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Bakalářská práce

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Phenomenological Reading of Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway

Fenomenologická interpretace Mrs. Dalloway Virginie Woolfové

Ráda bych poděkovala Mgr. Ondřeji Šveci, Ph.D. za odvahu, preciznost a trpělivost při vedení mé práce. Zároveň chci poděkovat svým rodičům za jejich cenné rady a znalosti, bez kterých by téma práce nikdy nevzniklo.

Prohlášení:

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Abstrakt: Cílem této práce je poskytnout kritické čtení knihy *Mrs. Dalloway* od Virginie Woolfové prostřednictvím aplikace argumentačních struktur a termínů Maurice Merleau-Pontyho, jak je zavedl ve svém díle *Fenomenologie vnímání*. Postupným implementováním konceptů *fenomenálního pole*, *anonymního subjektu*, *komunikace*, *času* a *svobody* tak, jak je nacházíme ve *Fenomenologii vnímání*, provedeme fenomenologickou analýzu Woolfové románu. V závěrečné části pojednáváme na příkladu postavy Septima Warrena Smitha o odchylce od běžných způsobů vnímání u člověka trpícího duševním onemocněním. V průběhu naší analýzy se zaměříme nejen na podobnosti, ale také na rozdíly mezi oběma přístupy, které jsou nejvýrazněji patrné v části věnované mezilidským vztahům.

Klíčová slova: Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Virginia Woolf; Paní Dallowayová; Fenomenologie vnímání; fenomenologické čtení; komunikace; kulturní objekt; čas; sebevražda; šílenství; subjekt; druzí

Abstract: The objective of this work is to provide a critical reading of *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf through the application of Merleau-Ponty's argument structures and terms as introduced in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. By following the structure of *Phenomenology of Perception*, we implement the concepts of the *phenomenal field*, *anonymous subject*, *communication*, *time* and *freedom* to conduct a phenomenological analysis of Woolf's novel. In the final part, we discuss the deviation from common modes of perception in a person suffering from mental illness, as demonstrated through the character of Septimus Warren Smith. Throughout our analysis, we will focus not only on the similarities but also on the differences between the two approaches, which are most prominently seen in the section dedicated to interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Virginia Woolf; Mrs. Dalloway; Phenomenology of Perception; phenomenological reading; communication; cultural object; time; suicide; madness; subject; the Other

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1 Introduction

Both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Phenomenology of Perception* begin, so to say, on a street. We are put into the skin of Clarissa Dalloway, forced to start experiencing the world around her with all its noises, smells, sights, errors and movements. Merleau-Ponty, more systematically but with similar intentions nonetheless, commences his work by presenting to us the multitude of false theories of what it means to perceive. After we are thrown into the world that both authors introduce to us in their respective styles, we start to follow a similar line of reasoning: both Merleau-Ponty and Woolf start by describing the reality of the daily experience of the world and expand their arguments and demonstrations towards the descriptions of our lives as social beings. The climax of both meditations is the problem of the self. While writing this I feel like correcting my previous sentence, to say something in the spirit of: “they start on the surface and dig deeper until they discover the true constitution of a subject” which is a statement that both of them, and I am sure of this, would hate. There is no body and soul distinction, no inside and outside in either of their works. There is only a kaleidoscope of the subjective experiences and perceptions all connected through the fabric of our being as social creatures. In “Room of One’s Own” Woolf writes that “the writer, as I think, has the chance to live more than other people in the presence of this reality. It is his business to find it and collect it and communicate it to the rest of us...”¹ This is the project that she sets for her novel: to truthfully and authentically capture what it is like to live.

Similarly, Merleau-Ponty finishes his Preface by the following definition of phenomenology: “It [phenomenology] is as painstaking as the works of Balzac, Proust, Valéry or Cézanne—by reason of the same kind of attentiveness and wonder, the same demand for awareness, the same will to seize the meaning of the world or of history as that meaning comes into being.”² It is this shared goal of capturing “the meaning of the world” that provides us with material for a unique comparison. The difference in styles and strategies is enormous and yet their goal seems to be alike. My aim is to showcase not only their similarities but most importantly diversions of the two works focusing mostly on the problem of communication and free will.

I hope to challenge some of Merleau-Ponty’s claims regarding the nature of our everyday experience with the Other and to suggest a slightly different critical reading of *Mrs. Dalloway*

¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Grafton, 1977), 119.

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2005), xxiv.

than what we are used to encountering in various companions and literary magazines. Most works of literature would not benefit from the approach that I have chosen. There will be no separate discussion of formal aspects of narrative, symbolism, characters, etc. which are of the greatest importance when discussing the majority of literary canon. But in case of *Mrs. Dalloway* it is, in my opinion, the most suitable way to write about this piece of work. As was said earlier, Woolf tried to capture the reality of a day on the pages of her novel in one fluid, uninterrupted stream of thoughts, perceptions and emotions. By choosing the phenomenological approach as our strategy for literary criticism, we lose some of the proven building blocks of literary critique but we also gain a new structure of terms and relations that will allow us to better highlight the strange effect or “realness” that *Mrs. Dalloway* famously produces.

The structure of my thesis follows roughly the structure of *Phenomenology of Perception*. We will try to map the argument from the establishment of the relationship between a subject and the world to the definition of temporality. *Mrs. Dalloway*, on the other hand, is very confused and non-linear work; there are no chapters to follow but there is this subtle division between two “plot” lines: that of Clarissa and the story of Septimus Warren Smith that only intertwine at the end of the novel. This structure is reflected in my work as well with first three chapters being dedicated to Clarissa’s difficult relationship with the Other and the last one to Septimus’s madness. So let us start from the beginning, from our relationship with the natural world and navigate our way towards more complex problems of the Other and the constitution of a subject.

2 The World

The world of Clarissa Dalloway is vivid, dynamic, ungraspable and full of impressions. It is perhaps here – more than in works of the continental modernist writers such as Mann or Kafka, whose attempts were often focused more on exceptional moments of one’s life rather than the everyday experience – that we encounter the almost perfect portrayal (for we do not seek analysis in Woolf’s case) of what a human experience is like. In the following chapter I will demonstrate how Virginia Woolf’s literary style displays the relationship between the world and a human consciousness, and compare her portrayal with Merleau-Ponty’s explanation of the very same problem. In the subsequent chapters the focal point of my investigations is going to be the comparison of both authors and a proposal of primacy of Woolf’s portrayal of human experience over Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological description. But in this first chapter I am forced to reduce the scenes from *Mrs. Dalloway* to a slightly more diminishing role of affirmative demonstrations of Merleau-Ponty’s claims. It is necessary for the establishment of the key terms upon which I can build up further discussions. So let us start with a brief introduction to Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*.

What distinguishes Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the relationship between a subject and the world from those of empiricist or intellectualist philosophers is the “nearness” of the world and the subject. Unlike empiricists he does not subscribe to the idea of the “self-sufficient” material world which remains unaltered by the subject nor does he agree with the intellectualist’s concept of Transcendental Ego which gives the world all its reality. For Merleau-Ponty the existence-granting process is always bilateral: The world is always being established by a subject while the subject herself is constantly being constructed as a project of the said world³. Alternatively, our ability to perceive, exist, alter and constitute the world around us stems from our nature as its product that finds its origin in it and through this tight connection is granted the ability to influence it. This relationship is possible thanks to the bodily nature of perception. The perception, for Merleau-Ponty, is not something that is “triggered” or “received” by consciousness through the means of body – perception *is* bodily phenomenon. In this chapter I will aim to discuss and demonstrate the process of the perception and interaction of a subject with the world by explaining the concepts of *phenomenal field* and *anonymous existence*. The former is important for our understanding of *what* the perception of the world

³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 499.

actually is in terms of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology and the latter will provide us with a tool to comprehend the special position of the Other in our shared world.

2.1 The Phenomenal field

This strange concept is most substantial for Merleau-Ponty's efforts of reuniting the inner and the outer world that has been forcefully separated by empiricists and intellectualists alike. The *phenomenal field* is the sphere of all our perceptions, with their possibilities and limitations. It is not a mental image of the outside world that we would create in our intellect but rather, it is an open set of all that is there to be perceived by a subject at any given moment. Through the adjustment of our position in the world, the *phenomenal field* changes and gets constituted anew. It is the world as we live it. There are no specific objects in *phenomenal field*, just a swarm of phenomena that get forgotten and recalled anew when we decide to observe them more closely.

This state, the most fundamental prerequisite of any perception, would not be possible without a thorough reconceptualization of the common perception of a body as an object, as something that is governed by our consciousness or soul. The body is the very thing that experiences and hence bounds us to the common sphere of the perceived. Therefore, we must recognize our body as the source of all action, as something that moves, touches and feels and hence connects us to the world by which we are constituted while remaining its undividable part. Multiple problems arise when we are presented with these explanations of the subject-world relationship: Firstly, is it possible for Woolf, as we have claimed at the beginning of the chapter, to adequately describe such condition as the *phenomenal field* when one of its most distinct characteristics is that it is devoid of any qualities which only emerge after we focus on the specific objects? Secondly, what exactly is the role of the body in this construction? How can the body be an undividable part of the world when it is the body that perceives it? How can we dismiss this intuitive subject – object relation? And lastly, does our way of perceiving change when confronted with another subject? I will attempt to elucidate these questions in the following paragraphs.

Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that “the phenomenal field (...) places a fundamental difficulty in the way of any attempt to make experience directly and totally explicit.”⁴ One cannot enumerate objects in order to capture the nature of the *phenomenal field* for it would lead her to the same mistaken construction emblematic of the empiricist understanding of the

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 70.

problem: the *phenomenal field* is not a collection of sensations or qualities. Those can be extracted *after* the act of focusing and observation but they do not sufficiently characterize what existing (which equals perceiving) in the world in a passive manner is like. It would be just as futile as trying to name every value of an interval. There is no way of ever adequately describing the nature of our constant state of unfocused perception as we are limited by the grammatical structures that require a predicative construction (which, in its essence, is always qualifying or classifying), an object, complements, adverbials and so on. We can only describe things based on their characteristics which, as we have said above, do not have their place in the sphere of *phenomenal field*. And yet, the description of a busy London street that opens Woolf's novel seems to be achieving exactly that sensation of perpetual unfocused perception of the peripheral world:

“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

We, as readers, are introduced, through the eyes, ears, flesh and orientation of Clarissa Dalloway, to what Merleau-Ponty would describe as *phenomenal field*. In this excerpt she is not orienting herself towards any of the objects that were described. The sudden and fast enumeration of *things* (for even people's eyes are not much else than mere *things* at this point, they are not familiar, they are just as opaque as any other inanimate object which shall be discussed in the second chapter more carefully) represents the constant stream of perceptions. Woolf introduces the world as uncertain, unspecified and everchanging. This world is not thoroughly examined which reflects the authentic experience of everyday life. Clarissa is a part of the world which moves around her, produces an instant blast of impressions that she receives with the potentiality of focusing on them if pleased. What tools did Woolf use that allowed us to intuitively understand this description as something unfocused and as if without a definite quality – as *phenomenal field*? It is her use of ellipsis. It is true, we still have some enumeration, as it is inevitable but only enough to tickle our imagination, to nudge it in the correct direction and then leave it to its own devices. It corresponds to Merleau-Ponty's remark that one of the main attributes of consciousness is that “it is of the essence of consciousness to forget its own phenomena thus enabling ‘things’ to be constituted.”⁶ We do not remember the phenomena that constitute the *phenomenal field* in a distinct way, we only remember them as standalone objects

⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: Harper Press, 2013), 2.

⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 67.

once we observe them – when we ascribe them some quality and hence pull them out of the mush that is the *phenomenal field*. Let us imagine that we are sitting in a tram. Suddenly, we notice a dog chewing on a toy and we ask to pet it. When we come home, a friend asks us how our ride was. What will we tell him? Well we will probably describe the dog, his toy, a manner in which it behaved, who was its owner and so on. But our friend wants to know more. We can say that there were other people, there were cars on the road, buildings on the street and many other things which we are not able to further specify as they were mere parts of an infinite number of phenomena that constituted our *phenomenal field* at that time. When it comes to the dog, we cannot imagine him in the same way. Our consciousness already forgot our perception of the dog as a part of *phenomenal field* in order to constitute him as an object of our observation. Which one of these states does Woolf's description evoke? I would argue that the former. There are only three verbs in the whole section, the actions are described in very vague terms, the objects and their directions are jumbled and the whole section ends with three very broad terms that all contain a sense of "atmosphere" rather than description. It is thanks to this scarcity of information, the intentional withdrawal of any specific qualification, that Woolf achieves the sensation of a background upon which we expect an object of Clarissa's attention to arise.

The unfocused perception of the world around her, or, in other words – portrayal of the *phenomenal field* is explicitly disturbed in two instances: A) when she hears a plane over her head and tries to decrypt the message it is trying to write, B) when a car with a monarch is sighted. Both of those actions cause a ripple in the vortex of unconscious perceptions of which Clarissa can note only that they (as a whole) cause her "to love life". She would not be capable of specifying what colour were the eyes that she looked into, what kind of sandwiches a man was selling or what was the melody emitted by the barrel organ. But when she focuses her attention on a specific object of her perception, the narrative changes. Compare these two scenes:

A) "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! Every one looked up."⁷

B) "The violent explosion which made Mrs. Dalloway jump and Miss Pym go to the window and apologise came from a motor car which had drawn to the side of the pavement precisely opposite Mulberry's shop window. Passers-by who, of course, stopped and stared, had just time

⁷ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 17.

to see a face of the very greatest importance against the dove-grey upholstery, before a male hand drew the blind and there was nothing to be seen except a square of dove grey.”⁸

In the scene A, the object that prompts the focus of people is something interesting, out of ordinary, mysterious in its illegibility. The plane is triggering people’s love for riddles. In scene B, the object of attention is once again covered in mystery: who is the very important person behind the tainted windows? Did I just find myself in the presence of the Queen? The power of the symbol is strong enough to spark attention of (until now) inattentive passers-by. We are now reading full sentences with qualifying descriptions such as “white smoke,” “opposite Mulberry’s shop window,” “a male hand” etc.

Merleau-Ponty argues that the attentive perception of an object is in its nature transformative. It is not just a further “inner discussion” of an empiric perception that I already have but rather a new “reestablishment” of “the unity of the object in a new dimension at the very moment when they destroy it.”⁹ The consciousness must forget its phenomenon and build it anew in its more specific form. If we compare this understanding with the excerpt from *Mrs. Dalloway*, we will observe a similar pattern. What otherwise was just a plane in the sky (“some aeroplane overhead”) becomes an object of attention for the onlookers. By perceiving the smoke coming out the plane as letters, the perception is modified and the object of attention transformed. It articulates itself with every new letter till it comes to the resolution when people read the entire message and understand it as what it is: an advertisement for toffee. For some people on the street the smoke will remain just that, a smoke somewhere in the sky, a background. But once the attention is employed, the smoke gets a new meaning and provides the attentive observer with new *knowledge*. We look at the objects, concentrate our eyesight on them and so *pull* them in front of the *phenomenal field* which, nonetheless, still remains in our unfocused vision, readily awaiting our attention if we wish to grant it. We re-constitute the world around us with every transfer of our attention.

The shift from *phenomenal field* to a specific object is easily provable just by looking at the structure of the utterances just as we have demonstrated in the previous paragraphs. Woolf is very effective in her manipulation of the reader’s imagination through the formal means of language. She forces us to experience the act of observation that we are all intimately familiar with through the skin of one of her characters. We, as readers, “look up” with the characters, the scene’s authenticity is granted by its evoking of our own lived experience as we know it.

⁸ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 11.

⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 35.

We can feel ourselves follow a passing car with our eyes, lifting our head towards the sky etc. This brings us to our second point, the importance of a body as the thing that perceives.

2.2 The Body

In the introductory paragraph of the Part II “The Theory Of The Body Is Already A Theory Of Perception” Merleau-Ponty begins his conception of the world and its relation to the conscious body. The first predisposition for successful perception of the world is body that is positioned towards it. Mrs. Coates is looking up, following the smoke of the plane with her eyes, trying to find a perspective that would give her the object of her attention as defined as possible. Similar example can be found during Clarissa’s visit to the florist: “turning her head from side to side among the irises and roses and nodding tufts of lilac with her eyes half closed, snuffing in, after the street uproar, the delicious scent, the exquisite coolness.”¹⁰ Clarissa looks from one flower to the other, moves her head, takes in array of perspectives, observes how the colour of flowers changes. She even smells the air. They are the same flowers that take up space in the world just being looked at from different angles and hence gradually being discovered in their multitudes of qualities by Clarissa’s perception of them. The “immediacy” of the *phenomenal field* and its objects is granted by the inclusion of the body in the world and by the abolishment of dualism. One can only “take in the world” through our experience as material. It is our body that moves, changes perspective and gathers information and hence constitutes the world around it. Maybe it sounds trivial. Of course we perceive with our body, how else should we do it? The unintuitive part is that it is our body that perceives with *nothing behind it*.

We are more than used to expressions such as: “my eyes deceive *me*” or “it has a mind of its own”. It does not strike us as strange to talk about our body-parts as somewhat independent from *us* or to associate the ability of behaving and moving with “a mind”. Merleau-Ponty wants to eradicate all of these artifacts of cartesian dualism. It is not shocking that our senses are bound to our material form, not even Descartes would oppose to that, but the originality of Merleau-Ponty’s take lies in its claim that we *are* this material form. For him, “the eyes”, the body, are not the origin of perception that is subsequently evaluated and reconstructed in a mind but rather the perception itself, fully formed.¹¹ That is why a body cannot be regarded as one of the objects of our perceptual field. It is not an “object” that has “a mind of its own” that governs it and prescribes its movement according to its fancy but rather a subject herself that orients

¹⁰ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 10.

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 107.

herself towards the world and thus perceives – not according to an invisible puppeteer but through motivation triggered by the flux of phenomena surrounding her.

2.3 The Anonymous existence

It might seem that we have dismissed the idea of an objective world. After all, we are all our separate bodies, which should mean that the world is different based on everyone's subjective point of view. There is no metaphysical connection that would bind us together, no universal matter of which the souls are made. How is it possible to establish any common ground? Why do people from the excerpts look collectively at the sky? It is because even though we indeed are unique subjects, we have the ability to perceive the world around us not as a fully formed subjects with our qualities, ideas and experiences but rather as subjects pre-personal and *anonymous*. How does this work? By looking at a thing from a different angle and attentively perceiving it, it gives itself to us as what it is (unless I am somehow disabled but we shall omit this exception for now). This natural world is what we share with the others. We are never alone in it. We recognize the world as given to other subjects that we perceive as something more than another objects of our perception:

“In reality, the other is not enclosed in my perspective on the world because that perspective itself does not have definite limits, because it slips spontaneously into that of the other, and because they come together in a single world in which we all participate as anonymous subjects of perception”¹²

Just as we perceive our surroundings as one unified field of perceptions, not as sounds *and* sights *and* smells but rather as one continuous field of perceptions that gives itself to us, we also do not consider the world as shattered to pieces, each closed off in a subjective perspective – the world is not a jigsaw puzzle of every subjective perception. Of course, there are personal reasons why the perception of the world can be different from person to person but the world *can* be shared. This is possible thanks to the *anonymous existence* that we all partake in and build our personal existence upon. Because of this anonymous core of our perceptual experience, we can *agree* with the other on what the natural world is. It is a state before the personal distinctions come to play.

The division between the anonymous and personal subject might be quite obscure so let us now investigate how *Mrs. Dalloway* deals with the problem of multiple perspectives – it is,

¹² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 411.

after all, one of the most innovative aspects of this novel. Is her world shattered and unstable due to the multitude of subjective points of view?

Clarissa is looking at the flowers but so is Miss Pym, the florist. As we have explained above, the perception of everything is always bodily and which would seem to imply that it is also necessarily subjective but the flowers that they are observing are *there* for both of them. The individual perspectives are captured by Woolf in a very dynamic style that tends to jump as if from the mind of one character to the other. The description of the world is never as if captured by an objective camera but rather moves and changes based on who is the one perceiving it. Because of a third person narrator it is not always easy to distinguish whose body we are “occupying” at any given moment. This is of the highest importance. If the perspective of the world was always subjective, surely we would have no problem establishing which character is perceiving it at the moment but that does not seem to be the case. The subjective perspectives of her characters are not separate but rather always intrinsically connected as the perspectives of a shared environment which makes “the swich” almost undetectable as it is lost in a description that could “belong to anyone” and is thus *anonymous*. For Woolf, just as for Merleau-Ponty, the world as perceived by an *anonymous subject* is what allows us to coexist as not entirely separate entities but rather subjects connected through their primal existence as the anonymous experiencers of the world.

To demonstrate this point further, consider this scene:

“Love—but here the other clock, the clock which always struck two minutes after Big Ben, came shuffling in with its lap full of odds and ends, which it dumped down as if Big Ben were all very well with his majesty laying down the law, so solemn, so just, but she must remember all sorts of little things besides—Mrs. Marsham, Ellie Henderson, glasses for ices (...) She must telephone now at once.

Volubly, troublously, the late clock sounded, coming in on the wake of Big Ben, with its lap full of trifles. Beaten up, broken up by the assault of carriages, the brutality of vans, the eager advance of myriads of angular men, of flaunting women, the domes and spires of offices and hospitals, the last relics of this lap full of odds and ends seemed to break, like the spray of an exhausted wave, upon the body of Miss Kilman standing still in the street for a moment to mutter "It is the flesh."¹³

Both Clarissa and Miss Kilman hear the same sound present in the natural world – the striking of a clock that is two minutes late. What is completely different is their personal perception of it. For Clarissa it works as an alarm-clock that wakes her up from her pondering and reminds her of her party-related duties. The narrator then continues in her descriptions of the sound of

¹³ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 119-120.

the clock – the perception of the sound could belong to anyone, it is anonymous. But even before finishing the sentence and realizing that the point of view has switched from Clarissa to Miss Kilman, an attentive reader can tell, that the clock “sounds different”. When we read it from Clarissa’s point of view, it seems as if the clock became a reflection of herself with its being late, rushing towards the pondering tasks. The clock itself seems to be a busy house-wife, uninterested in what Big Ben, the stately impractical husband whose political endeavours have the air of eternity and hence cannot be rushed, has to say. In the second part of the excerpt the clock is drowned by the buzz of the street where Kilman is standing while the sounds are projected upon her. For her, the clock is somewhat of an insult to the great Big Ben, laughable in its lateness. This “extra” meaning that both women ascribe to the sound is what a personal perception of the world is. It is important to note that there is no such a thing as “pure anonymous perception”, our experience of the world is indeed always subjective but we have *learned* to extract and recognize those parts that we share.

The utilization of *anonymous existence* is of the highest importance for Woolf. The perspectives of her characters do not switch randomly, it always happens when they get a chance to occupy the same space that they all share as *anonymous subjects* and yet are divided by in a subject-other relationship. The point of view switches from Clarissa to Peter when he comes visit her, from Peter to Septimus when he meets him in a park, from Septimus and Rezia to Hugh who is passing by and hears the same announcement as them and so on. Woolf collects her characters on the level of *anonymous existences* and builds them up to their full personal selves, highlighting the commonness of human experience. Two questions arise which will be at core of my investigations: firstly, we have said before that the others cannot be regarded as unconscious objects – perceiving a chair is much different than another human because we understand the Other as having a subjective perception. But is this perception completely closed off? Is everything beyond an *anonymous existence* incomprehensible? Or is there a way how to catch a glimpse of a subjective existence of the Other as well? And secondly, if we establish that such communication is indeed possible, what is that fully fledged Other that we aim to discover?

3 The Other

Descartes made a human being very lonely. He trapped a soul within a body, divorced the outside world and the consciousness and hence forbade us from trusting majority of our perceptions as they were deemed a product of an erring body. This understanding of a subject greatly complicates the problem of communication and recognition of the Other. How could I ever truly know someone if the only thing I “see” of them is their body which *is* theirs, that much is true, but which is not exactly “them”. The mind of the Other remains obscured. Merleau-Ponty, as we have demonstrated in the previous chapter, abhors dualism. The disapproval of cartesian tradition is to be expected of Merleau-Ponty and is not exactly novel; what makes his construction stand out is its alleged efficiency when it comes to the getting-to-know of the Other. He constructs a theory of communication which at times feels almost limitless in its scope of what it can convey. He goes even beyond Husserl who claims that we can empathize with the Other and imagine their perspective based on our own experience. But just as we cannot see the “hidden interior”¹⁴ of an object, neither can we apprehend the experience of the Other as our own genuine perception - we do not actually feel the same way they do but we can understand their dispositions *by analogy* that is possible as we recognize them as beings with the same construction and abilities as we possess. There is no way I could directly look into the Other’s mind, I can only empathize which is in itself limited by my own experience. The *alter ego* remains a paradox.

For Merleau-Ponty, the Other is not that mysterious. Sure, it cannot be comprehended fully, I will never experience the Other in the same manner I can experience myself, but neither is it completely closed off. In Cartesian philosophy the Other is impenetrable because of her material form but in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty presents a completely reversed argument: the Other is comprehensible *because* it is a body. Every person is a conscious being moving in the world that we share. We constitute the world and the world constitutes us. It is because of this unbreakable connection that we can perceive each other not only as some other objects that happen to be also capable of perception but as other subjects whose personal identities are observable in their interactions with the world. We are not consciousnesses floating in our bodies but rather we are conscious through our senso-motoric abilities. This primacy of body provides us with a tool for projecting our thought in the world: “an intention, a thought or a project can detach themselves from the personal subject and

¹⁴ Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008) 137.

become visible outside him in the shape of his body, and in the environment which he builds for himself.”¹⁵ Thanks to our occupying of the same space and our intertwinement with the world, we are able to read other people’s gestures, hear their speech, follow their faces and thus perceive them on the plane of our shared world. The perception is more than empathizing, by observing other people’s bodily acts I can reflect on them and as if *feel* them in myself but not as an analogy to my own personal experience but rather as an experience that is acquirable to me through my pre-personal origin that I share with the Other. Here is the great distinction between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty that we mentioned earlier. Husserl’s theory of analogy retains the distinction between a consciousness and its physical shell – body. Merleau-Ponty opposes followingly: “when my gaze meets another gaze, I re-enact the alien existence in a sort of reflection. There is nothing here resembling ‘reasoning by analogy’. As Scheler so rightly declares, reasoning by analogy presupposes what it is called on to explain.”¹⁶ For if we claimed that I can know the Other only in relation to my own experience of the World, we would be building upon a claim that we already understand the structure of personhood before we even perceive the Other. He arguments that babies, who would not be capable of such a complex task as empathising and perception by analogy, can and do mimic the acts of adults. Merleau-Ponty applies this strategy to adult perception as well. According to him, we do not “understand” the mental conditions of the Other but rather we mirror them in our own bodies which we are permitted to do thanks to our common nature as pre-personal subjects of the social world. Furthermore, this is how we learn not only to understand the Other but also to express ourselves, to communicate. We learn the language, the mimics, gestures and so on in our early age. We smile when our parent smiles at us and thus develop a connection between “feeling happy” and “smiling” – we live their experience in our own body. The “mirroring stage” does not identify the Other with the I, as Husserl would fear, for there is a more advanced level of being which is hidden from us in our toddler years but which we subsequently adapt as we grow older – we become a personal subject that is private. My perception of the Other is not symmetrical, as my subjective personal experience is indeed irreplaceable but it is not purely objective as I share with the Other the inescapable commonness of the social world to which we all inevitably belong.

But why is this important? One might say that at the end of the day it does not matter what “mechanisms” are at play when we are trying to understand each other. How does the

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 406.

¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 410.

method of choice influence the result of it all which is: knowing the Other in her consciousness? It is because of this: if I look at human communication as analogical, I am necessarily locking my own consciousness within the shell of my body, I am perpetuating the faulty division between the ghost and the machine. The idea of *taking* the experience *from* the world to the comfort of our own consciousness where it is reflected and re-lived simply does not go far enough. Merleau-Ponty's indivisibility of the two is the most fundamental principle upon which his theory of perception is built as it prevents us from pretending that there is something mystical and unattainable behind the façade that is our body. It is also important to note that even though technically everything that exists and influences us stems from the physical world, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes a special "sphere" of our existence which he calls a "social world". It is the world of the Other – it is our unbreakable connection to the world of social relations into which we are all integrated from the moment of our birth. He recognizes the subject not only as necessarily related to the physical world that she always perceives and constitutes but also as a subject that is always in communication with the Other and recognizes it thus as its equal – a living perceiving body which has the same primordial relationship to the physical and the social world as I do.

This claim is a reaction to Sartre's conception of the interaction with the Other. There are some similarities between Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's conception of a subject (the existential nature of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology will become clearer in the penultimate chapter of this work) but in the question of the Other they could not differ more. For Sartre, the Other is an object, a "victim" of a *gaze* that dehumanizes her. After someone looks at me I feel ashamed and threatened for I feel that I have become an object of a subject, my subjectivity is taken away from me which gives me a sense of discomfort. Merleau-Ponty does not agree with this distinction. For him, the look of the Other is rarely objectifying even though it is possible:

"In fact the other's gaze transforms me into an object, and mine him, only if both of us withdraw into the core of our thinking nature, if we both make ourselves into an inhuman gaze, if each of us feels his actions to be not taken up and understood, but observed as if they were an insect's. This is what happens, for instance, when I fall under the gaze of a stranger. But even then, the objectification of each by the other's gaze is felt as unbearable only because it takes the place of possible communication."¹⁷

The feeling of objectification is possible but it is a form of privation not a primary mode of perception, as Sartre would have it. Merleau-Ponty relies on the unifying nature of the social world which provides us with common ground. We see the Other as a human body first and

¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 420.

foremost: our perception differs greatly from the way we look at a chair or a dog because it carries with itself the notion of the “same origin”. We know that *communication* can be established as we understand each other as sharing the physical world as *anonymous subjects* and the social world as the heirs of *cultural objects*.

The concept of *cultural objects* in *Phenomenology of Perception* is a little bit vague, in my opinion. They are the building blocks of the social world, the artifacts of those who inhabited the world before us and to whose already established social world we have been born and woven into. They are the objects that emit “atmosphere of humanity”¹⁸, from ruins of an ancient city, to a table. The everyday communication is possible because none of us is themselves fully, we are not separate from the world. The *cultural objects* are the tools through which we communicate with the most prominent of them being language. During our experience in the world we learn to communicate by repeating the actions of the Other in our own body, as we have explained above. This ensures that I do not need to understand the Other through the use of analogy because I can directly conceive his state as if in myself since we share our experience with the social world and its *cultural objects*:

“In the cultural object, I feel the close presence of others beneath a veil of anonymity. Someone uses the pipe for smoking, the spoon for eating, the bell for summoning, and it is through the perception of a human act and another person that the perception of a cultural world could be verified.”¹⁹

The body itself cannot be described as a cultural object because it cannot be *used for* something – unlike pipe that is *used for* smoking – but the behaviour of a human which is manifested through our bodily presence in the world ²⁰is the first of the cultural objects²¹. Someone has established that bowing means respect, that nodding means agreement and that a woman dying her hair pink means that she has just been through a bad breakup. Our behaviour is always understood within the scope of recognised meanings that precede us. And it is precisely because we see each other as bodies that manifest behaviour which is the very first *cultural object* through which all the other *cultural objects* have been established and hence the origin of communication why we do not see the Other as an object unless we suppress not only everything that is human in him but also what is human in us – the awareness of our entanglement with the social world.

¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 405.

¹⁹Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 405.

²⁰Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 273.

²¹Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 406.

I find this conception troublesome and insufficient. For Merleau-Ponty the communication seems to always work. I see the Other, I recognize him as a human body that behaves in a certain way, I can “read” this behaviour thanks to our shared entanglement in the social world that I have, just as the Other, acquired through my life and thus understand him without a need to construct any analogy. I simply intuitively possess the ability to understand. Even if I have not encountered yet the *cultural objects* that he uses for the communication of his feelings, thoughts, states, etc., I can still learn to understand them as they are parts of our shared world and hence always attainable and graspable. I just do what I have been doing my whole life – observe the behaviour of the Other and internalize it in my own body, saving it for future use. Sure, my relationship with the Other will always be asymmetrical and hence opaque as I can always look at him only from the perspective of my own perception, I can never feel his grief, for example, the same as he does but when it comes to communication there seem to be no limits – nothing prevents me from recognizing him as grieving. That is, in my opinion, wrong. Furthermore, there is very little insight into how the *cultural objects* come to existence. He describes the process as: “an intention, a thought or a project (...) detach themselves from the personal subject and become visible outside him in the shape of his body, and in the environment which he builds for himself.”²² but he only elusively explains how a new *cultural object* can come to existence while rather once again highlighting that we are already born into a cultural world that transcends us.

In the following chapter I will further specify the problems I see with Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the Other by contrasting it with Woolf’s writing which, in my opinion, more adequately captures the actual nature of human relationships and answers the problems that I have mentioned above.

3.1 The Social World

3.1.1 Peter

We should perhaps start from ground zero and build up the levels of intimacy as we go. The first example, that I have chosen, demonstrates the interactions of people in a “pre-verbal” state and hence “pre-personal”. It is true that the speech is not the only “cultural object” used for perception of human beings in their subjectivity but for Merleau-Ponty it is the most cardinal of communication devices: “There is one particular cultural object which is destined to play a

²² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 406.

crucial rôle in the perception of other people: language”²³ but the language or any other form of specifying communication is not always present as we know from our everyday experiences. It is important to note that seeing the Other as pre-personal does not equate to seeing him as an object. To be recognized as a pre-personal subject means that one is already observed as a fellow human body whose characteristics are just hidden by the lack of communication. This strange feeling of commonness and fellowship of human race that precedes any specific characterization of the Other is maybe harder to describe than to showcase. Consider the following scene:

“And just because nobody yet knew he was in London, except Clarissa, and the earth, after the voyage, still seemed an island to him, the strangeness of standing alone, alive, unknown, at half-past eleven in Trafalgar Square overcame him. (...) And down his mind went flat as a marsh, and three great emotions bowled over him; understanding; a vast philanthropy; and finally, as if the result of the others, an irrepressible, exquisite delight; as if inside his brain by another hand strings were pulled, shutters moved, and he, having nothing to do with it, yet stood at the opening of endless avenues, down which if he chose he might wander.”²⁴

Peter Walsh is standing on a street. There are masses of people around him, people that he does not know. And in this world full of strangers that are perhaps looking at him just as they would at a lamp post, fleetingly, without interest, he finds himself alone on a crowded London street. The only person that *knows* is Clarissa. The pre-personal subject, that is, all the people around him, is not yet defined in any more detail other than “a human body”, since the communication has not taken place yet. Peter Walsh cannot say that this or that person is such and such, all he can perceive is that they are a fellow human being with ability to evaluate and navigate within the world just as he does. When he focuses his attention he can observe a behaviour of a person and start (very ineffectively) “communicating” with them. It is interesting that for Woolf, at least in this excerpt, people are never mere objects. What excites Peter is exactly their humanity, their partaking on the *social world* that keeps pulling him in whether he likes it or not. The understanding of his involvement with the *social world* comes to him as a euphoric realization – even if he stands on the street, he cannot be truly alone because he belongs to the *social world* that gives him the Other as a separate entity with which he shares his origin that is rooted in their entanglement with the social and the physical world. There is not even a moment of the objectifying gaze. Peter observes the Other in their behaviour, he focuses his attention on the people around him, pulls them to the front of his *phenomenal field* and considers the possible meanings of their behaviours.

²³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 413.

²⁴ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 47.

In the following passage he starts walking behind a woman that caught his eye. Her behaviour allows him to perceive some of her qualities such as: “she's young”²⁵ or “There was colour in her cheeks”²⁶ or that she was laughing. Based on these fleeting perceptions, Peter immediately creates a series of assumptions that are a product of his own imagination. The perception of a young woman, being very shallow and completely one-sided, did allow him to create a nice story, just as one would about a wrapped gift which contents are unknown but which size and shape might hint on possible options. This excerpt demonstrates two things: Firstly, it describes the feeling of commonness with the Other and secondly, it shows our constant need of getting to know the Other which is attainable through familiarization that is conducted by means of *cultural objects*.

The feeling of “belonging” is strengthened by the fact that it is not just people that he sees, it is people *in London* – let us not forget that he has just returned from India – that make him sentimental. It is his return to a culture that shaped his life since childhood and has influenced his form of behaviour throughout his life. He feels his “strings being pulled” by the set of bodies that represent the cultural world that birthed him. At a later point he gets especially happy about the existence of ambulance which he calls “One of the triumphs of civilisation”²⁷ as it is passing by to collect what is left of Septimus Warren Smith. Peter did not start to fight for his class nor country, but the sole act of coming home made him aware of the *social world*. This awareness of what is actually the fabric that constructs our being as a subject is not something one would consider on daily basis but it can be made explicit under a certain set of circumstances: “A revolutionary situation, or one of national danger, transforms those pre-conscious relationships with class and nation, hitherto merely lived through, into the definite taking of a stand; the tacit commitment becomes explicit.”²⁸

One of the main struggles of Peter's is his inability to fit in. He keeps changing his jobs, he is not built for academia, nor for army, he wants to live with a married woman while still loving Clarissa and hating Mrs. Dalloway and so on. He “arms” himself with a pocket knife that he nervously plays with to show his contempt for the “adult world”. His admiration and awe of the “civilization”, of his return to the more familiar and hence more understandable set of cultural objects, is perhaps a bit of mockery done by Woolf given what kind of a character Peter is, but that does not change the fact that she recognizes the necessity of the *social world*

²⁵ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 48.

²⁶ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 49.

²⁷ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 141.

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 423.

and its influence on its subjects. It is the simplification of the *social world* to “cultural heritage” that Woolf ridicules. She saves the more fundamental understanding of what it means to be a part of the *social world* for Clarissa to explain.

3.1.2 Clarissa

Clarissa seems to have a talent for recognising the significance of one’s behaviour; she can “read” people and this ability is one of her most prized possessions: “Her only gift was knowing people almost by instinct, she thought, walking on.”²⁹ There is no need for any kind of “empathy”, she does not *compare* the person she observes to herself but rather is capable of appraising them based solely on their behaviour. Her awareness is quite extraordinary. Not only, is she capable of detailed perception of others, she is also, just like Peter, very aware of the strange shared experience that bounds us all – the *social world*. Compare Peter Welsh’s naïve realization that we have discussed above with the following passage:

“but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself.”³⁰

Clarissa is not so easily impressed by the artifacts that are the cultural objects but, unlike Peter, who has just experienced a series of uncoherent realizations in a form of a *feeling* rather than fully formed thought or opinion, she understands their importance for her personal life. She feels the connection between her and the rest of the mankind that transcends her, she is “part of people she had never met”, part of her childhood home that influenced her in her infant and adolescent years in ways that she can no longer remember and she understands herself as contributing to this net of cultural relations that constitutes the existence of those that will be born after her. The mist that she mentions represents her relation towards every unnamed stranger with whom she did not enter into verbal relationship, person who has not manifested to her their consciousness and is obscured but nonetheless bound by and contributing to the composition of the *social world*.

3.2 Communication and the Intimate Relationships

We can now move along and look at how Woolf portrays the intimate relationships between people who do not considered each other to be only fellow living beings but rather

²⁹ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 6.

³⁰ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 7.

humans whose consciousness they are trying to penetrate, with whom they have “collaborative”³¹ relationship. This will be demonstrated on the example of Peter and Clarissa.

Peter and Clarissa have known each other for ages, they used to be in love. Their conversations carry with themselves a feeling of obscurity caused by the long duration of separation and social rules and yet, they are, without a doubt, the most interconnected couple in the whole novel – they know each other and understand each other while constantly clashing with the boundaries of human intimacy established by their experience as separate personal subjects. They are in a state that Merleau-Ponty described as follows:

“Although his consciousness and mine, working through our respective situations, may contrive to produce a common situation in which they can communicate, it is nevertheless from the subjectivity of each of us that each one projects this ‘one and only’ world.”³²

They grew up together, think alike and yet, Peter and Clarissa struggle throughout the whole novel to project the full version of themselves and, as a result, suffer because of this unbridgeable gap. This is not something Merleau-Ponty considered in detail. The “clash” is most prominent in two instances: in Peter’s annoyance of how cold and closed off Clarissa can be and in Clarissa’s resentment towards being reduced to a role.

Peter’s sentiments are described as follows:

“And he couldn't see her; couldn't explain to her; couldn't have it out. (...) That was the devilish part of her—this coldness, this woodenness, something very profound in her, which he had felt again this morning talking to her; an impenetrability. Yet Heaven knows he loved her.”³³

It seems queer that this should be the case given that at different times he can tell whom she will marry solely by looking at her, or is perfectly capable of differentiating between her authentic behaviour and manipulation.³⁴ Even Clarissa herself admits that: “with Peter everything had to be shared; everything gone into.”³⁵ She recognizes that Peter is, more than anyone else, aware of her true personality, he challenges her and forces her to be herself. So how come that two people, who can make themselves so close in conversation that they, to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty, lend each other their thoughts, bring them out to the world for both of them to consider and so find ideas in themselves that they had no idea they possessed, can at the same time struggle this much with the impenetrable barrier that separates them? Is it true

³¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 413.

³² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 415.

³³ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 55.

³⁴ The dog incident – Clarissa puts on a performance to showcase how “loving” and “kind” she is when she notices that Peter thinks her the very opposite of that because of her previous actions.

³⁵ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 5.

after all that communication between two people is not in actuality possible, that what we consider to be our knowledge of the Other is just a mirage with no real depth? Are we returning to solipsism? It does not seem to be so, or at least not completely.

Peter knows Clarissa's habits, her gestures and moves, he can deduce what they mean; the whole re-union scene is an exquisite example of an intimate communication that is channelled through all the possible cultural objects, from gestures and habits to tone of the voice and vague references. Clarissa is for Peter, and vice versa, a gathering of representations that can collectively be coined a behaviour that manifests itself to him. But how does one ensure that the emotions and thoughts displayed correlate with what Clarissa is feeling and thinking on the inside? At the end of the day, such an assessment is impossible. For Merleau-Ponty, the experience of feelings is never completely authentic: "Our natural attitude is not to experience our own feelings or to adhere to our own pleasures, but to live in accordance with the emotional categories of the environment."³⁶ This is caused by nothing else but our entanglement with the net of the *social world* that gives us a tool for expressing our emotions and hence reducing their originality. We must always use cultural objects that were created *for us* and not *by us*. But what if that is not enough? I find this to be the fundamental problem.

We can approach this obstacle from two possible perspectives. The first one being kinder to Merleau-Ponty's explanation: we could say that this struggle is caused by the fragility of authenticity. The second one is harder to reconcile with Merleau-Ponty's conception of human relations as it reconstructs the act of communication altogether.

3.3 Beyond Merleau-Ponty – Failure to Communicate

Let us start with these two pairs of passages:

1a.) "The girl who is loved does not project her emotions like an Isolde or a Juliet, but feels the feelings of these poetic phantoms and infuses them into her own life."³⁷

1b.) "'if it were now to die 'twere now to be most happy.'" That was her feeling—Othello's feeling, and she felt it, she was convinced, as strongly as Shakespeare meant Othello to feel it, all because she was coming down to dinner in a white frock to meet Sally Seton!"³⁸

2a.) "It is at a later date, perhaps, that a personal and authentic feeling breaks the web of her sentimental phantasies.' But until this feeling makes its appearance, the girl has no means of discovering the illusory and literary element in her love."³⁹

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 442.

³⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 442.

³⁸ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 31.

³⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 442.

2b.) “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. But this young man who had killed himself—had he plunged holding his treasure? “If it were now to die, 'twere now to be most happy,” she had said to herself once, coming down in white.”⁴⁰

It is obvious that the two excerpts from Mrs. Dalloway are intentionally mirroring each other. The 1b excerpt can be found in the beginning of the book when Clarissa is remembering her days spent in Bourton with Peter and Sally when she was a very young adult. The quote is almost identical to what Merleau-Ponty, quoting Scheler, describes as the mode of feeling that is so intertwined with the cultural object that it takes all of its reality from it. Clarissa is charmed by Sally even though she cannot describe her love “in her own words.” She is happy in her ignorance as she naively believes her feelings to be as authentic as possible, she feels represented by the literary character in its fullness. This makes a great case for Merleau-Pontian understanding of Clarissa’s depression: Clarissa is frustrated with herself because she realized that her past self, her youth, were not authentic. She has now sobered up which makes her question her past choices and by proxy her current position in the world. How can she be happy with the life she chose when it was served to her while she was blinded by inauthentic understanding of herself? Merleau-Ponty, continuing existential tradition, would say that such insecurity is baseless. Just because she perceived the motivation for her acts differently than she does now, it does not make her (a personal subject of today) any less true as it is the acts that formed her, not the motivations (this will become more clear in the next chapter where we take a look at how is a personal subject constituted). Merleau-Ponty would perhaps conclude that Clarissa’s frustration stems from her misunderstanding of what it means to be a personal subject. Her feeling like she does not live authentically is based on her questioning of choices that she made years ago e.g. marrying Richard instead of Peter, choosing the role of a hostess instead of education, etc. The solution is simple: She should learn to not doubt her constitution as true to herself because it is impossible to live in any other way, unless she is hysteric.

This is the first explanation of Clarissa’s frustrations but the 2b excerpts changes our understanding of what the problem is drastically. It can be found at the end of the novel. Clarissa is old now. She has lived through majority of her life as *Mrs. Dalloway – the perfect hostess*, as Peter would call her. She was ascribed a role that she has always wanted to play and yet she despises it. The reduction to a role: be it a mother, a hostess or a wife⁴¹ does not provide her

⁴⁰ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 172-173.

⁴¹ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 9.

with enough tools to show herself. As she lived through her life, she has found much deeper emotions, inclinations and thoughts that are unsuccessfully trying to climb through her body to light as Peter notes when observing young Elizabeth: “she feels not half what we feel, not yet.”⁴² But she does not really care that her past might have been blindsided by inauthentic thoughts, that is not the cause for her feeling of inauthenticity.

This dissonance between Clarissa’s personal constitution and her projection in the world is the most prominent idea of the novel. It is not only discussed by Clarissa herself, it is also commented on by Peter, a person who knows her the best. For him, as a human that perceives his dear friend and not an omniscient reader as we are, it should not really matter, what Clarissa is feeling, for the lack of better term, “on the inside”. The thing that matters is the thing that she becomes in her projection into the world where she can be observed by Peter and yet he can feel that there is something unsaid about Clarissa’s thoughts which frustrates him. For this portrayal of herself Clarissa must choose from a plethora of *cultural objects* that are at her disposal within the bounds of her environment. And this is where the problem lies. She is a woman from upper-middle class, a housewife with very limited education, she does not possess the medium that could effectively and fully express her authentic self. Her natural instinct and piercing perception make her feel uncomfortable and trapped in her role of a socialite. Peter Walsh can sense these qualities of hers and values them deeply. He is annoyed because Clarissa seems to lack the capability to demonstrate them, to *behave* according to them because of the lack of tools. He is able to perceive the hints that betray her authentic nature and feels angry at her “coldness” that prevents them from demonstrating themselves fully.

What Peter only senses, Clarissa lives in her everyday experience. She feels trapped by her inability to project herself to the world, she finds herself unable to communicate herself to the other human beings. This is presented in the scene where Clarissa is looking at her reflection:

“(as she looked into the glass), seeing the delicate pink face of the woman who was that very night to give a party; of Clarissa Dalloway; of herself. 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 drawingroom...”⁴³

⁴² Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 181.

⁴³ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 33.

Clarissa, in her 52 years of age, understands herself. She is not just a hostess, nor Othello but because she loses these *cultural objects* that made her behaviour in the world easy and straight-forward, she feels lost and alone, she does not question her past but finds herself scarce of suitable means of expression – her behaviour not being true to what she finds herself to be, this is a situation that should not exist for Merleau-Ponty. A correct communication with others is what gives us our being:

“Once the other is posited, once the other’s gaze fixed upon me has, by inserting me into his field, stripped me of part of my being, it will readily be understood that I can recover it only by establishing relations with him, by bringing about his clear recognition of me, and that my freedom requires the same freedom for others.”⁴⁴

But Clarissa is unable to establish such relations. Not only does she not have the tool to “bring about a clear recognition of herself” she does not have a suitable audience either. But how does she know that these feelings are her true self? Why was she incorrect back then and now feels authentically?

Merleau-Ponty argues that the search for the “authentic” feelings is never-ending as we will never know what the retrospect will bring us, how changed our understanding of ourselves will be and hence, it is never a good idea to appraise our behaviour after years of its taking place; the only way to “verify” if our feelings are authentic is by reflecting upon our actions because what we do is the true demonstration of our confused feelings. It is not that much, that her feelings were “not real” back when she was a girl, the problem with old Clarissa is that she, unlike in her youth, does not know *how to behave* authentically which frustrates her. That is, until the end of the novel, when she does realize what would need to be done. She evolves from relating her whole emotional distress to that of a literary character (by taking her feelings *outside* and living them as-if through Othello before taking them back in) and from being completely content with her representation in the world being constituted by a specific instance of a *cultural object* to becoming existentially frustrated by the lack of suitable tools for her authentic self-representation. She recognises that the only suitable tool that would finally eject her fully into the world for others to observe her and to finally understand her desperation and loneliness, would be to commit a suicide.

In the early stages of writing of Mrs. Dalloway, Septimus did not exist⁴⁵. It was Clarissa who was supposed to kill herself. Woolf then decided to change it and have a young veteran be

⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 416.

⁴⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Random House, 1928), p. vi.

a double for Clarissa who, at the end, does not have the strength to do what she felt was the only fitting demonstration of her thoughts and emotions and chooses to continue her role while remaining envious of Septimus's "bravery". In both excerpts Clarissa says that she would be happy to die at that moment, in 1b it is because she feels so fulfilled, excited and authentic as humanly possible and her death would capture her in that moment forever and in 2b she feels like death would bring her happiness as it would finally communicate her hollowness to the world and she would be understood at last. Both end with Clarissa walking downstairs, to be among people whose perception and attention she always peruses. The mirror image is completed by Clarissa wearing white, in 1b to represent her innocence⁴⁶ untainted by strong, deeply personal, emotions and unrepresentable feelings and in 2b to signal her rebirth as she reclaims her understanding of herself while remaining opaque to the outside world by restraining from doing the one thing that would present her fully. She becomes the old woman that she observes through her window, secluded, alone but solemn in her knowledge of herself:

"There! the old lady had put out her light! the whole house was dark now with this going on, she repeated, and the words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun. She must go back to them."⁴⁷

So where has this comparison led us? I am not content with the idea of coming back to consciousness being hidden and unattainable but we must recognize that it is not as easy as Merleau-Ponty would have it. Communication of certain thoughts and feelings is often times impossible. The inability to communicate, the lack of correct expressions – *cultural objects*, or perhaps even the non-existence of such tools is something that has interested Woolf greatly. In her essay "A Room of One's Own" she dedicates one whole section to discussing to what extent the female writers were limited just by the lack of experience. She comes to a conclusion that for example Jane Austen's talent and style were perfect for the kind of fiction she wrote. Her observations of upper-middle class were not hindered by what she was allowed to do and *know*. But for sisters Brontës, she argues, their position in society was detrimental:

"But perhaps it was the nature of Jane Austen not to want what she had not. Her gift and her circumstances matched each other completely. But I doubt whether that was true of Charlotte Brontë, I said, opening *Jane Eyre* and laying it beside *Pride and Prejudice*. (...) She knew, no one better, how enormously her genius would have profited if it had not spent itself in solitary visions over distant fields; if experience and intercourse and travel had been granted her."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 234.

⁴⁷ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 174.

⁴⁸ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 75-76.

The same goes for Clarissa. She does not know *how* to show the world who she really is, she is angry with her closest ones for not understanding her but even angrier with herself for this incapability. It is not the shame that Sartre would describe, that would perhaps be applicable for her distaste of being called a “hostess”, of being reduced to a single role but her existential frustration is more fundamental than that, it is the desperation of not being able to communicate. This should not be possible to Merleau-Ponty. For him, we all live and stem from the one world in which we read the behaviour of the other and internalize it, ascribe one-to-one relation of a state and behaviour and so we should not be able to feel anything that is not already given to us in the behaviour of the Other. But it must have started somewhere. Someone must have been the first to present herself into the world, to give rise to a *cultural object*. While Merleau-Ponty does recognize that the constant creation of a new *cultural objects*⁴⁹ is at core of our humanity and hence will never reach completion, he does not elaborate on *how* that special kind of new communication that he calls “authentic” comes to existence⁵⁰, nor does he consider the possibility of encountering such a thought or mental state that would not be expressible by the individual experiencing it. I think that this area of Merleau-Ponty’s investigation is unfinished. He makes a distinction between a *spoken* and *speaking word* where the former is the authentic expression that we have mentioned above, an original way of expressing oneself and the latter acts as building blocks through which new thoughts can be constructed:

“Hence the spoken word, which enjoys available significances as one might enjoy an acquired fortune. From these gains other acts of authentic expression—the writer’s, artist’s or philosopher’s—are made possible.”⁵¹

But why should we assume that we are all given all the adequate tools to express ourselves or that we are always ready to find the correct combination? He puts too much value on the original commonness of human experience which should secure the unproblematic communication but it seems like that it is not always enough.

Clarissa feels alone, misunderstood and not possessing the adequate tools for expressing herself. Maybe her condition is original, yet unexpressed in the world and her struggle has its roots in her inability to create a communicational device on her own, to allow her thoughts to

⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 225-226.

⁵⁰ This problem is more thoroughly dealt with in *The Prose of the World* but it still seems to me that the description focuses once again mostly on the “commonness” of worldly experience and the rise of new ideas in dialogue with the Other. The mechanisms of how a new thought can arise are more clearly sketched out as products of different combinations of already existing concepts but they are still deficient when it comes to the link between the creation of a new thought and a creation of new *cultural object* to represent it which is exactly the phase that interests us.

⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 229.

materialize in the world and so she is stuck with a brand new emotion and a deficit of creative power to turn it into a *cultural object*, to behave authentically. Or, the problem is simpler: she was denied proper education and freedom that would allow her to *find* the correct expression, to project herself into the world as what she actually is. Either way, the progression from recognizing her own thoughts as original and expressing them to the Other is obstructed. One could argue that perhaps she *is* aware of the *cultural object* that would serve her cause after all: a suicide. But can we agree with such a morbid conclusion? The suicide is indeed generally understood as an expression of utter desperation, to that extent it would work as the *cultural object* that would be suitable for Clarissa's manifestation of her state to the world but it would be addressing only the result, not the cause. The cause of her desperation remains her inability to truthfully give herself to the Other, caused by the inaccessibility of *cultural objects* that would truthfully manifest her. Merleau-Ponty mentions some instances of the inability to communicate but they were all caused by mental illness. Let us compare Clarissa's situation with that of Schneider:

“He would like to be able to think about politics and religion, but he does not even try, knowing that these realms are closed to him, and we have seen that generally speaking he never performs an act of authentic thought...”⁵²

It seems that the comparison is quite unfair. Clarissa did not lose her grip of reality, nor is she confused about her own body or, at the end, about herself as a subject. She does not suffer from aphasia nor is her mobility affected in any way. Her thoughts are authentic but without the strength to break through and since, as we have established above, this inability seems to be caused by the lack of education, financial means to experience more and privacy to evaluate and, in a fitting form, to project one's sentiments, it does not seem correct to discuss this problem as a mere result of a mental illness and so we are left without a lead that would allow us to solve this problem within Merleau-Ponty's structure.

In order to better understand how is it possible to claim that the communication might be impossible at times and yet not returning to complete solipsism, we must take a look at subject herself, to see of what are we actually trying to give an account when we communicate with the Other and try to adequately present ourselves in the world.

⁵² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 182.

4 Time

*“For she was a child, throwing bread to the ducks, between her parents, and at the same time a grown woman coming to her parents who stood by the lake, holding her life in her arms which, as she neared them, grew larger and larger in her arms, until it became a whole life, a complete life, which she put down by them and said, “This is what I have made of it! This!” And what had she made of it? What, indeed?”*⁵³

The whole novel is enclosed within one day. Clarissa Dalloway is preparing one of her many parties. We know exactly when: it was eleven o’clock in the morning when Clarissa came back home and the rest of London was looking up at the plane in the sky. The novel ends at 3 o’clock in the morning, with party coming to an end. Time seems to be as if sliced by the sequence of fleeting lived episodes of all the actors and characters. Thanks to this division of time, there are seemingly „two types“ of time at play in Mrs. Dalloway: the objective one, that connects the lives of subjects (for the book is written in a fashion that makes us *experience* the singular perceptions of its characters hence unifying us, readers, with them) – everyone hears the bell ring, everyone takes notice of a clock that strikes a certain hour, etc. and the personal one that seems to be speeding up and slowing down, returning and jumping ahead of itself based on who perceives it.

4.1 “Objective” and “Subjective” Time

Firstly, we shall think of this “cyclical” time announced by machines that keep track of it and consider to what extent can we really call it “objective” or “universal”. This “type” of time could be understood as existing “outside” a subject and only “taken in” once the perception has taken place. It is for everyone alike that the bell rings, that the sun sets or clock strikes, simply put, it is time that is “out there”. Compare these two excerpts:

A) “The clock was striking—one, two, three: how sensible the sound was; compared with all this thumping and whispering; like Septimus himself. She was falling asleep. But the clock went on striking, four, five, six and Mrs. Filmer waving her apron (they wouldn't bring the body in here, would they?) seemed part of that garden; or a flag. She had once seen a flag slowly rippling out from a mast when she stayed with her aunt at Venice. Men killed in battle were thus saluted, and Septimus had been through the War. Of her memories, most were happy.”⁵⁴

B) “To get that letter to him by six o'clock she must have sat down and written it directly he left her; stamped it; sent somebody to the post.”⁵⁵

⁵³ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 38.

⁵⁴ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 140.

⁵⁵ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 145.

Two things happen at six o'clock. Rezia is drugged to sleep after witnessing Septimus's suicide and Peter gets a letter from Clarissa. Most obviously, the two instances have nothing in common but their artificial time description. Both Peter and Rezia are aware of the fact that it is six o'clock but it does not mean the same thing to them. The perception of time as something objective, something that can be perceived as one can perceive a duck swimming in a pond seems to be incorrect. Rezia is falling into a drug induced sleep, she starts remembering her times in Italy, the war and past experiences mixed with dreams. It can be *felt* through the tempo of the sentences that she is at peace, her time is slowed down as she is gradually losing consciousness. But she is still living in present. The memories, the visions, the sensory inputs are coming to her *now*, it does not matter, that she has to retrieve them from something already experienced, the thought, the imagination is happening in her *field of presence* – the sphere in which the objects around us and the “past-present-future dimension”⁵⁶ enter for us to momentarily perceive them. And while Rezia is slowly dozing off, mixing up memories and present perceptions, Peter gets a letter from Clarissa and his thoughts are racing:

“Oh it was a letter from her! This blue envelope; that was her hand. And he would have to read it. Here was another of those meetings, bound to be painful! To read her letter needed the devil of an effort. "How heavenly it was to see him. She must tell him that." That was all. But it upset him. It annoyed him. He wished she hadn't written it. Coming on top of his thoughts, it was like a nudge in the ribs. Why couldn't she let him be?”⁵⁷

We can already see how much different Peter's perception of time few seconds after six o'clock is. The short sentences make a reader speed through this section, we can *feel* Peter's annoyance and excitement over being invited by his old love. His perception of time is completely different, he only cares that it is six o'clock in relation to Clarissa, that is what six o'clock signifies to him: that Clarissa has put in the effort to invite him right after finding out that he is in London. So what does this mean for us? Why did Woolf decide to section her day, part by part and give us the illusion of objectivity and cyclicity? Does she think time to be an object of our perception that just keeps rhythmically ticking and ticking somewhere in the back of our minds?

This is what Merleau-Ponty says about that sort of time that we have described and what might solve our problem with *Mrs. Dalloway*: “Time restarts itself: the rhythmic cycle and constant form of yesterday, today and tomorrow may well create the illusion that we possess it immediately, in its entirety (...) But the generality of time is no more than one of its secondary

⁵⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 309.

⁵⁷ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 144-145.

attributes and provides only an inauthentic view of it, since we cannot get as far as conceiving a cycle without drawing a distinction, in terms of time, between the point of arrival and the point of departure.⁵⁸

For Merleau-Ponty, time can never be an object and neither it is for Woolf. Similarly to what Merleau-Ponty says, Woolf employs the “general” time in order to demonstrate how deceptive the understanding of time as “cyclical” can be. The clock strikes regularly but the *field of presence* of every character is transformed with various tempo. The repetitiveness of “general” time highlights that even though the day begins for Clarissa when she goes to buy her flowers and heads towards the party that is in the evening, it does not *repeat* itself in its eternity, not every day is like the other, not even every minute “lasts” equally long. Morning and evening are arbitrary terms that do not represent the true nature of time which is one continuous flow. We cannot look at time as we would at an object of the outside world. This kind of time, the time of clocks, bells and watches, is nothing else but one of the *cultural objects* that we have discussed in the previous chapter. We use it to communicate among ourselves but it is not time lived.

4.2 Time as a Subject

So what does constitute time? Perhaps it is a series of events joined together by memory. This outlook would explain why our time seems to be at times running at incredibly high pace and at a different point it appears to be lazily dragging by. If one is experiencing a lot of change, her memory is running at full speed, saving one event after the other and on the other hand, if nothing is happening around us, there is only occasional save of information, we feel that time has slowed down. But this explanation has one cardinal problem: Who would be that subject to whom those memories belong? Another obstacle is that it directly contradicts our previous claim that time cannot be perceived as mere object, a result of the outside world’s influence on our psyche.

Now we come to the breaking point. Merleau-Ponty posits the following solution:

“We must understand time as the subject and the subject as time. What is perfectly clear, is that this primordial temporality is not a juxtaposition of external events, since it is the power which holds them together while keeping them apart.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 492.

⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 490.

Time is not something given to us, nor is it created for us but rather lived by the subject as undivided and inseparable. I cannot escape time. I did not give existence to it but it is flowing through me since the day I'm born. I can feel time pass before I can tell what time it is on a watch or even remember specifically the events of my day. This is not time of the clocks and calendars but my subjective time that transforms itself in my *field of presence* from present to past and from future to present. And this is exactly what Woolf is trying to accomplish. The two opinions that Merleau-Ponty is trying to abolish in his chapter "Temporality" are those of the common perception of time as something *out there* and the empiricist understanding of time as collection of moments. Let us look at opposing ideas and highlight why their explanations err.

4.2.1 The Common and Empiric Conceptions of Time and Their Problems

The common perception of time explains it as a river that flows from point A to point B, that would be from past to future. The problem with this metaphor is that it lacks a correct kind of an observer. If we imagine that we are sitting at the bank of that river, looking at it (time) pass by, we will not be capable of *seeing* the water flowing in, nor can we experience its past state. The only thing that I can do, as an observer tied to one place, is to *assume* that the water that I am now seeing has at some point been a glacier somewhere in the mountains, but I can only assume its past in my present and based on my present observations. Even if we do imagine that we are some all-seeing creature that has access to the separate events of ice melting and that water forming a river, we still need to have *someone* to experience those successive events. Time is not a part of the objective world in a sense that I could turn my attention to it and take it as it is, "it arises from my relation to things."⁶⁰ If we want observe how the time transforms itself, we need to be sitting in a boat and accompanying the river at all times of our shared history. We need to move with time not let it pass independently by us.

The empiricists try to fix this by internalizing the "instances of now" which leads to the repeating of the same mistake only on a different level. They still consider time to be just a series of moments but now they are tied together by something as finical as memory. According to Merleau-Ponty, this will not do. If I want to recall certain memories, there must be *someone* to recall them. Without establishing *ipse* identity, one cannot retrieve memories into the *field of presence*.

⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 478.

If we consider how time is portrayed in *Mrs. Dalloway*, we should come to a similar conclusion. Let us think of the importance of a clock within the novel once again. As we have said before, it represents the differences between individual subjects and their perception of time. It announces what should be “the general time” and yet, we, as readers, can sense that the difference between the *actual* time perceived by the characters is enormous. Clarissa is preparing her party, time for her rushes with every hour. There is so much to plan, so much to see to. On the other side of the spectrum we would find Septimus who hears the bells ring but does not pay much attention to them. His time is slowed down by his lack of perception of the outside world. As a reversed character from the Wonderland, his hallucinations cause him to perceive the time with much slower tempo, similarly to Rezia in the example above. Time is not a collection of happenings in the world around me, Septimus is sitting at a bench and strolling through the same busy London street as Clarissa or Peter. The world is out there for him just the same and yet, his time is very different. This demonstrates that the empiric perception of time is not complete as it does not take subjectivity of temporal moments into the account. Only I, as a subject, am my own temporality, I am the continuous flow of transformations on the horizon of my *field of presence*. The “outside”, general time of the clocks is useful for the construction of the objective world but is not sufficient for characterization of time as we live and experience it. Now we shall dispute the empiric conception of time as showcased on, yet another, example.

According to Merleau-Ponty, one of the most substantial attributes of time is its self-awareness.⁶¹ It is because of the awareness of time of its own passing, which is synonymous with subject’s awareness of itself, that we are able to discover our *ipseity*. Clarissa “felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged.”⁶² She feels at one with her former self, she recognizes the young Clarissa, who was in love with Sally and Peter and Richard at the same time even if she is not capable of such feelings anymore. That does not take away from her identification with her past self that is granted to her through her awareness of her own temporality. She recognizes herself as temporal being with vast history. In this way, time can be thought of as river when we understand it as nothing else but an undivided continuity of present moment being pushed to the past and future pulled to present. Merleau-Ponty disproves Hume’s conception of a personal identity as collection of memories and identifies subject with temporality. Peter, Clarissa and all the characters of the novel are formed by their past

⁶¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 495.

⁶² Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 6.

experiences, they *are* their past since they are continually formed by it with or without their conscious knowledge of it. Miss Kilman in her monologues often bases her entire personality on the history of her life:

“And then, just as she might have had a chance at Miss Dolby's school, the war came; (...) Miss Dolby thought she would be happier with people who shared her views about the Germans. She had had to go. It was true that the family was of German origin; spelt the name Kiehlman in the eighteenth century (...) Then Our Lord had come to her (and here she always bowed her head). She had seen the light two years and three months ago.”⁶³

It is implied that Kilman repeats her life to herself regularly, she finds comfort in explaining and excusing her current state by the employment of her personal history. It is true that there is certain kind of avoidance of responsibility in her actions which is not entirely justified but that does not change the fact, that she is aware of her existence as a subject that is synonymous with time that she constitutes through her life in the world and that constitutes her in its undivided continuity. She even accounts for her family history, a “time” long before her that nonetheless presents itself in the sphere of her *field of presence* as it is *this* Kilman that recognizes it and relates it to herself at a present moment. It is in this way that we can claim that a subject equals time: We are the collection of influences and happenings that we have encountered through our lives and that we were born into. A subject built by the sediments of the social and the natural world that are the results of her history which is unified in her through the power of self-awareness.

4.2.2 The Past

This *ipseity* explained as one's awareness of their own life provides us also with a tool for uncovering the nature of remembering:

“I am guaranteed access to the past itself, has the essential characteristic of being formed only gradually and one step at a time; each present, in virtue of its very essence as a present, rules out the juxtaposition of other presents and, even in the context of a time long past, I can take in a certain period of my past life only by unfolding it anew according to its own tempo.”⁶⁴

It is important to note that *tempo* can only relate to past perceptions. We can unfold our past between us and recall the past perception to our *field of presence*, separated from us by the thickness of duration. The “recalling” of past perceptions is a substantial part of the novel, it is happening “in real time,” right in front of readers eyes. There is no “prequel-like” narration

⁶³ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 115.

⁶⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 491.

regarding the past of the characters⁶⁵. We learn about it in the light of the *field of presence* by being granted an access to character's consciousness. Together with them, we uncover and recall past perceptions separated by various thickness of duration. From Clarissa remembering Bourton because a nice warm day reminded her of those spent in the country with her old friends, to Peter recalling his quite recent memories of Daisy when seeing her picture. All this is possible because of the *ipseity* granted to us through our temporality. Characters can *reach* for their past perceptions – with various degrees of success – and “look” at them within their *field of presence*.

Sometimes, when the past perception is separated by long duration, we must peel away our past perceptions one by one in order to get to the desired moment of time. This is caused by the fact that we are not given to ourselves in our entirety but rather we are formed step by step, layer by layer, as every moment of our present transforms itself into our past.⁶⁶ This process of “unfolding” can be observed in aunt Helena's recognition of Peter:

“Peter Walsh,” said Clarissa. That meant nothing. (...) “He has been in Burma,” said Clarissa. Ah. She could not resist recalling what Charles Darwin had said about her little book on the orchids of Burma. (...) No doubt it was forgotten now, her book on the orchids of Burma, but it went into three editions before 1870, she told Peter. She remembered him now. He had been at Bourton⁶⁷

Aunt Helena does not remember Peter. But the mention of Burma initiates the process of “unfolding” in her. Burma “makes her” recall her book about orchids. Sooner in the novel we learn that Peter, while at Bourton, used to bring her rare flowers that she liked which made her appreciate him. By following this line of past perceptions in a succession of: Burma – botany – flowers – Peter, aunt Helena manages to locate and recall her past perception to her *field of presence*. This more elaborate process than just simple recalling, and its, at times unsuccessful results, are not caused by forgetting as we understand it in common sense, for forgetting implies that something has been lost, erased from our existence. According to Merleau-Ponty, it is more like being unable to pinpoint the correct moment because of their ambiguity. In different words, sometimes it takes the act of “unfolding” to find the specific past present moment which, nonetheless, still belongs to our existence as subjects and hence constitutes us and that remains

⁶⁵ Perhaps with the exception of Kilman's monologues where she makes conscious decision to retell her life as a historian that she fancies herself to be. But that does not change the fact that the style in which Woolf describes her “retelling” is still taking place at the present moment which is the point that I am trying to argue. It is the character that chooses that style of describing *herself*, it is not Woolf describing her character in that manner.

⁶⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 491.

⁶⁷ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 167-168.

true even if we grow unable to recall the perception from our past. We are a *passive synthesis* of our time lived, a collection of marks left on us by our past.

We have explained how one can re-experience past by recalling it to their *field of presence* and why it is possible to forget while not losing our identity in the process. Now we shall take a look at how one may understand future and how is this “stage” in the flux of time depicted in the novel.

4.2.3 The Future and the Determinism

For Merleau-Ponty, future is the horizon of *possibilities* made available in our present: I see a curtain in front of me that I am contemplating on closing because the sun is shining in my eyes. When I get up and do close it, I will cement that ex-future possibility in my presence and, consequently, past. That being said, it is important to note that the *possibilities* or all the different scenarios that future can become are rooted deeper than in our immediate present. It is the very nature of our present experience that it necessarily and at all times encompasses our past as we have argued in the previous paragraphs:

“It is I who give a direction, significance and future to my life, but that does not mean that these are concepts; they spring from my present and past and in particular from my mode of present and past coexistence. Even in the case of the intellectual who turns revolutionary, his decision does not arise ex nihilo...”⁶⁸

This perception of future as a plethora of goals, which possibility of existence is already rooted in my past, may seem to be quite deterministic. Because how can one influence their future if it is already given in advance by our entanglement in the net of relations, governed by the world that precedes our being in it and so establishes us before we can have a say? Let us remember the case of Miss Kilman who through her personal history, and even “objective” history that preceded her immensely, justified her position in the world. She felt that she was owed everything by the Dalloways solely because of their different origin. She hates Clarissa for making her feel ugly and blames her position in life for not allowing her to express her love for Elizabeth. If Merleau-Ponty stopped here, we would be obliged to excuse Doris Kilman, to mentally pet her head and say: there-there. But that is not what Woolf (and neither Merleau-Ponty) wants us to do:

"I never go to parties," said Miss Kilman, just to keep Elizabeth from going. "People don't ask me to parties"—and she knew as she said it that it was this egotism that was her undoing; Mr. Whittaker had warned her; but she could not help it. She had suffered so horribly. "Why should they ask me?" she said. "I'm plain, I'm unhappy." However, she was Doris Kilman. She had her

⁶⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 519.

degree. She was a woman who had made her way in the world. Her knowledge of modern history was more than respectable.”⁶⁹

It is obvious that Kilman *chooses* her life as someone who was hurt, who is “too good” to be interested in such foolish affairs as parties and to satisfy her need for attention, she manipulates people into feeling bad for her. It seems that her freedom is quite limited until one realizes that it is *her choice* to express herself like this. She has claimed a role that limits her choices: she is religious, good at history, modest and so on. All of these attributes bring her happiness but if she wants to retain them, she is forced to sacrifice something else. So we have showed that Kilman is not just thrown around as an object of fate but rather makes choices, behaves in a certain sense in the world, that establish her as what she is.

We have shown that Woolf presents Kilman’s life as series of unfortunate, self-determining choices but we have not yet explained why is it that if we all are parts of the world, products of social history that we cannot influence, it still *does not* automatically mean a descent to determinism. Merleau-Ponty has his answer ready in the final part of *Phenomenology of Perception* titled “Freedom” but before I reveal it, let us try to deduce it on the example from the novel.

For a moment, let us forget all about the determinism, freedom and Kilman and focus our attention on the first problem of this subchapter that we promised to solve: the future. We know that future is not something waiting for us behind blinds already made. As we said, it is a horizon of possibilities established by our past, nothing can come to be “out of no-where”: “there is one single time which is self-confirmatory, which can bring nothing into existence unless it has already laid that thing’s foundations as present and eventual past, and which establishes itself at a stroke.”⁷⁰ The future transforms itself into an actuality in the light of a present moments and simultaneously opens a new horizon of possible future as it becomes a part of their constituting origin. So how do the characters think of future? For Peter the horizon of future possibilities regarding his marriage to Daisy is wide open, he is not sure about anything, as seems to be his trait: “What is it? Where am I? And why, after all, does one do it? he thought, the divorce seeming all moonshine.”⁷¹ But the fact is that he came to London with one specific goal: to see the lawyers about the divorce, his decisions are cementing his constitution as a subject and becoming a foundation for all possible futures. Clarissa’s future is even more clear, her whole day orients itself towards the party, she prepares herself for her role,

⁶⁹ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 108.

⁷⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 489.

⁷¹ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 47.

she knows exactly what to expect, she has done this million times: “future is not made up exclusively of guesswork and daydreams. Ahead of what I see and perceive, there is, it is true, nothing more actually visible, but my world is carried forward by lines of intentionality which trace out in advance at least the style of what is to come...”⁷² Both Clarissa and Peter have some expectations of their respective futures, an outcome, that seems logical and yet, as we see in the final pages, it fails to deliver. Peter underestimates his feelings from the past, the novel ends with him replacing Daisy with Clarissa, admitting to himself the true nature of his emotions that he was battling the whole day. For Clarissa, the party takes on a completely different significance, as we have demonstrated in the previous chapter. Septimus’s suicide shakes her to her core, revealing her suicidal inclinations. Not Peter, nor Clarissa could have guessed such an outcome of their not-so-distant futures. One may say: But have we not established that future can never come to being out of nothing? Why are the subjects of our story so shaken by the results of their actions when they are the determining factors of their own futures? The proverb *you reap what you sow* comes to mind.

4.3 Freedom

We are getting to the core of our problem of determinism. Just like Peter and Clarissa could not expect the outcome of their day because of the opacity of the objective and social world and because of the opacity of themselves as self-aware subjects, neither can Doris Kilman blame the world and the history for all her difficulties as she cannot assess them transparently and truthfully. Because we are opaque to ourselves, we are forced to make our decisions freely:

“What then is freedom? To be born is both to be born of the world and to be born into the world. The world is already constituted, but also never completely constituted; in the first case we are acted upon, in the second we are open to an infinite number of possibilities. But this analysis is still abstract, for we exist in both ways at once. There is, therefore, never determinism and never absolute choice, I am never a thing and never bare consciousness.”⁷³

It is because of our bilateral relationship with the world as constituted by it and constituting it that we can never make a choice “out of no-where”: Clarissa’s epiphany was caused by Septimus’s suicide but also by her choice to marry Richard, by her frustration over her inability to express herself authentically, by her seeing of Peter that rekindled old ideals, by her disgust of Doris Kilman and so on and so forth. But even within the scope of a novel, which is only a still of real life, I cannot claim to be able to put forward a full account of *why* Clarissa felt and experienced what she did at the end of the novel or, to highlight the act of volition, why she

⁷² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 483.

⁷³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 527.

chose to not kill herself. One is certain, her decision was free, modelled by the world that influenced her from her birth but also supported by the tools which that very world gave her to make it: “I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them.”⁷⁴

We must understand time as a subject. We are a collection of our past perceptions, conscious and unconscious that pile up during our years of existence and of parts of the natural and social world – their outcome and creator. If we go back to our chapter on the Other, we may remember Peter’s quote about Elizabeth and how she does not feel what older people do. Woolf feels the density of constituting perceptions that grows with time and, by relation, age. Remember the quotation at the beginning of the chapter. Clarissa feels her life getting heavier in her hands as it grows with the number of never-ending interactions with the world that constitutes her. She is asking herself what is this life that I lived? It is not possible to give an account of oneself in its true fullness, no matter how hard one may try. Perhaps this may feel annoying, I can never give a complete account of myself, explain myself *a capite ad calcem* but it is this very ambiguity that forces us to live freely.

So how does this all relate to Clarissa’s inability to communicate? Some feminist philosophers⁷⁵ have argued that Merleau-Ponty neglects the difference between a female and a male body hence building his theory of universality of communication on a false ground. So perhaps we could ascribe Clarissa’s struggle to this inaccuracy: she, as a woman, cannot be fully understood in the “male” world, as her primal experience – the bodily experience is fundamentally different from that of men. But I do not think that that would do. Clarissa does not feel more understood by Sally than by Peter, quite the opposite. She sometimes wishes to be “like a man” but it is not because she wants to be understood by *them* better, she wants to be understood by anyone at all. No, the sex is not the problem, it is the power that Merleau-Ponty seems to neglect. He counts on our primordial experience as anonymous, pre-personal subjects to allow us to communicate freely. But we have established how significant our constitution as temporal subjects is: it gives us the futures to choose from. And this is very important. Clarissa’s inability to communicate is caused by her life choices that alienate her from the rest of the world, from the Other. There is no reason why it should not be possible to be constituted as a subject with a set of thoughts and opinions that one is unable to express exactly because our

⁷⁴ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 162.

⁷⁵ Dorothea Olkowski, *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty* (Pennsylvania: The Penn State University Press, 2006), 27.

nature is never fully authentic: Clarissa was born with high intelligence, a gift for picking up on every detail of someone's behaviour. We, as readers, can tell that she has creative and sharp mind with faculty for philosophy. And yet, Clarissa is unable to communicate any of it:

“Oh if she could have had her life over again! she thought, stepping on to the pavement, 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. She would have been, like Lady Bexborough, slow and stately; rather large; interested in politics like a man; with a country house; very dignified, very sincere.”⁷⁶

Clarissa regrets the choices she has made, feeling that they trapped her in the state of hopelessness and spurious behaviour. Her background, the net of social relations, to which she was born, her interactions with Peter and Sally, the autobiographies that she reads have all left behind a layer of curiosity and originality but they did not provide her with the set of skills that would allow her to communicate her true self. The successful communication is prohibited not by the physical constitution of body but by the composition of the personal subject which is in its essence limiting and hence a cause of frustration. The Other is too distant, separated from her by her personal experience, the primordial connection is simply not enough. Clarissa feels herself to be full of ideas and uncommon personal traits but the layers of time are providing her only with the choices that she detests and tools that are not sufficient, leaving the suicide as the last act of defiance and the last chance for authenticity and communication.

⁷⁶ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 8.

5 Septimus and an Alternative Perception

In the previous parts of my thesis I have explained and shown how the phenomenological concepts of Merleau-Ponty can be applied to Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. While discussing the relations between a subject and a world, a subject and other subjects and subject and time, we have been always building on the fact that a human being in question is sane and hence perceptive to the natural and the social world. In the first chapter we have talked about the mechanics of the perception that is always a perception of *something*, then we have shown that a subject is always already at communication with the Other and lastly, we have explained the relationship between the time and the subjects as synonymous. This has mostly been demonstrated on two characters: Clarissa and Peter. Both of these characters are good representatives of what it is like for an ordinary person to live in the world. I do not consider Clarissa's struggle to be in any way a result of a mental disorder but rather an unequal and deprived position within the social world. In this chapter we will put all of what we have learned "on its head," for in this passage I would like to discuss an "alternative" way of perceiving the world tainted by mental illness. So let us take a look how Septimus's madness demonstrates itself by diverting from a natural way of perceiving.

Merleau-Ponty in the part titled "The Spatiality of One's own Body and Motility" introduces the case of a mineworker called Schneider who was injured in World War 1. He was studied by Gestalt psychologists Goldstein and Gelb for his apperceptive visual agnosia. It is important to mention that the truthfulness of their results and the adequacy of their methodology have been widely questioned by modern psychologists and neurologist.⁷⁷ However, that should not influence our own investigation into Septimus's illness. Schneider's case serves Merleau-Ponty as a basis for his argumentation that the motility of a subject, her capability of orienting herself in the world, is the necessary requirement for perception. I mostly mention this to show that Merleau-Ponty did acknowledge the possibility of an "alternative" relationship between the subject and the world than the one that we have discussed in the previous chapters. In the following paragraphs we shall try to dissect how Septimus's illness influences his position within the world in order to highlight the vastly different nature of his depression, which stems from a true disorder, to that of Clarissa Dalloway.

⁷⁷ Komarine Romdenh-Romluc, *Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenology of Perception* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 24.

5.1 Septimus and the World

Septimus can move freely. In a bodily sense he is fully capable, his condition is nothing like Schneider's. So what are his limits and what makes his perception of the world distorted? Well, in a sense, it is still a problem of movement just not the one that we would perhaps expect.

Woolf agrees with Merleau-Ponty that to understand and to perceive is to move. The movement of her characters is almost as dynamic and fleeting as her descriptions of their inner monologues: everyone is walking somewhere, doing something, rushing, lazily walking, eating, reading etc. Remember the scenes from the beginning and the end of the novel. One can *feel* the buzz of a big city, people transporting themselves or, if we look at the final pages, it feels like we are looking through Peter Walsh's eyes that follow Clarissa attending her guests, rushing gracefully from one to the other. We never experience such a sensation when reading from Septimus's point of view, with an exception of his final moments.

Septimus is a decorated war hero with suicidal inclinations caused by trauma induced depression. He often talks to his dead friend Evans from whom he claims to have obtained the eternal truth which he needs to "deliver". He serves as the representation of destruction of the model introduced in the previous parts: his perceptions are almost never attentive as they are indistinguishable from hallucinations. The space as a discoverable dimension within which one must always orient herself or perhaps which is constituted in our consciousness through our movement, makes him nauseous. It is as if he was unable to pull the objects in front of him and the whole of his consciousness was taking in only the *phenomenal field*. Here lies his problem with the movement. It is true that his legs move just fine but it is his attention, the focusing of the eye that is not available to him.

Septimus's wife Rezia is trying to preserve what is left of her husband's sanity. She was instructed to do so by tightening his connection to the world, to make him perceive it as it is offering itself to him. The natural world is *always there* for us and our connection and awareness of it in our *field of presence* is crucial for our existence. It is established that Septimus's madness is caused by his "motion sickness", he lost the ability to focus on the world and thus to perceive it in a truthful manner:

"My field of perception is constantly filled with a play of colours, noises and fleeting tactile sensations which I cannot relate precisely to the context of my clearly perceived world, yet

which I nevertheless immediately ‘place’ in the world, without ever confusing them with my daydreams.”⁷⁸

Septimus cannot reliably “place” things “in the world”. Rezia is trying to help by exclaiming: "Look, look, Septimus!" many times throughout the novel, highlighting the importance of the active movement within the world. There is no way of distinguishing between the real and the imaginary when one does not actively shift one’s attention from one object of the outer world to another. The inability to exercise the creative action of grasping and re-building an object with attention results in madness. Septimus does not realize this. He has a very different idea of what “normal” means and he is adequately annoyed by this requirement.

There is one line that gets repeated multiple times throughout the novel: “ for one must be scientific, above all scientific”. It is uttered by Septimus every time he finds himself pondering about the beauty of the immaterial world. He enjoys the world around him in the unfocused way: the warmth of the sun, the green of the leaves, the raspiness of a voice. He only is capable of perceiving attentively his hallucinations; there he experiences meaning, he can investigate them from multiple angles, gain knowledge from them but in the natural world he remains limited to the continuous stream of perceptions. He considers this inability to focus his attention on the natural world of little importance, mockingly calling the natural world “scientific”. Septimus is mentally ill, unable to constitute the world around him through his movement for he, truthfully, does not care for it a bit. This behaviour cannot be described any differently than a madness from the point of view of a fully functioning individual for whom the movement and perception of the world and its objects is an undividable part of her being. That being said, it is not this discrepancy between active (normal) and passive (mad) that causes Septimus’s suicide, nor is it directly his depression but rather his fear of *being made aware* of the world in a traditional sense. He rather dies than to be re-built into a “scientific” form. We can speculate why that is with the most plausible explanation being PTSD. Septimus used to be a sensitive young man, easily influenceable by heroic tales. His story seems to be very similar to that of another famous literary character: Paul Bäumer. He goes to the war with a vision of bravery and glory but the reality causes him agony and so he is forced to distance himself from the world that caused him this much suffering: “He had only to open his eyes; but a weight was on them; a fear. He strained; he pushed; he looked; he saw Regent's Park before him.”⁷⁹ He

⁷⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xi.

⁷⁹ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 63.

feels more comfortable in the sphere of visions and hallucinations. In another passage Septimus blames the world directly for causing his insensitivity.⁸⁰

There seems to be a change right before his suicide. Septimus is looking around a room, evaluating the “realness” of the objects around him. He manages to connect to the real, shared world and to reject the intrusive hallucinations: “Miracles, revelations, agonies, loneliness, falling through the sea, down, down into the flames, all were burnt out, for he had a sense, as he watched Rezia trimming the straw hat for Mrs. Peters, of a coverlet of flowers.”⁸¹ There seems to be light on the horizon, Septimus waking up to the natural world that manifests itself to him in an unobscured fashion and recognizing objects instead of an never-ending swarm of hallucinations arising in front of his *phenomenal field*. This all is, of course, destroyed by the arrival of the psychiatrists that Septimus fears. The idea of being *forced* back into the world that he connects with cruelty and atrocity of the war scares him and he jumps out of the window as he does not want to live according to psychiatrists’ norm.

5.2 Septimus and the Other

We can look at the cause of Septimus’s illness from two points of view. One possible approach would be claiming that his perception of the outer world is completely distorted which strips him of the most fundamental prerequisite for ever being able to communicate with the Other as we have established in the second chapter: I cannot communicate if I do not share the anonymous and pre-personal perception of the world with the Other. Of course, thanks to Septimus’s moments of clarity, he is still able to talk to Rezia at times. If we remember the passage mentioned above where he recognizes the room around him as real and finds interest in it because of Rezia it seems as if his communication with the Others was coming back with it: ““It's too small for Mrs. Peters," said Septimus. For the first time for days he was speaking as he used to do! Of course it was—absurdly small, she said.”⁸² He appraises an object as “small”, borrowing some of his attention to the world and thus becoming “normal” again. This would agree with Merleau-Ponty’s prerequisite for any form of communication: I can only communicate when I recognize myself as positioned in the shared world that I and the Other simultaneously perceive. Unlike Clarissa’s struggle, Septimus seems to be proving Merleau-Ponty right.

⁸⁰ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 81.

⁸¹ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 132.

⁸² Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 133.

But could we also argue that Septimus has lost the perspective of the outer world *because* he grew unable to communicate with the Other? The breaking point came when his friend, Evans, died and he was not able to feel any emotions. He became immune to any sort of human relationship. It is true that this specific event was a catalyst, it was not a blow in the head or anything similar but we are, after all, still talking about the perception: Septimus's inability to communicate with the Other – to attribute to the social world and to be constituted by it is, once again, a problem of not being able to recognize the behaviour of the bodies that demonstrate it in our shared space. It is a symptom of the same problem. Septimus has snatched himself out of this equation, built a wall, one with many holes but wall nonetheless, between the world and himself. According to all of our previous claims this should be impossible but let us not forget that we are not talking about “normal” way of existence: “The hallucination is not in the world but ‘before’ it, because the patient’s body no longer enjoys its insertion into the system of appearances.”⁸³ It was not a physical change that caused Septimus’s deterioration and retreat into an unfocused way of perception but rather a mental blow caused by the decomposition of his social world. The social and the physical world go hand in hand and in this case, the crumbling of one meant the dissociation from the other as well.

It is interesting that Woolf made sure to let us, readers, know that Septimus did not wish to die. Unlike Clarissa who considers suicide to be the only adequate mean of communicating herself, Septimus only sees it as an escape from a “traditional” idea of perception and interpersonal relationships. There is a point where Septimus recognizes that his inability to communicate is affecting him, his wall seems to be undermined by Rezia’s efforts at times:

"Communication is health; communication is happiness, communication—" he muttered. "What are you saying, Septimus?" Rezia asked, wild with terror, for he was talking to himself. She sent Agnes running for Dr. Holmes. Her husband, she said, was mad. He scarcely knew her. "You brute! You brute!" cried Septimus, seeing human nature, that is Dr. Holmes, enter the room."⁸⁴

Septimus understands that communication, be it with the physical world in the form of perception or the Other, is what human experience is built upon, the thing that allows us to exist in a “healthy” and “happy” manner. But right when he realizes it, just like we have shown in previous paragraphs concerning Septimus’s return to the natural world, he is discouraged and scared off by the idea of “human nature” as he calls it, represented in the characters of the doctors. The term has a similar air to it as his coinage of the usual perception of the world as

⁸³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 396.

⁸⁴ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 87.

“scientific”. The “human nature” is for Septimus a collection of cultural objects that he thinks to be manipulative. In a way, he does feel similarly to Clarissa – they are both frustrated by the way a human can give herself to the other on the plane of the objective world. But there is one big difference, Clarissa feels numb because she *lacks* the means, Septimus is not unhappy about this deficiency, his mental state is too deteriorated for that, but rather he *fears* that he will be forced into behaving, which is in its nature communicative, according to a set of unfitting cultural objects which Dr Bradshaw calls “proportion”⁸⁵. It is this fear that makes him, unlike Clarissa, active.

We should mention that there is also one strange instance where Septimus is failing at communicating but he seemingly does not notice that it is unsuccessful at all. He tries, on multiple occasions, to convey the message from the dead: “

"To whom?" he asked aloud. "To the Prime Minister," the voices which rustled above his head replied. The supreme secret must be told to the Cabinet; first that trees are alive; next there is no crime; next love, universal love, he muttered, gasping, trembling, painfully drawing out these profound truths which needed, so deep were they, so difficult, an immense effort to speak out, but the world was entirely changed by them for ever.”⁸⁶

As if in a fever dream, Septimus uses the language in a way that deviates from its communicative function because he does not construct it in accordance to the norm that would be a *cultural object*. It does not bother him, because he seems to have, at times, forgotten the *cultural objects* altogether. Septimus has not only isolated himself from the physical world but also from all the artifacts of the social world. He feels like he is transforming the net of relations by uncovering the “eternal truths” that he struggles to fit into the words. The result is, of course, incomprehensible. Septimus fancies himself to be an interpreter of the “profound truths” to the mankind,⁸⁷ but he speaks only his own personal language.

5.3 Septimus and Time

Let us start our discussion on Septimus’s temporal perception with a quotation:

“But what was the scientific explanation (for one must be scientific above all things)? Why could he see through bodies, see into the future, when dogs will become men? It was the heat wave presumably, operating upon a brain made sensitive by eons of evolution. Scientifically speaking, the flesh was melted off the world. His body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left. It was spread like a veil upon a rock.”⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 90.

⁸⁶ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 62.

⁸⁷ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 63.

⁸⁸ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 62.

Septimus feels like he can *see* the essence of the Other, he sees them for what they are. If we remember what we have said in our chapter on time, this is, once again, a direct negation of how the Other is constituted. Septimus feels like the history of humankind is spread out in front of him. It is impossible for a subject to be fully transparent to herself, to predict her future and yet Septimus claims to *become* one with the net of relations of which everyone is part: he is the veil of nerves, the personification of the social relations that connect the whole of the mankind which deems him capable of foreseeing the future. And as we know, a subject is time which makes Septimus the universal time, time that is composed of time lived by every single subject, tied together in the net of relations which has been unified with Septimus's nerve system. He loses his body and becomes a universal subject to which nothing is opaque, he does not need to observe the behaviour of people's bodies as mere mortals do, he understands them from his special position of the messenger of an omniscient god. He can see the future because of the transparency of the time that he perceives. This is, of course, another hallucination, and even Septimus shortly questions its legitimacy. That being said, it is an exquisite demonstration of Septimus's divorce from natural perception. Not only does he weed himself out of the world, he also questions his own constitution as a subject by rejecting his personal history and transforming himself to an idea of universal time.

Let us investigate in what manner does Septimus seem to be not aware of his own personal temporality. We have talked about recalling memories as peeling one layer after the other. Septimus is not capable of doing this, or at least not always. His hallucinations do not present themselves as past moments recalled into the *field of present*. When Septimus sees Evans alive and well right in front of his eyes, he *believes* him to be there, not as a memory but as an authentic present perception: "an immortal ode to Time. He sang. Evans answered from behind the tree. The dead were in Thessaly, Evans sang, among the orchids. There they waited till the War was over, and now the dead, now Evans himself—"89 The perceptions are mixed, Septimus knows that Evans is dead but he also sees him singing and waiting for the end of the War. Septimus cannot believe his ability to remember any better than his present perceptions. His past is too confused.

So now we shall ask ourselves: did Septimus cease to be a subject? Is that even possible? How can he be one, if he does not remember his own life? Let us repeat what actually establishes someone as a subject: it is the subject's nature as her own temporality that grants her the *ipse*

⁸⁹ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 64.

identity. This does not change. No matter if Septimus remembers clearly how his life unfolded, no matter if he sometimes feels like an omniscient god, imagining himself to be a universal time – he will always remain a collection of his past experiences. He is like this *because* of what happened to him in his past, because he was born to the world that he was born into. It is true that he has changed, there is no Septimus anymore, according to his own wife,⁹⁰ the madness has destroyed the majority of his *idem* identity but his conception as subject, as time, remains.

⁹⁰ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 60.

6 Conclusion

There can be no doubt that the similarities between the modernist experiment that is *Mrs. Dalloway* and the reimagining of the goal of phenomenological investigation performed in *Phenomenology of Perception* are more than prominent. We have showcased that they are both interested in portrayal of everyday experience of perception, the interpersonal relationships and the subject herself. In the first chapter we have established the primacy of body as the thing that perceives, not an object manipulated by some different thing, be it a soul, a brain or a consciousness. This was important for our understanding of a subject as always present in the world, ready to perceive and be perceived by the Other. Because of the preparation that we have done in the first chapter, it became clear that since we are conscious bodies it is not possible for us to hide from the Other as I always betray myself through my behaviour in the world. Thanks to this anti-dualistic understanding of the self we were able to form a theory of communication that we subsequently challenged by our reading of *Mrs. Dalloway*. The definition of the Other prompted us to focus on the other side of the coin – the I, and so we have reimagined Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of a personal subject and temporality within the scope of the novel. At last, we have contrasted the idea of a usual, “normal” way of perceiving with that of a mentally ill person, concluding our critical reading of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

The most important distinction that we have discovered was in the understandings of communication, with Merleau-Ponty taking an optimistic stance of a relatively unobscured possibility of projection of one’s thoughts, states and feelings through the act of behaving contrasted by Woolf’s portrayal of loneliness caused by the inability to communicate. Woolf’s approach proved more true to reality. One could argue that just because she wrote a character that behaves in the abovementioned manner that questions Merleau-Ponty’s theory, it does not yet prove anything. It is a piece of fiction, after all. But is it not the sense of touching upon the reality of our everyday experience that makes this novel so exceptional and widely praised? I do not doubt that there is a possibility of Clarissa existing: obscured, quiet and undiscovered. I am, of course, not claiming that Woolf herself felt like an unfulfilled socialite, unable to express her deeper nature. The specific content of Clarissa’s suffering is not and *cannot* be identical with the author’s, as that would have been a paradox. Woolf created a character whose emotional strain she was capable of presenting and communicating to the reader in order to capture the *feeling* of hopelessness it causes and given her own tragic end it seems inevitable that the portrayal of Clarissa is not random nor completely drawn from imagination but rather

a testament to real-life frustration. We will never know *what* Virginia Woolf struggled to convey, what must have been left unpronounced (and neither is it relevant for our reading of *Mrs. Dalloway*), but we can recognize the heaviness of such condition in Clarissa's monologues. And thus we need to identify the existential mutism, the incapability to communicate, as a real possibility that we have uncovered by implementing the argumentation and structures presented by Merleau-Ponty.

When it comes to our reading of the novel, we have demonstrated and described, through the use of Merleau-Ponty's well-developed system of terms and arguments, the cause of the feeling of commonality that one experiences when reading *Mrs. Dalloway*. Merleau-Ponty at the beginning of *Phenomenology of Perception* aims to "seize the meaning of the world" and if we agree that he succeeds in doing so at least to some extent, it seems only natural that a novel that mirrors many of his descriptions of what it is like to be would produce in its reader that famous atmosphere of the inexplicable and yet intimate experience of our everyday lives.

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