“Men Must Not Cut Down Trees:” Septimus Smith’s Madness of Nature

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Many critics have written about Virginia Woolf’s penchant for the natural world and its placement in the foreground rather than the background of her works (Armbruster and Wallace, Cantrell, Kostkowska, Hutchings Westling, Waller). They have provided ecocritical analyses of her narrative structure, language, and themes. Generally, these critiques have focused for the most part on works other than Mrs. Dalloway, and when they examine Septimus Smith, they do so in reference to his suffering from shell shock and the attendant grief of losing Corporal Evans, rather than the content of his hallucinatory visions. With the knowledge that Smith functions as Clarissa’s double, and given Clarissa’s intimacy with the natural world, this paper will examine Septimus’ emotional trauma from within the context of ecopsychological and ecocritical perspectives. The concepts of location, including that of the human perceiver, based on Merleau Ponty’s phenomenology, Woolf’s own scientific influences and attitudes, and the theoretical frameworks of ecocriticism will be addressed.

Virginia Woolf wrote in her introduction to the 1928 Modern Library of the World’s Best Books edition: “Books are the flowers or fruit stuck here and there on a tree which has its roots deep down in the earth of our earliest life, of our first experiences” (11). And:

Of Mrs. Dalloway then one can only bring to light at the moment a few scraps, of little importance or none perhaps; as that in the first version Septimus, who later is intended to be her double, had no existence; and that Mrs. Dalloway was originally to kill herself, or perhaps merely to die at the end of the party. (11)

To the critics who believed she had intentionally created a new method of writing out of dissatisfaction with existing narrative forms, she stated, “Dissatisfied the writer may have been; but her dissatisfaction was primarily with nature for giving an idea, without providing a house for it to
live in” (12). Did she mean nature, the natural world? Given her integration of the natural world throughout her writing, and her perpetual questioning of mechanistic forces in society, one cannot wholly discount this possibility.

Elizabeth Waller, in “Writing the Real: Virginia Woolf and the Economy of Language,” explains how

Woolf herself had difficulty expressing the real world within the conventions of language, and ...she resolved this problem by letting the flow and flux of ecocentric reality voice the language to describe that reality...Woolf develops an entirely different form of narrative that linguistically suggests an ecology beyond the backyard--a pulsing rhythm within an ecology of language. (138)

In “Scissors and Silks,” “Flowers and Trees,” and “Geraniums Ruined by the War”: Virginia Woolf’s Ecological Critique of Science in Mrs. Dalloway.” Justyna Kostkowska reiterates this observation:

...the novel enacts the natural organic unity in the way it is written, parts of it reverberating and echoing or foreshadowing each other, like the image of Clarissa standing at the top of the stairs or experiencing Septimus’s suicide (twice: in the opening page of the book, and then more extensively during her party. Another example of this organic structure is the masterful net of connections between the lives of Septimus and Clarissa, who never physically meet or interact, the net that extends to all characters who explain and illuminate each other. (195)

Waller cites Edward Casey’s theory of “implacement,” which seeks to subsume the dichotomy of self and other (139). James Hillman also cites Casey’s Phenomenology of Place as one of his influences when he states that, “the most radical deconstruction of subjectivity, called ‘displacing the subject,’ today would be replacing the subject back into the world, or re-placing the subject altogether with the world” (xxi). Woolf achieves this by decentering her human protagonists and constructing a web of connections between them and their environment, whether surrounding an official grey motor car in the streets of London, or walking through a verdant park.
Carol Cantrell charges that the modernists became distrustful of the foundations and institutions of Western culture because “they had experienced a revolutionary change in ‘the given,’ including ‘the given’ we call nature” and examines place and its meaning according to French philosopher Merleau-Ponty (33). She and Louise Hutchings Westling ‘place’ Woolf’s works in MerleauPonty’s ontological framework, which sustains an ecocritical approach by acknowledging humans as perceivers in the unstable setting of place, and that the realms of experience, creativity, and intellect are contingent on the moment by moment interactions of humans with their environment.¹ ²

Moreover, like the rest of the physical world, the phenomenological body is not fixed but ‘continually emerges anew of an ever-changing weave of relations to earth and sky, things, tasks, and other bodies.’ For the phenomenologist as for the ecologist, the weave of relations which we know as ‘reality’ is in fact neither fixed nor stable; not only do living things change in themselves, but constitutive relations constantly change as well. (35)

Cantrell characterizes Merleau-Ponty’s idea of ‘perceptual faith’ and his emphasis on bodily situation as “useful tools for ecocritical analysis because their beginning point is the continuity between human and world…[J]ust as we cannot talk about mind without body, we cannot talk about body without place”(35). Place is a condition of being, not merely background, and Merleau-Ponty even terms human and nonhuman interrelationships “conversation.”

‘it is the same world that contains our bodies and our minds, provided that we understand by world not only the sum of things that fall or could fall under our eyes, but also the locus of their compossibility, the invariable style they observe, which connects our perspectives…and..makes us feel we are two witnesses capable of hovering over the same true object, or at least of exchanging our situations relative to it, as we can exchange our standpoints in the visible world in the strict sense” (36).

Here Cantrell lauds Merleau-Ponty for doing what other ecological thought does not: placing the human observer as the starting point while also believing that the human is not all there is.

“Furthermore, we share perceptions with other perceivers, who ‘have the power to decenter me, to oppose [their] centering to my own” (35 brackets hers). This is vividly illustrated in the park scene,
where a number of characters perceive and interpret each others’ personas and actions, their internal monologues ricocheting off the reader’s own perceptions and impressions. Although one is tempted to use the phrase ‘misperceive’ in regard to some interpretations, for example, Peter’s that Septimus and Rezia were having a lover’s quarrel, while Maisie Johnson’s thought that “[b]oth seemed queer” was ‘closer to the truth,’ the reader is made aware that such interchanges represent ‘real’ life; that one constantly make judgments based on perception, and that one can never know the full story (Woolf 216). This awareness becomes especially important in Drs. Holmes’s and Bradshaw’s mis-treatment of Septimus and in contrast, sharpens their gross wielding of personal egos and institutional power.

This framework rejects both Cartesian mind/body dualism and the “humanism [that] insisted there was an ontological difference between Homo sapiens and the rest of the biosphere” (Glotfelty 20). Put in succinctly pragmatic terms, “[h]ow can the proper study of man be man if it is impossible for man to exist out of context?” (Glotfelty 93). In Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf addresses this very question with her insistence of visceral natural and human connections between and among (not meaning to sound dualistic), both realms. In this vein, Waller questions, “Is Woolf really pursuing the nature of identity, or the identity of nature? Does human identity exist outside the context of nature—ever?”(148).

Additionally, Woolf’s reciprocal assignment of human characteristics to natural entities, and descriptions of humans using nature-evoking phrases point toward a philosophical integration of subject and object; the natural world is no longer merely a background. As Neil Evernden states in “Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy,” “Ecology begins as a normal, reductionist science, but to its own surprise, it winds up denying the subject-object relationship upon which science rests” (Glotfelty 93).
Of particular note is the abundance of references to trees throughout Woolf’s personal and published work. In Mrs. Dalloway, Septimus’s hallucinations are, to his mind, peopled with trees. Woolf appears to use trees as metonymic for the whole of nature, and both she and her characters sense them as human entities. Kostkowska notes that while writing Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf made comments in her diary that indicate she viewed “the human and the non-human as a unity” (187). Woolf described human experience in natural terms, and described a walk on the downs with “a flat meadow with trees in groups like people talking leading to the downs” (187). Conversely, Woolf describes flowers in terms of manmade objects: roses “fresh like frilled linen clean from a laundry” (189). “By describing one in terms of the other, Woolf erases the artificial boundary between the human and the natural and shows how much they have in common. Nature and people reflect each other” (189). This predilection is shown by Septimus in his hallucinatory state. It is a poignant portrayal, given Woolf’s own mental illness and suicide, and, while Septimus may be Clarissa’s literary double, sadly, he can also be viewed as a double for Woolf herself:

A marvellous discovery indeed-- that the human voice in certain atmospheric conditions (for one must be scientific, above all scientific) can quicken trees into life! Happily, Rezia put her hand with a tremendous weight on his knee so that he was weighted down, transfixed, or the excitement of the elm trees rising and falling, rising and falling with all their leaves alight and the colour thinning and thickening from blue to the green of a hollow wave, like plumes on horses’ heads, feathers on ladies’, so proudly they rose and fell, so superbly, would have sent him mad. But he would not go mad. He would shut his eyes; he would see no more.

But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with this own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement. The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern; the white and blue, barred with black branches....All taken together meant the birth of a new religion. (Woolf 212-3).

Clarissa too thinks in tree metaphors:

She being part, she was positive, of the trees at home, of the house there, part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between 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. (201)
And from The Waves, Waller quotes: “But [Susan] is blind after the light and trips and flings herself down on the roots under the trees, where the light seems to pant in and out, in and out. The branches heave up and down,” and comments, “As children, they all understood their English language as entirely enwrapped in the language of trees because they do not perceive their bodies separate from the bodies of nonhumans” (Waller 150).

This idea correlates with Paul Shepard’s thesis in Nature and Madness, and with Septimus, who, in his hallucinatory state listens for the “language of trees,” and to the Greek of sparrows. According to Shepard, human development requires rites of passage that hearken back to an involvement in the natural world, acknowledging human situatedness in the world, and denying this leads to anger and alienation. In attempting to answer his fundamental question, “why do men persist in destroying their habitat?” he realized that people such as Erich Fromm had already considered the possibility of societal sickness. Fromm premised that cultural and sociological relativism which leads to “consensual validation has no bearing on mental health: ‘That millions of people share the same forms of mental pathology does not make these people sane’” (xxi).

Further, Shepard notes that anthropologist Derek Freeman ascribes a lack of normative standards for mental health because of such relativism, and that George Steiner, in Bluebeard’s Castle, hypothesizes that the Holocaust was motivated by the intolerable emotional and intellectual burden of monotheism. Acting as the frenzied agents for a kind of fury in the whole of Christendom, the Germans sought to destroy the living representatives of those who had centuries ago wounded the mythic version of creation, stripping the earth of divine being and numinous presences, and substituting a remote, invisible, unknowable, demeaning, vengeful, arbitrary god. (4-5)

While Steiner seems to be giving the base human motivations of hatred, scapegoating and self justification short shrift, the shift from animism to logocentrism due to Christian exegesis and
widespread literacy has without doubt fundamentally changed Western man’s relationship to and philosophy of nature (Glotfelty 16). The groves, no longer sacred, have become lumber with which to build things to be used. The language of trees has been silenced by institutionalized religion, economics and politics.

Shepard applies the notion of societal madness to human psychological development, what he terms ontogeny, or ‘coming into being,’ that takes the first twenty years of growth, conjecturing that non-Western tribal worldviews foster a calendar of mental growth, cooperation, leadership, and the study of ...a world where the clues to the meaning of life were embodied in natural things, where everyday life was inextricable from spiritual significance and encounter, and where the members of the group celebrated individual stages and passages as ritual participation in the first creation. (6)

A case can be made that Septimus’ initiation into the army, and thereby, according to society, manhood, through the war is symptomatic of the socially instituted madness Shepard describes. The reader’s first introduction to Septimus is his impression that the drawn blinds of the motorcar backfiring in the street have “a curious pattern like a tree” on them (Woolf 206). He is consumed with paranoia and “this gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him. The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames” (206). Peter Knox-Shaw views the motor car scene as a subtle and central introduction to one of the novel’s main concerns, the war itself. Each character perceives the car’s symbolism individually, as ‘multiple witnesses hovering over the same object’:

The motor car that takes Septimus back to the experience of shelling, arouses emotions in other onlookers which also have to do with war, albeit with its genesis rather than its aftermath. The dove-grey blind on which Septimus discerns the pattern of a tree, serves generally as an object of more secular veneration. Drawn by some anonymous dignitary of the state, the gathering crowds are swept by a patriotic fervour that is shown to exclude as well as unite, and to foster belligerence at as fast a rate as fellow-feeling. An outsider
beaten up in a pub, or the men at Whites--brimming with the pride that led their ancestors ‘to the cannon’s mouth’--stage the arousal of war-fever in the present, as surely as Septimus turns the present into a vehicle for a moment from the Great War. (106)

Knox-Shaw uses Psycho-Analysis and the War Neuroses, a collection of essays from a 1920 conference on shell-shock (published by Hogarth Press), and Freud’s four stages of hysteria: trauma, repression, repetition and abreaction, to provide historic context for Septimus’s breakdown. Psychologists at that time were viewing the symptoms of shell-shock as “stages in a remedial progress instituted by the psyche itself,” in an attempt at self-healing, in contrast to the medical profession’s theory that it was the result of neurological damage (Knox-Shaw 103, Davis 174). Repression of the psychic trauma leads to symptoms including hallucinations, fearfulness and nightmares, which, by their repetition, bring the patient closer to the original horror of the trauma he has suffered. The eventual re-experiencing of the events ultimately provides catharsis, and allows the patient to move forward toward emotional healing. These stages manifested intrinsically, and in Septimus’s case, were a delayed reaction to his trauma, occurring five years after the war was ended.

Woolf’s portrayals of Drs. Holmes and Bradshaw are obvious critiques of the medical establishment’s self-entrenchment in biological empiricism at the cost of psychological awareness, and reflective of the level of governmental concern given, or more accurately, being denied war veterans.5 When Woolf revised her short story “The Prime Minister,” in October 1922 to create the character of Septimus:

A storm had broken in Parliament only a fortnight before over the announcement that, as from October 1, six hundred or so ex-servicemen in asylums were to forego their right to a pension under a now expired Royal Warrant, and to be supported wholly under the provision of the Poor Law--on the grounds that their mental derangement was judged to have been due to causes other than the war. (Knox-Shaw 99)
It was not until 1930 that “The Mental Treatment Act,” a direct result of the poor treatment of war veterans, and which provided intensive out patient care for mental illness patients, while severely curtailing the requirements for institutionalization in asylums, became statute. This was the bill to which Richard Dalloway made mention at Clarissa’s party. (Woolf 101-2)

The Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry Into “Shell-Shock,” was published in 1922. It includes statements from 59 witnesses, mostly medical officers and psychologists, who debated the nature of and use of the term “shell shock.” Woolf may not have been familiar with this report. But interestingly, Megan Burroughs, while correlating the character of Septimus with Woolf’s acquaintance Sigfried Sassoon and the poet Wilfred Owens, quotes from Sassoon’s diary about his experiences with a psychologist named Dr. Rivers. Sassoon was opposed to the war, and published “A Soldier’s Declaration,” and resultanty was sent to Craiglockhart Hospital in 1917 diagnosed with shell shock. In the Hospital, he wrote,

My doctor is a sensible man who doesn’t say anything silly. His name is Rivers, a notable Cambridge psychologist. But his arguments don’t make any impression on me. He doesn’t pretend that my nerves are wrong, but regards my attitude as abnormal. I don’t know how long he will go on trying to persuade me to modify my views. (qtd. in Burroughs 72)

Further, Sassoon believed that Rivers’ diagnosis of shell shock was meant to discredit his declaration against the war:

By passing me for General Service (which Rivers says is ‘the only thing they can do’) they admit that I never had any shell-shock, as it is quite out of the question for a man who has been three months in a nerve-hospital to be sent back at once if he really had anything wrong. (Burroughs 72)

One of the witnesses in the War Office Report is a Dr. W.H.R. Rivers, Praelector in Natural Science, St. John’s College Cambridge, Late Consultant in Psychological Medicine, Royal Air Force. Rivers stated to the Committee that he believed that a ‘mental wound,’ which he termed ‘trauma,’ could arise from the emotional shock of war, and that symptoms could arise as the result of a specific experience. Shell shock as a physical or a mental disorder is debated throughout the testimonies given. The witnesses answered a set of 38 questions, and the Report’s Appendix includes scant tables from earlier wars outlining incidences of shell shock. The introduction wryly notes this under the heading Absence of Statistics in its introduction:
Unfortunately we have been unable to obtain any reliable statistics covering cases of ‘shell-shock.’ … Much statistical matter was unavoidably lost during the progress of the war, and other material of a statistical kind, buried in the archives of the War Office and other Depts is as present inaccessible. The Committee were advised by Lt. General Sir J. Goodwin, that it could not, in fact, be obtained without a prohibitive amount of labour and expense and an expiration of time which would have postponed our report until the Official History of the War is published; that publication which must be of supreme interest and importance will no doubt contain exhaustive information as to the casualties of the war. (7)

Social stratification plays a large role in diagnosis, with more forgiving analysis of the officers’ breakdowns (neurasthenia) than those of the enlisted men (hysteria). Theories of susceptibility were based on heredity, age, class, former occupation, (those who led the ‘outdoor’ life might be less prone to shell shock, city dwelling soldiers with no experience with horses had higher stress levels; but all agreed on the validity of the rum ration: “I must certainly say that had it not been for the rum ration I do not think we should have won the war. Before the men went over the top they had a good meal and a double ration of rum and coffee” (68). The doctors strove to delineate between commotion versus emotion, concussion versus fear, and physical effects of shell blasts versus cowardice: most agreed that ‘shell shock’ was not a useful term. A Dr. Gordon Holmes supplied testimony, and may or may not have provided inspiration for Woolf’s character. However, a Dr. Roussy, Faculte de Medicine de Paris, late Consultant in Neurology to the French Army, seems to provide fodder for Dr. Bradshaw’s outlook:

He thought the mental defectives were very commonly found among the hysterical cases, but that it was impossible to eliminate them during the war, although he agreed that there would be certainly less emotional “shell shock” if they were excluded. But it would be an unfortunate thing for the nation if one kept behind all the mental defectives and sent all the men of higher mental capacity to the front. (21)

After advising that “Killing power, not man power, wins a war,” Section D: Selection, Care and Reinvigoration of Instructors recommends that instructors be given the opportunity to engage in calming agricultural pursuits for 5-7 days every three weeks, advising, “[h]e has been teaching destruction, the practice of war, the art of killing. Reverse the procedure. Let him practice construction, and the arts of peace. …Give him an allotment. Set him to work among the farm stock and poultry” (21).

Knox-Shaw points out Septimus’s resilience rather than his potential role as societal scapegoat, and that on a basic level, his symptoms were indicative of the healing process (106).
Part of that process includes making meaning out of his traumatic experiences, and the appearance of natural imagery in his hallucinations may be an attempt at constructing an alternate psychic place for himself; one that is the total antithesis of his military socialization:

Into a text composed largely of urbane impressions there erupts through his distress a stream of natural imagery, ranging from the vibrant to the brutal. The insane truthfulness of his mental state is inseparable from its disordered, even random character. It is not enough that Septimus should ‘let himself think about horrible things,’ his mode of thought has itself to be socially uncovenanted, self-born, rhapsodic. When he speaks as a seer he ‘mutters’, and we watch him from some distance ‘gasp[ing], trem[bling], painfu[l]ly draw[ing] out these profound truths which needed, so deep were they, so difficult, an immense effort to speak out.’ … Septimus’s arcadian realm, though it serves as a sort of mental cocoon, is experientially quite distinct from the numbed, anaesthetised state which follows on his shock. Indeed Septimus’s fictive world is not only vital, but immensely vitalizing in its effect, since the reassurance he derives from it plainly pushes him towards his headlong encounters with the unspeakable (107-8).

His visions circle ever closer to his distress about Evan’s death, and it may be that his vision of the terrier evolving into a man “works as a rebus for the brutality of man.” Ultimately, “[t]he grim bedrock of fact on which Septimus’s imagination comes at last to rest is the idea that human impulses are a relic of a non-human past”(Knox-Shaw 108). The false dichotomy of civilization versus nature represses on a broader level the twin realities of violence and death. Even in Shepard’s admittedly romanticized tribal communities, there is infighting, slavery, and warfare, so his thesis is no panacea to human violence. But the truth it contains, that humans, being part of the biological world, cannot sustain themselves outside of it, and owe their psychic well-being on a visceral level to their environment, cannot be ignored. Kostkowska alludes to this, and the tension between science and the psyche’s own natural process of healing:

In Septimus’s delusions, the world is filled with universal love where trees are alive. These visions of the world’s unity are disrupted by reminders that ‘one must be scientific’—so such images must be repressed and put back where it ‘belongs’—outside of human life. After the physical violence of the war, Septimus is subject to emotional violence from his doctors. His sensitivity and individuality will be controlled and converted to Proportion, so he can feel and be just as little as everybody else. In a totalitarian-controlled system where nothing natural is permitted, he is isolated from his close environment and encouraged by Bradshaw
to distrust and deny his instincts. His visions of nature being one with the human world, of universal love and of the world with ‘no crime’ are ‘scientifically’ interpreted as madness. (191-2)

Septimus’s visions in the park include a heightened awareness of the sensual: “[a]ll the little red and yellow flowers were out on the grass, like floating lamps,” he sees an old lady’s face in a fern, and later, “red flowers grew through his flesh” (perhaps Flanders’ red poppies?), and “thick red roses grow on his bedroom wall” (Woolf 253, 255). He becomes convinced of the need to tell the Prime Minister that “trees are alive; next there is no crime; next love, universal love” (254). He is torn between his requirement of a scientific explanation for his awareness of beauty and his unmediated enjoyment of it, and ends up paraphrasing Keats:

Long streamers of sunlight fawned at his feet. The trees waved, brandished. We welcome, the world seemed to say; we accept; we create. Beauty, the world seemed to say. And as if to prove it (scientifically) wherever he looked at the houses, at the railings, at the antelopes stretching over the palings, beauty sprang instantly. To watch a leaf quivering in the rush of air was exquisite joy….all of this, calm and reasonable as it was, made out of ordinary things as it was, was the truth now; beauty, that was the truth now. Beauty was everywhere. (256)

Some striking aspects of Septimus’s breakdown are his burgeoning awareness of his repression of Evan’s death, his consequent christening Holmes and Bradshaw ‘human nature,’ and his short reprieve with Rezia, during which she realizes she must accompany him to the home. In his mind, his great crime was his inability to feel; however, ironically, it is the surfacing of his grief and survivor’s guilt that cause him to believe this of himself. This is his great crime, and one which he comes close to admitting to Bradshaw until Rezia assures him that he has done nothing wrong (281). “…[W]hen Evans was killed just before the Armistice, in Italy, Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognizing that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably” (272). Later, after Dr. Holmes’s first visit, Septimus equates his own self-condemnation with that of ‘human nature’:
So there was no excuse; nothing whatever the matter, except the sin for which human nature had condemned him to death; that he did not feel. He had not cared when Evans was killed; that was worst...he had married his wife without loving her... The verdict of human nature on such a wretch was death. (276)

After Dr. Bradshaw has decided Septimus must go to one of his homes for the “rest cure,” the couple has a respite when Rezia works on a ludicrously small hat for Mrs. Peter. The act of creation rouses Septimus and engages him. Just before that occurs, his interior reverie is filled with natural images:

He would wait in this warm place, this pocket of still air, which one comes on at the edge of a wood sometimes in the evening, when because of a fall in the ground, or some arrangement of the trees (one must be scientific above all, scientific), warmth lingers, and the air buffets the cheek like the wing of a bird. (324)

In literal opposition are Drs. Holmes and Bradshaw: “Human Nature,” products of rationalism and purveyors of didacticism. Both characters, aside from being very much the unmoving subjects of their own worlds represent then-current cultural values. An examination of Woolf’s scientific influences reveals that her father knew Charles Darwin, as a young girl, she attended a lecture on and demonstration of Roentgen rays or x-rays, and she had a friendship with Clive Bell, another Bloomsbury member, who wrote Theory of Civilization and On British Freedom. Critics posit that all of these influences influenced Woolf’s portrayal of Septimus’s medical diagnoses and treatment. Woolf’s father “was converted from Christianity to science after reading The Origin of Species and even wrote his own version of evolutionary philosophy” (Lambert 278).

Elizabeth Lambert, in “Proportion Is in the Mind of the Beholder; Mrs. Dalloway’s Critique of Science,” notes how “evolutionary concepts appear in the medical discourse of Sir William Bradshaw, the scientific religion of Septimus Smith and the primeval images that help form Clarissa Dalloway’s world”(278). Sex-based stereotypes played a role in what Elaine
Showalter terms “psychiatric Darwinism” and “psychiatric modernism.” These approaches believed that mental illness was based in the body, and usually due to heredity. What was termed “the rest cure,” and one from which Woolf herself benefited, was often prescribed for ‘hysterical’ women, to “neutralize their rebellious tendencies” (279). With the return of shell shocked soldiers from World War I, this treatment was extended to them as well, in tacit recognition that their ailment was not organic. The underlying assumption with the rest cure was that those who had mental illness were unable to perform their duties and proper roles. Dr. Bradshaw’s worship of Proportion had its basis in Victorian biology, which held to the ‘nerve force’ notion. The brain’s extended use for thought and emotion had a direct correlation on the depletion of physical energy, and therefore, moderation was the key to restoring health.

Woolf’s scathing depictions of the medical establishment and its underlying social forces owe much to Clive Bell’s works On British Freedom and Civilization. Bell had had some of his works censored and spoke out against censorship in his works. Brian Shaffer, in “Civilization in Bloomsbury: Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway and Bell’s “Theory of Civilization” states:

It is my contention that Bell’s ‘theory of civilization,’ as expressed in On British Freedom and Civilization provides what Bakhtin calls the ‘necessary extratextual context’ by which we can better understand and evaluate the civilization represented in Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway. This novel invokes and critiques, absorbs and parodies Bell’s…theory of civilization not only because of its currency at the time, but because Woolf herself remained deeply skeptical about many of its ramifications.” (74)

Woolf parodies Bell’s belief in the need for social classes; the leisure class must be tended to by a servant class, according to him. But she does “appropriate Bell’s view that England is ‘enslaved’ by various ‘enemies of liberty’: politicians, scientists, doctors, and religious ‘goody-goody-rolllers’ who seek to legislate and to censor the cultural fare consumed by the public” (78). Bell condemns the ‘religion of health,’ and declares that the ‘enemies of liberty’ cannot help themselves: they must meddle in the affairs of others, under the auspices of their work being for those persons’ own good.
Shaffer examines Drs. Holmes and Bradshaw as representative medical meddlers, who proved Bell right in his assertion that, “organized medicine, were it to have its own way, would be fatal” (79). He notes that the doctors give conflicting cures for Septimus’s undefined ailment. Holmes holds forth that only the body could be ill, and that his symptoms are only products of his imagination. Bradshaw’s diagnosis of complete breakdown at least is closer to the mark, although his prescription of the rest cure may be interpreted as an act of both bullying and censorship of Septimus’s personal freedom, since he was to be isolated from Rezia (79).

Believing himself ‘condemned to death by human nature,’ with Holmes and Bradshaw cast in the role of ‘human nature,’ Septimus is finally driven to suicide not by the voices he hears, but by Holmes’s attempt, based on his legal right, to remove Septimus physically from his wife, Rezia, for bedrest in total isolation. (80)

In contrast, Bell saw civilization not as a nation state, but rather as a state of mind among individuals. Kostkowska also cites Bell’s theory of civilization as an influence on Woolf, claiming its artificiality is because it is in opposition to nature. “[I]t imposes a set of unnatural restrictions and regulations on life, limiting its diversity and harmonious coexistence. In other words, it practices an intentional and artificial separation from nature” (185).

Lambert equates the twin Goddesses of Proportion and Conversion to empiricism and imperialism, and she sees Septimus’s creating his own scientific religion, as a response to Bradshaw, one which emulates Bradshaw’s in “claiming the authority to interpret the truth for others,” with his Messianic delusions (279-80). Here, I diverge from Lambert’s interpretation that:

The struggle comes down to his word against Bradshaw’s both vying for the role of priest, the controller of meaning. Unlike Bradshaw, however, for whom words are a convenient means to power over others, Smith looks to religion and science for the meaning they promise and fails to find it. (280)

Lambert goes on to cite Septimus’s terrier hallucination (an act of reverse Darwinism), and his thoughts that “It was the heat wave presumably, operating on a brain made sensitive by eons of
evolution. Scientifically speaking, the flesh was melted off the world” (Woolf 255). (The allusion to heat melting off the world is one that Michael Whitworth ascribes to Woolf’s first hand introduction to the x-ray.) She characterizes Septimus’s visions of trees as a “frightening sense of unity with trees…also part of a new religion” and concludes that Septimus, although a true believer in science and religion, fails in his belief that words stand for reality (280). In contrast, Dr. Bradshaw harnesses words in order to wield personal, institutional, and patriarchal power over others.

One is struck with Lambert’s failure to acknowledge that Septimus is mentally ill and in the throes of an emotional breakdown. Rather than attempting to mediate truth for others, Septimus has gone so far inside himself that the only meaning he seeks is a reason to continue living. His thought processes have become impaired, and his words are those of psychic disintegration seeking some sort of resolution, not a Nietzschean will to power. Further, across Woolf’s writings, trees bear the reader no animosity, and for Septimus, they convey a sense of excitement and even awe. His need to give a scientific explanation for their quickening, even in his delusional state, reflects his socialization as a rational Western male and how Conversion has worked, via his war experience, to change him from a Shakespeare aficionado into a “man of science,” one who may not mourn the death of his friend Evans. Shepard would say that Septimus’s rite of passage (his war experience) was supremely flawed, and his yearning for natural unity, indeed, conversation with the natural world, precisely reflects human pathology resulting from separation from the environment. Tragically, there were not enough warm places where “the air buffets the cheek like the wing of a bird” for Septimus (Woolf 324).
1 Westling’s “Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World” offers a sustained application of Merleau-Ponty’s work to texts other than Mrs. Dalloway, including “The Window” and Between the Acts, and notes how quantum physics influenced Merleau-Ponty.

2 Merleau-Ponty’s notion of affordances, defined as what the environment offers to an animal, whether good or bad, directly relates to human intellectual and creative pursuits: “Human creativity that is, an active, shaping response to place, is inherent in virtually everything we see and do, for we are constantly improvising our relations to the world around us, responding to affordances, making sense of things.” (Cantrell, 39) Intellect is “an elaboration, or recapitulation, of a profound creativity already underway at the most immediate level of sensory perception.” (Cantrell, 39)

3 As Kostkowska notes: “An overwhelming majority of characters are repeatedly described in floral or animal terms: Clarissa is ‘perched’ bird-like, ‘a touch of the bird about her, of the jay, blue-green, vivacious’ …Elizabeth is ‘like a poplar, […] like a river, […] like a hyacinth’…; Septimus is ‘beak-nosed’.; Peter is ‘hawk-like’; Septimus sees Rezia as a ‘flowering tree’…, and as a ‘little hen’” (188).

4 In “The Otherness of Septimus Warren Smith,” Knox-Shaw is one of the few critics to ponder the content of Septimus’s hallucinations, and to correlate Woolf’s chronicling of his breakdown with the prevailing psychological theories and political events. Other critics (Karen DeMeester, Susan Bennett Smith), as well as he have examined Septimus and noted Woolf’s personal experiences with the medical establishment in treating her mental illness, but his article provides the most in depth historical elucidation.

5 See Daniel Zwerdling’s report on returning Ft. Carson soldiers’ difficulties and in some cases, military denial of treatment for post traumatic stress disorder. The story was aired on National Public Radio on December 6, 2006, with an officer stating; “Some people are just weak.”

6 Kostkowska reiterates this idea: “In effect, Woolf conducts an ecological critique of science, especially sociology, and condemns its insistence on human superiority to and exploitation of the natural environment” (186). Mrs. Dalloway portrays a world which contains no divisions or barriers between its human and non-human components. Both of these elements are inseparably interconnected, and when one is being oppressed, the other also suffers. Woolf shows how a civilized, oppressive social realm is the result of the artificial separation between nature and civilization, which causes emotional deadness in those who agree to live in it. Physically and metaphorically, Woolf aligns nature with the theme of individual freedom and presents all forms of oppression (nationalist, military, patriarchal, capitalist, fascist, religious, psychological, and medical) as “unnatural” by surrounding them with images that are either man-made and artificial: scissors, silks, cars, brass statues; or exploitative of nature: pavements, captive animals, cut or potted flowers. Consequently, she subverts the Cartesian mind-body dualism and the idea of human intellectual and evolutionary superiority” (197).

7 In “Porous Objects: Self, Community, and the Nature of Matter,” Whitworth examines how current advances in physics may have influenced Woolf to write with an idea towards ecological integration that centered her human protagonists: “X-ray photography provided striking images which implicitly questioned the idea of solidity…In the x-ray images, if flesh was paradoxically both visible and transparent, at least bone and iron remained reassuringly solid; in Rutherford’s model [of the solar or porous atom], the paradox extended its scope to encompass the entire material world…metaphors of solidity can be used to express confidence in facts, theories and personalities, as well as figuring forth our feelings about an environment which is limiting or oppressive”(152). He claims Woolf challenged the Edwardian aesthetic with one of “fluidity and transparency.”(153) “The porous atom, and the atom surrounded by a field of force, model a very different kind of individual, one without clear boundaries, and model a very different kind of group relationship, one of invisible interfusion and interdependency. This model, I propose, was very congenial to Woolf” (153). And finally, “Woolf had already explored the idea of ‘community of feeling’ in Mrs. Dalloway, centrally in the relationship of Septimus and Clarissa, but that novel’s allusions to the new physics reinforce the sense of community only in a general sense…If the world can lose its solidity, then one might infer that the social and physical barriers which separate Septimus’s world from Clarissa’s might also break down; but the novel does much less to encourage this association of ideas than do the later works. It is clear that Woolf’s treatment of the theme of community is not absolutely dependent on scientific concepts” (154).
Works Cited


