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Fullness of Life for Virginia Woolf and *Mrs. Dalloway*

The great eighteenth century pragmatist William James worried once that a particular philosophy was “too economical to be all-sufficient” (James 83). He goes on to say: “Profusion, not economy, may after all be reality’s key-note.” Virginia Woolf knew this instinctively and profoundly; indeed practically her entire body of work can be read as a comment on the fullness of life. Although she is better known for her writing’s detailed delicacy and her tragic suicide, it is her assertion of life’s profusion that contrasts her most starkly with other Modernist writers, for whom negation and “its correlative states—absence, void, emptiness, and nothingness”—are the essence of reality (Colleen Jaurretche, qtd. Rubenstein, “Negation” 47). Eliot’s *Hollow Men* and Hemingway’s shattered expatriates populate a world where nothingness predominates and little is spoken. Woolf on the other hand remains convinced that humanity leads a brimming, extravagant existence. James Wood compares this to how, if “we are asked by a friend what we are thinking, we often say ‘Nothing.’ [...] Yet Woolf’s delicate method shows us that we are never thinking about nothing, that we are always thinking about something” (Wood, *Broken* 115). Life, she insists, “is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills” (*E5* 204). As such, her art aims at offering the reader a similarly expansive experience. She reminds her fellow writers: “Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small” (*RO* 118). This paper will trace Woolf’s dedication to literary fullness throughout her work, particularly focusing on *Mrs. Dalloway*.

“I want to read largely,” her diary states on 12 February 1927 (*WD* 103). Reading, however, is not the only activity she wishes to perform “largely.” For instance, her eventual acceptance of the automobile results from her realization that it could be “a great opening up in our lives” and “expand that curious thing, the map of the world in ones [*sic*] mind.” (qtd. Sims 121). Or she praises the late Horace Walpole, saying:

Certainly there is something wonderful to the present age in the sight of a whole human being — of a man so blessed that he could unfold every gift, every foible, whose long life spreads like a great lake reflecting houses and friends and wars and snuff boxes and revolutions and lap dogs, the great and the little, all intermingled, and behind them a stretch of the serene blue sky. (*DM* 62)

In practically every area of her life, Woolf equates the expansive with the good. Thus it is little surprise to hear her praise Elizabeth Barrett Browning for “her ardour and abundance,” or Russian writers like Dostoevsky and Tolstoy for a conception of the novel that is “larger, saner, and much more profound than ours[, ...] allow[ing for] human life in all its width and depth” (*E5* 527; qtd. Rubenstein, “Russian” 200). She complains elsewhere:

Why have we no great poet? You know that's [*sic*] what would keep us straight: but for our sins we only have a few pipers on hedges like Yeats and Tom Eliot, de la Mare—exquisite frail twittering voices one has to hollow one's hand to hear, whereas old Wth fills the room.” (qtd. Sims 155)

“Old Wth” is William Wordsworth, who urged the poet to “recognize / A *grandeur* in the beatings of the heart” and nourish “a more comprehensive soul” (*Prelude* I.413-414, emphasis added; “Preface” 103). Then the “spontaneous overflow” of their souls could become their poetry (98). Woolf similarly endorses Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the co-writer of *Lyrical Ballads*, for his idea that “a great mind is androgynous” (*RO* 93). A mind that can embrace both male and female—androgyny for Woolf is not *sexless*—allows for “fusion [to take] place” and the mind to be “fully fertilized.” Again, Woolf finds her ideal in the Russian sensibility, which is simultaneously “comprehensive and compassionate” (*RO* 120). This all-embracing mind she

contrasts with the “comparative poverty of the writer’s mind” whose work gives a “sense of being in a bright yet narrow room, confined and shut in, rather than enlarged and set free” (118). Such writers suffer from “limitation imposed by the method as well as by the mind.” (Woolf’s own method for expansive literature will be explored later.) The ideal mind for Woolf is extravagant and embracing. It can fully take in the fullness of the life it encounters. “Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this [...] uncircumscribed spirit[?]” she asks (117).

The first difficulty the writer meets, however, is the inadequacy of language. Bernard in *The Waves* notes that words such as “love” are “too small, [they have] too particular a name. We cannot attach the width and spread of our feelings to so small a mark” (*TW* 70). Another character in the same novel expresses feeling “tied down with single words” when she is grasping for life’s muchness (6). Woolf further draws attention to this difficulty in her tongue-in-cheek biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s pet dog, Flush:

Where two or three thousand words are insufficient for what we see [...] there are no more than two words and perhaps one-half for what we smell. The human nose is practically non-existent. The greatest poets in the world have smelt nothing but roses on the one hand, and dung on the other. The infinite gradations that lie between are unrecorded. Yet it was in the world of smell that Flush mostly lived. [...] To describe his simplest experience with the daily chop or biscuit is beyond our power. (*F* 129-130)

Language cannot even account for the limited sensual experience of the world. Even more pointedly, Woolf uses typographical emptiness in the following passage from *Orlando* to poke fun at both language’s shortcomings and the lame side-stepping writers are frequently guilty of:

For it has come about, by the wise economy of nature, that our modern spirit can almost dispense with language; the commonest expressions do, since no expressions do; hence the most ordinary conversation is often the most poetic, and the most poetic is precisely that which cannot be written down. For which reasons we leave a great blank here, which must be taken to indicate that the space is filled to repletion.

After some days more of this kind of talk, [...] (qtd. McLaurin, *Echoes* 87)

Clearly, Woolf refuses to let these limitations hinder her expression of life's extravagance, even though—to her constant chagrin—“most of life escapes” (qtd. Sim 1). She writes:

It is poetry that I want now—long poems. [...] I want [...] the words all glued together, fused, glowing; [I want] all my nerves [to stand] upright, flushed, electrified (what's the word?) with the sheer beauty—beauty astounding and superabounding. So that one resents it, not being able to catch it all and holding it all at the moment. (*WD* 64)

She writes frequently in her diary of how she desperately wants to “enclose everything, everything” in whichever novel she is writing, although never without “doubt[ing] how far it will enclose the human heart” (qtd. McLaurin, *Echoes* 33). She begins developing a style of writing that is “so elastic that it will embrace any thing, solemn, slight, or beautiful that comes into my mind” (*WD* 13). “How I trembled with excitement,” she writes after discovering “how [she] could embody all [her] deposit of experience in a shape that fitted it” (qtd. Jackson 113-114). She had found her “method of approach,” one which would be essential for writing *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Woolf's method comprised of a three distinct elements: embracing, enlargement, and expression. First: embracing, or inclusion. Here is yet another attribute exemplified by the Russians, whom Woolf praises for how they “accumulate” life in their writing (qtd. Rubenstein, “Russian” 199). The writer must include everything, “enclosing” it all. “But also we desire synthesis,” she writes: combining into *wholeness* is essential (*E5* 84). Again in her diary: “I want to put practically everything in: yet to saturate” (qtd. Jackson 119). Woolf consistently uses “saturation” to refer to what might be called synthesis, and it is such saturation that she found lacking in *Ulysses*. Joyce presents life's muchness by “forcing against us a sheer stylistic arbitrariness,” as Hugh Kenner puts it, rather than synthesizing accumulation into a saturated whole (qtd. Schleifer 58). Woolf worked diligently to forge a style of writing that was marked by “wholeness that encompasses fragmentation and multiplicity” (Woods, “Language” 178). In “Letter to a Young Poet,” she advises:

All you need now is to stand at the window and let your rhythmical sense open and shut, open and shut, boldly and freely, until one thing melts in another, until the taxis are dancing with the daffodils, until a whole has been made from all these separate fragments. [...] let your rhythmical sense wind itself in and out among men and women, omnibuses, sparrows — whatever come along the street — until it has strung them together in one harmonious whole. That perhaps is your task — [...] to absorb every experience that comes your way fearlessly and saturate it completely so that your poem is a whole, not a fragment; (E5 315, 316)

Wholeness is achieved through saturation, fullness through synthesis, and so the embrace is complete. Significantly Woolf uses music in the passage above as the analogy for her method. Music repeatedly features in her thought and writing as a means of embracing everything. The unifying presence of music in *Between the Acts* (her final novel) has been the focus of much scholarship, but music has a significant presence even in Woolf's debut novel, *The Voyage Out*. In that novel, Woolf's protagonist ponders how "music goes straight for things. It says all there is to say at once," and is thus perfectly saturated (VO 212). When "[a]bsorbed by her music," Rachel's "mind seem[s] to enter into communion, to be delightfully *expanded* and *combined*" (37, emphasis added).

Here the second element of Woolf's method appears, again introduced through music: Not only must writing combine and saturate, it must *enlarge*. Woolf predictably takes her cue from the Russians, who write of and with what she calls a "yeasty" soul (E5 80). A comparison of the following passage from *The Waves* and its holograph draft shows Woolf attempting to put this idea into words. The published version reads: "We are enlarged and solemnized and brushed into uniformity..." while Woolf originally fiddled with: "We are tremendously united... We are grandified—enlarged—made majestic in some curious way by the..." (qtd. McLaurin, "Unanimism" 120). Enlarging the language itself through her coining of words ("made majestic," "grandified"), Woolf's struggle here attests to the need for expansive means of expression. Continuing this idea later in the same novel, various objects are described as being

“lengthened, swollen, and made portentous,” taking on a peculiar sort of bulk through her vision and writing (*TW* 118).

The third aspect of Woolf’s method, expression, is once again musically suggestive, often discussed in connection with how to eliminate silence or emptiness from the world. As discussed earlier, Woolf’s view of life as full and her desire to revel in this fullness sets her apart from many of her contemporaries, but this does not preclude the presence of the ghost of nothingness in her work. As Roberta Rubenstein masterfully explores in *To the Lighthouse*, creation or expression proves a powerful way to dispel the nothingness. Woolf writes wistfully in her diary about “the singing of the real world” which opposes the “loneliness and silence”: “If I could catch the feeling, I would” (*WD* 144). Music, she insists, is “inborn in us [so much so] that we can never silence music, any more than we can stop our heart from beating” (qtd. Wood, “Language” 165). Kathryn Stelmach notes that even in passages such as this one from *Between the Acts* which explicitly force emptiness onto the reader:

Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell, singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence. (*BTA* 26)

yet the “room paradoxically sings in its stillness” (Stelmach 305). Achieving such expression is difficult for Woolf—and for her characters, as we shall see—but is, along with embracing and enlarging, essential to her method of engaging the world’s abundance.

Although much of Woolf’s writing focuses on her method for containing the “brimming” of life, one novel in particular explores it through both discussion and demonstration: *Mrs. Dalloway*, of which Woolf herself said, “in this book I have almost too many ideas” (*WD* 56). Allen McLaurin, in his analysis of the novel, aptly compares Woolf’s method to a musical keyboard. In “an attempt to capture in language the richness and diversity of our intuitive and sensational life,” Woolf “constructs a keyboard on which there is a scale running from [...]

inclusion to exclusion, from sensation to abstract symbolism. [...] Within this overall keyboard, [she] constructs various scales” which allow her to enact her method of synthesizing and grandifying, embracing and expanding, leading ultimately to expression (McLaurin, *Echoes* 43, 151).

Mrs. Dalloway opens with a thrillingly full evocation of a London morning, described in distinctly musical imagery. The tolling of Big Ben, the “brass bands” and “barrel organs,” the “jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead” introduce us to Clarissa Dalloway and the life that she loves so dearly (*MD* 4). Woolf stretches the reader’s attention outward (along and across the street) and upwards (looking to the mysterious airplane). The spaciousness is further increased by the presence of many bustling persons, to whom Woolf wisely gives individual names exploding with Dickensian vibrancy, and which suggest entire lives being lived. Clarissa’s symbolic removing the doors of her house from their hinges functions similarly as an opening up of her world (cf. Stelmach 309). Then there are Clarissa’s own exultations in life’s expansive richness: “it spread ever so far, her life, herself” (*MD* 9). Throughout the novel and its voices, Woolf reminds us how “[a]bsorbing, mysterious, of infinite richness” this life is, existing in a world which, like “the walls of a whispering gallery,” “return[s] a single voice expanded and made sonorous” (159, 18). It is a world flooded with Nature’s “determination to show, by brandishing her plumes, shaking her tresses, flinging her mantle this way and that,” just how extravagant she is (136). Clarissa is exemplary in her embrace of this abundance. She sees life’s fullness and loves it, hearing the music of its fragments and instants, and synthesizing them into a coherent whole. She personifies Woolf’s artistic principle of saturation.

Peter, on the other hand, falters in acknowledging life's abundance, due to his enormous self-absorption and his tendency to think of himself as "[o]nly one person in the world" (47). Largely oblivious to others except as "these miserable pigmies, these feeble, these ugly, these craven men and women," he disturbingly misreads Septimus and Rezia's "awful scene" and entirely misses the tragedy calling forth the ambulance at the end of the novel (56, 69, 147). However, while he fails in this aspect of Woolf's method (the embracing at which Clarissa excels), Peter surpasses Clarissa in the second aspect (expansion). While Clarissa is overwhelmed by thinking about the "dwindling of life" which she fears aging will inflict ("how little the margin [of life] that remained was capable any longer of stretching, of absorbing, as in the youthful years, the colours, salts, tones of existence, so that she filled the room she entered..."), Peter sees aging for what it is—the expanding of a life (29). Furthermore, he recognizes the "compensation of growing old": "the power of taking hold of experience, of turning it round, slowly, in the light," of enlarging it (77). In life, Peter realizes, one is "given a sharp, acute, uncomfortable grain," yet as time passes, it "flower[s] out, open[s], let[s] you [...] get the whole feel of it" (149). "Having done things millions of times enriched them," and this is "the power which the young lack" (159). "It increase[s]," Peter tells Sally Seton, "it [goes] on increasing" (189).¹ Thus he and Clarissa mutually fulfill the embracing and expanding of Woolf's method.

Still, despite their complementary abilities for synthesizing and enlarging, both Clarissa and Peter hesitate over what to do with the sheer muchness of life. Clarissa notices in herself "an overwhelming incapacity" to deal with the prodigality of life, while Peter feels "as if the eye

¹Ultimately Clarissa too recognizes the expansive—as opposed to dwindling—properties of age: "For the young people could not talk. And why should they? Shout, embrace, swing, be up at dawn; carry sugar to ponies; kiss and caress the snouts of adorable chows; and then all tingling and streaming, plunge and swim. But the enormous resources of the English language, the power it bestows, after all, of communicating feelings (at their age, she and Peter would have been arguing all the evening), was not for them. They would solidify young" (173).

were a cup that overflowed and let[s] the rest run down its china walls unrecorded” (180, 161).

“Nothing could be slow enough; nothing last too long,” thinks Clarissa (181), and Peter muses:

Life itself, every moment of it, every drop of it, here, this instant, now, in the sun, in Regent’s Park, was enough. Too much indeed. A whole lifetime was too short to bring out, now that one had acquired the power, the full flavour; to extract every ounce of pleasure, every shade of meaning; (77)

Neither of them yet posses a way of *expressing* life’s muchness. To see this final aspect of Woolf’s method it is necessary to turn to Clarissa and Peter’s narrative counterparts, Septimus and Rezia Warren.

While Woolf personifies in Clarissa and Peter the ideas of embracing and expansion, in Septimus and Rezia she explores how one might “enclose” (as she puts it) or express life’s fullness. Septimus both saturates and enlarges what he sees (often combining it with and expanding it into the unreal), but his madness springs in part from not knowing how to express the muchness that he encounters. Just as Clarissa hears musical counterpoint in the London morning, Septimus hears the singing of the birds and trees (22, 24), as well as the “anthem” made from the “old man playing a penny whistle,” the motor horn, and other traffic, all “chim[ing] and chatter[ing] in queer harmony” (67).² While Septimus has no trouble embracing it all, Rezia misses life’s abundance even when she is looking for it. She pushes Septimus (per Dr. Holmes’s instruction) to “notice real things,” but stops short, asking herself, “But what was there to look at? A few sheep. That was all” (25). Her husband’s writing surprises her, both by its beauty and its variety, but still “she hear[s] nothing” of the wholeness that he does (137). Like Clarissa and Peter, however, Rezia and Septimus find that combined they can do what neither alone is capable of: express extravagance. In their last moments together, Rezia worries that the

² Woolf contrasts this with Dr. Holmes, Miss Kilman, and Mrs. Gorham, who only hear music that has been defined as such by the dictionary or the music hall. From this watered-down harmony they take a shallow sort of “comfort,” but nothing more (cf. 88, 121, 131).

hat she is making is “too small” (138). Septimus agrees (139), and together they begin to *add* to the hat, an activity which makes them both peculiarly happy. Septimus piles “odd colours together,” and Rezia realizes “he has a wonderful eye, and often he was right, sometimes absurd, of course, but sometimes wonderfully right” (140). “Now it was finished—that is to say, the design; *she* must stitch it together” (emphasis added). Thus working together, Septimus (the seer of life’s richness) and Rezia (the seamstress of it) find deep satisfaction in their creation: “Never had she felt so happy! Never in her life! [...] Never had he done anything which made him feel so proud. It was so real, it was so substantial” (140, 141). They have discovered the joy of expressing the enlarging and synthesizing force of love, which Clarissa has described earlier:

It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores! (31)

In fierce opposition to this enlarging and loving expression stands Sir William Bradshaw, the worshipper of “divine proportion” (97). McLaurin notes: “A strict ‘sense of proportion’ is the pre-eminent scientific [as opposed to artistic] virtue, for everything is given its exact quantitative weight” (McLaurin, *Echoes* 67). To “invoke proportion” not only means eschewing extravagance, but entails—in Dr. Bradshaw’s estimation—silence, seclusion, and sterility (*MD* 97). Besides the hypocrisy of his “goddess” proportion (“men who made ten thousand a year and talked of proportion...”), Bradshaw’s idea of “health” requires life to be “cramped, squeezed, pared, pruned, [drawn] back” (145, 98). This “[s]hredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing” confirms that Bradshaw’s “proportion” does the exact opposite of expanding or synthesizing; rather, it shrinks and shatters (100). That Bradshaw “[sees] nothing clear” is no surprise, and neither is his inability to answer his patients when they protest: “But to us, [...] life has given no such bounty” (145, 99).

Clarissa provides the antithesis to Bradshaw's deliberate diminishing of life's fullness. She uniquely possesses "that gift [...] to be; to exist; to sum it all up in the moment as she passed" (169). She also feels keenly responsibility to enact this gift in a dutiful manner, to "pay back from this secret deposit of exquisite moments" (29). This obligation haunts her in an obscure childhood memory:

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? (42)

Ultimately Clarissa answers this question through her parties, which she presents as "an offering" (118). They fulfill her desire "to combine, to create" the disparate lives with which she comes in contact (199). She thinks: "if only they could be brought together; so she did it." She recognizes this as her gift—in both the word's meanings—and is affirmed in it by others ("how generous to her friends Clarissa was!"), even if they sometimes doubt her parties (187). Profoundly connected to her synthesizing and making a saturated whole out of varying elements, her gifting or generous way of seeing allows Clarissa to enclose both the large and small. For instance, when she hears Big Ben chiming, she feels that "[g]igantic as it was, it had something to do with her," and yet also that "she must remember all sorts of little things besides" (124, 125). Stelmach makes the case that Clarissa provides a vivid depiction of Woolf herself as a generous artist. Just as Clarissa "enable[s] communal fellowship and a collective consciousness to arise from her extravagant expenditure," Woolf creates a work of art that proves "the concepts of excess [or enlarging] and integration [or embracing] are not incompatible [...] in the midst of superfluous generosity [the expression]" (Stelmach 311, 309). Woolf and Clarissa both present an offering of life's extravagance through embracing, enlarging, and expressing the much that is there, and thus

“posit a supersaturated wholeness of experience, a genre incorporating life and art, both facts and inspiration” (Thompson 206). “[I]t was an offering; to combine; to create...”

“...but to whom?” (*MD* 119). This is the question that haunts not only Woolf and Clarissa, but also Septimus (66) and practically every other character in Woolf’s novels. In the presence of such glorious fullness, almost all of them sense, as Clarissa does, “an emptiness about the heart of life, an attic room” (30). “Where there is nothing, Peter Walsh said to himself; feeling hollowed out, utterly empty within” (48).³ While this hollowness undoubtedly finds its roots in Woolf’s debilitating struggles with depression—“Where there is nothing” became her phrase describing depression throughout her diary (cf. Rubenstein, “Negation” 38)—it also seems resultant of the one area of her life (both as a person and a writer) where she was unwilling to embrace or express fullness: religious faith. Her consistent refusal of the possibility of muchness in spiritual belief or the ultimate extravagance of a belief in God not only contradicts her otherwise life-encompassing philosophy, but also mars her work aesthetically, as seen in the sadly—and conspicuously—one-dimensional representations of people of faith in her work. Woolf never came to the conclusion of her contemporary Evelyn Waugh, who determined that in order to “represent man *more fully*,” he must write about “man in his relation to God” — even at the expense of making his writing “unpopular” (qtd. McCartney 97, emphasis added). Though this is not the place for biographical speculation, the deep vein of anger towards Christianity that runs throughout Woolf’s life and work seems as tragic and awful in her aesthetic disavowal of life’s fullness as in her suicide. That she once thrilled with Clarissa in the extravagance of existence, seeking to enlarge and embrace and express all of it, only makes the emptiness of her disbelief and the hopelessness of her passing all the more heart-rending.

³ Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* also comments on “a centre of complete emptiness” (*SW* 371), and Woolf in her essay on the painter Sickert speaks of “a silence at the heart of art” (qtd. McLaurin, *Echoes* 89).

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List of Abbreviations

<i>BTA</i>	<i>Between the Acts</i>
<i>DM</i>	<i>Death of the Moth</i>
<i>E5</i>	<i>Essays: 1929-1932 (Volume 5)</i>
<i>F</i>	<i>Flush</i>
<i>MD</i>	<i>Mrs. Dalloway</i>
<i>RO</i>	<i>A Room of One's Own, and Other Essays</i>
<i>SW</i>	Selected Works
<i>TW</i>	<i>The Waves</i>
<i>VO</i>	<i>The Voyage Out</i>
<i>WD</i>	<i>Writer's Diary</i>