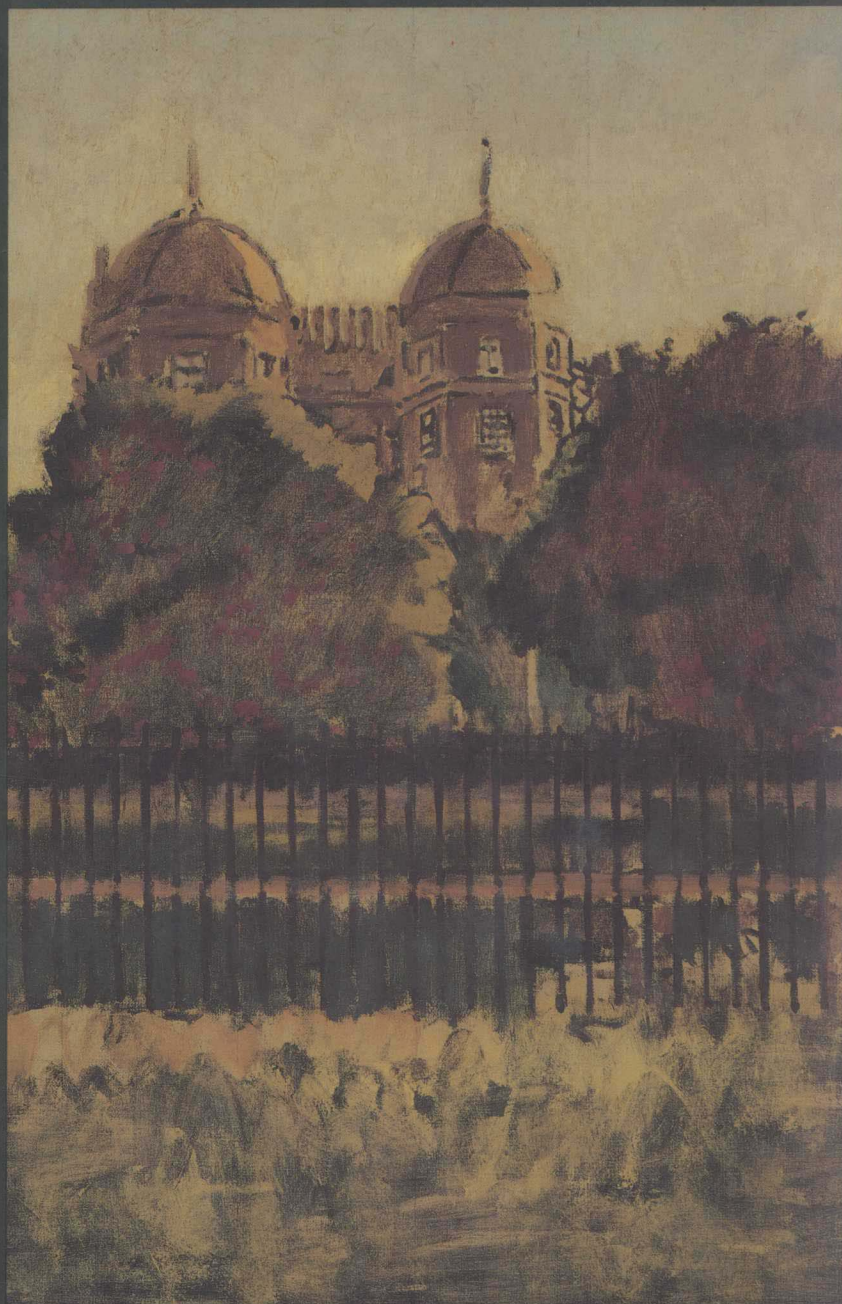


Modern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

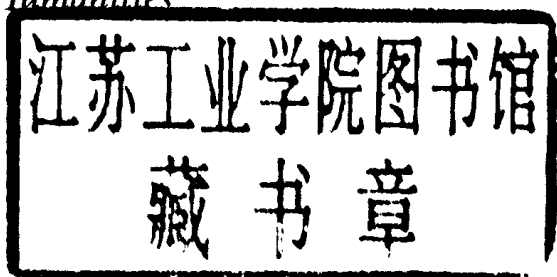
Virginia Woolf's
Mrs. Dalloway



Modern Critical Interpretations

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Mrs. Dalloway

Edited and with an introduction by
Harold Bloom
Sterling Professor of the Humanities
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Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best critical interpretations of Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. The critical essays are arranged here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Shawn Rosenheim for his aid in editing this volume.

My introduction centers upon the Paterian Impressionism of perception and sensation in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Allen McLaurin, arguing against Reuben Brower, demonstrates how the novel's recurrent images transcend mere decoration. In a detailed close reading, Hermione Lee emphasizes "narrative texture," which enables Woolf to link together Clarissa's past and present, and connect both to Septimus.

Maria DiBattista, in a feminist reading, relates Woolf's sense of her characters' identity to issues of history, state, religion, time, and power. Pater returns in Perry Meisel's analysis, which suggests that Clarissa survives, where Septimus cannot, because she has Pater's discipline of *ascesis*, and poor Septimus has not.

In J. Hillis Miller's deconstructive reading, *Mrs. Dalloway* is seen as being organized around various forms of recurrence, a "repetition of the past in memory." Elizabeth Abel, combining feminist and Freudian modes, argues that the novel foregrounds the domestic, romantic plot while burying the story of Clarissa's development as a woman.

Mrs. Dalloway's openness to life is the subject of Lucio Ruotolo, who affirms that she "transcends, however tentatively, the constraints of gender, class, and hierarchy." In this volume's concluding essay, Alex Zwerdling interprets the novel as a social text which both reflects a set class structure and also demonstrates a countervailing sensibility in several figures, most complexly in Clarissa Dalloway.

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Introduction

In May 1940, less than a year before she drowned herself, Virginia Woolf read a paper to the Worker's Educational Association in Brighton. We know it as the essay entitled "The Leaning Tower," in which the Shelleyan emblem of the lonely tower takes on more of a social than an imaginative meaning. It is no longer the point of survey from which the poet Athanase gazes down in pity at the dark estate of mankind, and so is not an image of contemplative wisdom isolated from the mundane. Instead, it is "the tower of middle-class birth and expensive education," from which the poetic generation of W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice stare sidelong at society. Woolf does not say so, but we can surmise that she preferred Shelley to Auden, while realizing that she herself dwelt in the leaning tower, unlike Yeats, to whom the lonely tower remained an inevitable metaphor for poetic stance.

It is proper that "The Leaning Tower," as a speculation upon the decline of a Romantic image into belatedness, should concern itself also with the peculiarities of poetic influence:

Theories then are dangerous things. All the same we must risk making one this afternoon since we are going to discuss modern tendencies. Directly we speak of tendencies or movements we commit ourselves to the belief that there is some force, influence, outer pressure which is strong enough to stamp itself upon a whole group of different writers so that all their writing has a certain common likeness. We must then have a theory as to what this influence is. But let us always remember—influences are infinitely numerous; writers are infinitely sensitive; each writer has a different sensibility. That is why literature is always changing, like the

weather, like clouds in the sky. Read a page of Scott; then of Henry James; try to work out the influences that have transformed the one page into the other. It is beyond our skill. We can only hope therefore to single out the most obvious influences that have formed writers into groups. Yet there are groups. Books descend from books as families descend from families. Some descend from Jane Austen; others from Dickens. They resemble their parents, as human children resemble their parents; yet they differ as children differ, and revolt as children revolt. Perhaps it will be easier to understand living writers as we take a quick look at some of their forebears.

A critic of literary influence learns to be both enchanted and wary when such a passage is encountered. Sensibility is indeed the issue, since without "a different sensibility" no writer truly is a writer. Woolf's sensibility essentially is Paterian, as Perry Meisel accurately demonstrates. She is hardly unique among the great Modernist writers in owing much to Pater. That group includes Wilde, Yeats, Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane, as well as Pound and Eliot. Among the novelists, the Paterians, however involuntary, include Scott Fitzgerald, the early Joyce, and in strange ways both Conrad and Lawrence, as well as Woolf. Of all these, Woolf is most authentically Pater's child. Her central tropes, like his, are personality and death, and her ways of representing consciousness are very close to his. The literary ancestor of those curious twin sensibilities—Septimus Smith and Clarissa Dalloway—is Pater's Sebastian Van Storck, except that Woolf relents, and they do not go into Sebastian's "formless and nameless infinite world, quite evenly grey."

Mrs. Dalloway (1925), the fourth of Woolf's nine novels, is her first extraordinary achievement. Perhaps she should have called it *The Hours*, its original working title. To speak of measuring one's time by days or months, rather than years, has urgency, and this urgency increases when the fiction of duration embraces only hours, as *Mrs. Dalloway* does. The novel's peculiar virtue is the enigmatic doubling between Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith, who do not know one another. We are persuaded that the book is not disjointed because Clarissa and Septimus uncannily share what seem a single consciousness, intense and vulnerable, each fearing to be consumed by a fire perpetually about to break forth. Woolf seems to cause Septimus

to die instead of Clarissa, almost as though the novel is a single apotropaic gesture on its author's part. One thinks of the death died for Marius by Cornelius in Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, but that is one friend atoning for another. However unified, does *Mrs. Dalloway* cogently link Clarissa and Septimus?

Clearly the book does, but only through its manipulation of Pater's evasions of the figure or trope of the self as the center of a flux of sensations. In a book review written when she was only twenty-five, Woolf made a rough statement of the stance towards the self she would take throughout her work-to-come, in the form of a Paterian rhetorical question: "Are we not each in truth the centre of innumerable rays which so strike upon one figure only, and is it not our business to flash them straight and completely back again, and never suffer a single shaft to blunt itself on the far side of us?" Here is Clarissa Dalloway, at the novel's crucial epiphany, not suffering the rays to blunt themselves on the far side of her:

What business had the Bradshaws to talk of death at her party? A young man had killed himself. And they talked of it at her party—the Bradshaws talked of death. He had killed himself—but how? Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt. He had thrown himself from a window. Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness. So she saw it. But why had he done it? And the Bradshaws talked of it at her party!

She had once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine, never anything more. But he had flung it away. They went on living (she would have to go back; the rooms were still crowded; people kept on coming). They (all day she had been thinking of Bourton, of Peter, of Sally), they would grow old. A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death.

The evasiveness of the center is defied by the act of suicide, which in Woolf is a communication and not, as it is in Freud, a murder. Earlier, Septimus had been terrified by a "gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes." The doubling of Clarissa and Septimus implies that there is only a difference in degree, not in kind, between Clarissa's sensibility and the naked consciousness or "madness" of Septimus. Neither needs the encouragement of "Fear no more the heat o' the sun," because each knows that consciousness is isolation and so untruth, and that the right worship of life is to defy that isolation by dying. J. Hillis Miller remarks that "a novel, for Woolf, is the place of death made visible." It seems to me difficult to defend *Mrs. Dalloway* from moral judgments that call Woolf's stance wholly nihilistic. But then, *Mrs. Dalloway*, remarkable as it is, is truly Woolf's starting-point as a strong writer, and not her conclusion.

The Symbolic Keyboard: *Mrs. Dalloway*

Allen McLaurin

The title of this [essay] was inspired by Charles Mauron's introduction to Roger Fry's translations of Mallarmé. Virginia Woolf's sense of emptiness is similar to that of Mallarmé, and she attempts to create from it an art similar to that described by Mauron in his introduction to Fry's translation:

The discovery of "something else" has altered everything, at least in appearance—for we know nothing of the psychological depths of the question. Something other than reality, however, in the last resort is—nothing. And the whole of literature (as Mallarmé, henceforth perfectly lucid, was to explain to the English public in a style at first sight incomprehensible) consists in the play of modulations between these two extremes.

A capital discovery: for if one thinks at all about the conditions of what Roger Fry calls pure art, one cannot fail to see that the first of these conditions is the establishment of a keyboard. There can be no architecture without fixed points and subtle methods of passing from one to another: without the modal system, no Gregorian music: without "tempered" keyboard, no Bach: without depth and scale of luminous values, no true painting. And the great creators are those who not merely perform and construct, but in the

first place cast their instrument to suit the kind of performance which is proper to them. Mallarmé from the very first knew the two extremes of his own range—crude reality and “grudging silence”; he suffered because he found himself rejected by each in turn. What he wanted was to write, that is, to make free play from one extremity to the other. A keyboard is nothing but a system of transitions.

The transitions between the recurrent images and symbols in *Mrs. Dalloway* form a keyboard of this kind. In his excellent essay on *Mrs. Dalloway*, Reuben Brower points out that the recurrent imagery in that novel indicates an artistic integrity and an underlying consistent vision. He stresses the use of repetitive devices:

The unity of her design depends on the building up of symbolic metaphors through an exquisite management of verbal devices: through exact repetitions, reminiscent variations, the use of related eye and ear imagery, and the recurrence of similar phrase and sentence rhythms.

The integrity which Brower sees in the imagery of *Mrs. Dalloway* is also evident in Virginia Woolf's works as a whole. Bernard Blackstone points out that her work is a whole, in that each scene and image is related to other scenes and images throughout all the novels. An image of this type is the spider's web—the idea of people being attached to each other by an invisible thread constantly recurs throughout her works. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, this example is typical:

And they went further and further from her, being attached to her by a thin thread (since they had lunched with her) which would stretch and stretch, get thinner and thinner as they walked across London; as if one's friends were attached to one's body, after lunching with them, by a thin thread.

Similarly, Virginia Woolf's novels are linked to each other by various strands of imagery. (Another of these characteristic recurrent images, that of the parrot, also occurs in *Mrs. Dalloway*.) Limiting himself to the complexity of the imagery within *Mrs. Dalloway* itself, Brower brings out the significance of certain key words such as “plunge” and “party.” He examines the use of the word “solemn” and finds that its full significance is built up by repetition in different contexts. He sees a two-fold sense of life in the novel, the enjoyment of being included

and the fear of exclusion: "But the sense of being absorbed in the process is inseparable from a fear of being excluded, from the dread that the process may be interrupted." This poise between inclusion and exclusion is in some ways a better expression of the "double nature of repetition" which I have been speaking of. The dual value of the "moment" can indeed be seen from the point of view of inclusion and exclusion from life, but if we persist in our investigation of repetition, I think that it is possible to see certain aspects of *Mrs. Dalloway* in a more favourable light than does Brower; it is possible to see a greater coherence in the keyboard of its images and symbols.

Our starting point in this analysis of the novel is a full recognition of Virginia Woolf's self-consciousness in her use of symbols and images. This involves an investigation into the nature of language and repetition, and not simply a description of her employment of recurrent images and symbols as rhetorical devices or decoration. This is a different emphasis from that of Brower, for he claims to detect in *Mrs. Dalloway* a certain amount of apparently irrelevant adornment. He argues that on occasion Virginia Woolf "elaborates the metaphor out of all proportion to its expressive value" and he instances "the interlude of the 'solitary traveller.' " If we bear in mind Virginia Woolf's introspective interest in language, then this apparent irrelevance becomes part of the complex meaning of the novel. As we saw [elsewhere], language does not repeat a given reality. This solitary traveller interlude is part of Virginia Woolf's investigation of the nature of image and metaphor. Brower's second objection is directly related to this theme: "Perhaps the most obvious examples of metaphorical elaboration for its own sake are the super-literary, pseudo-Homeric similes which adorn various pages of *Mrs. Dalloway*." If we look at the novel with an approach similar to that of Mauron's to Mallarmé's poetry, then these two "irrelevances" which Brower notes can be seen as bound up with each other as part of that "integrity" which he finds in the rest of the novel. What we have in *Mrs. Dalloway* is the establishment of a keyboard, a "system of transitions" which moves from the complete fusion to the complete separation of the human and the natural. If we take as our starting point the question "in what way are the image and symbol connected with each other and with external reality?" then the apparently irrelevant imagery becomes directly relevant.

Our symbolic keyboard is made up of images which range from the subterranean (the fish, physical sensation) to the aerial (the aeroplane, science); the third term in the triad is the terrestrial (the tree, myth

and metaphor). Within this overall keyboard, Virginia Woolf constructs various scales. We saw [elsewhere] the scale which runs from the “scraping” images to those of “cutting.” We can understand this process better, perhaps, if we concentrate on the three key symbols mentioned, the fish, the tree and the aeroplane. But it must be borne in mind that this is only one of the tunes played in the novel. This scale is one ranging from the complete fusion of internal and external reality in the scraping of the fish, to the complete separation of the human and the natural in the latest scientific marvel, the aeroplane. The old woman singing marks a transition from pre-linguistic sensation to the beginning of language, our first step out of the water into an amphibious region:

A sound interrupted him; 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—

the voice of no age or sex, the voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth; which issued, just opposite Regent’s Park Tube Station, from a tall quivering shape, like a funnel, like a rusty pump, like a windbeaten tree for ever barren of leaves which lets the wind run up and down its branches singing

ee um fah um so
foo swee too eem oo,

and rocks and creaks and moans in the eternal breeze.

We have here again the evolutionary idea which itself involves the notion of a scale with “transitions” from one species to another—a very Butlerian theme:

Through all ages—when the pavement was grass, when it was swamp, through the age of tusk and mammoth, through the age of silent sunrise—the battered woman—for she wore a skirt—with her right hand exposed, her left clutching at her side, stood singing of love—love which has lasted a million years.

This earthly creature is, on our scale, one note down from "mother nature" who appears in that "interlude of the solitary traveller" which Brower objected to as being irrelevant. In the passage to which he refers, the human and the non-human are beginning to separate:

she seemed like the champion of the rights of sleepers, like one of those spectral presences which rise in twilight in woods made of sky and branches. The solitary traveller, haunter of lanes, disturber of ferns, and devastator of great hemlock plants, looking up suddenly, sees the giant figure at the end of the ride.

The human being has become a mere visitor on the earth and has to consciously project a human face onto the external world:

Such are the visions which ceaselessly float up, pace beside, put their faces in front of, the actual thing; often overpowering the solitary traveller and taking away from him the sense of the earth, the wish to return, and giving him for substitute a general peace, as if (so he thinks as he advances down the forest ride) all this fever of living were simplicity itself.

Elizabeth, being further removed from "nature" in her concern with religious myth, rather than the myth of "mother nature," strongly objects to being compared to a tree, or having her beauty compared with the beauty of nature: "People were beginning to compare her to poplar trees, early dawn, hyacinths, fawns, running water, and garden lilies; and it made her life a burden to her." The next transition is from the use of cliché, in which nature is merely coinage, to the scientific attitude, in which nature is seen as "data." Between the two comes Septimus, who is "connected" with the trees, but in a way which, like the rest of his madness, is a pseudo-scientific relationship of apparent cause and effect: "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." This is also clearly part of the "thread" imagery which was mentioned earlier. On the blinds of the official car, the tree has been converted into a sign, it is simply a pattern "like a tree." But it triggers some hidden war-horror in Septimus' memory, it is "as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames. . . . The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames." The same complex of

tree, "grey" and fire is evoked later by the image of an artificial tree created by an indoor firework, a harmless employment of the gunpowder which had given Septimus shellshock: "as if he had set light to a grey pellet on a plate and there had risen a lovely tree in the brisk sea-salted air of their intimacy."

In *Mrs. Dalloway* Virginia Woolf examines some of the meanings of "symbol." The symbolic vision and the establishment of a keyboard run counter to the science of Bradshaw and Holmes. For them, symbolism is evidence of disease, as their diagnosis of Septimus indicates: "He was attaching meanings to words of a symbolical kind. A serious symptom to be noted on the card." In the novel, the aeroplane is the symbol of symbols. For Mr Bentley it is a triumph of scientific achievement:

Away and away the aeroplane shot, till it was nothing but a bright spark; an aspiration; a concentration; a symbol (so it seemed to Mr Bentley, vigorously rolling his strip of turf at Greenwich) of man's soul; of his determination, thought Mr Bentley, sweeping round the cedar tree, to get outside his body, beyond his house, by means of thought, Einstein, speculation, mathematics, the Mendelian theory—away the aeroplane shot.

For the scientific man, Nature has become a strip of turf to be vigorously rolled, just as Septimus, according to Bradshaw, must be crushed into submission, and for Miss Kilman, human nature must be religiously "converted." Mr Bentley sees Man's achievements as mathematical and scientific, and so his interpretation of what is meant by a symbol is scientific. For different characters the aeroplane has various meanings. This symbol of man's soul, as Bentley calls it, is used for the trivial purpose of advertising some product or other (and people differ in their interpretation of what the plane is writing in the sky). It is not a straightforward symbol, simply standing for something else in an allegorical way. We must not go to the other extreme, as some critics are in danger of doing, of seeing it as completely meaningless, as simply a technical device which enables the writer to relate spatially separated characters and to jump from one mind to another. It is neither an allegory nor a technical device, but a symbol in a wider sense. It is related to religious symbolism:

Then, while a seedy-looking nondescript man carrying a leather bag stood on the steps of St Paul's Cathedral, and

hesitated, for within was what balm, how great a welcome, how many tombs with banners waving over them, tokens of victories not over armies, but over, he thought, that plaguy spirit of truth seeking which leaves me at present without a situation, and more than that, 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 spirit, disembodied, ghostly—why not enter in? he thought, and while he hesitated out flew the aeroplane over Ludgate Circus.

The religious, scientific and martial attitudes form a mutual criticism here; the three faiths are undercut and we are left with a trivial advertisement, and even that is ineffective:

It was strange; it was still. Not a sound was to be heard above the traffic. Unguided it seemed; sped of its own free will. And now, curving up and up, straight up, like something mounting in ecstasy, in pure delight, out from behind poured white smoke looping, writing a T, and O, an F.

We have seen how the solitary traveller episode fits into the rest of the novel, but there remains Brower's other objection, to the "pseudo-Homeric similes." Clearly, these are part of our keyboard, part of the transition between simile, metaphor and symbol which we have been tracing, and so a passage like the following has its place:

As a person who had dropped some grain of pearl or diamond into the grass and parts the tall blades very carefully, this way and that, and searches here and there vainly, and at last spies it there at the roots, so she went through one thing and another.

The dislocation here, the separation between vehicle and tenor, is clearly deliberate. Further, the similes are not "pseudo-Homeric" they are mock-heroic, for they fit into their own pattern of allusion and display the disjunction between the traditional martial values and the actual squalor and waste of the First World War, which is personified in Septimus. Brower has failed to sense the ironic tone of much of the novel, a tone and attitude close to Eliot's *Waste Land* which the Hogarth

press had published four years earlier. So, Clarissa Dalloway shores against her ruin the song from *Cymbeline*:

Fear no more the heat o' the sun
Nor the furious winter's rages.

Brower's objection, then, to the Homeric similes and to the so-called interlude of the solitary traveller, on the grounds that they are irrelevant, is not tenable, for they are both aspects of that web of allusion which binds the novel together.

On the scale which we have established, the following passage marks the transition from myth to metaphor. This is the world of Ceres and Mother Nature, of Sirens and Mermaids:

Such are the visions which proffer great cornucopias full of fruit to the solitary traveller, or murmur in his ear like sirens lolloping away on the green sea waves, or are dashed in his face like bunches of roses, or rise to the surface like pale faces which fishermen flounder through floods to embrace.

The mock-epic element in *Mrs. Dalloway* has often been compared with Joyce's use of epic in *Ulysses*. It is evident how much more general are Virginia Woolf's allusions. Her framework is not a particular epic, but, as I have tried to establish, a keyboard of symbols. She is much more concerned with the general type of simile or theme in epic poetry, and particularly with the glorification of war which led to the sickening waste of the First World War. This waste and degradation is conveyed in the irony of the allusion to Ceres in the following passage:

Something was up, Mr Brewer knew; Mr Brewer, managing clerk at Sibley's and Arrowsmith's, auctioneers, valuers, land and estate agents; something was up, he thought, and, being paternal with his young men, and thinking very highly of Smith's abilities, and prophesying that he would, in ten or fifteen years, succeed to the leather arm-chair in the inner room under the skylight with the deed-boxes around him, "if he keeps his health," said Mr Brewer, and that was the danger—he looked weakly; advised football, invited him to supper and was seeing his way to consider recommending a rise of salary, when something happened which threw out many of Mr Brewer's calculations, took away his ablest young fellows, and eventually, so prying and insidious were