: “The experiencing self in a first-person narration . . . is always viewed by a narrator who knows what happened to him [sic] next, and who is free to slide up and down the time axis that connects his two selves” (145). Although Sasha is able to connect her present self and her past self, she concludes the narration of her anger by temporally fixing her two selves. Thus the potential “recuperative power” held by her narrating self is undercut by the censorious voice which claims she “didn’t even think” her anger. Her experiencing self accepts Mr. Blank’s judgement without question. Even though the narrating Sasha has used her position in relation to her experiencing self in order to revise her encounter with Mr. Blank, her rebuttal is divorced from the story. It is de-contextualized. Resistance is given textual (narrating) expression only; contextually, Mr. Blank is never put in his place, but his authority reigns and remains in Sasha’s “own little story of misery.”

As her silent (silenced) retort to Mr. Blank reveals, Sasha is not incapable of criticizing the “extremely respectable,” who “think in terms of a sentimental ballad”: “Everything in their whole bloody world is a cliché. Everything is born out of a cliché, rests on a cliché, survives by a cliché”

(36). One could read this as another instance of Rhys “talking back” through Sasha’s bitter voice, but when she adds, “And they believe in the clichés—there’s no hope,” our narrator’s helplessness dominates. The world—Sasha’s world (and Rhys’s?)—is in the hands of the “extremely respectable.”

Similarly, her recollection of the rich woman in Montparnasse entails a perceptive but ultimately ineffectual critique of the “extremely respectable.” The control of language is again at the root of their encounter. Sasha is shrewdly aware that the stories concocted by this woman, which she has been employed to transcribe, are themselves trivial, meaningless, and cliché-ridden: “‘Once upon a time there was a cactus—’ Or a white rose or a yellow rose or a red rose, as the case might be” (139). Criticized because she fails to sufficiently disguise these clichés, Sasha is ordered to use “long words,” to cloak the nakedness of meaning in a gown of superlatives. A failure to do so will cost her her job. Through her narrator’s sarcastic insight, Rhys suggests that those with money enough to possess authentic Louis Quinze chairs are *in control* of language and meaning, because they control what Deborah Cameron calls the “regulatory mechanisms which grow up around languages” (145). Although this control is ridiculed, it is not challenged. When the rich woman asks if Sasha agrees with her criticism, Sasha gives her retort only parenthetical utterance: “(No, I certainly don’t think so, you pampered chow [sic].)” Her *spoken* reply borders on self-deprecating: “‘I’m awfully sorry you didn’t like the story,’ I say” (140). Sasha’s rebuttal is offered to us alone, and the rich woman from Montparnasse goes uncontested.

Those whom Sasha criticizes are often given quotation marks but she is not. This is the case in her encounters with Mr. Blank and the rich woman from Montparnasse, with the castigating daughter of the old lady who tries various ornaments on her bald head, and with the tall, red-haired English woman who insults Sasha at Théodore’s café. When Sasha relates the cruel words of the daughter as she leads her mother from the shop, the daughter speaks *within* the story (with quotation marks, for all to hear), while Sasha’s outrage is given silent voice only:

Oh, but why not buy her a wig, several decent dresses, as much champagne as she can drink. . . . One last flare-up, and she’ll be dead in six months at the outside. That’s all you’re waiting for, isn’t it? But no, you must have the slow death, the bloodless killing

that leaves no stain on your conscience. ...

I put the ornaments back in the cases slowly. . . . (20)

Restoring order, putting things back as they were, Sasha silences her own (silent) anger.

In Théodore's café, Sasha reveals that she is actually *unable* to confront the woman who insults her (and thus to position herself as a [speaking] subject):

I would give all that's left of my life to be able to put out my tongue and say: 'One word to you,' as I pass that girl's table. I would give all the rest of my life to be able even to stare coldly at her. As it is, I can't speak to her, I can't even look at her. I just walk out. (45)

Once again, her anger is given silent voice only: "One day, quite suddenly, when you're not expecting it, I'll take a hammer from the folds of my dark cloak and crack your little skull like an egg-shell." Unable to meet this woman on her own linguistic turf,¹⁷ to speak, Sasha escapes into this pathetically violent fantasy. And it too is silenced: "One day the fierce wolf that walks by my side will spring on you and rip your abominable guts out. One day, one day. ...Now, now, gently, quietly, quietly...." (45). Not only is she incapable of speaking her anger within her story (/life), to position herself as a speaking subject, but so too in this instance does she silence its expression in her narration. She leaves Théodore's café in silence. Once again, the person who has cruelly objectified her goes unchallenged within the story.

Like her encounters with Mr. Blank, the rich woman from Montparnasse and the old lady's insensitive daughter, Sasha's encounter with this woman leaves the reader not with an impression of her anger as much as with the recognition of her failure (her inability) to speak. The fact that many of these incidents involve other women, and not men, emphasizes the degree to which Sasha is unable to assert herself. It is one thing to acquiesce to the intimidating presence of "le businessman" and "his masculine interrogation," another to accept the rudeness of a woman she doesn't know. This is accentuated by the fact that Sasha is not simply being polite or avoiding an

¹⁷Which is, incidentally, the turf of the linguistic transvestite: this woman, with her shocking language, has assumed a masculine posturing. Sasha makes a point of observing that her presence is imitative of a man's: she is tall, wears sports clothes and has no hat (43) (recall, too, that Sasha's hats are a source of great worry, a symbol of her objectified image).

unpleasant scene; rather, she acknowledges that she “would give all the rest of” her life “to be able even to stare coldly at” the red-haired woman.

All of these encounters in some way confirm Sasha’s claim that “every word” she says, “every thought” she thinks and “everything” she does is “tied up, weighted, chained.” Paradoxically, as Judith Kegan Gardiner points out, Sasha reveals that she is “intelligent, perceptive, and articulate.” The clue to this contradiction, and to my claim that the narrative structure effects an unwriting of resistance, resides with the distinction made by Dorrit Cohn between the narrating self and the experiencing self. While Sasha’s narrating self is imbued with an angry wit, her experiencing self struggles in silent rebellion. Sasha’s pathetic silence within her story undercuts and overrides her narration, reducing her voice to an angry whisper. Objectified and silenced by others, she objectifies and silences herself. Although she intimates the desire for escape, Sasha remains trapped in her “little story of misery.”

CHAPTER II

MODERNISM OR MADNESS?

There is an irony in René's question when he asks Sasha, "Have you ever felt like this—as if you can't bear any more, as if you must speak to someone, as if you must tell someone everything or otherwise you'll die?" (61). Although she acknowledges that she "can imagine" such a need, his question is rhetorical, intended only to provide himself with a beginning for his own story: "He is not looking at me—he hasn't looked at me once. He is looking straight ahead, gathering himself up for some effort. He is going to say his piece." But what about Sasha's piece? If (as her interactions with René, Serge and Mr. Blank reveal), the masculine code demands a woman's silence and acquiescence to her position as other, as object of the (male) gaze and voice, what then happens to the woman who proposes to cross the line from background to foreground, from absence to presence, from silence to speech? This is, I think, the fundamental question in *Good Morning*, *Midnight*, and the focus of this chapter.

The choice facing the woman like Sasha (or Rhys) who desires to speak/narrate her story is either to imitate "masculine' systems of language" or to speak from her position as other, to make her absence/silence/alienation heard, to disrupt the "symbolic economy in which 'woman' is objectified as a means of exchange between men and positioned as the silent support of patriarchal fantasy and desire" (Longfellow 26). For some feminists, the latter option suggests the sexual/textual politics of resistance. As Xavière Gauthier proposes in her essay "Existe-t-il une écriture de femme? [Is there such a thing as women's writing?]," to "speak 'otherwise'" is to "*make audible* that which agitates within us, suffers silently in the *holes of discourse*, in the unsaid, or in the non-sense" (163).¹⁸ To "speak 'otherwise'" is to challenge the rigours of masculine

¹⁸This is one of the theoretical focal points in Nancy Harrison's analysis of Rhys's fiction. While she does not deal in any detail with *Good Morning*, *Midnight*, it seems to me that her argument that Rhys "makes audible" that which "suffers silently" misses the mark in relation to Sasha's narrative, which is fraught with Sasha's silent suffering (and suffering of silence). My discussion of Sasha's narration will in part question the reading Harrison suggests.

(phallogocentric) discourse, to deconstruct that hierarchical fixed opposition (man/woman) which forms the basis of patriarchal culture. Fragmenting (symbolic) language, calling into question the position of the master “I” is, for Julia Kristeva, a potentially revolutionary sexual/textual politics (in Marks 165). Nevertheless, Rhys’s modernist style does not ultimately effect a (textual) transgression. In *Good Morning, Midnight* there is an implicit (if anguished) acceptance of the patriarchal symbolic. From within the (fixed) enclosure of either/or, there is no way out. As Sasha intuits, the “passages will never lead anywhere, the doors will always be shut” (28). This is true, I think, of Rhys’s modernist style: it involves not a traversal (passages leading somewhere, doors being opened) but, for her narrator/protagonist, it entails a further imprisonment:

For Rhys and her narrator, freedom, iconoclasm, innovation imply danger, isolation, alienation. The tenets of modernism do not hold out liberation for a bound mind, they only release that mind into a further and more horrible entrapment, particularly if that mind is female, and by definition, not free. (Mezei 202)¹⁹

This points to one of the crucial differences between *Good Morning, Midnight* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. For Woolf, the tenets of modernism are a means of expressing the “myriad impressions” to which “an ordinary mind on an ordinary day” is subject (“Modern Fiction” 154), and they do suggest the possibilities of resistance and liberation. This is not the case in *Good Morning, Midnight*. Unable to imitate masculine discourse, to speak/narrate from a position of mastery, Sasha speaks from her position as object/other, “at the margin, painfully, off-kilter” (Dupré 34). Modernist expression (disruptions in voice and a fragmentary, associative play of language) are used by Rhys to depict—and ultimately, to *create*—the nightmare world of her narrator.

The Woman at his Door: The Master’s Narrative

As Sasha recognizes, women’s words/stories are not granted the seal of hegemonic approval: “Thinking how funny a book would be, called ‘Just a Cérébrale of You Can’t Stop me From Dreaming.’ Only, of course, to be accepted as authentic, to carry any conviction, it would have to be

¹⁹Written with reference to *Wide Sargasso Sea* and appropriated for my purposes here.

written by a man” (135). Through the ironic voice of her narrator, Rhys comments here not only on women’s (historical and philosophical) exclusion from literary production but, I think, on her own frustration as a woman writer writing herself through the voice of a woman narrator. Sasha’s struggle to speak, to be heard, is perhaps a reflection of Rhys’s own struggle within a symbolic and literary framework. In a text inscribed with the masculine control of language, the authority of the male voice, Sasha’s observation is hardly surprising. (Even if a woman’s story isn’t written by a man, the implication is that it must, at least, be written *like* a man.) Yet Rhys implies that this control is not entirely based on a sexual arbitration (that is, ‘because you’re a man we’ll accept your words as authentic; because you’re a woman we will not’). Rather, the nature of Sasha’s voice in Rhys’s own “funny” book suggests that feminine narrative—the speaking female voice—may be qualitatively different from the masculine. We have only to compare Sasha’s “little story of misery” with the tale of the mulatto woman told by the painter Serge.

Paradigmatic of masculine discourse and conventional narrative, Serge’s voice flaunts the self-assured mastery of the speaking “I.”²⁰ The sexual politics of Serge’s tale affirm that he is a (phallic) subject in control. The story of the mulatto woman at his door is ultimately not *her* story, but she becomes an anecdote about his stay in London. The crux of the narrative comes with his typically masculine observation that the solution to this woman’s misery is the proverbial ‘good fuck’: “I knew all the time that what she wanted was that I should make love to her and that it was the only thing that would do her any good. But alas, I couldn’t” (81). When he goes on to recall two other women in the house, with the suggestion that “perhaps all women have cruel eyes,” he seems to have forgotten the helpless misery of the woman at his door. Her misery, afterall, is not the point. He is a speaking subject, and this woman is only the subject (/object) of his speech.

Although as a poor artist Serge is marginal to the hegemonic class, his narrative is nonetheless that of a real man, carrying with it the tone of conviction which Sasha has recognized

²⁰Virginia Woolf aligns conventional narrative with (an oppressive) masculine discourse in *A Room of One’s Own* and in her essays, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” and “Modern Fiction” This will be discussed at length in Part II.

as a masculine privilege. Sasha's exclusion from that privilege, her inability to emulate Serge, is textually amplified because his ordered, conventional tale does not come to us vis-à-vis a narrator (omniscient or otherwise) external to *Good Morning, Midnight*, but is contained within, and related through, Sasha's autodiegesis.²¹ Although she is able to tell his story as he himself tells it, she is unable to forge the well-ordered syntactical and lexical rhythm of his narration in her own. The difference in their narratives is visible on the page: while most of the text abounds with brackets and ellipses, visual indicators of Sasha's fragmented voice, the lengthy passage belonging to Serge marches along without elliptical or parenthetical intrusions. By inserting Serge's narrative into Sasha's own, Rhys not only suggests the narratological implications of the difference between the "two economies" described by Hélène Cixous in "Castration or Decapitation?," but she also creates a paradigm of conventional narrative against which Sasha's voice can be judged.

Yesterday, Today or Tomorrow

Writing about the character and psychology of her narrator, Jean Rhys emphasizes "that yesterday today and tomorrow are all mixed in her mind" (*Letters* 60).²² As was her practice, Rhys found the form to fit the story. In contrast to Serge's well-ordered and conventional narrative, Sasha's ordering of time is confused and a-chronological. She swings to and fro, from past to present and back again, without always making the distinction clear. There are two main story lines in Sasha's narrative: that of her present, beginning on the fifth day of her stay in Paris, and that of her past, which unfolds in an a-chronological and associative pattern of memory. Her present experience is related largely through "simultaneous narration": "narrative in the present contemporaneous with the action" (Genette 217). Confusion arises because her use of the present tense (and the corresponding use of this, here, now) is not confined to her narration of the present

²¹*Autodiegesis* is a term used by Gérard Genette to describe a first-person narration wherein "the narrator is the hero of his [sic] narrative" (245).

²²From a letter written to Selma Vaz Dias, who adapted *Good Morning, Midnight* for radio broadcast in 1949.

but is also used to narrate the past, which then becomes the present in her narrative. In the narration of past experience, simultaneous rather than subsequent narration disrupts the temporal position of the speaking/narrating subject. For Sasha, “there is no past, no future, there is only this blackness, changing faintly, slowly, but always the same” (144).

Sasha’s inability to “know whether it’s yesterday, today or tomorrow” illuminates again her tenuous position as (speaking) subject (121). According to linguist Emile Benveniste

the indicators of *deixis*, the demonstratives, adverbs, and adjectives, which organize the spatial and temporal relationships around the “subject” taken as referent: “this, here, now,” and their numerous correlatives, “that, yesterday, last year, tomorrow,” etc. . . . have in common the feature of being defined only with respect to the instances of discourse in which they occur, that is, in dependence upon the I which is proclaimed in the discourse. . . there is no other criterion and no other expression by which to indicate “the time at which one is” except to take it as “the time at which one is *speaking*.” (226-227)

Sasha’s dislocation as a (speaking) subject is manifest on a formal level as a temporal dislocation. This, here and now—the discursive instances of the speaking “I”—become confused, disrupting the position of the speaking subject (and the position of the subject speaking). When remembering/(re)experiencing her stay in the hospital and the birth of her baby, for example, “this” time of the past becomes “this” time of the present:

Well this was a funny time. (The big bowl of coffee in the morning with a pattern of red and blue flowers. I was always so thirsty.) But uneasy, uneasy. ...Ought a baby to be as pretty as this, as pale as this? The other babies yell from morning to night. Uneasy. ... (51-52)

The uneasiness in this passage reverberates in the sudden tense changes. Her present self is lost to her past self; or, the past establishes itself as present. If “the time at which one *is*” is “the time at which one *is speaking*,” then where is Sasha in a discursive instance such as this?

To Speak or Be Spoken: Narrating from the Place of the Other

“Et qu’est-ce qu’elle fout ici, maintenant?” (43); “Who are you, anyway?” (77); “Just a hopeless, helpless little fool, aren’t you?” (24). Sasha’s experience is laden with moments when she

is object of a “masculine interrogation,” those “voices like uniforms.” Within her “own little story of misery” she is, as I have shown, unable to talk back. Contextually, she receives the objectifications of others with a pathetic resignation. ““Yes, yes, yes, yes. Oh, yes”” she says to Mr. Blank, masochistically bowing to his authority. Although Sasha’s (silent) rebuttals do show that she is “intelligent, perceptive, and articulate” (Gardiner 241), her narrating voice does not consistently challenge the world of her story because, on the textual level too, her voice is frequently broken, elided, or lost. Thus her acquiescence to the “extremely respectable” is further magnified when she turns their words against herself: “What is she doing here, the stranger, the alien, the old one? ...I quite agree too, quite. I have seen that in people’s eyes all my life. I am asking myself all the time what the devil I am doing here. All the time” (46). The object of others’ voices, she is also the object of her own. Textual control is elided by contextual victimization. Unlike the confident Serge, Rhys’s narrator is unable to speak with the mastery of “I.”

According to Benveniste, subjectivity can only be activated within language:

It is in the instance of discourse in which *I* designates the speaker that the speaker proclaims himself as the “subject”. . . . Language is the possibility of subjectivity because it always contains the linguistic forms appropriate to the expression of subjectivity, and discourse provokes the emergence of subjectivity because it consists of discrete instances. In some way language puts forth “empty” forms which each speaker, in the exercise of discourse, appropriates to himself and which he relates to his “person,” at the same time defining himself as *I* and a partner as *you*. (Benveniste 226-227)

If self (“I”) exists in relation to other (“you”), then what happens when “I” is lost? When the discourse of the self becomes the discourse of the other, when “I” becomes “you”? This pronoun oscillation is characteristic of Sasha’s (narrative) voice: “In the middle of the night you wake up. You start to cry. What’s happening to me? Oh, my life, my youth. ...There’s some wine left in the bottle. You drink it” (75). On one level, this encourages us to identify with Sasha’s plight: the pronoun “you” interpellates the reader into the text. But in terms of (Rhys’s writing of) Sasha’s voice, the oscillation from “I” to “you” engraves the text with a formal demonstration of her inability to position herself as (speaking) subject. She has grown so accustomed to *being spoken* by others that she speaks herself as other.

Because she is the autodiegetic narrator of her story, the sudden textual intrusions of other points of view confirm that Sasha is unable to maintain her position as speaking subject in control of her (narrative) discourse. Throughout the novel, she loses her own voice (the voice of “I”) to another, a pattern which is initiated by the novel’s opening: “‘Quite like old times,’ the room says. ‘Yes? No?’” (13). The room is given priority of voice over the narrator, who doesn’t appear until the “I” of the third paragraph. Benveniste’s claim that “‘Ego’ is he who says ‘ego’” confirms that this initially absent “I” indicates an occluded subject(ivity). Although she is narrator, Sasha is not at first the subject of the textual discourse but its object, defined as “you” in relation to the speaking room. This becomes a repeated diegetic pattern.

These lapses into a discourse directed *at* her occur at times when Sasha is feeling especially nameless, faceless, absent. The stranger, the alien, the old one, she frequently finds it difficult to narrate/speak her own story/life. When sitting alone and lonely in a not-so-friendly bar, for example, her anxious sense of alienation is translated into her (narrative) voice. She begins first to speak of herself in the third person, as if in an attempt to distance herself from the tumult of her emotion by objectifying herself as (an)other: “I’m a woman come in here to get drunk. That happens sometimes. They have a drink, these women, and then they have another and then they start crying silently” (89). “I” becomes “they”—her individual experience is transformed into that of a collective (not so personal) other. The narrating voice then becomes that of the other patrons: “‘Poor woman, she has tears in her eyes.’ ‘What do you expect? Elle a bu.’” Object of their gaze(s), object of their voice(s), she relinquishes her own perspective and voice (as subject), and is instead seen and spoken of as other. Finally, she is objectified by the object world itself: “And the street walks in. It is one of those streets—dark, powerful, magical. ...‘Oh, there you,’ it says, walking in at the door, ‘there you are. Where have you been all this long time?’” (89). “I” slips into abeyance and becomes an objectified other, a “you” (magnified in this instance, as in others, by the fact that the speaker of the narrative discourse, the appropriated “I,” is not subject [a person] but object [part of the phenomenal world]). Thus Rhys inscribes the text with a formal expression of Sasha’s extreme

alienation and inability to imitate the “I” who marches confidently through the pages of masculine narrative.

A Language That is No Language: Politics of the Poetic

While Sasha’s interactions with men reveal that they speak with all the conviction and privilege consequential to their position in masculine culture, there is the suggestion in *Good Morning, Midnight* of a feminine culture with a language all its own. Sasha’s recalled encounter with a midwife intimates the possibility of communication that is not grounded in the rigours of symbolic signification: “She comes and wipes my forehead. She speaks to me in a language that is no language. But I understand it Speaking her old, old language of words that are not words” (50). (Rhys’s writing) of Sasha’s narration involves, I think, an investigation of this “language that is no language.” Throughout Sasha’s own narrative discourse, we encounter suggestions of a breakdown in the signifying function when her words cease to privilege denotation and exist only in their materiality; that is, when the signifier/signified relation of the sign is collapsed, and words become ‘things’ in themselves. After one of the Russians asks Sasha if she is sad, for example, she scarcely acknowledges the meaning (signification) of his question but revels instead in an associative word-play: “Tristesse, what a nice word! Tristesse, lointaine, langsam, forlorn, forlorn” (40).

The connection initiated through the midwife’s touch has pre-Oedipal associations. Prior to the infant’s induction into language, with its “this is separate from that” rule of signification (which supports and is supported by the subject/object binary), words do not signify but are experienced in their materiality. Margaret Homans refers to this relation to language as “the literal,” where “words matter as sounds, monotonous and rhythmic, issuing from and returning to the body. . . . [and where] the presence and absence of referents in the ordinary sense is quite unimportant” (18). Referring to the work of feminist psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow, she posits that women are more

closely bound to the literal because as little girls, we are not required (by the patriarchal Symbolic) to relinquish our attachment to our mother(s' bodies) as completely as are little boys. For theorists like H  l  ne Cixous, herein lies the possibility of a sexual/textual politics; her theory of *  criture f  minine*, which celebrates "tactility" and is "straightway at the threshold of feeling," draws on the notion of women's pre-Oedipal (primeval) bond with the maternal, suggesting that "Writing in the feminine is passing on what is cut out by the Symbolic, the voice of the mother, passing on what is most archaic" ("Castration" 54).

While the disruption of symbolic signification suggests the possibility of finding a (feminine) voice with which to resist the mandates of phallogocentric discourse, this is not realized in *Good Morning, Midnight*. The emergence of a "language that is no language" in Sasha's discourse does not signal resistance, a "writing in the feminine," but refers, again, to her inability to speak with the authority of subject. This is affirmed by the nature of her encounter with the midwife. Framed as it is by pain and loss, Sasha's recollection of this experience (and the potential subversion she suggests) cannot be read in a positive light. In this "place for poor people," where there is no "Jesus, no Mother, and no chloroform either," the calming presence of this "sage femme" is accepted only as a last resort; it is she, in fact, who is responsible for the absence of the chloroform which Sasha craves: she "doesn't approve" of it (50). And the entire episode is finally overshadowed by Sasha's anguished memory of her little baby "lying with a ticket tied round his wrist because he died in hospital" (52). Her own experience of motherhood (with its renewal of the pre-Oedipal bond) is cut short; the midwife is no longer an ally, "encouraging, soothing, reproaching," but she insists upon erasing the memory of Sasha's experience from her body: "She swathes me up in very tight, very uncomfortable bandages. . . . When she takes them off there is not one line, not one wrinkle, not one crease" (51-52). So too are the subversive implications of her encounter with the midwife erased from the text.

For Julia Kristeva, writing which involves pre-Oedipal expression is associated with what

she terms *the semiotic chora*.²³ Once the subject enters the (post-Oedipal) Symbolic (which is presided over by the One, the father/Phallus) *le sémiotique* (which is pre-ego boundary, pre-signification) is, for the most part, repressed, and “can be perceived only as pulsational pressure on symbolic language,” emerging “as contradictions, meaninglessness, disruption, silences and absences in the symbolic language” (Moi 162). According to Kristeva’s theory of “poetic language,” the effects of *le sémiotique*, in a textual context, are potentially subversive, disrupting and deconstructing the phallogocentrism of patriarchal culture.²⁴ While this “archaic” voice may challenge “the constraints of a civilization dominated by transcendental rationality” (Kristeva in *Desire* 140), there is another side to the textual politics of the poetic: if “unconscious pulsations . . . take over the subject entirely, the subject . . . would fall back into pre-Oedipal or imaginary²⁵ chaos and develop some form of mental illness” (Moi 11). The poetic, then, is related to psychosis; according to Kristeva, both reactivate “the first echolalias of infants. . . as rhythms, intonations, glossalalias” (*Desire* 133).

For Rhys, who has created a narrator with “no pride, no name, no face, no country”—who is objectified not only by others, but by herself—the subversive possibilities of the poetic are elided by the threat of psychosis. This is illuminated by her dream of the tube station. The sudden appearance of her father, wounded and dying, does in fact suggest a way out of the patriarchal Symbolic which imprisons her: “Now a little man, bearded, with a snub nose, dressed in a long white night-shirt, is talking earnestly to me. ‘I am your father,’ he says. ‘Remember that I am

²³*Le sémiotique* is characteristic of the pre-Oedipal phase, when the child exists in a state of unity and identification with the mother (or primary caretaker) and object world; linguistically, it can be “detected genetically in the first echolalias of infants as rhythms and intonations anterior to the first phonemes, morphemes, lexemes, and sentences” (*Desire* 133). The term *chora*, which means “receptacle,” is borrowed from Plato, and is defined by Kristeva as “unnamable, improbable, hybrid, anterior to naming, to the One, to the father, and consequently, maternally connoted to such an extent that it merits ‘not even the rank of syllable.’”

²⁴Kristeva elaborates on the textual politics of poetic language in her essays, “From One Identity to An Other” in *Desire in Language*, and “Revolution in Poetic Language” in *The Kristeva Reader*.

²⁵In Lacan, the imaginary phase is pre-Oedipal, preceding the subject’s introduction to language and entrance into the (patriarchal) Symbolic Order.

your father.' But blood is streaming from a wound in his forehead. 'Murder,' he shouts, 'murder, murder'" (12). Just as "the murder of the mother is necessary for the founding of patriarchal culture" (Homans 2),²⁶ breaking free of the patriarchal prisonhouse would necessitate the death of its figure-head, the father. But in Sasha's dream, his death is not greeted with celebration. Because, from a Lacanian perspective, the Symbolic Order is *by nature* patriarchal, presided over by the One, the Phallus, the Father, the subject who does not successfully make the Oedipal transition, who is not inducted into the world of the symbolic (where this is separate from that, self is separate from other, and the play of binary oppositions structures both language and one's perceptions of the world) runs the risk of lapsing back into a pre-Oedipal state (and, potentially, psychosis). Thus although she longs for a way out, Sasha fears the possibility of this avenue of escape. Living/narrating within the world of her nightmare, what other choice does she have but to follow the steel finger, to obey the signs?

Marching to the Patriarchal Beat: The Quest for Staying Power

Although Serge denies the connection, Sasha rightfully identifies with the distraught mulatto woman at his door. She too has cried and asked for a drink; she too has known what it is to drown in the panic of isolation and objectification. Like Sasha, who has "no pride, no name, no face, no country," the mulatto woman doesn't "belong anywhere" (38). And as is the plight of the nameless and faceless, paranoia and hysteria loom large on the horizon. This is Sasha's fear, and Serge's words of warning to the woman at his door resonate throughout her own narrative (and psyche): "Don't let yourself get hysterical, because if you do that it's the end" (80).

²⁶Homans briefly traces the western tradition of the "murder of the mother," and, prompted by the theories of feminist psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow, suggests that this tradition is psychologically rooted in the Oedipal crisis. Simply put, in order for the male child to step into his father's shoes, to assume, that is, a phallic position, he must relinquish all connections with his mother (and all that she represents, or all that is associated with her and is defined as "feminine"). Hence, Homans's claim. (The crux of Chodorow's argument can be found in her essay, "Gender, Relation, and Difference in Psychoanalytic Perspective," in *The Future of Difference*).

Prompted by her analysis of Freud, Kaja Silverman suggests that “frigidity, lesbianism, hysteria, and paranoia” are “heavily traversed paths [which] diverge from the straight and narrow one leading to Oedipal normalization,” and as such, stand as potential points of “female resistance to patriarchal culture” (144).²⁷ However, resistance can be passive, strangled in the grip of a miserable acquiescence. This, I argue, frames Rhys’s writing of Sasha’s narrative. Sasha is a protagonist who struggles to follow the “straight and narrow.”²⁸ She has accepted (albeit, with a resisting shudder) that sanity is bound to an acceptance of patriarchy’s rules which, for a woman, involves submitting (silently, passively) to the masquerade: “Saved, rescued, fished-up, half-drowned, out of the deep, dark river, dry clothes, hair shampooed and set . . . here I am, sane and dry, with my place to hide in. . . . When you’ve been made very cold and very sane you’ve also been made very passive” (10-11). If a woman is active and acts out against the order that imprisons her, she become, in Serge’s words, “hysterical.” And that, he warns, will be the end. Within a patriarchal regime, there is no way out of this catch-22 dilemma, as Hélène Cixous reminds us in her tale of General Sun Tse: “the moral [of the story] is that if [women] don’t actually lose their heads by the sword, *they keep them on condition that they lose them*—lose them, that is, to complete silence, turned into automatons” (“Castration” 43). Cixous’s analysis reverberates in Sasha’s narrative/life, where she exists as “a bit of an automaton, but sane, surely—dry, cold and sane” (10). One either marches in (decapitated) silence, or risks (feminine?) madness.

Heeding Serge’s warning throughout her narrative, Sasha silences the expression of her anger, calming and soothing herself with the words, “gently, quietly, quietly.” Within the

²⁷From within a psychoanalytic framework, Oedipal normalization for a woman entails her acceptance of the Law of the Father and of her exclusion from the dynamics of power, control and authority signified by the Phallus. Rather than attempting to gain access to this power in her own right, she will project her desire onto the possessor of the P(p)hallus. Hence Silverman’s argument that the failure of a woman to position herself happily within this scheme of things—finding her potential fulfillment as desiring subject through the definition of herself as a desired object—is in fact a failure to commit herself wholeheartedly to a ‘normal’ (as determined by the patriarchal Symbolic Order) state of affairs.

²⁸In my discussion of *Mrs. Dalloway*, I will suggest that Woolf’s writing of these divergent paths is in fact a writing of resistance. The difference lies in the contextualization of these psychic ‘disorders.’

patriarchal symbolic (epitomized by the regime of General Sun Tse), sanity is aligned with “masculine rationality,” which “has always privileged reason, order, unity and lucidity, and. . . it has done so by silencing and excluding the irrationality, chaos and fragmentation that has come to represent femininity” (Moi 160). For Sasha, any display of heightened emotion (recall that joyful and rebellious laughter of the king’s wives) must be suppressed:

But careful, careful! Don’t get excited. You know what happens when you get excited and exalted, don’t you? ...Yes. ...And then, you know how you collapse like a pricked balloon, don’t you? Having no staying power. ...Yes, exactly. ...So, no excitement. This is going to be a quiet, sane fortnight. (14)

The key to sanity, to “staying power,” involves the repression of “the irrationality, chaos and fragmentation that has come to represent femininity”—the repression of what is other to patriarchal authority. Thus Sasha struggles to maintain control, to follow the steel finger in the tube station, to keep the way out at bay: “The thing is to have a programme, not to leave anything to chance—no gaps. No trailing around aimlessly with cheap gramophone records starting up in your head, no ‘Here this happened, there that happened’” (14). Within the textual world created by Rhys, sanity, “like conventional narrative apparently requires clarity of sequence and distinction” (Mezei 200).²⁹ Chance—the random, the spontaneous—represents a gateway to disorder, (imaginary) chaos, potential madness.

Fearing the way out, Sasha attempts to follow the signs, to conform to the (patriarchal) order that directs her: “Please, please, monsieur et madame, mister, missis and miss, I am trying so hard to be like you” (88). Trying so hard, clinging to the need of a programme, she suppresses the threat of ambiguity and attempts to follow the rules of the “masculine economy,” envisioning her life in either/or terms:

My life, which seems so simple and monotonous, is really a complicated affair of cafés where they like me and cafés where they don’t, streets that are friendly, streets that aren’t, rooms where I might be happy, rooms where I never shall be, looking-glasses I look nice in, looking-glasses I don’t, dresses that will be lucky, dresses that won’t, and so on. (40)

Her creation of this scheme of things grants her the illusion of control: “avoidance of certain cafés,

²⁹In reference to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but also applicable to *Good Morning, Midnight*.

of certain streets, of certain spots, and everything will go off beautifully” (14). Playing both the part of soldier and General, she commands herself to “Eat. Drink. Walk. March” (120). Yet in the very act of marching, Sasha’s enterprise is undermined. The (ordered) form of her discourse is betrayed by its (banal and random) content: “I had looked at this, I had looked at that, I had looked at the people passing in the street. . . . The bottle of Evian on the bedtable, the tube of luminal, the two books, the clock ticking on the ledge, the red curtains” (11). Her forced control implies her lack of control; one has the sense, in these passages, of a voice on the brink of babbling.

Similarly, the repetition of the phrase “first this happened, then that happened” is a parodic utterance of Sasha’s need to impose order. While these words refer to her desire for clarity and distinction, her failure to define ‘this and that’—to fill in the narrative details—betrays that she is unable to actualize this desire. Framed as these utterances are by Sasha’s need of a programme, and her (albeit, bitter) acquiescence to the order which oppresses her, they do not ring with subversive possibility. Rather, her random lists and obscure chronologies resound as instances of a failed mimicry, her inability to imitate the forms of (a masterful) masculine discourse.

The Voice of Hysteria: Miming the Master’s Discourse

In contrast to the lucid Serge, Sasha’s narrative is fraught with moments when clarity is shaken and the gramophone records begin to play. Her discourse is saturated with non-sense; associative, obscure and fragmented phrases weave their way throughout *Good Morning, Midnight*. In a “poetic” or “revolutionary” text, according to Julia Kristeva, “fragmentation of language calls into question the very posture of” the (phallic) mastery epitomized by the narrating Serge (in Marks 165). This is not, I think, the case in *Good Morning, Midnight*. Rather than displacing/ disrupting the ruling code, Sasha’s (fragmented) narrative discourse speaks of her inability to position herself securely within it. If sanity is textually aligned with conventional narrative (privileging reason, order, unity and lucidity—those auspices of masculine rationality), then the

breaking of convention signifies madness.

Sasha indulges in nonsense not as a means of subverting (hegemonic) sense but as a way to avoid confronting the painful reality of her position as other:

. . . . it isn't my face, this tortured and tormented mask. I can take it off whenever I like and hang it up on a nail. Or shall I place on it a tall hat with a green feather, hang a veil over the lot, and walk about the dark streets so merrily? Singing defiantly 'You don't like me, but I don't like you either. "Don't like jam, ham or lamb, and I *don't* like roly-poly. ..."' Singing 'One more river to cross, that's Jordan, Jordan. ...' (37-38)

Suggestive of anger and defiance though they may be, within the context of Sasha's narrative world passages like this one signal the dangerous loss of "staying power," the threat of lost control. Throughout her narrative, Sasha attempts to gain control (within the discourse of masculine rationality) by repressing her nonsensical outbursts:

(But, alas! the waiter has a louse on his collar Bitte schön, mein Herr, bitte schön. ...) Swing high. ...Now, slowly, down. A beautiful room with a bath. A room with bath. A nice room. A room. ...

Now, what are they saying? (29)

Swinging in and out of nonsense, littered with repetition and ellipses (visual indicators of gaps, things left unsaid or thoughts incomplete), the beginning of this quotation works against a reading for clarity and distinction. The words "Now, slowly, down" remind us of that cautionary self, the one that fears excitement and clings to the need of a programme. With the sudden break and the question, "Now, what are they saying?" Sasha comes "down" with a thud, and attempts to relocate herself in the discourse of masculine sense: "As soon as the question 'What is it?' is posed, from the moment a question is put. . . .*we are caught up in masculine interrogation* And this interrogation precisely involves the work of signification: 'What is it?' A work of meaning, 'This means that'" (Cixous in "Castration" 45).

In her discussion of Luce's Irigaray first book, *Le Langue des déments* (*The Language of Dementia*), Toril Moi notes that Irigaray's elucidation of the speech of psychotics is echoed in her later work on women and patriarchy:

“Spoken more than speaking, enunciated more than enunciating, the demented person is therefore no longer really an active subject of the enunciation. . . . He is only a possible mouthpiece for previously pronounced enunciations” (351). This passive, imitative or mimetic relationship to the structures of language is strikingly similar to the way in which, according to *Speculum*,³⁰ women relate to phallogocentric discourse. (Moi 127)

“Spoken more than speaking,” Sasha’s narrative discourse lapses time and again into mimicry as she becomes a “mouthpiece for previously pronounced enunciations.” (This is suggested too in her dream of the tube station, when the words which tear from her chest echo the words of her father: “I too shout: ‘Murder, murder, help, help,’” [13]). Fragments and phrases of French and German, well-known expressions and snatches of poems and songs erupt (and disrupt) throughout her narration. When forced to confront, for example, the interrogating Mr. Blank with his desire to know how many languages she can speak, Sasha’s anxiety is translated into a mimetic verbiage: “All the little German I know flies out of my head. Jesus, Help me! Ja, ja, nein, nein, was kostet es, Wien ist eine sehr schöne Stadt, Buda-Pest auch ist sehr schön, mein Herr, ich habe meinen Blumen vergessen, aus meinen grossen Schmerzen. . . .” (21). Scarcely the discourse of one with “staying power,” passages such as this resonate as moments of lost control. Making no sense, babbling nonsense, Sasha speaks with the tongue of hysteria: “And—how could it be otherwise—miming/reproducing a language that is not its own, masculine language, it [hysteria] caricatures and deforms that language” (Irigaray 137). Her (hysterical) mimicry is, in fact, another display of silence, her inability to position herself as “an active subject of the enunciation”: “Hysteria is silent at the same time it mimes” (ibid).

Depending on how it is contextualized, mimicry can be read, not as the voicing of hysteria, but as a parodic or subversive (textual) device. It may be tempting to argue that Rhys wishes to “make audible”—through the voice of her narrator—“that which agitates within us, suffers silently in the *holes of discourse*, in the unsaid, or in the non-sense” (Gauthier 163). Or one might want to view Sasha’s mime as a form of displacement, what Teresa de Lauretis calls a strategy of cultural

³⁰A text in which Irigaray deconstructs the western philosophical tradition—from Plato to Freud—in relation to Woman.

resistance: “the only way to position oneself outside of that [dominant] discourse is to displace oneself within it to answer deviously (though in its words), even to quote (but against the grain)” (7). Thus when all the little German that Sasha knows flies out of her head in a disconnected, nonsensical flow, one might suggest that she is resisting the demands of Mr. Blank by refusing to take him seriously; she is answering his question, ““And how many languages do you speak?”” deviously (17).

However, the narrative context will not allow this interpretation. For one thing, if I was going to take this line of argument, I would then be faced with the fact that this is another one of those silent/silenced rebuttals: the passage in question is confined to Sasha’s private narration/consciousness only. Answering deviously can only be read as an effective form of resistance if the person who is being answered actually hears the answer. Otherwise his authority reigns unchecked. More importantly, the context of Sasha’s nonsense cannot be discounted—she is not intending to answer deviously or quote against the grain; this is not an instance of linguistic parody. Rather, she fears that she will not be able to comply with Mr. Blank’s authority: “I at once make up my mind that he wants to find out if I can speak German. . . . Jesus, help me!” (21). Sasha’s is the painful voicing of the hysteric who attempts to obey the pointing steel finger directing her through alien and undesired passages. Rhys has not created a subject who *effects* her displacement in discourse in order to resist that discourse; rather, Sasha’s discursive struggle is an *effect of* her displacement.

CHAPTER III

A FINAL ACQUIESCENCE

It strikes me as incredible that people are able to read the conclusion of *Good Morning, Midnight* as anything but tragic. And yet they do. Their explanations vary, but a number of critics read the novel's ending in some way as a moral victory. Thomas Staley claims that when Sasha "opens her body to a man at the novel's end, she at least acknowledged the need of union beyond its simple erotic dimension. . . . she has learned that the smallest human contacts are what we need most, and her 'yes' is for herself as well as those who try to reach her" (98). Peter Wolfe suggests that Sasha is "reborn" at the end, although he also sees her final embrace as an appropriate retribution: "Because Sasha has spurned a handsome young man who craves her, she must embrace a scrawny old one with contempt in his heart" (134). Arnold Davidson, who calls *Good Morning, Midnight* Rhys's "most affirmative novel," interprets "Sasha's 'yes' to the *commis*" as a "successful example of sex as existential charity" (93; 102). Perhaps the most incredible (mis)reading comes from Elgin Mellow, who not only concludes that she "gives herself" to the "previously despised" *commis* "out of compassion" (462), but claims that "Sacha [sic] leaves her door open, *inviting* the man next door whom she has long avoided into her bed" (467; my emphasis). This type of response is not confined to male critics alone; although less blatantly sexist, Helen Nebeker reads the conclusion as a "complete psychic breakthrough . . . facilitated in the person of René," whereby Sasha learns "to welcome the midnight which must precede the dawn of her new day" (107). Even feminist Judith Kegan Gardiner claims that with her acceptance of "the white-robed fellow traveler," Sasha "accepts the burdens of a full humanity" (249).

In contrast to these various (and, I think, often misogynist) conclusions, I read Sasha's narrative as the chronicle of a woman who has, in Virginia Woolf's terms, "gone under" (*Dalloway* 152). The end of the novel entails neither a moral (nor a sexual) victory. Although the climax of Sasha's struggle for control is finally resolved, this resolution is not affirmative. The end of her story is foretold by her dream of the man who ill-treats her and betrays her, but upon whom she is

utterly dependent for her happiness and her life; it does not involve some form of awakening, rebirth or “psychic breakthrough.” Rather, in “giving” herself to the commis, Sasha acquiesces with a painful finality to the life-denying world of her nightmare.

Sasha’s relationship with René and her final embrace of the commis must be read in context of the rest of her narrative. Neither one of these men represents the possibility of rebirth or new beginnings. It is true, however, that René does awaken a hopeful desire in Sasha:

I have my arms around him and I begin to laugh, because I am so happy. I stand there hugging him, so terribly happy. Now everything is in my arms on this dark landing—love, youth, spring, happiness, everything I thought I had lost. I was a fool, wasn’t I? to think all that was finished for me. (148)

But once they enter Sasha’s room (a symbol, throughout the novel, of her helpless position) and the lights go on, she recognizes her hope as an illusion: “Now the room springs out at me, laughing, triumphant. . . . Four walls, a roof and a bed. *Les Hommes en Cage*....Exactly” (149). It is impossible for Sasha to clutch at René as a way out. He may be, as Arnold Davidson suggests, in some ways a mirror for herself, but part of what he reflects back is her exclusion from the world of masculine privilege. The exchange that follows draws us back into this dynamic, as René engages in a not-too-playful game of “masculine interrogation”:

He says: ‘Just now on the landing—you knew it was me?’
‘Yes, of course.’
‘But how could you have known before I said anything?’
‘I did know,’ I say obstinately.
‘Then you knew that I was coming up after you. You expected me to?’
. . . . You love playing a comedy, don’t you?’ (150)

Typically failing to acknowledge that she is justified in feeling “Sparks of anger, or resentment, shooting all over” her, Sasha blames the alcohol for the fact that she begins to “feel quarrelsome.” Yet the truth of what is happening is captured by her sudden sense of objectification: “The damned room grinning at me. . . . Qu’est-ce qu’elle fout ici, la vieille?” With his questions and his commands (“No, don’t drink any more”), René has ruined the possibility of reciprocity between them. He has declared himself subject, and Sasha is his object/other.

The struggle which ensues shows Sasha giving voice at long last to her anger. But René holds the upper hand: masculine dominance, Rhys reminds us, is not only social or symbolic. Pinning her on the bed, threatening her with rape (“‘There’s a very good truc,’ he says, ‘for women like you’”), René takes from Sasha her last claim to autonomy and control. Humiliated and bruised, her mouth bleeding, she reminds him that he is a gigolo and offers to save him the trouble of servicing her. By re-defining their positions, she manages to turn the tables just enough. Insulted, he leaves. But she has not gained a victory over René. We are not allowed this reading, because, in keeping with the rest of the text, the words in her story contradict the words in her narration. This time, however, the pattern is reversed: while the words she speaks to René are at last the words of resistance, they are denied by the words of her (silent) narration: “Don’t listen, that’s not me speaking. Don’t listen. Nothing to do with me—I swear it” (153). While throughout the novel Rhys has used Sasha’s narration to permit her narrator the opportunity to talk back, to insert the voice of resistance (at some level) into the text, at the end of Sasha’s story she uses the same device to completely subvert and silence this voice in her story. Although Sasha finally does talk back and position herself as (speaking) subject, she does so only to relinquish her claim to this position.

In the scenes that follow René’s departure, the struggle that has framed Sasha’s narrative reaches a climax. Two voices—what could be called a voice of (feminine) alienation and a voice of (masculine) reason—grapple for control:

Who is this crying? The same one who laughed on the landing, kissed him and was happy. This is me, this is myself, who is crying. The other—how do I know who the other is? She isn’t me.

Her voice in my head: ‘Well, well, well, just think of that now. What an amusing ten days!. . . Now, calm, calm, say it all out calmly. (154)

She attempts to silence the “Damned voice” in her head, but the painful dialogue continues. All pretense of control has collapsed, and what remains is not a victorious awareness but a final acquiescence: “All that is left in the world is an enormous machine, made of white steel. It has innumerable flexible arms, made of steel. Long, thin arms. At the end of each arm is an eye, the eyelashes stiff with mascara” (156). The finger of steel in her dream of the tube station has become

an arm—capable no longer simply of pointing, but of embracing. With her vision of this masquerade-playing automaton, Sasha envisions herself and her fate. Her wish for René's return is not a "psychic breakthrough" but is instead a breakdown, activated by the need to completely submit herself as desirable object. As her film-mind has foretold, she can only glean a(n illusory) sense of herself through the denial of her desire, a relinquishing of self to the man who "ill-treats" and "betrays" her. Such is the embrace of the automaton, the doll, the mannequin.

At the novel's end, it is true that Sasha embraces not "a handsome young man" but "a scrawny old one with contempt in his heart" (Wolfe 134). But I cannot agree that this is Rhys's idea of a just "retribution" (retribution for what I cannot fathom). In his discussion, Peter Wolfe goes on to imply that there is some kind of kinky Freudian subtext in Sasha's reception of the commis whom, he (rightly) points out, has been identified as a father figure (Wolfe 135). Yet while father-figures "in Freud" may "excite lust," this is certainly not the case in *Good Morning, Midnight*. We first meet the commis immediately following Sasha's dream of the tube station. Wearing his "famous white" dressing gown, he reminds us of the image of the murdered father in her dream, who wears "a long white night-shirt" (12-13). Later, the commis suggests a different type of father-figure, when he appears at Sasha's door "wearing his beautiful dressing-gown, immaculately white, with long, wide, hanging sleeves," looking "like a priest, the priest of some obscene, half-understood religion" (30). Indicative of a father-figure he may be, but he certainly does not excite lust in Sasha who, when he appears at her door in search of sex, places her "hand on his chest" and pushes him away (31). She thinks of him as "the ghost of the landing," and, with his "bird-like face and sunken, dark eyes with a peculiar expression, cringing, ingratiating, knowing," he both frightens and disgusts her (13).

It is thus incredible that anyone can read the appearance of the commis at the end of Sasha's narrative as "the need of union beyond its simple erotic dimension," an act of compassion, or a "successful example of sex as existential charity." Most of the critics who make claims such as these are also quick to point out the connection between Sasha's last words and the words of Molly

Bloom at the conclusion of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Staley suggests, for example, that Sasha's iteration of the word "yes" is an affirmation similar to that uttered by Molly. In both instances, he claims,

As the feminine consciousness releases itself in that nether world where deep truths frequently reside after a crisis between wakefulness and sleep, the self asserts a qualified affirmation—not an individual affirmation but rather an impassioned shout for the efficacy of the possibility of union between man and woman in which both natures are in harmony and love, and each fulfills the other. (97)

Elizabeth Abel reads the novel's end as "both an ironic parody of Molly Bloom's affirmation and a sign that she has achieved a portion of Molly's wholeness and sympathy" (167). Judith Kegan Gardiner claims, on the other hand, that when Sasha "accepts the white-robed fellow traveller, she does not abandon herself to Molly's sensual oblivion or to Joyce's artistic detachment" (249). This is the way I would choose to read the echo of *Ulysses* at the novel's end. However, when Gardiner too goes on to read the ending as affirmative, suggesting that with her final words Sasha "regains the power of speech, the power of the last word," I recoil. For one thing, the iteration "Yes—yes—yes," which ends her encounter with the intimidating Mr. Blank, signifies, for Sasha, a humiliating acquiescence: "Just a hopeless, helpless little fool, aren't you? . . . 'Yes, yes, yes, yes. Oh, yes'" (24). Further, the final pages of the novel preclude the possibility of the reading Gardiner and others propose. With these words Sasha speaks not an affirmation of self and desire but an affirmation of her complete submission to the Law of the Father, represented by the sinister and priest-like commis.

Whether she intuits her own death at the hands of this feared father-figure or the symbolic death of herself as subject, she is, at the novel's end, indeed "like one of those straws which float around the edge of a whirlpool and is . . . sucked into the centre, the dead centre" (38). With her embrace of the commis, Sasha enters the world of her nightmare. She relinquishes all claim to self as subject, and her weak narratorial attempts at resistance are forgotten. Appropriately, her narrative ends. She is silent.

PART II
WRITING A WAY OUT: THE POETICS OF *MRS. DALLOWAY*

Mrs. Dalloway, Virginia Woolf's fourth novel, traces a day in the life of a number of related (and unrelated) characters. A heterogeneous weaving together of numerous voices, sensations and memories, the text culminates with the death of shell-shocked Septimus Warren Smith and society lady Clarissa Dalloway's party. Although Septimus and Clarissa never meet, their stories are ineffably bound. My discussion of the novel moves toward an exploration of Woolf's doubling of these two extremely different lives.

While *Good Morning, Midnight* is saturated with the claustrophobic aura of Sasha's nightmare, *Mrs. Dalloway* resonates with subversion and the writing of a new (feminist) version. Woolf's vision of subjectivity is not one which bows to the rule of the patriarchal Symbolic Order, but rather suggests the possibilities of resistance. Refusing to tow the phallogocentric line trailed by the subject who dominates the pages of patriarchal history and texts, her strategies of writing "work to turn dominant discourses inside out" and challenge the code which demands woman's (silent) acquiescence.

CHAPTER IV

THE SUBJECT OF SEXUALITY: CONFLICT AND RESISTANCE

Like Rhys, Woolf articulates an understanding of woman's (self-)objectification within patriarchal culture. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, however, even as Woolf discloses the trap within which Clarissa Dalloway defines/finds herself, she intimates that there might be a way out. While in Rhys's novel Sasha's memories serve only to underscore her tragic plight, when we arrive at the narrative of Clarissa's memories we discover that she is not without her personal form of resistance. It is through her creation of a specifically female bond that Woolf celebrates the possibilities of (feminine) transgression. Clarissa Dalloway does not march to the code of General Sun Tse; the masculine economy is, in fact, elided by an intrusion of the feminine. Finally, although it can be argued that Rhys implies a critique of the objectifying male gaze and voice, Woolf enters into this critique with an enthusiastic and unrelenting insight. Thus I conclude this chapter with a skip across the great patriarchal divide, to read Woolf's writing of the masculine enterprise.

Self as Other: This Being Mrs. Richard Dalloway

While most of the characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* are fraught with "disunity and conflict" (Weedon 21), slipping from one discursive position to another in an attempt to establish (the illusion of) identity, Woolf's creation of Clarissa Dalloway implies that, for women, this process is compounded. Although openly antagonistic, poor, religious Doris Kilman and Clarissa Dalloway have more in common than either realizes—both are subject to the objectification(s) of patriarchal desire and discourse.³¹ Like Sasha in *Good Morning, Midnight*, they are caught in a system of

³¹Doris Kilman's pathetic feelings of self pity and resentment are fostered by her recognition that value, for a woman, lies not in her possession of a degree (she, after all, "was a woman who had made her way in the world") but in her attractiveness to men. Without dismissing the relevance of her class (for she cannot "afford to buy pretty clothes"), it is because Miss Kilman is "ugly, clumsy" and "minded looking as she did beside Clarissa" that she is excluded from the world of "angular men" and "flaunting women" whose desires dictate her own (194). Just as she stumbles her way through "all the commodities of the world" in the Army and Navy Store (201-202), Miss Kilman—herself a commodity within patriarchal and capitalist

conflict which is, according to Luce Irigaray, particular to their identity as women under patriarchy. Woolf's text, like Rhys's, articulates that for women, "Participation in society requires that the body submit itself to a specularization, a speculation, that transforms it into a value-bearing object, a standardized sign, an exchangeable signifier" (179).

Mrs. Richard Dalloway is a woman caught in the net of her social role, her value as a social commodity. She seeks reassurance of an image of herself through the behaviour of others towards her. She desires to be seen a certain way, as an *object* of the gaze: "How much she wanted it—that people should look pleased as she came in" (13). As Mrs. Dalloway, she defines herself according to the discourse of upper-crust propriety—the gracious and accomodating lady of the house: "thank you, thank you, she went on saying in gratitude to her servants generally for helping her to be like this, to be what she wanted, gentle, generous-hearted. Her servants liked her" (58).

Mrs. Dalloway not only seeks reflections of herself in the attitudes of others toward her, but we also witness her actively involved in an exercise of self-construction when she looks into the mirror. Woolf shows us that the desire for a unified image is an illusion, an active (act of) creation on the part of the subject looking into the glass:

How many million times she had seen her face, and always with the same imperceptible contraction! She pursed her lips when she looked in the glass. It was to give her face point. That was her self—pointed; dartlike; definite. 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, a radiancy no doubt in some dull lives. . . . she. . . had tried *to be the same always, never showing a sign of all the other sides of her* . . . (55; my emphasis)

This passage is a precise enactment of the Lacanian mirror stage, whereby the subject discovers and constructs a sense of identity through her reflection: the "*mirror stage* is a drama . . . which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality. . . ." (Lacan 4).

(cont'd) society—stumbles in search of herself through the various constructions of meaning available to her, relying always on the discursive catchphrases of her religion to reflect back (and create) her self-image.

When Mrs. Dalloway looks in the mirror and purses her lips, she is creating a focussed (“pointed; dartlike; definite”) image of herself (moving from a fragmented to an integrated sense of self). Drawing the parts together, creating a “meeting point” as she sits in her drawing room, the perfect London hostess, the image Mrs. Dalloway creates of herself is specifically a social one. People come to see her, and she gives them this centred, unified creation of herself, “never showing a sign of all the other sides of her.” There is a suggestion not only that she understands this process of self-creation (and objectification, submitting herself as social commodity) with her intuition of the “other sides,” but also that she is to some extent in control of this image-making. In *Good Morning, Midnight*, on the other hand, when Sasha looks into mirrors, they look back; and what they reflect is a fragmented vision of her sad alienation. She has not even the illusion of self-identity accorded by the mirror stage.

Mrs. Dalloway’s sense of self is—as for all subjects, according to Lacan—constituted through self-alienation. As is made painfully evident through the character and experience of Sasha in *Good Morning, Midnight*, for women this process is augmented by the specula(riza)tions of patriarchal desire. This is not simply something which is done to women but, as we see with both Sasha and Mrs. Dalloway, it is a process to which we acquiesce: “A woman must continually watch herself And so she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman” (Berger 46). We witness this scheme of self-objectification unfold through Mrs. Dalloway’s contemplation of self as other:

That she held herself well was true; and had nice hands and feet; and dressed well. . . . But often now this body she wore (she stopped to look at a Dutch picture), this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing—nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now. . . . not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway. (14)

This is a powerful invocation of the extreme self-alienation experienced when a woman appropriates the male gaze and turns it against herself. Within a culture that defines woman’s worth, her very existence(/presence) in terms of marriage and motherhood, Mrs. Dalloway’s alienation is doubly enforced because, as an older woman who is past the age of marrying and

child-bearing, she is no longer definable as a desirable subject (/object) within this patriarchal discourse. Momentarily positioned on the object/passive/absent side of the classic patriarchal dyad, she feels “invisible,” her body “seemed nothing—nothing at all.” She has been swallowed up by her “participation in society,” having submitted her body to “a specularization, a speculation, that transforms it into a value-bearing object” (Irigaray 180). The “Dutch picture” she stops to look at reflects back her self-objectification and alienation: her body is painfully foreign to her.³² In fact, Mrs. Dalloway does not (at this point in the narrative)³³ feel connected to her body; it has become merely an object (like a painting), like a piece of clothing (“this body she wore”), signifying who she is in terms of society (“this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway,” an older woman past the age of marrying and child-bearing).

Mrs. Dalloway’s self-objectification is underlined by her concern with appearances. Not unlike Sasha in *Good Morning, Midnight*, she plays the masquerade, adorning “herself in the feathered accoutrements of femininity” (Longfellow 27). While these “feathered accoutrements” pertain figuratively to personality—there is her concern that people like her, that she be seen as kind and generous, the perfect hostess—they also pertain more literally to her physical appearance. While Sasha is preoccupied with her hair and clothing, Mrs. Dalloway displays a passion for gloves and shoes, adorning her “nice hands and feet,” subscribing to the fetishizing dicta of her old Uncle William, who “used to say a lady is known by her shoes and gloves” (15). Ironically, old Uncle William just about sums it up: a woman is a commodity defined by commodities, and (lady or not) she is always the object of the male gaze, which then determines whether she is lady or not!

There is, however, ambivalence in Mrs. Dalloway’s position, an ambivalence which intimates the unfolding of another version/vision. Unlike Sasha, who longs to be invisible as a way of

³²The appropriation of woman’s body by masculine specula(riza)tions is epitomized by the function of the male gaze in constructing (an) image(s) of the female body in classical art. See John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*.

³³It is always necessary to clarify that because Woolf’s subjects are enigmatic, continuously oscillating from one position, to another, my statements regarding character are always placed within the context of a specific textual instance.

avoiding victimization, there is an implicit regret in Mrs. Dalloway's sense of invisibility. She desires to be seen and known—not as an object of the gaze but as a subject in her own right, as Clarissa. She envies “people like Richard who did things for themselves”—people (men?) that is, who are able to define themselves as active/acting subjects, free from the objectifying gaze. She expresses regret that, in contrast to the Richards of the world, “half the time she did things not simply, not for themselves; but to make people think this or that. . . . Oh if she could have had her life over again!” (13-14). Although this wish implies the desire for action—if she could *do* it again, she'd *do* it differently—what follows is not an expression of the desire to act as a subject (like Richard) but to have been cast differently as an object: “if only she. . . . could have looked even differently! She would have been, in the first place, dark like Lady Bexborough, with a skin of crumpled leather and beautiful eyes” (14). If she had looked differently, then she would have *been seen* differently. Yet here too there is a suggestion of a transgressive desire: “She would have been, like Lady Bexborough. . . . rather large, *interested in politics like a man*” (14; my emphasis). Mrs. Dalloway's model of feminine beauty and charm does not entirely conform to the standard of the day but includes a hint of transgression, a crossing of boundaries (perhaps not unlike the narrator of *A Room of One's Own*, when she strays from the Oxbridge path onto the grass, where only [male] Fellows and Scholars are permitted to roam!).³⁴

Otherwise and Elsewhere: Making Space for the Critical Self

In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha ultimately acquiesces to the order which oppresses her. Although she wryly observes that the ideal woman is a mannequin, not unlike “those damned dolls” in the shop where she works, her own story suggests that there is no way out of this trap. At

³⁴On the other hand, Lady Bexborough's political inclinations could be said to correspond to the other play of the masquerade, that of the transvestite, who adopts “masculine' systems of language” (Longfellow 27). However, I prefer to read Clarissa Dalloway's admiration of Lady Bexborough at this point in the story in context of her dissatisfaction with herself as an object of the gaze and as a desire to position herself as an active subject (which would mean having the freedom of thought and speech—the right to wonder off the gravel path and onto the grass—claimed as a masculine privilege).

the end of her narrative, she relinquishes any sense of autonomous desire she may have had and steps masochistically into her function as “a value-bearing object.” Woolf, in contrast, not only writes with an awareness of the objectifications to which the female subject of patriarchy is subject, but she also sketches the possibilities of a way out—the possibilities, that is, of a woman’s resistance as a speaking/desiring subject.

The narrative of Clarissa Dalloway’s subjectivity is that of all women who find that their position within patriarchy is not without conflict: “For women. . . existing in the dominant system of meanings and values that structure culture and society may be a painful double dance, clicking in, clicking out—the divided consciousness” (Blau DuPlessis in Eisenstein 149). This “clicking in, clicking out” intimates, for Woolf, the possibility of cultural critique. In *A Room of One’s Own*, while arguing that there is “no single state of being” for anyone, she suggests that the particular form of disunity to which women are subject is potentially subversive: “if one is a woman one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall, when from the natural inheritor of that civilization, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical” (93; my emphasis). Clarissa Dalloway may be a “natural inheritor of that civilization” that names her Richard’s wife, but she has moments when she undergoes “a sudden splitting off of consciousness,” and it is these moments which open the text to resistance, the speaking of an “alien and critical” voice. In contrast to *Good Morning, Midnight*, these moments become moments of being, flashes of insight that are treasured rather than guiltily suppressed.³⁵ Unlike Lady Bradshaw, who has “gone under” and is “quick to minister to the craving which lit her husband’s eye so oilily for dominion” (152), Clarissa Dalloway has, within Luce Irigaray’s schema, held onto some nebulous, secret part of herself, that “natural” body that exists separately (even if devalued) from the social element (Irigaray 179-180):

³⁵In *Moments of Being*, Woolf outlines the difference between “non-being” and “being.” The greater part of every day, she claims, is “embedded in a kind of nondescript cotton wool” (81); with this she contrasts moments of insight, recognition and personal significance. While *Mrs. Dalloway* is a weave of such moments of being, in *Good Morning, Midnight* Sasha struggles to wrap herself as securely as possible in “a kind of nondescript cotton wool”—she desires not to feel, not to think, not to be.

If she can play that role so well, if it does not kill her, quite, it is because she keeps something in reserve with respect to this function. Because she still subsists, otherwise and elsewhere than there where she mimes so well what is asked of her. Because her own "self" remains foreign to the whole staging. (Irigaray 152)

Woolf has created two aspects of Clarissa Dalloway which guide us toward a reading of a (woman's) self that subsists "otherwise and elsewhere": the narrative of her sexuality and Clarissa's moments of defiant insight both provide a point of convergence for the themes of female subjectivity and resistance.

Or Women Together: Sexual Subversions

Resistance to a defining discourse emerges at the point where that discourse fails to support the desires and needs of the individual subject:

Subjectivity works most efficiently for the established hierarchy of power relations in a society when the subject position, which the individual assumes within a particular discourse, is fully identified by the individual with her own interests. Where there is a space between the position of subject offered by a discourse and individual interest, a resistance to that subject position is produced. (Weedon 112-113)

The narrative of Clarissa Dalloway's sexuality discloses that she has not fully identified her interests with that of patriarchy; both her frigidity and what might be called her lesbian tendencies signal transgression. While Mrs. Dalloway does to an extent feel that she has failed sexually according to the code that dictates her position as her husband's wife, the narrative continually offers us another (sub)version, revealing that she has not aligned herself completely with the dictates of patriarchal discourse or been entirely successful in her navigation of the path leading to "Oedipal normalization." This recalls Kaja Silverman's claim that paranoia and hysteria, along with lesbianism and frigidity, represent the possibility of resistance. In Sasha's narrative, the manifestation of these "psychic 'disorders'" do not refer us to an active(/act of) resistance but to her inability to follow the "straight and narrow" path "leading to Oedipal normalization." In contrast, Woolf's writing of Clarissa Dalloway entails a celebration of alternatives for the female subject. *Mrs. Dalloway* suggests that lesbian love enables a woman to declare her own desire as subject,

sidestepping the patriarchal mandate that requires she submit herself as an object of masculine desire. Thus the narrative of Clarissa's sexuality is ultimately a narrative of resistance.

Within the patriarchal scheme of things, to fail as a woman in any way implies a failure as a sexual being, because women are first and foremost defined according to their sexuality. Thus, when Mrs. Dalloway sadly contemplates that "Lady Bruton, whose lunch parties were said to be extraordinarily amusing, had not asked her," her disappointment and sense of social inadequacy is articulated as a sexual failure, causing her to feel "herself suddenly shrivelled, aged, breastless" (45). What follows is an exploration of her sexuality, and what is ultimately revealed is poignant and startling. She may be past her prime, she may in fact feel "shrivelled, aged, breastless," but the narrative refuses to endorse this position. The fissure in the textual grounding of Clarissa Dalloway's sexuality is first suggested by the contradictory juxtaposition of metaphors describing her ascent to her attic bedroom, "Like a nun withdrawing, or a child exploring a tower" (45). While "a nun withdrawing" connotes a sense of lassitude and enclosure, days of discovery and adventure passed, the image of an exploring child implies the opposite. Clarissa Dalloway's retreat to her attic bedroom does in fact entail both connotations—it is both a virginal cloister and a place of exciting (even forbidden) discovery. The narrative which follows invokes a voice of transgression, involving the presentation of an alternative version/vision of woman's sexuality to that demanded by patriarchy.

With the description of the clean sheets on Mrs. Dalloway's bed, "tight stretched in a broad white band from side to side," Woolf makes an allusion to her nun-like solitude, in part due to her recent illness and in part to her own "nature"—a lack of interest in sexual interaction with her husband:

Narrower and narrower would her bed be. The candle was half burnt down and she had read deep in Baron Marbot's *Memoirs*. She had read late at night of the retreat from Moscow. For the House sat so long that Richard insisted, after her illness, that she must sleep undisturbed. And really she preferred to read of the retreat from Moscow. He knew it. So the room was an attic; the bed narrow; and lying there reading, for she slept badly, she could not dispel a virginity preserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet. (45-46)

Although her frigidity is alluded to, this passage does reverberate with a transgressive irony: Clarissa prefers to read of masculine exploits and adventures than to be herself subjected to the more trivial and personal exploit of having sex with her husband. As a reader, she has a degree of control, the ability not only to pick up or put down but to judge, to question, to play the (active) role of spectator. In this sense, her preference for Baron Marbot's *Memoirs* is a preference *to do* rather than to be *done to*. Yet as Mrs. Richard Dalloway she is not unaware of her obligations to masculine desire, and she accepts, with a tone of failure and regret, responsibility for her tightly-clung virginity:

Lovely in girlhood, suddenly there came a moment. . . . when, through some contraction of this cold spirit, she failed him. . . . again and again. 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 women together. (46)

Or women together. Thus does Clarissa move toward an expression of an alternative vision of women's desire, and the retreat of the nun begins to metamorphose into the adventurous discovery of the child. And thus does Woolf break the code of isolation imposed upon women by the specula(riza)tions of masculine desire and offer a new version, an exploration of the bond which can exist between women apart from their interactions with men³⁶:

. . . .she did undoubtedly. . . . feel what men felt. . . . It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores! Then, for that moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed. (47)

The sexually-evocative language in this passage triumphs over the sterile image of Clarissa's narrower and narrower marriage bed, with its clean and tight-stretched sheets: "Against such moments. . . . there contrasted. . . .the bed and Baron Marbot and the candle half-burnt." Lying undisturbed in a room of her own, she is able to speculate on "this falling in love with women." Not

³⁶In contrast, this code is never broken in *Good Morning, Midnight*. Sasha's interactions with other women are either negatively contextualized or, as is suggested by her recalled friendship with Lise and her attempt to establish a symbolic connection with the mulatto woman in Serge's story, the masculine presence intercedes.

only does her husband not intrude, but he is made the brunt of a private joke:

Lying awake, the floor creaked; the lit house was suddenly darkened, and if she raised her head she could just hear the click of the handle released as gently as possible by Richard, who slipped upstairs in his socks and then, as often as not, dropped his hot-water bottle and swore! How she laughed! (47)

Her laughter announces the subversive potential of women's laughter ringing out against the manoeuvres of the masculine. It is a proclamation of that part of herself that subsists "otherwise and elsewhere than there where she mimes so well what is asked of her" (Irigaray 152). Her laughter—as is the laughter of the King's wives in Hélène Cixous's tale of General Sun Tse—is defiant, signifying resistance to the patriarchal order which demands female subservience and silence. Clarissa Dalloway laughs quietly despite (and against) the order to which Sasha, in *Good Morning, Midnight*, ultimately succumbs. In this way the text moves towards a writing *in the feminine*, a writing which works "to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth' with laughter" (Cixous in Marks 258).

A Kiss Upon the Lips: A Significant Memory

Clarissa's narrative/memory of her youthful love for another woman not only elaborates the theme of lesbian sexuality, but Sally Seton represents, to the remembering Clarissa, an alternative way of being and the possibilities of resistance.³⁷ The transgressive aura surrounding Sally is signalled by Clarissa's recalled "first impression" of her friend, as "she sat on the floor with her arms around her knees, smoking a cigarette" (48). The cultural codification of this image, within the historical context of upper middle-class England in the early part of the century, immediately places the young Sally Seton as a rebel. It is her rebellion which initially attracts Clarissa, and throughout her memory-narrative, she dwells upon her friend's social contraventions. She recalls

³⁷In *Writing Beyond the Ending*, Rachel Blau DuPlessis points out that while Sally and Clarissa's lesbian attachment is celebrated as a positive (and I would add, transgressive) bond, the relationship between Miss Kilman and Elizabeth is not similarly depicted: "If lesbianism is a nondominant form of the erotic, Woolf valorizes it; if it is yet another version of power and dominance, she satirizes it" (59). It is not just that Sally and Clarissa love; it is the nature of their love that is celebrated.

the time Sally ran naked along the passage because she forgot her sponge, her untidiness, her disregard for valuable property, her cigar-smoking, her tendency to do “the most idiotic things out of bravado,” and, in a word, her passion. While as a woman (by definition, marginal to the hegemony) Sally cannot “transform the codes,” she can—and does—“transgress them, make trouble, provoke, pervert, turn the representation [of woman in patriarchy] into a trap” (de Lauretis 35). Her politics defy the phallogentric economy of what Irigaray calls “the proper”: her fervent desire to “reform the world” includes a plan “to provide a society to abolish private *property*” (49; my emphasis). Like the feminine text, Sally’s way of being takes “pleasure in . . . turning propriety upside down,” and threatens to “bring about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments” (Cixous in Marks 258). While the proper, property and propriety march hand in hand (as is analyzed by Woolf in *Three Guineas*), Sally threatens to break ranks altogether.

Clarissa’s feelings for Sally Seton are exerted against the dictates of (masculine-controlled) heterosexuality, signalling the possibilities of resistance. Although neither Clarissa nor Sally questions that they will one day be parted through marriage, they spurn the desirability of this social requisite. Their relationship emerges in a space outside of the stifling perimeters of patriarchy with its heterosexual mandate:

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 a quality which *could only exist between women*, between women just grown up. It was protective, on her side; sprang from a sense of being in league together, a presentiment of something that was bound to part them (they spoke of marriage always as a catastrophe). . . . (50; my emphasis)

While the patriarchal code scripts the alienation of women from one another, Sally and Clarissa have positioned themselves in a “reverse’ discourse,”³⁸ celebrating a bond that supersedes masculine desire. That they are bound to be parted is inevitable: within the historical context, a

³⁸In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault refers to a “literature of a whole series of discourses” in the nineteenth century which condemned homosexuality, and claims that this literature “also made possible the formation of a ‘reverse’ discourse” (101). He emphasizes, however, that there is not “on the one side, a discourse of power, and opposite it, another discourse that runs counter to it,” but that discourses are “tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations” (101-102).

young woman such as Clarissa would have little choice but to be married off to some deserving young man. But even where “choice is not available, resistance is still possible” (Weedon 106). The two young women not only resist the dictates of the social discourse which claims them, but Sally literally resists the intrusion of masculine desire in the form of old Joseph and Peter, who interrupt the exquisite moment following Sally and Clarissa’s kiss. Peter, with his egocentric jealousy, is determined “to break into their companionship” which threatens to topple the complacency of patriarchal desire (53). But—and not unlike the older Clarissa, lying in bed at night listening to her husband fumble in the dark—Sally laughs, “gallantly taking her way unvanquished.” She refuses to be shaken by this intrusion, and she asserts herself as subject in the face of (an objectifying) opposition: “She made old Joseph tell her the names of the stars. She stood there: she listened. She heard the names of the stars.” Despite her bitterness at the interruption, Clarissa recalls that her friend’s unwillingness to be vanquished filled her with a great respect: “never had she admired her so much!”

Sally Seton’s way of being shows Clarissa that the patriarchal code is not absolute but can be withstood, challenged, even broken. Through her memory of this passionate young woman, Clarissa not only glimpses the possibilities of resistance but, within the limited confines of her life in the present narrative, her celebration of this memory is itself a mode of resistance. This is underlined when she remembers, not her marriage or the birth of her child, but Sally’s kiss upon her lips as “the most exquisite moment of her whole life” (52).³⁹

³⁹Other moments in the text confirm the subversive existence of a female bond that exists despite of or against patriarchal orthodoxy—a bond which is repressed in *Good Morning, Midnight*. Woolf uses even the most unlikely of women to affirm its prevalence. Lady Bruton, with her “reputation of being more interested in politics than people; of talking like a man; of having had a finger in some notorious intrigue of the eighties” is an imposing, male-identified figure—a phallic woman, to say the least (159-160). Yet the image of Lady Bruton, standing with her feet firmly planted within the courtyard of androcentric values, is undercut by the narrator’s revelation that some aspect of her being emerges from behind these privileged walls and defies their power to completely restrict her subjectivity as a woman: “her inquiry, ‘How’s Clarissa?’ . . . signified recognition of some feminine comradeship which went beneath masculine lunch parties and united Lady Bruton and Mrs. Dalloway, who seldom met, and appeared when they did meet indifferent and even hostile, in a singular bond” (160-161).

The potential of resistance that Sally represents for the remembering Clarissa does not itself escape the processes of conflict and contradiction to which she is subject. Immediately following her reminiscences of Sally, Clarissa re-inserts herself into the code which moments before she had resisted through memory, and she begins to anxiously ponder how she will fare as the object of Peter's appraising gaze when next they meet: "What would he think, she wondered, when he came back? That she had grown older? Would he say that, or would she see him thinking when he came back, that she had grown older?" (54). Woolf shows us time and again that Clarissa Dalloway's consciousness is divided between different ways of being and seeing. She is not alone in this painful double dance, this shift from inheritor to critic and back again. This is ironically underscored at the novel's end, when Sally Seton reappears, no longer as the reckless, vivacious young woman whom Clarissa had loved, but as Lady Rosseter, the wife of "a bald man with a large buttonhole who owned, it was said, cotton mills at Manchester. And she had five boys!" (277).

The Masculine Enterprise: Search for a Looking Glass

Woolf not only traces the way in which the female subject is subjected to patriarchal desire and discourse, but she illuminates the manoeuvres of this desire from the point of view of the male subject. Because we are not confined to a first-person perspective, as we are in *Good Morning, Midnight*, Woolf is able to show what lurks in the hearts and minds of all her characters and thus to challenge the masculine "from the inside out." Imagine, for example, how Rhys's text would be changed if we were able to tap into Mr. Blank or René's thoughts. Their position of power cannot be as easily deconstructed because we never see beyond what Sasha sees. This is, I think, another crucial difference between the two novels, and one which is central to the writing of resistance.

Published four years before *A Room of One's Own*, *Mrs. Dalloway* paves the way for Woolf's feminist assessment of gender relations within androcentric culture: "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of

man at twice its natural size" (*Room 35*).⁴⁰ Through the character of Clarissa Dalloway's beau from Bourton, Peter Walsh, Woolf deconstructs this image-making in process. As is characteristic of the "the figure of man" who prunes himself in front of the (female) mirror, Peter cannot think of Clarissa Dalloway without in some way reflecting on himself. Concern for her health, an understanding that she has been very ill, is translated into a fear of his own inevitable decline: "No! No! he cried. She is not dead! I am not old, he cried" (75). From Peter's perspective, Clarissa functions as a metaphor representing/reflecting his own need and desire, a function understood by Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* and subsequently elaborated by feminist critics:

the conventional polarity of masculine and feminine names woman as a *metaphor of man*. Sexuality . . . functions. . . as the sign of a rhetorical convention, of which woman is the *signifier* and man the *signified*. Man alone has thus the privilege of proper meaning, of *literal* identity: femininity. . . is but a metaphor, a figurative substitute; it can but refer to man. (Felman 1981: 25)

And so Peter seldom thinks of Clarissa without reference to himself:

Clarissa had grown hard, he thought; and a trifle sentimental into the bargain, he suspected, looking at the great motor-cars capable of doing—how many miles on how many gallons? For he had a turn for mechanics; had invented a plough in his district, had ordered wheel-barrows from England, but the coolies wouldn't use them, all of which Clarissa knew nothing whatever about. (73)

Assuming the (masculine) privilege to define her, Peter inserts himself into androcentric discourse (wherein the wonders of mechanics and colonialism march hand in hand).⁴¹

Peter's pitiful need of a magical mirror image finds its ironic culmination in a little adventure he makes for himself pursuing an "extraordinarily attractive" young woman through the streets of London. I suspect that Woolf is having fun in this passage, showing the male gaze in action,

⁴⁰Twenty years later Simone De Beauvoir writes that "many men . . . seek to find in two living eyes their image haloed with admiration and gratitude, deified. Woman . . . is the mirror in which the male, Narcissus-like, contemplates himself" (173).

⁴¹It should be clarified, however, that Peter is not cut from the same patriarchal cloth as Sir William Bradshaw, the physician. His consideration of the marching soldiers' "very fine training," for example, is cut short by the realization that they are not "robust" and powerful men but "weedy for the most part, boys of sixteen, who might, to-morrow, stand behind bowls of rice, cakes of soap on counters"—who might, that is, be shipped to their deaths in the name of God and country (76). Peter is not an entirely unsympathetic character, as is Sir William. It is because he is also (to an extent) marginal to the hegemonic order that Woolf is able to trace his struggle for self-definition as a male-subject subjected to, and thwarted by, patriarchy's codes.

revealing how woman as image/object is a product, a construction of the gaze itself. As Peter watches this vision of loveliness she “seemed. . . . to shed veil after veil, until she became the very woman he had always had in mind; young, but stately; merry, but discreet; black, but enchanting” (79). In his unveiling/invention, he performs the act of the male gaze, side-stepping any recognition of this young woman as a subject in her own right. He is her creator: “He pursued; she changed. There was colour in her cheeks; mockery in her eyes” (80). She is whatever Peter wants her to be, because she is a product of his gaze/his image of himself. Luce Irigaray’s claim that women, as commodities, yield to men “their natural and social value as a locus of imprints, marks, and mirage of his activity” (Irigaray 177), is realized as Peter follows this young woman through the London streets: “He pursued. . . . he was an adventurer, reckless, he thought, swift, daring, indeed (landed as he was last night from India) a romantic buccaneer, careless of all these damned proprieties. . . . and respectability. . . . He was a buccaneer” (80). Woolf reveals his need to see himself as a hero, a swashbuckling lover, a successful player on the field of (masculine) desire—a male figure reflected back at twice his natural size through the object(s) of his gaze.

While Peter defines himself as a rebellious, active and independent adventurer, he sees the object of his gaze not as an active subject *in control* of the space through which she moves but as a sign of passive, almost ethereal femininity, *defined* by the space through which she moves: “On and on she went. . . . ahead of him, her cloak, her gloves, her shoulders combining with the fringes and laces and the feather boas in the windows to make the spirit of finery and whimsy which dwindled out of the shops on to the pavement” (80). Commodity, she moves amid the commodities by which she is defined.⁴² She does not speak but her body and clothes speak for her: “‘You,’ she said, only ‘you,’ saying it with her white gloves and her shoulders” (79). Belonging as she does to background, to (a patriarchal) setting (subjected to the displays of masculine desire), the “fringes and laces and the feather boas” in the shop windows become almost interchangeable, in Peter’s eyes, with the woman herself.

⁴²Miss Kilman, as she lurches her way through “all the commodities of the world” might in fact be seen as an ironic parody of this more applauded version of feminine identity.

In Woolf's text, this game must end, the curtain fall, and the young woman cease to exist as the object of Peter's gaze, "exquisite amusement" though she may be. In a word: she acts. She fits her key, she opens her door and for the first time *she looks*: "with one look in his direction, but not at him, one look that bade farewell, summed up the whole situation and dismissed it triumphantly, forever" (81). The power Peter felt when he alone controlled the game of the gaze is lost (and, ironically, her gaze by-passes him, refuses to recognize him at all). And so he scurries ever-so-quickly back into that comforting bastion of ethics, those "damned proprieties" from which, moments before, he had fancied himself free: "The house was one of those flat red houses with hanging flower baskets of *vague impropriety*" (81; my emphasis). Thus he falls into the judgements of a code he struggled to transgress when envisioning himself a "buccaneer." But what the narrative discloses is that both the reckless adventurer and the "spruce old men wearing white slips beneath their waistcoats" belong to the same (old boys') club. Control of the game, whatever it might be, is as crucial to the swashbuckling hero as it is to Sir William Bradshaw with his divine sense of proportion. And Woolf emphasizes that it is a game. With this woman's "one look in his direction, but not at him," Peter's fun is "smashed to atoms" and he is forced to recognize the entire episode for what it was, a fiction: "invented, this escapade with the girl; made up, as one makes up the better part of life—making oneself up; making her up; creating an exquisite amusement and something more" (81).

Peter's predilection for his knife, that not unobviously phallic symbol, is a constant reminder that his position as a real man in a man's world is precariously maintained. When faced with the possibility of failure, of exclusion, his knife suddenly appears, reconfirming, presumably, his fragile masculine ego:

And this has been going on all the time! he thought; week after week; Clarissa's life; while I—he thought; and at once everything seemed to radiate from him, journeys, rides, quarrels, adventures, bridge parties; love affairs; work; work! and he took out his knife quite openly—his old horn-handled knife which Clarissa could swear he had had these thirty years—and clenched his fist upon it. (65)

By suddenly inserting Clarissa's point of view into this passage,⁴³ Woolf exposes the fragility of Peter's male mask: like his slips into lists of masculine accomplishment (journeys, adventures, love affairs), his knife is but an old, well-worn habit, revealing his insecurity, his nervousness, and his need for reassurance. Never are his male musings allowed to dominate. Whenever he begins to position himself as a masculine subject (in relation to a feminine object), the narrative either deconstructs this as the product of a struggling insecurity, or supplants his version of the world with another. While playing with his knife and contemplating, for example, that "women don't know what passion is," he is interrupted by "a frail quivering sound" which turns out to be the voice of an old woman singing about a "love which has lasted a million years" (122-123). Not only does the narrative thus refute his claim that women are passionless and cold, but the focus of the passage shifts and his critical point of view is, for the moment, occluded.

⁴³The oscillation of viewpoints is vital to the heterogeneous process of Woolf's writing, which undermines the dominant "I" of phallogocentric discourse. This will be dealt with at length in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

THE SUBJECT OF WRITING: SUBVERSIONS AND NEW VERSIONS

The Masculine Pen: In Control of Meaning

Although she is a phallic woman, there is one thing about Lady Millicent Bruton which entails her exclusion from the world of masculine enterprise: “. . . one letter to the *Times*. . . cost her more than to organise an expedition to South Africa (which she had done in the war). After a morning’s battle beginning, tearing up, beginning again, she used to feel the futility of her own womanhood as she felt it on no other occasion” (165). At such times she turns, with appreciative need, to the honourable Hugh Whitbread, a “being so differently constituted from herself, with such a command of language; able to put things as editors like them put”—a being, that is, who is at home in the male-dominated word of letters. But just as Woolf has a bit of fun with Peter on the prowl, so too she subjects the masculine control of the pen to her ironic wit. While Peter plays with his knife in an attempt to assure himself of his masculinity, Hugh has his immortal silver fountain pen, “which had done twenty years’ service. . . . It was still in perfect order. . . . there was no reason. . . why it should ever wear out; which was somehow to Hugh’s credit, and to the credit of the sentiments which his pen expressed” (166). His pen is a symbol of his success as a man in a man’s world. As feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in their introduction to *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the pen can be read as a metaphorical penis, signifying the male prerogative to (pro)create in a sphere which precludes women’s exclusion. And so it is up to Hugh to transform Lady Bruton’s nonsense—her “tangles—into “sense.” He has access to the editor’s grammar and sentiments—he’s in the (masculine) know. The ironic crunch is never far behind, however, as Lady Bruton, upon hearing the draft of a letter that she feels certain is “a masterpiece,” wonders if “her own meaning [could] sound like that” (167). With this, Woolf subtly raises a question about writing and meaning, for what is Lady Bruton’s meaning, and what is Hugh Whitbread doing when he transforms Lady Bruton’s (feminine) tangles into (masculine)

sense?

Impossible Meaning: The Shifting of Signs

If “Strategies of writing *and* of reading are forms of cultural resistance” (de Lauretis 7), what strategies are at play in Woolf’s text? In contrast to the (phal)logocentrism of the honourable Hugh with his virile pen, there exists, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, another (strategic) version of writing and meaning. Near the beginning of the novel, the appearance of the aeroplane, with its somewhat futile attempts to write a message in the sky, stands in the novel as a kind of literary clue, directing us toward a new understanding of the interconnected processes of writing, reading, meaning and resistance:

There it was coming over the trees, letting out white smoke from behind, which curled and twisted, actually writing something! making letters in the sky! . . . But what letters? A C was it? an E, then an L? Only for a moment did they lie still; then they moved and melted and were rubbed out up in the sky, and the aeroplane shot further away and again, in a fresh space of sky, began writing a K, an E, a Y perhaps?⁴⁴

In her description of the soaring aeroplane, Woolf playfully offers us a “key” of interpretation. The letters—which seem never to be complete before they fade again into clouds of nothingness while another letter is begun—suggest a deconstructionist’s vision of language. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explains Jacques Derrida’s concept of signification in her preface to *Of Grammatology*, “Such is the strange ‘being’ of the sign: half of it always ‘not there’ and the other half always ‘not that’. . . . one sign leads to another and so on indefinitely” (Spivak xvii). The aeroplane’s sky-writing enacts the notion that “our very language is twisted and bent even as it guides us”

⁴⁴Makiko Minow-Pinkney, in *Virginia Woolf & the Problem of the Subject*, refers to this passage as an indication of “the extent to which Woolf is playing with the conventions of novelistic interpretation. . . . For this ‘key’ to all mythologies is doubtless the transcendental signifier or solution to the hermeneutic riddle of the novel. . . . As narrator, [Woolf] refuses an ‘authoritarian’ relation to her own novel. . . . her writing makes the fixed ‘T’ or K-E-Y recede. It loosens the ligatures of the unifying subject so as to produce a style whose characteristics are simultaneity and fluidity” (59). Although Minow-Pinkney’s analysis of subjectivity intersects at points with my own, her thematic pre-occupation with the concept of “subject” is psychoanalytic and focusses primarily on the theory of Julia Kristeva; my analysis of subjectivity, in contrast, is framed by a post-structuralist concern with the politics of (sexual/textual) resistance.

(Spivak xiv). It enacts, that is, the process of what Derrida calls *writing*,⁴⁵ a practice, dependent on the processes of deferral and displacement, which scripts the impossibility of establishing absolute clarity of meaning. (Nonphonetic) *writing* is concerned with process itself; it “describes relations and not appellations” (Derrida 26). In deconstructive defiance of the logocentrism of western metaphysics, *writing* relies on the recognition that “nothing is ever fully present in signs” and that meaning “is . . . never identical with itself,” but “is the result of a process of division or articulation, or signs being themselves only because they are not some other sign. It is also something suspended, held over, still to come”⁴⁶ (Eagleton 129). The process of *writing* is metaphorically evoked not only by the sky-writing aeroplane but also later in *Mrs. Dalloway* by an image of clouds, as they metaphorhose from one shape, to another:

For although the clouds were of mountainous white so that one could fancy hacking hard chips off with a hatchet. . . and had all the appearance of settled habitations assembled for the conference of gods above the world, *there was a perpetual movement among them. Signs were interchanged*, when. . . now a summit dwindled, now a whole block of pyramidal size which had kept its station inalterably advanced into the midst. . . Fixed though they seemed at their posts. . . nothing could be fresher, freer. . . to change, to go, to dismantle the solemn assemblage was immediately possible; and in spite of the grave fixity, the accumulated robustness and solidity, now they struck light to the earth, now darkness. (210-211; my emphasis)

While clouds might appear to have a fixed (unified, definable) shape, their constant transformation undermines this appearance as an illusion, a fiction constructed by the (ego's) desire to pinpoint (transcendent) meaning.

Right from its beginning, *Mrs. Dalloway* articulates an awareness of the process enacted by the sky-writing aeroplane and the shifting signs of the clouds. Although Hugh Whitbread suffers from a confident illusion in thinking that he is in control of words and meaning, the text continually proposes that nothing can be pinpointed with any certainty. This is illuminated by our first introduction to Clarissa Dalloway. While recalling an early morning when she was eighteen, she

⁴⁵More specifically, *nonphonetic writing*, by which he refers to a break from the traditional connection between the breath/voice of the transcendent ego and the written word, or logos (Derrida 18-26).

⁴⁶Characteristics of what Derrida calls *différance*, ie, *difference* and *deferral*.

tries to remember what exactly it was that Peter Walsh had said to her: “‘Musing among the vegetables’—was that it?—‘I prefer men to cauliflowers’—was that it? . . . it was his sayings one remembered. . . . a few sayings like this about cabbages” (4). Clarissa does not remember Peter’s sayings, only that he said them. As Peter Walsh later acknowledges, “one makes up the better part of life” (81). Not only is meaning shown to be the product of language, the desire to organize and clarify through systems of signification, but language itself is revealed as arbitrary: signs “are themselves only because they are not some other sign” (Eagleton 129); and so, cauliflower or cabbages? Clarissa matter-of-factly (and unselfconsciously) flounders in the arbitrary, when she is unable to distinguish, for example, between “Albanians” and “Armenians” (181-182). Does it, after all, matter? One word may be as good as another, because “nothing is ever fully present in signs” anymore than a cloud, or the smoke from an aeroplane, holds any one (significant/signifying) shape.

In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha’s belief that there are “no water-tight compartments” and that everything is “washing around in the same hold” is not embraced as a potentially subversive understanding that there is no clear-cut truth, no ultimate Word, but instead (contextually) signifies her inability to keep a grip on things (140). For the subject with “staying power,” with a “programme,” everything *is* in water-tight compartments. This is this, that is that; maintaining “clarity of sequence and distinction” poses no problem for those who are “masters of their speech” (Kristeva in Marks 165). Sasha has accepted that herein lies the key to sanity. Thus the instability of her narrative is Rhys’s way of stylistically intimating the threat of lost control and madness; in contrast, Woolf’s writing celebrates the discovery of “multiplicity instead of consistency, and signifying flux instead of stable meaning” (Silverman 246). In *Mrs. Dalloway* the logocentric drive to pinpoint meaning and arrive at some ultimate (One) truth is both contextually and textually⁴⁷ undermined.⁴⁸ First I will explore the thematic (contextual) subversion enacted by the sky-writing

⁴⁷The level of narrative (content) and the level of narration, respectively; see p. 27.

⁴⁸In *Good Morning, Midnight*, the question of truth for Rhys’s alienated narrator becomes a question of her inability to control her narrative/life. Not knowing the truth is consequential to the chaotic world of her

aeroplane, and then will conclude this chapter with a reading of Woolf's own writing, the textual politics at play in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Undermining Logocentric Desire: Writing *jouissance*

As we witness each person who watches the aeroplane attempt to read its message, Woolf parodies the (reader's) desire to know. The spectator's (reader's) quest is not simply to accept the writing process but to translate that process into "some ultimate 'word'" (Eagleton 131): "'Glaxo,' said Mrs. Coates in a strained, awe-stricken voice . . . 'Kreemo,' murmured Mrs. Bletchley, like a sleep-walker" (29). For some, the aeroplane represents the logos/word itself—a transcendent sign of "presence, essence, truth or reality":

Away and away the aeroplane shot, till it was nothing but a bright spark; an aspiration; a concentration; a symbol . . . of man's soul; of his determination, thought Mr. Bentley . . . to get outside his body, beyond his house, by means of thought, Einstein, speculation, mathematics, the Mendelian theory—away the aeroplane shot. (41)

Mr. Bentley's vision of the aeroplane as something other than what it is—as something signifying a transcendent, essential meaning of life and "man's soul"—is undercut even as it unfolds: for while indulging in his Ode to Science, he is shown in the (literally) down-to-earth acts of "rolling his strip of turf" and "sweeping round the cedar tree." His vision is then immediately supplanted by another, that of "a seedy-looking nondescript man" standing "on the steps of St. Paul's cathedral." While Mr. Bentley bows to the Word of Science, this man looks to the cathedral and the cross as signs of Truth and transcendence:

the cathedral offers company, he thought, invites you to membership of a society; great men belong to it; martyrs have died for it; why not enter in, he thought, put his leather bag stuffed with pamphlets before an altar, a cross, *the symbol of something which has soared beyond seeking and questing and knocking of words together* and has become all disembodied, ghostly—why not enter in? (41-42; my emphasis)

His vision co-incides with Derrida's claim that the "age of the sign is essentially theological" (14).

(cont'd) nightmare: for Sasha, "the truth is improbable, the truth is fantastic, it's in what you think is a distorting mirror that you see the truth" (63). The philosophy of truth itself is not questioned, as it is in Woolf's text.

While the cross is Meaning and Logos, the plane (writing) represents process, *différance* (difference and deferral), and the impossibility of arriving at ultimate Truth. And it is this which is victorious in Woolf's text, for before he succumbs to "that plaguy [sic] spirit of truth seeking" and enters the cathedral, "out flew the aeroplane Unguided it seemed; sped of its own free will. . . . like something mounting in ecstasy, in pure delight writing" (42). The *jouissance*⁴⁹ of (the aeroplane's) writing rises above and against logocentric desire, tracing (the potential of) its deconstruction:

The "rationality" . . . which governs a writing thus enlarged and radicalized, no longer issues from a logos. Further, it inaugurates the destruction, not the demolition but the de-sedimentation, the de-construction, of all the significations that have their source in that of the logos. Particularly the signification of *truth*. (Derrida 10)

The narrative demonstrates that this process of "a writing thus enlarged" has the potential to undermine Power and Authority, those auspices of Truth. The plane's audience, mesmerized by the ecstatic dance of smoke, fails to notice the passing of a car which is rumoured to be transporting "the enduring symbol of the state" (23): "It's toffee," murmured Mr. Bowley—(and the car went in at the gates and *nobody looked at it*)" (30; my emphasis).

Off the Beaten Track: The Writing of Writing

Woolf's own writing "inaugurates the . . . de-construction" of (phal)logocentrism, that system of meaning/being enforced by the code of General Sun Tse and symbolically depicted in Woolf's text by the clocks on Harley Street, which, "Shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing. . . nibbled at the June day, *counselled submission, upheld authority*, and pointed out in chorus the supreme advantages of a sense of proportion" (154; my emphasis). Like the drumbeat which dictates the soldier's uniform footfall, their dogmatic ticking allows no space for "life, with its varieties, its irreticences" (77). The ticking clocks and the marching soldiers can be read not only as ideological metaphors but as metaphors for conventional form; as my reading of the sky-writing

⁴⁹First suggested by Roland Barthes, "In Kristeva's vocabulary. . . 'jouissance' is a *total joy or ecstasy (without mystical connotation)*" (Roudiez 16; my emphasis).

aeroplane has indicated, form and ideology, ways of being and seeing in the world, are inextricably connected.⁵⁰ It is thus through her “exploitation of the sportive, sensual nature of language,” that “Woolf rejects the metaphysical essentialism underlying patriarchal ideology, which hails God, the Father or the phallus as its transcendental signified” (Moi 9). Inscribed as it is with a “both/and vision,” her writing undoes the oppressive either/or schema which is privileged in Rhys’s text (Blau DuPlessis in Eisenstein 132).

As I’ve suggested, not only does Woolf parody and undermine the logocentric drive of the aeroplane’s spectators but we, as readers (/spectators) of her text, are implicated in this process as well. According to Roland Barthes, the “readerly” or “classic” text is fundamentally logocentric, involving as it does the quest for stable meaning, the privileging of Word (“‘Glaxo,’ says Mrs. Coates in a strained, awe-stricken voice”) over the signifying process (“out flew the aeroplane. . . . like something mounting in ecstasy. . . .writing”). Barthes claims that, in the readerly text,

the *author* is always supposed to go from signified to signifier, from content to form, from idea to text, from passion to expression; and in contrast, the *critic* goes in the other direction, works back from signifiers to signified. The *mastery* of *meaning*, a veritable semiurgism, is a divine attribute, once this meaning is defined as the discharge, the emanation, the spiritual effluvium overflowing from the signified toward the signifier. . . .⁵¹ (174)

The readerly text confirms the reader(/critic)’s experience of self as a unified, integrated and transcendent ego. While the conventions of realist fiction allow the reader to assume what Kristeva calls a “‘phallic’ position” or position of mastery vis-à-vis the text (in Marks 165),⁵² Woolf’s

⁵⁰Phyllis Rose claims that “Authority, the rigid imposition of form upon matter, whether the matter be subject peoples or the fictive stuff of life, is associated for Woolf with masculinity, and the critical arguments she makes in 1919 and 1924 on behalf of innovation in fiction prefigure her feminist arguments of 1929 and 1938” [in “Modern Fiction,” “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*, respectively] (100-101).

⁵¹This corresponds to Derrida’s claim that the “age of the sign is essentially theological” (14).

⁵²For a succinct explication of the principles of traditional humanism and realist form, and how these principles have inculcated the negative reception of Woolf by certain Anglo-American critics, see Toril Moi’s introduction to *Sexual/Textual Politics*. In alignment with Moi’s discussion, my use of the term “realism” refers to a textual practice which demands clarity and distinction, life envisioned as “a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged,” which is based on the traditional humanist belief in the “whole person,” and the quest for “a unified, integrated self-identity” (Moi 7). According to Marcia Holly’s elaboration of a feminist aesthetic, in “Consciousness and authenticity: towards a feminist aesthetic,”

fragmented and deconstructive writing not only keeps the letter “I” from casting its oppressive shadow *within* her narrative, but also poses a challenge to the *reading I/eye*. We are forced to work at making sense of the text, and herein lies the key to Woolf’s textual politics: unlike the readerly text, “the writerly project ‘dis-places’ the reader or viewer, alienates him or her from the all too-familiar subject-positions of the existing cultural regime”; thus calling upon “us to speak rather than to be spoken. . . . to participate in the production not only of meaning but of subjectivity and the larger symbolic order” (Silverman 248-249). In this way, Woolf’s writing in and of itself is an act of resistance.

The style of *Mrs. Dalloway*, what Toril Moi calls Woolf’s “textual practice,” soars and dances like the aeroplane, shifts and changes like the clouds, and spirals like the dissolving leaden circles of Big Ben’s striking.⁵³ The novel’s syntax and sentence structure work against the possibility of a reading (way of being) aligned with the authoritative dividing and subdividing of the clocks on Harley Street. The narrative is fraught with digressions, delays, forks in the road, and roundabouts; we, as readers, find ourselves continually displaced. Phrases abound which bear no clear syntagmatic relationship to one another. Often the point of a sentence is confused or uncertain, caught up in the rambling variances of a character’s thought:

For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, rumbling it, creating it every moment afresh; but the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps (drink their downfall) do the same; can’t be dealt with, she felt positive, by Acts of Parliament for that very reason: they love life. 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 of June. (5)

The “it” in the first sentence of this passage lacks an antecedent; not until the end do we

(cont’d) realism “first of all demands a *consistent (noncontradictory)* perception of those issues (emotions, motivations, conflicts) to which the work has been limited” (42; my emphasis). I am arguing, in agreement with Toril Moi, that this mandate is rooted in a phallogocentric ideology, and that Woolf’s depiction of the marching soldiers, the clocks on Harley Street and Sir William Bradshaw’s divine sense of proportion involves an investigation of this ideology and its oppressive, life-denying consequence for both women and men.

⁵³In Hélène Cixous’s terms, Woolf’s writing is feminine, constituting “woman’s gesture—flying in language and making it fly” (in Marks 258).

understand what “it” is. In this way the narrative enacts the process of deferral, **whereby meaning** is “something suspended, held over, still to come” (Eagleton 129). Words do not follow **an orderly** line of syntagmatic displacement; their relationship is connected to the processes of **subjective** thought which Woolf believed characteristic of “an ordinary mind on an ordinary day”:

The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms . . . Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. (“Modern Fiction” 154)

Woolf’s image of the “gig lamps symmetrically arranged” implies a realist literary convention which demands order, clarity, unity—a convention which Rhys aligns with sanity. Hence the two writers are working at odds: Rhys uses modernist technique to create a sense of her narrator’s entrapment and hysteria, whereas Woolf’s modernism is intended to depict a more authentic form of consciousness, one which does not coincide with the unitary, integrated subject envisioned by patriarchal humanism.⁵⁴ Clarissa Dalloway’s contemplation of “why one loves it so” enacts Woolf’s vision of mind, this “incessant shower of innumerable atoms” as she thinks of this, and this, and this, tracing the spiral pattern of Big Ben’s striking in defiance of classic or readerly conventions, the regularity of a clock’s ticking.

The segmentation of the text is signalled by the abundance of commas and semi-colons throughout. The proliferation of phrases, one after the other in an often syntactically discordant manner, counteracts the possibility (and desirability) of a linear progression. Just as the *jouissance* of the aeroplane’s sky-writing defies the logocentric drive of those who watch it, so Woolf “exposes the way in which language refuses to be pinned down to an underlying essential meaning” (Moi 9). Not only do we not know what “it” is, in the above-quoted passage from *Mrs. Dalloway*, but the process of deferral and displacement continues. While it is finally possible to establish a semblance of meaning, it is not made easily accessible. Woolf’s writing draws us into the production of meaning, forces us to make connections, and refuses to grant us (the illusion of) a position of

⁵⁴See also Makiko-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf & the Problem of the Subject*, p. 61.

mastery over the text.

A recognition that meaning cannot be pinpointed with any certainty (that there are indeed “no water-tight compartments”) is bolstered by the nebulous nature of Clarissa’s love: what does it mean to say that what she loves is simply “this moment in June”? We have hardly reached a clear-cut closure. According to Barthes, closure—the resolution of stable meaning—is fundamental to the readerly text. Through it, the reading subject’s desire for unity is confirmed (the unity of the text finds its correspondence in the reading/viewing self). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, no scene or passage is unambiguously resolved (nor, in fact, is the novel’s end). We are drawn, instead, into the spiralling process of a textual *différance*. This is emphasized by the recurrence of the words “for” and “but.” While commonly these conjunctions initiate an answer, explanation or solution of some sort, in *Mrs. Dalloway* they suggest the endless process of deferral, tracing the unfolding of connections, without ever drawing that (desired) conclusion, establishing certainty of meaning (of closure). This process is confirmed by the repetition of key words or phrases in any given passage (and throughout the novel as a whole):

Was everybody dining out, then? Doors were being opened here by a footman. . . . Doors were being opened for ladies. . . ladies with bare heads. . . . Everybody was going out. What with these doors being opened. . . it seemed as if the whole of London were embarking in little boats moored to the bank. . . . as if the whole place were floating. . . . And Whitehall was skated over. . . . skated over by spiders. . . . And here in Westminster was a retired Judge, presumably. . . . An Anglo-Indian presumably. (249)

Stylistically imitating the image of the leaden circles of Big Ben’s striking dissolving in the air, repetition involves the reader again in the processes of writing, tracing a spiralling out of connections rather than a dogmatic march toward unambiguous meaning. In contrast, in *Good Morning, Midnight*, repetition belongs to Sasha’s nightmare, signifying her inability to speak/narrate with the authority of a subject in control.

The mandates of realism, which require “a consistent (noncontradictory)” (Holly 42) narrative presentation—like “gig lamps symmetrically arranged”—are further undermined with the abrupt, often incongruous changes of verb tenses. While our usual perception of time depends on a

logical progression, the demarcation of past, present, future (epitomized by the “dividing and subdividing” of the clocks on Harley Street), the disruption of this uniform system inserts a degree of confusion (of non-sense) into the text: “. . . he burst into tears; wept; wept without the least shame, sitting on the sofa . . . And Clarissa *had leant* forward, taken his hand, drawn him to her, kissed,—actually had felt his face on hers. . . .” (69; my emphasis). We move from a narration of action in the past tense to the past perfect, implying that the narration of Clarissa’s consolation happened in a time before, prior to Peter’s display of despair. A reading for consistency and clarity (first this happened, then that happened) is thus confounded. Yet while in *Good Morning, Midnight* this type of a-chronological confusion signals the narrator’s inability to control her narrative/life, this is not the case in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Because we are limited to Sasha’s voice, disruptions in sequence (and similar stylistic strategies) function solely with reference to her alienated experience. Woolf’s writing, on the other hand, takes precedence over the more traditional concerns with character, plot and story. An enactment of “traversal,” the segmentation, disruptions and incoherencies which form her “textual practice” keep the reader from assuming a position of mastery, a position identified by Woolf as co-incidental with (patriarchal, political and spiritual) oppression.

That Woolf has written a novel which does not comply with the dictates of phallogocentric realism—the conventions of Barthes’s “readerly” text—is also manifest through her formal deconstruction of the dominant “I” (a blinding of the all-knowing eye). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, no one point of view dominates. Like the dissolving letters etched in the sky by the aeroplane’s smoke, the narrative continuously slips from one subject’s point of view, to another. So too are the dissolving circles of Big Ben’s striking characteristic of the novel’s pattern of focalization. Shaped by the unfolding of connections and interconnections, the narrative mirrors Clarissa Dalloway’s experience: “Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to, some woman in the street; some man behind a counter—even trees, or barns” (231). The text repeatedly explores the “odd affinities” between characters, keeping the dominant “I” from taking root and casting its shadow

across the page.

While there are the principal focalizers—Clarissa, Peter, Rezia and Septimus—numerous other viewpoints peep through the spaces between. Multiplicity supplants uni(formi)ty as we skip quickly from one gaze, one train of thought, one snatch of observation to another; and so we move from the glove shop to the hat shop, from Sara Bletchley to Emily Coates, to little Mr. Bowley. We meet and share fleeting moments of ‘reality’ with any number of characters without ever being granted the conventional satisfaction of knowing who they are or of having their roles within the narrative defined. The narrative’s (and Woolf’s) celebration of life’s varieties and irreticences is confirmed by the absence of a ubiquitous and all-knowing (implicitly “phallic”) “I.” In *Writing Beyond the Ending*, Rachel Blau DuPlessis suggests that the creation of the “communal protagonist”⁵⁵ is in itself a writing of a “both/and vision,” a way of rejecting either/or. Enacting “the structures of social change in the structure of narrative,” the “communal protagonist operates as a critique both of the hierarchies and authoritarian practice of gender and of the narrative practice that selects and honours only major figures” (163). Hence this aspect of Woolf’s writing involves, too, a “traversal,” the textual politics of resistance.⁵⁶

The constant shift of viewpoints often involves a momentary confounding of time and space, further defying the mandates of realist/readerly conventions (the dividing and sub-dividing tick of the clocks on Harley Street) and revelling instead in the (spiralling) possibilities of multiplicity. The logic of the narrative is disrupted when we do not know who we are with, or where we are:

Calmly and competently, Elizabeth Dalloway mounted the Westminster omnibus.

Going and coming, beckoning, signalling, so the light and shadow which now made the wall grey, now the bananas bright yellow, now made the Strand grey, now made the omnibuses bright yellow, seemed to Septimus Warren Smith lying on the

⁵⁵Most fully realized in *The Waves*, *The Years*, and *Between the Acts*, but evident too in *Jacob’s Room*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Mrs. Dalloway*.

⁵⁶It is Woolf’s “use of mobile, pluralistic viewpoints,” her failure to comply with a “unitary vision” that exasperates critics like Elaine Showalter and Patricia Stubbs, who, Moi suggests, operate from the perspective that “good feminist fiction would present truthful images of strong women with which the reader may identify” (Moi 7-8).

sofa in the sitting-room. . . . (211)

A shared experience of light and shadow by two different (and seemingly **unconnected**) characters in two different places enables Woolf not just to shift the narrative from **Elizabeth Dalloway** to Septimus Smith, but to defy rational limits of time and space. Similarly, **distinctions between** thought and speech are not always maintained; conventional boundaries are **dismissed**. Thus Peter Walsh responds in his own mind to a thought of Clarissa's: "But he never liked **any one who—our** friends,' said Clarissa; and could have bitten her tongue for thus reminding **Peter that he had** wanted to marry her. Of course I did, thought Peter" (62). It is as if Peter is **responding not only** to what Clarissa has implied but to the narrative itself, the textual revelation of what **Clarissa had** almost said. This pattern continues. After a paragraph tracing Peter's thoughts of **sitting on the** terrace at Bourton in the moonlight, Clarissa suddenly responds: "'Herbert has it now,' she said. 'I never go there now,' she said" (73). Bourton has not been explicitly mentioned, but the "it" of Clarissa's reference becomes the "it" of Peter's thoughts. Her words too involve not only an implicit response to Peter's inner world but an explicit response to what is written in the text, engaging in a dialogue with the narrative itself. This process is repeated a few pages later, when Peter reacts again to what is unspoken by Clarissa but 'spoken' in the text: ". . . it was his silly unconventionality, his weakness; his lack of the ghost of a notion what any one else was feeling that annoyed her, had always annoyed her. . . . I know all that, Peter thought" (69). So the rug is pulled from beneath the traditional narrative desire for clarity and consistency; and, as readers, we are drawn into the enigmatic twists and turns of Woolf's writing.

CHAPTER VI
THE SUBJECT OF MADNESS

While in *Good Morning, Midnight* we are limited to the first-person perspective of Rhys's narrator and are forced to share her nightmare, the heterogeneous exchange of perspectives in *Mrs. Dalloway* means that we are not confined to Septimus Warren Smith's vision of the world. We enter it, and we leave it. This is a crucial difference between the two novels. Writing (and reading) are in a sense the primary 'subject' of *Mrs. Dalloway*, whereas in *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha is the subject of the text and the narrative discourse is dictated by her story and her state of mind. We are confined within the perimeters of meaning (an either/or vision of the world) which structure her voice and experience. The result is a claustrophobic narrative fraught with the sensations illuminated by Sasha's dream of the tube station. There is no way out. In contrast, *Mrs. Dalloway* glimmers with subversive possibility, questioning patriarchy, oppression, and the definition and nature of madness.

A Guiding Voice: Writing a Space for Criticism

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, resistance is expressed not simply through the distorted throes of hysteria, the strangled silence of the automaton, but through the narrative's exploration and criticism of that which is resisted. Because we are not confined to the world of Septimus Smith, as we are to the world of Sasha, there is a scope for commentary in *Mrs. Dalloway* not found in *Good Morning, Midnight*. Another voice (other voices) are granted expression.

As I discussed in Chapter II, Rhys's "initiation of dialogue, her mapping of the terrain upon which we may begin to argue" (Harrison 65) is undermined within the narrative context, what I called the *unwriting* of resistance. The structure of *Mrs. Dalloway*, in contrast, does allow Woolf to 'talk back'—to criticize where Rhys's text acquiesces. The novel's narrative design permits not only

the interchange of the various character's viewpoints but allows for Woolf's own voice—or the voice of an unknown narrator whom I will identify as Woolf—to insert itself in the gaps in between. The writer (narrator) is able to engage in a dialogue with her own fiction (narrative). At times it is possible to disentangle her voice from the others in the text, but the narrative viewpoint is often ambiguous. Sometimes a character's subjective point of view comes filtered through the voice of our narrator; at other times, she remains behind the scene, responsible for the choreography but not participating in the performance. Occasionally, the narrator jumps onto centre stage, not only directing the narrative movement but commenting on characters and situations. It is the narrator who, with her almost hyperbolic description, implicitly criticizes the public's reponse to the appearance of "the Proime Minister's kyar": "But now mystery had brushed them with her wing; they had heard the voice of authority; the spirit of religion was abroad with her lips gaping wide" (20). The narrator's is an ironic and critical tone, prone to grand, mythic metaphors: Sir William, with his goddess proportion, divine proportion, is but one example.⁵⁷ Shaping the text with a language of her own, but not limited to a single viewpoint, as is Rhys in *Good Morning, Midnight*, Woolf is able to criticize and resist the dictates of an oppressive patriarchy.

The Tables Turned: A Mad Sense of Proportion

While in *Good Morning, Midnight* Sasha's bouts of lunacy are connotatively negative, invoked in the context of extreme alienation and fearfully resisted, Septimus's visionary experiences often resound with positive vibrations. The pain and confusion which he feels are not grounded in the expressions of his madness. His personal visions are characteristically filled with

⁵⁷Woolf's critical commentary has, in fact, solicited some criticism: her satirical mythic vision of Sir William's goddess, "Proportion, divine proportion," is labelled by Elaine Showalter as the unfortunate intrusion of Woolf's own voice; she claims that "Personal experience explains the inartistic lack of proportion most critics have noticed as a 'flaw' in this fiercely vibrant section of the novel" (277). I think it is unfortunate that Showalter apparently couldn't resist using the phrase 'lack of proportion'—its ironic relevance to the passage she is describing is in very poor taste not only because it aligns Virginia Woolf with Sir William's 'mad' victims, but also because this alignment implicitly sides with Bradshaw's version of reality, the system of values which Woolf seeks to undermine and resist.

exquisite beauty, and are broken only by intrusions of the world's 'wickedness,' when, for example, he recalls the horror of the war with the hallucinatory appearance of Evans, or when he is faced with the condemning, oppressive presence of Human Nature in the figures of Holmes and Bradshaw. While Rhys implies that hysteria and madness are the inevitable if tragic end of the woman who is unable to position herself as subject within an oppressive and objectifying order, Woolf suggests that Septimus's madness may be a sane response to an insane world.

The character of Sir William Bradshaw stands as the paradigm of the "extremely respectable" feared and hated by Sasha in *Good Morning, Midnight*, but in Rhys's text there is no deconstruction of the order to which the likes of Sir William and Mr. Blank belong. With Woolf's creation of Septimus Warren Smith, we see the tables turned. With his character a critical light is again cast on the soldiers whose feet pound the pavement for love of God and Country. Septimus Smith is not simply mad according to the hegemonic definitions of sanity and insanity; he is mad *as a consequence of* hegemonic values. It is because he marched so well that he came back from the war to shuffle his way through personal chaos. The clue to Septimus's retreat into a world of his own making is found in his rejection of the world which made him a soldier: "he could reason . . . his brain was perfect; it must be the fault of the world then—that he could not feel . . . it might be possible that the world itself is without meaning" (133). As a soldier, he attained the heights of Sir William Bradshaw's sense of proportion: "The War had taught him. It was sublime. He had gone through the whole show, friendship, European War, death, had won promotion; was still under thirty and was bound to survive" (130-131). The price of survival within this patriarchal scheme of things is repression. This recalls again the joyless fate of the King's wives at the hands of General Sun Tse. Having swallowed the patriarchal/patriotic line so well, Septimus finds that he has lost the ability to feel; in Cixous's terms, he's been symbolically "decapitated," "drugged into a stiff yet staring corpse" (*Dalloway* 77). Whereas in Rhys's novel there is no external context for Sasha's emotional death, the narrative of Septimus's fate, framed as it is by the rest of the text, comes with an un-relenting indictment against the life-denying drumbeat of courage, honour, duty:

those catch-phrases expounded by the patriots of patriarchy.

While in *Good Morning, Midnight*, mimicry—Sasha’s imitation of “‘masculine’ systems of language”—functions primarily as a sign of her struggle to position herself as a subject in control and as the hysterical voicing of her failure to achieve this position, mimetic utterances in relation to Septimus Warren Smith become (contextually) the instrument of parody. Frequently, the discourse of his madness is but an exaggerated imitation of the dominant and historical discourses of patriarchy, in the form of Philosophy, religion, politics and science. He counts himself, in his delusions of grandeur, among the great minds of (patriarchal) civilization: “Greeks, Romans, Shakespeare, Darwin and now himself” (101-102). Not unlike the overbearing judges of his own character, Septimus too fancies himself the possessor of truths and assumes the role of judge: “He would . . . explain how wicked people were . . . He knew all their thoughts, he said; he knew everything. He knew the meaning of the world, he said” (100). Septimus asserts the primacy of sense, of reason, through an articulation of (unself-conscious) non-sense. By having him mimic hegemonic—and logocentric—discourse within the perimeters of his madness, Woolf ridicules the catch-phrases of those with power, and challenges the discursive supports of patriarchal sense.

The text not only plays with the clichéd notion that there is a fine line between genius and insanity, but prompts us to question the very nature of madness. The narrator, commenting on the cold, calculating power of Sir William, claims “this is madness, this sense, in fact, his sense of proportion” (151). Sir William, for his part, informs Rezia that “he never spoke of ‘madness’; he called it not having a sense of proportion” (146). Apples are apples and oranges are oranges only in so far as it is convenient for Sir William that they should be: not unlike Mr. Blank in *Good Morning, Midnight*, he is in control of the definitions. According to this knowledgeable man of science, one of Septimus’s worst symptoms is his tendency to do what Bradshaw himself does so expertly: to attach “meanings to words of a symbolical kind” (what, exactly, is “a sense of proportion?”) (145). Bradshaw’s interview with Septimus is loaded with irony. We know that “the War” means for Septimus—a soldier who did in fact serve “with great distinction”—something that

it can never mean for Bradshaw; the war for Septimus was anything but symbolic. He *literally* experienced the nightmare of mud, trenches, death all around. It is Bradshaw, with his notion of “the War”—of duty, courage and serving “with great distinction”—who is in fact guilty of “attaching meanings to words of a symbolical kind.”

Through the character of Sir William Bradshaw, Woolf demonstrates that patriarchy relies on discursive constructs to bolster self-serving values in the name of Truth. Michel Foucault claims that “power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms” (86). Bradshaw’s power goes unchallenged by society because it is masked by feigned benevolence and patriotic fervour. His divine sense of proportion is part of the same ideology that dictates the marching footfall of the uniformed soldiers (who are, Woolf reminds us, boys of sixteen going to war); an ideology which excites praise for “duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of England” (76) and, in the mind of Sir William, “family affection; honour, courage; and *a brilliant career*” (154; my emphasis). This cold patriarch’s proclamations serve him well. Since forms “of subjectivity which challenge the power of the dominant discourses at any particular time are carefully policed” and are often “marginalized as mad or criminal” (Weedon 91), Sir William knows that if honour and courage fail, “he had to support him police and the good of society, which, he remarked very quietly, would take care . . . that these unsocial impulses, bred more than anything by lack of good blood, were held in control” (154). Like Mr. Blank in *Good Morning, Midnight*, he is always able to rely on the discourse which constitutes and supports his power. Woolf shows us that his notions of “the good of society,” “good blood,” and what does or does not constitute an acceptable social impulse are discursive fabrications which keep at bay that which threatens to disrupt the order which serves him so well. The narrator, with her wry observation that life is indeed good for Sir William—with his divine sense of proportion, his “twelve thousand a year” and his “lust. . . to override opposition”—directs us to a judgement of his dangerously selfish motivation (153-154).

While Bradshaw is judged as calculating and cruel, the buffoonish Dr. Holmes is treated to the quiet critique of Woolf's irony. We are prompted to question what salvation, what worth can possibly lie in the "real" according to Dr. Holmes—the music hall, cricket, things outside of oneself—when Septimus carries within him the horror of war (37). We are led to look closely at the values implicit in Holmes's own sense of proportion, as we watch him speculating on the likelihood that fine panelling is hidden beneath the wall-paper while pompously asserting that nothing whatsoever is the matter with dear Mr. Smith that a bit of sport and fresh air won't cure. Holmes, stupidly blind to the condition of his patient, knocks on the wall in search of what might be hidden: his character, too, reveals a sense of madness. Though "different in their verdicts (for Holmes said one thing, Bradshaw another)," these two men, with their wealth and power, represent the backbone of patriarchal oppression, embracing the united values of Propriety and Property: "men who never weighed less than eleven stone six, who sent their wives to Court, who made ten thousand a year and talked of proportion . . . yet judges they were; who mixed the vision and the sideboard; saw nothing clear, yet ruled, yet inflicted" (224-225). By questioning the behaviour and motives of those who are in a (power) position to define sanity, Woolf is able to question not only the validity of their definitions but to expose the ideological assumptions on which they are based. What, then, is madness?

Writing the Poetic: The *jouissance* of madness

Our first entrance into the magical mad world of Septimus Warren Smith involves an invocation of *le sémiotique*. Like Lacan's "hommelette," Septimus is frequently without ego boundaries. His vision is dominated by pre-Oedipal sensations—color, light, an unmitigated immediacy of sensation—and he makes no distinction (imposes no difference) between his self and (what is) other:

But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement. The sparrows fluttering, rising,

and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern; the white and blue, barred with black branches. (32-33)

Like Sasha, at those points in her narrative when she desires “not to think” but “only to watch the branches of that tree and the pattern they make standing out against a cold sky” (*GMM* 116), Septimus’s vision privileges the (Lacanian) real. But unlike Sasha, whose narrative reveals a powerful ambivalence toward the attraction of the real (or literal) as an attraction to (the imaginary) madness, Septimus is not caught up in a struggle of acquiescence and denial. He is not split in the way that Sasha is split but he embraces, with a kind of visionary ecstasy, that feared aspect of Sasha’s self.

In contrast to *Good Morning, Midnight*, Woolf’s narrative suggests the lure of psychotic vision. The character and experience of Septimus provide us with a few grains of the textual wisdom at play in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Unlike the other characters who stand watching the aeroplane sky-writing and who attempt (with futility) to establish meaning, to make (symbolic) sense of the fading signs, Septimus responds to the aeroplane in what Margaret Homans would call a “literal” rather than a “figurative” (involving the dynamics of signification) way. He has the ‘key’ for he takes sublime pleasure in the movement of the writing itself:

it was plain enough, this beauty, this exquisite beauty, and tears filled his eyes as he looked at the smoke words languishing and melting in the sky and bestowing upon him in their inexhaustible charity and laughing goodness one shape after another of unimaginable beauty and signalling their intention to provide him, for nothing, for ever, for looking merely, with beauty, more beauty! (31)

In this state of heightened (un)awareness, language, in the conventional sense, ceases to exist. The letters aren’t part of a syntagmatic chain of signification, a system of meaning dependent on absence (that is, they don’t stand for something other than what they are) but exist for Septimus as presence (beautiful shapes in the sky). He responds to sound in a similar way: “‘K...R...’ said the nursemaid, and Septimus heard her say ‘Kay Arr’ close to his ear, deeply, softly, like a mellow organ” (32). Sound ceases to be privileged—silence (absence) becomes presence: “Sounds made harmonies with pre-meditation; *the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds*” (33; my emphasis).

As Toril Moi warns, the subject who permits unconscious pulsations—the pulsations of *le sémiotique*—to “disrupt the symbolic order . . . is also the subject who runs the greater risk of lapsing into madness” (11). Thus while Septimus’s *jouissance*—his pleasure in the materiality of language—refers on the one hand to the subversive potential of *writing*, it also indicates his position as a mad subject in relation to the Symbolic:

To . . . [the] demand for recognition and for the restoration of identity through language . . . [is opposed] in the figure of . . . madness. . . the dislocation of any transitive, communicative language, of “propriety” as such, of any correspondence or transparency joining “names” to “things,” the blind opacity of a lost signifier unmatched by a signified, the pure recurrent difference of a word detached from both its meaning and its context. (Felman 1975: 9)

I think that, with her creation of Septimus Smith, Woolf is exploring the relationship between madness and poetic language—language, that is, which permits and exploits discursive disruptions of *le sémiotique* and which therefore dislocates the (illusory) stability of the transcendent subject/ego in control of her/his meaning.

An image of *le sémiotique* is invoked in Mrs. Dalloway, as it is in *Good Morning, Midnight*, in the form of an archaic female figure. The voice of the old woman, who sings her “ancient song” opposite Regent’s Park Tube station involves—like that of the midwife recalled by Sasha—“a language that is no language” (*GMM* 50), dependent not on the rigours of signification and the logocentric drive for meaning but on the unintelligible rhythms of *le sémiotique*: “a frail, quivering sound, a voice bubbling up without direction, vigour, beginning or end, running weakly and shrilly and *with an absence of all human meaning* into ‘ee um fah um so/foo swee too eem oo—” (122; my emphasis).⁵⁸ Woolf’s imaging of this “rusty pump” suggests her vision of *le sémiotique* as a potentially subversive expression which can resist the workings of an oppressive/oppressed civilization: while this archaic voice sings, “the passing generations—the pavement was crowded with bustling middle-class people—vanished, like leaves, to be trodden under, to be soaked and

⁵⁸Minow-Pinkney suggests that the voice of this old woman is “precisely the voice of the mother. . . . The woman or mother is always a void, a hole in discourse—as the unconscious, the unrepresentable” (73).

steeped and made mould of by that eternal spring" (124).⁵⁹

Julia Kristeva opposes *le sémiotique* to *le symbolique*, the symbolic, which is the "inevitable attribute of meaning, sign and the signified object for the consciousness of . . . [the] transcendental ego" (*Desire* 134). The symbolic, in other words, is fundamentally homogeneous, and as such it supports (and is supported by) what Luce Irigaray terms the Economy of the Same, presided over by the One (the Father/Phallus). It is this order which the poetic transgresses because it defies the rigours of homogeneous meaning:

there is within poetic language . . . a *heterogeneousness* to meaning and signification . . . this heterogeneousness to signification operates through, despite, and in excess of it and produces in poetic language 'musical' but also nonsense effects that destroy not only accepted beliefs and significations but . . . syntax itself, that guarantee of thetic consciousness (of the signified object and ego). (*Desire* 133)⁶⁰

There is a heterogeneity in Septimus's vision: like the plane tracing letters in the sky, his discourse refuses to be pinned down to (one) coherent, cohesive meaning; he slips from one point, one perception, to another, failing to establish the connections (logical syntax) made by the subject (who believes her/himself) in control of her/his meaning. In Kristeva's terms, poetic language "posits a thesis, not of a particular being or meaning, but of a signifying apparatus; it posits its own process as an undecidable process between sense and nonsense, between *language* and *rhythm*. . . between the symbolic and semiotic" (*Desire* 135). Rezia's description of Septimus's revelatory rantings illustrates this process, drawing attention to the "musical" and "nonsense effects" of poetic language: "Some things were very beautiful; others sheer nonsense. And he was always stopping

⁵⁹Jane Marcus, in *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*, refers to this ancient voice as one of several instances in Woolf's fiction which suggest that "other oppressed voices of race and class, of difference and colonial subjectivity, are beginning to syllable themselves" (11). Writing as she is within a specifically socialist-feminist framework, Marcus claims that the presence of such old working women refers us to Woolf's concern with all kinds of oppression: "Woolf does not privilege gender over class and recognizes that once the woman writer's voice finds its tongue and speaks and writes its own language, other oppressed voices will find their tongues and write the languages of class and race" (13).

⁶⁰In "Revolution in Poetic Language," Kristeva associates the thetic with the ability of the subject to "separate, from and through his image, from and through his objects" (*Reader* 98)—thetic consciousness, then, substantiates the illusion of the self as transcendent ego, the subject in control of meaning, and corresponds, again, to the ego-bound "I" described by Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*.

in the middle, changing his mind; wanting to add something; hearing something new; listening with his hand up” (212-213). Septimus’s statement that he can be counted among the great minds—akin to Shakespeare (who, according to Kristeva, is a *poetic* writer)—takes on an added irony: he is not so dissimilar from the poets and processes which Kristeva describes. He too has transgressive visions and is fascinated with words, with language, with writing things down. He too revels in the beauty of process, movement, the materiality of words (as in his response to the plane’s sky-writing), and intuits that it might be possible that “the world itself is without meaning.”

The character and experience of Septimus Smith are closely connected to the processes at work within the novel as a whole: his visions, language, and experience reverberate throughout the text, finding correspondences in Woolf’s writing of subjectivity and the poetic nature of her own language/style. Yet the character of Septimus, driven by a subversive creative energy, points toward the danger of poetic language. There may, after all, be a fine line between genius and insanity. On the one side are poets and writers (Woolf herself?),⁶¹ praised by Kristeva as artists who solicit the disruptions of *le semiotique* as a means of transgressing the Economy of the Same, and on the other side are psychotics, those who have plummeted into the chasm “that threaten[s] the unstable subject of poetic language” (*Desire* 139). As illuminated by the treatment of Septimus’s experience in context of the novel as a whole, madness is not an absolute or an essence but exists relationally, in response to—as the result of—an oppressive order. Poetic language, Kristeva argues, “in its most disruptive form (unreadable for meaning, dangerous for the subject), shows the constraints of a civilization dominated by transcendental rationality” (*Desire* 139-140; my emphasis). The subject of madness in *Mrs. Dalloway* involves, I think, an exploration (and an implicit critique) of these constraints—the constraints of a society dominated, that is, by men like Sir William Bradshaw.

⁶¹Phyllis Rose, in her interpretive biography of Woolf, traces the connections between her art and madness, claiming that while “there was a close connection between her madness and the sources of her creativity . . . her creativity was her principal stay against madness” (158).

CHAPTER VII
CLARISSA DALLOWAY

If the patriarchs and pedagogues represent one extreme and Septimus Smith another, I would suggest that Clarissa Dalloway represents a point between the two, a point which is concerned with the possibilities of individual resistance to (patriarchal) oppression.⁶² As discussed in Chapter IV, Clarissa Dalloway is, to an extent, a prisoner of the social discourse which claims her as Richard's wife, a "value-bearing object." For Woolf to choose as her 'protagonist' a character who belongs to the social system which she is criticizing⁶³ is not as incongruous a decision as it might at first appear, given her comment regarding the work of E.M. Forster: "He is always constrained to build the cage—society in all its intricacy and triviality—before he can free the prisoner" (*Death of the Moth* 165). When at the end of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Sally Seton (now Lady Rosseter, the mother of five boys), asks "Are we not all prisoners?," and suggests that in life one can only scratch on the cell wall, she gives voice to Woolf's own concern with the cage and what can be done to resist and defy its oppressive enclosure. One possibility, of course, is to go the route of Septimus Smith. Clarissa reads the writing on his particular wall when she acknowledges that "Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate" (280). But although psychotic vision has its lure, it leads ultimately to a dead-end street. Septimus may escape the oily eye of Human Nature, but he will no longer know the beauty of life, "the triumph and the jingle and the strange

⁶²Alex Zwerdling, in *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*, gives an insightful account of these positionings in terms of Woolf's concern with class and the historical social system (England following World War One). While I agree with his claim that the "fundamental conflict in *Mrs. Dalloway* is between those who identify with Establishment 'dominion' and 'leadership' and those who resist or are repelled by it" (130), I have chosen to frame my discussion of this conflict within the context not so much of class and history, but of the philosophical and discursive dynamics which structure the (gendered) subject in/of the patriarchal Symbolic Order.

⁶³"I want to criticise the social system, and to show it at work, at its most intense" (*Writer's Diary* 63); it is in fact Clarissa's society-lady persona that has drawn a great deal of ambivalence and criticism, including from Woolf herself when she writes, in her diary of 1925, that the character seemed to her "in some way tinselly" (III, 32). The original Clarissa Dalloway, who we meet in the short story "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street," is "tinselly" in the extreme, but Woolf 'fleshes out' the character of this charming society hostess in *Mrs. Dalloway* through the invention not only of her memories but of a lively and rebellious personal vision.

high singing of some aeroplane overhead” (5). With the character of Clarissa Dalloway and her love of “this moment in June,” Woolf sketches the possibility of another path of resistance, one that skirts the line between sense and non-sense, sanity and insanity, and allows life, with its varieties and irreticences, to triumph against “the constraints of a civilization dominated by transcendental rationality.”

In Acceptance of the Supreme Mystery: The Philosophy of Clarissa Dalloway

Through the occasional revelations of Clarissa Dalloway, Woolf proposes a way of being and seeing in the world which contradicts the patriarchal dogma of Sir William and company (without completely succumbing to the *semiotic* chaos of Septimus Smith). In direct opposition to the code of General Sun Tse, Clarissa recognizes the undesirability of imposing definitions: “She would not say of any one in the world now that they were this or were that” (11). While she knows “nothing” according to the values of an androcentric culture, she has an understanding of life that embraces the wonders of multiplicity: “She knew nothing; no language, no history; she scarcely read a book now . . . and yet to her it was absolutely absorbing; all this; the cabs passing; and she would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that” (11). Clarissa Dalloway’s philosophy defies the exclusive/excluding codes of phallogocentric discourse:

Why creeds and prayers and mackintoshes? when, thought Clarissa, that’s the miracle, that’s the mystery; that old lady, she meant, whom she could see going from chest of drawers to dressing-table. She could still see her. And the supreme mystery which Kilman might say she had solved, or Peter might say he had solved, but Clarissa didn’t believe either of them had the ghost of an idea of solving, was simply this: here was one room; there another. Did religion solve that, or love? (193)

Here was one room, there another—difference is quietly celebrated without being encoded, entrapped within an oppressive system of binary oppositions (correlating to a schema of presence and absence, the feminine subsumed by the masculine). Clarissa not only experiences a sense of what it is to step beyond the discourses that support the character of Doris Kilman (creeds and prayers), but her vision also includes moments when binary oppositions are broken down and the

tension of contradiction (experienced so fearfully by Sasha in *Good Morning, Midnight*) is alleviated: “She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on” (11). Life, with all “its varieties, its irreticences” is resurrected from beneath “a pavement of monuments and wreaths” (77) and endowed with “supreme mystery”—the mystery and wonder of a heterogeneous vision.

As Sasha recognizes herself in the reflections of other women, the old lady across the way serves as a kind of mirror-image for Clarissa. But rather than reflecting a contorted image of self-alienation and objectification, she signifies “the privacy of the soul”—one could suggest, that is, that she reflects the possibility of that part of a (woman’s) self that subsists “otherwise and elsewhere.” It is this “privacy of the soul” that those with a creed would destroy—and it is this which Clarissa’s philosophy of self and other resists: “Big Ben struck the half-hour. How extraordinary it was, strange, yes, touching, to see the old lady. . . . move away from the window, as if she was attached to that sound, that string. Gigantic as it was, it had something to do with her” (193). The “‘me’-‘not-me’ distinction,” described by Nancy Chodorow as constitutive of the masculine ego, is dissolved by Clarissa’s vision. And with her recognition that the old woman in the room opposite is connected to the leaden circles of Big Ben’s striking, Clarissa intuits the narrative’s movement, which embraces the one and the other in a perpetual spiralling, in defiance of a code which strives to keep them separate.

Unlike Peter, with his flailing masculine ego and his rigorous need to impose difference, Clarissa’s (feminine?) vision breaks difference down. While Peter takes refuge in his knife, she takes up her needle and sews; her desire is not simply to rend, to tear things apart (to separate and categorize), but to put things together, to make connections. Her sewing finds its correlative in her party-making; both stand apart from—and against?—the world of phallogocentric logic and values:

could any man understand what she meant. . . . about life? . . . Here was So-and-so in South Kensington; some one up in Bayswater; and somebody else, say, in Mayfair. And she felt quite continuously a sense of their existence; and she felt what a waste, and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. And it was an offering; to combine, to create. . . . An offering for the sake of

offering, perhaps. (184-185)

Writing resistance at every turn, Woolf has the locus of Clarissa Dalloway's position within patriarchy—her role as hostess, lady of the house—become the locus of her quiet challenge to patriarchy's values. Her desire to bring people together “suggests communal values that transcend the egos of any single person” (Blau DuPlessis 59). Clarissa's “offering for the sake of offering” affirms the narrative structure, with its celebration of “odd affinities” and refusal to cast “a shadow shaped something like the letter ‘I.’”

A Significant Double: Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith

While throughout *Mrs. Dalloway* Septimus Warren Smith and Clarissa Dalloway are connected through common associations of time and space,⁶⁴ this is only secondary to (and supportive of) the way in which they are continually united thematically. The narrative discourse of their internal ramblings and perceptions is often strikingly similar, and in one specific instance, they share the same poetic phrase. Near the beginning of the novel, Clarissa recalls a couplet which continues to echo in her mind throughout her day—“Fear no more the heat o' the sun / Nor the furious winter's rages” (13)—and, at a startling moment toward the end of the narrative, it also reverberates in the psyche of Septimus: “Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more” (211). The opening of a poem from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, the repetition of these words not only constitutes another (buried) reference to that poetic genius with whom Septimus identifies, but also draws Clarissa into Septimus's visionary experience (or vice versa). While Alex Zwerdling states that the references to Shakespeare throughout the novel are “a kind of shorthand indication that the soul has survived, that some kind of sympathetic imagination is still functioning” (128), I would go further and suggest that this (*contextually ambiguous*)⁶⁵ reference unites both Septimus and

⁶⁴“Mrs. Dalloway. . . looked out with her little pink face pursed in enquiry. Every one looked at the motor car. Septimus looked” (21); “twelve o'clock struck as Clarissa Dalloway laid her green dress on the bed, and the Warren Smiths walked down Harley Street” (142).

⁶⁵I want to emphasize that in context of the novel, the phrase “Fear no more” is non-referential—its source

Clarissa in a subversive *poetic* bond: both characters permit the reverberations of *le sémiotique* to pattern their thoughts and perceptions.

Throughout the narrative of Clarissa's self are moments when she undergoes an exquisite loss of self, an intense relinquishing of ego-boundaries reminiscent of pre-Oedipal experience:

Quiet descended on her, calm, content, as her needle, drawing the silk smoothly to its gentle pause, collected the green folds together. . . . So on a summer's day waves collect, overbalance, and fall; collect and fall; and the whole world seems to be saying "that is all" more and more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says too, That is all. Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall. And the body alone listens to the passing bee; the wave breaking. . . . (58-59)

(Thus the capital "I" which rides masterfully through the pages of masculine fiction and the ideologies of masculine culture is further defied in Woolf's text). Rhythm, repetition, a languorous flow of sensation taking precedence over meaning, Clarissa's visions reverberate with the wave-like pulsations of *le sémiotique*. Like Septimus Smith, she revels in sound, colour, the primacy of her senses pushing sense into nonsense: "nonsense, nonsense, she said to herself, more and more gently, as if this beauty, this scent, this colour. . . . were a wave which she let flow over her" (19). As we witness with the character of Septimus, for the subject to continually exist in this merging state would signify madness, an inability to function according to the regulations of the Symbolic (able to maintain a distinction between the self and the object world). Hence Clarissa's vision, that sense of herself "being laid out like a mist" (12), prompts us to question again the (relational) nature of madness and its alliance with the (potentially subversive) poetic. For if Clarissa's moments of lost ego resound as moments of resistance, a celebratory challenge to the rigid boundaries of the masculine "I," then how do we read the resonance of Septimus's madness?

In her "Introduction" to *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf states that "in the first version [of the novel] Septimus, who later is intended to be Clarissa's double, had no existence, and . . . Mrs. Dalloway was originally intended to kill herself, or perhaps merely to die at the end of the party" (1928 vi).

(cont'd) unspecified.

Her original intent was, perhaps, to write Clarissa as a 'mad' subject who plummets, with an embrace of death, into the imaginary. We might then have been tempted to read Clarissa's fate as similar to that of Sasha in *Good Morning, Midnight*. But in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the creation of the character of Septimus allows the text to explore and to question the nature of madness, without confining the reader to that subject's experience. The interchange of viewpoints, the connections between all of the subjects and particularly between Septimus and Clarissa, keep us from becoming entrapped in an oppressive system of meaning and being. The two characters provide an inter-textual commentary on one another: while Septimus represents that part of Clarissa which threatens her own stability as a subject within the (patriarchal) Symbolic Order, her character keeps us from being able to write Septimus off as a psychotic. Because Clarissa remains, after Septimus kills himself, to contemplate the significance of his action, his death cannot be dismissed as the final, pathetic display of his madness. She recognizes him as both a potential genius and as a victim, forcing us once again to draw connections between the possibilities of the poetic, madness, and tyranny:

Or there were the poets and thinkers. Suppose he had had that passion, and had gone to Sir William Bradshaw, a great doctor yet to her obscurely evil . . . but capable of some indescribable outrage—forcing your soul, that was it—if this young man had gone to him, and Sir William had impressed him, like that, with his power, might he not then have said (indeed she felt it now), Life is made intolerable; they make life intolerable, men like that? (281)

It is because Clarissa has felt her own soul forced to comply with the dictates of the patriarchal drumbeat that she can empathize with Septimus Smith. Divided though they are by sex, age, class and experience, the two are united throughout the novel by their struggle to protect the "privacy of the soul" from the thwarting intrusions of "Human Nature."⁶⁶ It is thus that Clarissa interprets Septimus's suicide as a preservation of "a thing there was that mattered" and hopes that he died

⁶⁶Rachel Blau DuPlessis, in her analysis of *Mrs. Dalloway* as an anti-romance, makes the acute observation that Woolf's "structural coup" is "the creation of an unsexual, nonromantic central couple . . . neither of the men to whom [Clarissa] is bound in a social, legal, or romantic sense is the man to whom she is bound in the psychic sense" (57). The fact that Woolf chose to cast Clarissa's double as a man, rather than a woman, may then be read in light of a wish to undermine the traditional heterosexual narrative. I would add that the creation of Septimus's character facilitates Woolf's exploration of the effects of war on the human spirit, and that the bond between Septimus and Clarissa enables her to trace a connection between the military mentality and the oppression of women, elaborated in *Three Guineas*.

“holding his treasure” (280-281). The doubling of Septimus and Clarissa opens the text up to possibility, to questions, to a more liberating level of interpretation than is granted space in Rhys’s novel.

In Cixous’s terms, (Woolf’s) *writing*

is working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live, *undoing the work of death*—to admit this is first to want the two, as well as both, the ensemble of the one and the other, not fixed in sequences of struggle and expulsion or some other form of death but infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another. (in Marks 254; my emphasis)

From within a phallogocentric system of binary oppositions, where one side of the proverbial dyad is always privileged and the other repressed, death is aligned with darkness/passivity/the feminine (in contrast to that which is granted expression and the privilege of logos: life/light/activity/the masculine). This is the workings of an either/or vision/version of the world. For Cixous, to free a text (and, by implied extension, thought and civilization) from the enclosure of this binary is a goal of *écriture féminine*/writing in the feminine. To reclaim a space/voice for the repressed feminine is to allow a “both/and vision” to ignite the textual world. For Clarissa, Septimus’s death suggests a defiance of the (phallogocentric/binary) code; she envisions death, not as belonging to one (repressed and feared) side of the dyad, but as an expression which breaks free from the structure of the dyad altogether (involving an embrace; a quest for the *centre*: a dissolving of the space (in)between same and other, a celebration of difference and defiance [281]).

Clarissa’s Retreat to a Room of Her Own

Immediately after hearing about Septimus’s suicide, Clarissa drifts into “the little room where the Prime Minister had gone with Lady Bruton The chairs still kept the impress of the Prime Minister and Lady Bruton, she turned deferentially, he sitting four-square, authoritatively. They had been talking about India” (279). Power, Authority, Colonialism—the drumbeat of patriarchy beats on, but at this point in the novel we hear it only as an echo. Only an emptied sign

of civilization's greatness remains. It is into this echoing absence of the drumbeat that Clarissa walks, carrying with her the connection she feels with that young man who killed himself.

This is the beginning of what I look upon as the climax of the novel. Because it doesn't acquiesce to literary conventions but instead involves a breaking of sentence and sequence, *Mrs. Dalloway* doesn't have a climax (or resolution) in the traditional sense. But there comes this moment at the end of Clarissa Dalloway's day, following her retreat from the hubbub of her party, when the enigmatic twists and turns which have woven their way throughout the text converge.⁶⁷

When Clarissa first hears of Septimus's death, it triggers a painful self-reflection. Her dissatisfaction with her (social) image is again invoked ("she was never wholly admirable, she had wanted success, Lady Bexborough and the rest of it"), and so too is her social pride, her position as Mrs. Richard Dalloway: "It was due to Richard; she had never been so happy" (282). She moves through this room—a symbol, in a sense, of her confinement within the patriarchal system which claims her, with its imprint of authority—fulfilling her function as lady of the house, "straightening the chairs, pushing in one book on the shelf." Yet even as we see her in this space, we see her resist it. The Clarissa of her youth merges with the Clarissa she is now: "Many a time she had gone, at Bourton, when they were all talking, to look at the sky; or seen it in between people's shoulders at dinner; seen it in London when she could not sleep. She walked to the window." At Bourton, the sky represented the possibility of moving beyond society's claims; in the present narrative, too, Clarissa looks out at the same sky from the space which claims her. The sky holds, "foolish as the idea was, something of her own in it, this country sky, this sky above Westminster." Something of her own? That subsistence of a self "otherwise and elsewhere than there where she mimes so well

⁶⁷While there is, at the novel's end, an affirmation, it is insistently ambiguous. We are not granted the release accorded us by the readerly text. Rather than draw pat and dry conclusions, performing the readerly critic's chore which involves, according to Barthes, "the mastery of meaning," a clear-cut movement "back from signifiers to signified" (174), I will attempt to align my reading of the novel's end with Clarissa Dalloway's claim that she "would not say of any one in the world now that they were this or were that" (11).

what is asked of her"? (Irigaray 152). Her interest in the sky also recalls the sky-writing aeroplane and the subversive, resistant message of its writing. While there is no aeroplane now, as Clarissa looks out, she is still greeted by the unexpected: "It will be a solemn sky, she had thought, it will be a dusky sky, turning away its cheek in beauty. But there it was—ashen pale, raced over quickly by tapering vast clouds" (283). We are harkened back again to the shifting signs of clouds, which confound (the gazing subject's) expectations and create a sense of the forever changing, forever new nature of meaning and being that is presented throughout *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Throughout this passage, while Clarissa's thoughts hop like a bird from one branch to another, she returns again and again to the old woman opposite, reminding us not only of the connections between subjects in the text—those "odd affinities"—but of the significance of this old woman as a symbol of celebrated (and unthreatening) difference, the "supreme mystery" of here one room, and there another. The old woman is preparing for bed, and as Clarissa watches her—this reflection of herself—she seems to have come to an acceptance of her own inevitable decline, an awareness that she too will put out her light "with all this going on." Life—"with its varieties, its irreticences," the passage of time, people on buses, in flower shops, at parties ("laughing and shouting in the drawing room")—will continue, while this old woman goes quietly to bed. Such is the nature of the spiral. Like Septimus, the old woman reminds Clarissa of the inevitability of death but, at the same time, her presence in the room opposite is an affirmation of life—the joy of life that Clarissa has experienced with a vague intensity throughout her day.

Acknowledging that "She felt somehow very like him," the connection between Septimus and Clarissa reaches a climax in this passage. When "the words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun," the narrative is inscribed once again with the poetic vision which unites Septimus and Clarissa. She suddenly feels "glad that he had done it; thrown it away. . . . He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun" (283-284); his death reaffirms her life. While those in the other room tut-tut over the loss of Sir William's "case," her thoughts unite death and life in the spiralling process which is life, Clarissa Dalloway's life, captured, in a single moment on a June day, "in the

triumph and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead” (5). This ineffable process is affirmed by the interruption of Big Ben’s striking: “She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air.”

This climactic passage resounds with the dissolving circles of Woolf’s style: the sentences do not unfold in a neat syntagmatic order, leading to (an) ultimate (dis)closure, but phrases fade into one another without any logical connection. Clarissa’s thought is caught in a spiral of meaning(s), reminiscent of the “incessant shower of innumerable atoms” characteristic of “an ordinary mind on an ordinary day” (“Modern Fiction” 154). Repetition, abrupt shifts in focus, unspecified pronoun usage—all the characteristics of Woolf’s writing reach a peak of expression in this single paragraph. It concludes with an implied awareness of its own fragmentation and the significance of this fragmentation in relation to Woolf’s writing of subjectivity and Clarissa’s self: “But she must go back. *She must assemble*” (284; my emphasis). With these last words, we are reminded again of Clarissa’s self-construction as a social object, pursing “her lips when she looked in the glass” to “give her face point. . . . That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, *drew the parts together. . . .*” (55; my emphasis). Leaving the quiet room where “there was nobody” (279), Clarissa must assemble, draw the parts of herself together again, compose herself “so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting-point” (55). And so Peter’s question, “But where is Clarissa?,” rings with irony, raising the question of subjectivity and the self as a (fictional) construct—where is Clarissa in the novel? Where is she in/to herself? Where is the locus of subjectivity to be found? The novel has guided us toward an understanding that we cannot answer this question with any certainty. We are left with our questions and, with Peter, we share the extraordinary excitement, the terror and ecstasy of meaning and being which is *Mrs. Dalloway*.

CONCLUSION

'Smile Please,' the man said. 'Not quite so serious.'
. . . . I looked down at my white dress, the one I had got for my birthday, and my legs and the white socks coming half way up my legs, and the black shiny shoes with the strap over the instep.
'Now,' the man said.
'Keep still,' my mother said.
I tried but my arm shot up of its own accord.
'Oh what a pity, she moved.'
'You must keep still,' my mother said, frowning. (*Smile Please* 19)

The opening of Jean Rhys's unfinished autobiography, *Smile Please*, this seemingly quaint memory of a child's first photograph is enormously suggestive. Another metaphor for "a particular relationship between two economies: a masculine economy and a feminine economy," Rhys's anecdote is connotative of a pseudo-rape, a young girl's induction into an objectifying patriarchal regime. The child is not only subject to coercion but is exposed to and possessed by the camera, which is, after all, an extension of the male eye, the masculine gaze. Already its object, the little girl begins to look at and objectify herself. This entire process is condoned and augmented by her mother, who admonishes her to submit herself passively. The suggestion is that women perpetuate their place in patriarchy; it is part of a learned tradition, passed along from mother to daughter. Rather than a feminine bond we have here instead what Irigaray claims is the separation of women by masculine specula(riza)tions. The connection between mother and daughter is severed by the camera/gaze of the photographer. However, the most striking thing about this not-so-innocent memory is the child's response. Her psyche already divided between self and other, viewer and viewed, she experiences a kind of schizophrenic relation to her body: her arm shoots up "of its own accord." This lack of control not only implies hysteria but is also the little girl's way of resisting her position without having to take responsibility for her transgression. In a similar way, resistance in Rhys's text is contextualized not as a willful rebellion but as a helpless and hysterical response to the "atrocious voices" and "abominable eyes" which objectify her narrator.

As I have shown, Woolf's writing not only deconstructs the dynamics of this objectification but entails an active/act of textual resistance. The differences between Rhys's fiction and Woolf's,

which I have attempted to trace throughout my discussion, can be summed up through a brief contrast of their autobiographical styles.⁶⁸ *Moments of Being*, a collection of Woolf's memoirs, is also filled with reminiscences of female experience. But where Rhys offers us her vignette-like memories with little attempt to draw connections or propose how they helped to form her identity as a woman, "A Sketch of the Past" is replete with Woolf's desire to understand herself in relation to her (patriarchal) family and culture.

Two of Woolf's early memories in "A Sketch of the Past" reveal that, like the little Jean Rhys who sat before the camera, women are very early inducted into their (feminine) roles. Yet while any sense of personal emotion or critical analysis is absent from Rhys's anecdote, Woolf is prone to interpretation, the need to understand the significant memories of her past. Recalling when, age six or seven, she would sneak a peak at herself in the hallway mirror, first making sure that she was alone, she attempts to account for the "strong feeling of guilt [that] seemed naturally attached" to this habit (78). Her discussion reveals, however, that this feeling of guilt was certainly not natural but culturally incurred. At age six or seven she was already locating herself within the discourses available to her. On the one hand, she suggests, she may have been ashamed because she was breaking the "tomboy code" with which she and her sister Vanessa defined themselves; on the other, her shame signals an awareness of vanity and the puritanical Victorian code of her ancestors. Yet as long as the "ecstasies and raptures" which she "spontaneously and intensely" experienced as a child "were disconnected" with her "own body," she felt neither shame nor guilt (79). What, then, is this shame of the body? The clue lies in her second memory. Recalling that at a very young age she was forced to submit to the invading hand of her half-brother Gerald Duckworth, Woolf reveals that the engendering of little girls entails a violent learning of what it is to be female in patriarchy, and that this education inaugurates not only shame but fear. It is this kind of critical awareness which is notably absent from Rhys's discussion of her own past. Further, Woolf is careful to acknowledge that these early experiences are not unrelated to her experience of

⁶⁸This difference is indicated by the fact that Woolf not only wrote fiction but numerous critical essays which reveal and elaborate her feminism. Rhys did not consider herself a feminist.

herself (particularly, her body) as a grown woman: “the looking-glass shame has lasted all my life, long after the tomboy phase was over. I cannot now powder my nose in public. Everything to do with dress. . . . still frightens me; at least makes me shy, self-conscious, uncomfortable” (79).

Stella Bowen, Ford Madox Ford’s common-law wife at the time of his affair with Rhys, wrote of the young writer as “a really tragic person” who “took the lid off the world that she knew, and shows us an underworld of darkness and disorder, where officialdom, the bourgeoisie and the police were the eternal enemies and the fugitive the only hero” (166-167). Yet while I too am impressed by the skill with which Rhys removes the lid and exposes the world beneath, I am not struck with a sense of the fugitive as a victorious “hero” but only with a sense of futility, helplessness and loss. While I have not intended to discount either Rhys’s personal politics nor her art, my goal has been to try and trace the reasons for my own response to this text, and to explore what it is about Woolf’s writing that makes me feel differently.

Both Jean Rhys and Virginia Woolf were hurt by the coercions of (masculine) culture. Both too were often angry, and anger informed their fiction.⁶⁹ But whereas Woolf channelled her anger into a creative rebellion with which to challenge oppression, Rhys’s goal was more simply (perhaps) to sculpt a text around the shape of her anger. This points toward a difference suggested by Jane Marcus:

If one takes the tragic view of the ‘flower beneath the foot’ in relations between women and men. . . . the result is sheer suicidal anger. Sylvia Plath’s Nazi boot in ‘Daddy’ may be an apt metaphor for her sense of oppression, but the writer who plays victim loses the reader, as Virginia Woolf well knew. (30)⁷⁰

One might argue that Rhys does “make audible that which agitates within us,” but where, I want to ask, does it leave us? Confined to the pathetic display of the little girl whose arm shoots up of its own accord, seemingly against her will? I am not suggesting that a text must “present truthful

⁶⁹Although Woolf and Rhys shared a not dissimilar class background, Rhys spent much of her life impoverished. I recognize that this places Rhys at a disadvantage—as Woolf claims, enough money and a room of her own are necessary for the female writer to write with an uncluttered, untroubled vision.

⁷⁰In “Women and Fiction,” Woolf claims that when a woman writes with resentment, a consciousness of “disability,” it “introduces a distortion and is frequently the cause of weakness” (47).

images of strong women with which the reader may identify” in order to be considered “good feminist fiction” (Moi 7). But nor does writing/speaking “otherwise” (from a position of other) necessarily offer us a way out of the patriarchal trap. Rather it can, I think, signal the impossibility of escape, and I don’t see how this can be considered advantageous to a feminist sexual/textual politics.

As I have discussed, one of the crucial differences between Rhys and Woolf pivots on their view of the subject within the patriarchal Symbolic Order. While Woolf’s writing inaugurates the deconstruction of the phallic “I,” that master of (his) discourse who defines woman as object/other, relegating her to silence, to the background, Rhys’s writing enacts a woman’s struggle to align herself with the (masculine) position of mastery. The code of General Sun Tse dictates Sasha’s experience. Her subjectivity, her declaration of self as speaking/desiring subject, is silenced by the authority which objectifies her, an authority which she turns against herself. Her story ends not with an affirmation of her subjectivity and resistance to the patriarchal code, as some critics have suggested, but Sasha’s final “yes—yes—yes. ...” reveals that she has indeed succumbed like a “flower beneath the foot.” *Mrs. Dalloway*, on the other hand, does end with an affirmation, not only of Clarissa Dalloway’s quiet resistance—that persistence of a self “otherwise and elsewhere than there where she mimes so well what is asked of her”—but of the possibilities of writing as a form of cultural resistance. While Rhys’s narrative strategies enact the *unwriting* of resistance and the occluding of Sasha’s voice (and*desire), Woolf’s writing celebrates the defiant potential of a “both/and vision.”

While I admire her technique, the finely-tuned turn of her sculptor’s knife, Rhys’s fiction leaves me with the claustrophobic impression of Sasha’s nightmare. The narrative ends on a strangled note of silence. With *Mrs. Dalloway*, however, I am left with the determined whispering of hope, a vision of “life, with its varieties, its irreticences,” resurrected from beneath “a pavement of monuments” and spread in vibrant colour across the pages of her text.

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