



A Car, a Plane, and a Tower: Interrogating Public Images in *Mrs. Dalloway*

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To explicate *Mrs. Dalloway*'s obsession with imagery and visuality, many critics have dwelled on the novel's interest in the relationship between seeing and being seen; on Septimus Smith's visions; on Peter Walsh's dream; on its many examples of ekphrastic language; on floods of detail that saturate many passages, such as Clarissa's visit to the flower shop; and on the subjectivities that serve as the spring (i.e. the habitat, source, and propulsive force) of the novel's images and pictures. In short, *Mrs. Dalloway*'s dense imbrication of narrative and image maps a territory too complex, too large for a single study. This paper targets only a corner of this territory, focusing on three specific images: (1) the motor car and (2) the aeroplane—both found in the novel's second section—as well as (3) Big Ben, the clock tower that chimes the passing of a fictional Wednesday in the middle of June 1923. These three images make up a collection of public objects viewed through a collective of private eyes. Rather than analyze the function(s) this collection performs for the novel, the focus of much Woolfian criticism, this paper poses a simple question, borrowed from visual theorist W.J.T. Mitchell: *What do these pictures want?*

I

"I'm not saying a picture is just a text, or vice versa. There are deep and fundamental differences between the verbal and visual arts. But there are also inescapable zones of transaction between them, especially when it comes to questions such as the 'life of the image' and the 'desire of the picture.'"

—W.J.T. Mitchell¹

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538 Much of the Woolfian criticism regarding the visual imagery of *Mrs. Dalloway* focuses on the technical, that is, on how its images help establish a new, modernist realism, particularly in developing a narrative sense of simultaneity. Susan Dick, in an essay from *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, explains that the “careful description of the flight of the plane over London functions, like the journey of the official car, as a structural device enabling [Woolf] to present scenes which are happening simultaneously.” Big Ben also plays a key role for Dick here; its chimes indicate the progression of time, even as “the narrative . . . pauses and loops back.”² In attempting to find an explanation for Big Ben that deviates from “primarily technical explanations,” Jörg Hasler, in an earlier article, writes, “[Big Ben] constantly reminds us of the contrast between the external, quantitative time and the inner, qualitative time. The hours of the day are far from equal in length[;] they have [an] elasticity ascribed [elsewhere in Woolf’s work] to ‘time in the mind.’”³ Despite his professed deviation, however, Hasler’s approach to Big Ben merely looks at a different “technical explanation.” Critiques like Susan Dick’s examine how such images make possible the spatial elasticity of a moment within a novel (i.e., the presentation of many people doing different things at the same time) while Hasler explicates a temporal elasticity (i.e., the presentation of the individual remembering the past while remaining corporeally present). Far from disagreeing with these technical interpretations, this paper co-opts Hasler’s initial motivation to look beyond the technical, to make sense of the car, the plane, and the clock tower as sites/sights of convergence for many subjective gazes, objects-turned-image that certainly *do*, but also *want*.

The relationship between painting and Virginia Woolf’s fiction has also served many critics as a vehicle into understanding the stylistic implications of her imagery. Sue Roe’s essay “The Impact of Post-Impressionism” traces the influence of Roger Fry and the Bloomsbury group on Woolf’s fiction, yet her analysis remains quite similar to Hasler and Dick’s: in order to “show the shifting uncertainties within the human psyche”—a goal of post-impressionists, according to Roe—Woolf sees that “she must somehow look, in writing, for solutions to the problem of simultaneity.”⁴ Likewise, in her recent article “Geometries of Space and Time,” Jennie-Rebecca Falcetta explores the cubist elements in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Cubist art achieves the multivalent, simultaneous “sides” Woolf desires to show, and by incorporating public images like the skywriting aeroplane, she too achieves such “sides,” integrating “several subjective Londons into a whole, expressing in . . . glittering prose the idea that at any given moment, the crowds of minds walking in, around, and through a city in one sense *are* that city.”⁵ Though Roe and Falcetta certainly help historicize and clarify how Woolf might have developed her narrative techniques, the examples and demonstrations therein implicitly support the image as subordinate to the narrative, always working, always serving, but never speaking. I certainly do not take issue with the possible influence of post-impressionism and/or cubism on Woolf’s writing, but in the following pages I do hope to question the images such investigations leave silent, to spark the inanimate to life in order to explore the relationship they have with the animate, the living, the collective of subjective gazes that frame them—including the gaze of the reader.

But is it possible to interrogate the image? This is not a simple historical matter. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates—in an effort to subordinate writing to speech—compares it to the art of painting. Though both modes of articulation and representation seem to show some thing, neither can clarify this thing. They can only repeat themselves when interrogated and neither can hide from those who seek to abuse them or fail to understand them; both always need their “father to help [them].”⁶ Writing, one might say (cautiously), has long been rescued from Plato's sentence, yet the image—ever since Plato's famous comparison—has continued to haunt the written arts in the eyes of philosophers and theorists. Over a millennium after the *Phaedrus*, Gotthold Lessing attempted to set the limits of painting and poetry in *Laocoön*, motivated by the need to purify writing/poetry, to establish an aesthetic hierarchy that sees the written word, the rightful partner of narrative, throned above the plastic arts (e.g., painting and sculpting): poetry has “a wider range” than plastic arts, a repertoire of “beauties at its command which painting is never able to attain”; ultimately, Lessing argues, “the poet has greater freedom than the sculptor and painter.”⁷

Projects similar to Lessing's have accumulated in the twentieth century, from George Lukacs's critique of the modern novel's obsession with copious detail to Andrew Higson's much more contemporary work with heritage cinema.⁸ Both studies demonstrate a concern that narrative—the only art capable of capturing the complexity of human relationships—is endangered, on the brink of a detail-oriented, fetishistic cataclysm. In addition, images have blurred the very concept of reality in the age of late capitalism. Guy Debord writes, “The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*.” These spectacles, however, are not an accumulation of images, but rather the sum total of “social relationships . . . [now] mediated by images”; in other words, they are impossible to escape.⁹ We live in an age of simulacra, a society where—to quote Murray Jay Siskind from Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985)—it is “impossible to see the barn.”¹⁰ Baudrillard calls this the *hyperreal*: “the generation of models of a real without origin or reality . . . the map that precedes the territory . . . that engenders the territory.” Only in such a culture could the mere image of the threat of atomic destruction be “the best system of control that ever existed.”¹¹

Despite this fear of the image's proliferation, however, some continue to hold that the image remains weak and silent, estranged from narratives that might offer understanding or explanation. Even the rise of photography as a forensic science, as solid ostensive evidence of a pastness brought before the present eye, cannot fill gaps that require narrative orchestration.¹² Baudrillard, in his disturbingly giddy *Seduction* (1979, 1990), argues that it is the very weakness of the image that has the power to seduce us: “To seduce is to appear weak. To seduce is to render weak. We seduce with our weakness, never with strong signs or powers. In seduction we enact this weakness, and this is what gives seduction its strength.”¹³ At this impasse over/between strength and weakness, power and powerlessness, agency and subordination, W.J.T. Mitchell wonders if we might “rein in our notions of the political stakes in a critique of visual culture, and to scale down the rhetoric of the ‘power of images.’”¹⁴ Certainly, one can

540 adopt images for ill purposes (just as Plato accused sophists of abusing rhetoric); nevertheless, Mitchell holds that our relationship with images remains more complex than the relationship that iconoclastic critiques of the society of the spectacle profess. The belief that images may indeed be weaker than some critical theory tends to assume/argue frames my study of *Mrs. Dalloway*, as does Mitchell's interest in "the ways . . . images seem to come alive and want things" (WDPW, 9).

In navigating between iconoclasm and idolatry, Mitchell argues that the proper strategy for interrogating images resembles playing "upon them as if they were musical instruments." This, he says, might be a way to overcome the fears that strike us in works like *The Society of the Spectacle*: "'Sounding' the idols [a phrase he borrows from Nietzsche] . . . does not dream of breaking the idol but breaking its silence, making it speak and resonate, and transforming its hollowness into an echo chamber for human thought" (WDPW, 26–7). It is the purpose of this paper to "sound" three public images within *Mrs. Dalloway*, to demonstrate how the novel itself sounds these images (pre-figuring many of the theorists I cite here), and to rethink this corner of the novel's obsession with visuality in order to shift the focus away from what these "pictures *do* to what they *want*, from power to desire, from the model of the dominant power to be opposed, to the model of the subaltern to be interrogated or (better) to be invited to speak" (WDPW, 33). Recast in this light, what do the motor car and the aeroplane want (in both senses of the word)? What—given its spinning hands, its face, and its chiming voice—does Big Ben, the monumental clock tower, lack and desire? Although Mitchell's text serves as a useful entry point into *Mrs. Dalloway*, I should clarify that the question "What do pictures want?" resists distillation into what one might call a *method*. Despite the eight decades that separate the publication of *What Do Pictures Want?*⁹ and *Mrs. Dalloway*, the question itself bores a path of textual intimacy between the texts, a critical passage that allows one to work from the middle with no established framework that indicates where to begin, what to apply, and when to finish. Far from following an established method from beginning to end, this essay offers an experiment, one that attempts to unfold the lack and desire of these images and that must continually reorient itself. In other words, I attempt an abermeneutical reading, and Mitchell's question offers a way to begin (but not a method) for such a project, a way to begin that always remains ready to begin again.

II

"Can one imagine a theory that would treat signs in terms of their seductive attraction, rather than their contrasts and oppositions? Which would break with the specular nature of the sign and the encumbrance of the referent? And in which the terms would play amongst themselves within the framework of an enigmatic duel and an inexorable reversibility?"

—Jean Baudrillard¹⁵

"Every one looked at the motor car. . . . [And later:] Every one looked up."

—Virginia Woolf¹⁶

The first section of *Mrs. Dalloway* trains readers to follow two sets of oscillatory movements: back-and-forth between its narrator and Clarissa's stream of consciousness as well as (within this stream) between Clarissa's present reflections/perceptions and her remembrances of things past. Shortly after a "pistol shot in the street outside" interrupts the lovely catalog of Miss Pym's flower shop selections, the second section marks the introduction of a third type of narrative movement between one character (whether major or minor) and another (*MD*, 13). When the motor car backfires (the sound Clarissa initially mistakes for a fired pistol), the Londoners about this part of the city combine their gazes to form a framework for the first of the novel's public images: "Passers-by who, of course, stopped and stared, had just time 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" (*MD*, 14). Unlike the sensory perceptions that spark the movements into Clarissa's consciousness or her past, Woolf places the motor car (and later the aeroplane) at the center of a framework comprised of dozens? hundreds? of gazes.

Such a framework, however, may be problematic. In a novel like *Mrs. Dalloway* that celebrates or explores subjectivity and consciousness, this picture of mass hypnosis stands out as a disturbing one.¹⁷ To echo Derrida, the crowd becomes a *parergon*, a frame that "verge[s] on" the image of the car, "push[es] it, press[es] it, press[es] against it, seek[s] contact, exert[s] a pressure at the frontier." This collective effort, of course, makes possible the "simultaneous effect" studied by the critics cited above (and others of course), and yet such a framework—comprised of several selves—is merely supplemental to the image, in an exterior position that threatens it. In such a position, subjectivity potentially, to cite Derrida again, "disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy" to present/ornament/frame the public image.¹⁸ By using this technique to train her readers to move quickly from subject-to-subject, Woolf potentially threatens to efface her characters, to rub out their subjectivity like the aeroplane's smoky letters, to subordinate their selves to the hypnosis of the car's celebrity, and—most important—to undermine her project.

However, rethinking this dynamic beside Baudrillard's *Seduction* helps dislodge this relationship from one of hierarchical subordination to one marked by inclusive reversibility. The locus of agency within the act or process of seduction remains, according to Baudrillard, indeterminable. He asks,

Is it to seduce, or to be seduced, that is seductive? But to be seduced is the best way to seduce. It is an endless refrain. There is no active or passive mode in seduction, no subject or object, no interior or exterior: seduction plays on both sides, and there is no frontier separating them. One cannot seduce others, if one has not oneself been seduced.¹⁹

Mrs. Dalloway casts the crowd (as *parergon*) and the motor car (as *image*) in the very kind of relation that Baudrillard outlines here; both participate in a strategy or play of *weakness* in which neither falls completely subordinate to the other. Like Woolf's oscillatory narrative—constantly in motion between narration and consciousness, between past and present, between Clarissa and Septimus and others—the relationship

542 between the public image and the private framework, caught within “an endless refrain,” continually shifts. Mitchell’s analysis of desire helps to articulate this: “the question of desire is inseparable from the problem of the image, as if the two concepts were caught in a mutually generative circuit, desire generating images and images generating desire” (*WDPW*, 58). This multistable status, then, effectively changes the question, “What does the motor car want?” to “What does this passage—i.e., the picture of the car and the crowd—want?”

To start with the car: it wants (i.e., lacks *and* desires) a face with which to peer back at its observers. Within a short space, the narrator mentions Septimus’s pale face, Clarissa’s “pink face pursed in enquiry,” as well as the ruffled faces of the crowd (*MD*, 14–16), all drawn to an image that has hidden its own. In order to maintain its celebrity, the car effaces its occupant early by drawing its blind and displaying a tree-like pattern (both Warren Smiths notice it), one that *branches out*, co-opting the faces staring at it, holding up a mirror in which most pedestrians come to recognize a regal or political allegiance to their image of the car’s occupant. But in the game of seduction, according to Baudrillard, “The mirror . . . is not a surface of reflection, but of absorption.”²⁰ So by co-opting and absorbing the faces through this reversible art (for can it not be said that the staring faces, jarred by the engine’s backfire, initiate this game? Are they seduced or seducing?), the effaced image can adopt a visually complex, multivalent face. Yet this face is not only a conglomerate of the masses, but of the many faces the crowds attribute to it, the different fruits the characters see hanging from its patterned limbs: simultaneously it absorbs the crowd’s faces but is also—like a shape-shifting chimera—at once the “Queen, Prince, [and] Prime Minister” (*MD*, 16).

This face, however impressive or complex, is only tentative, but while it remains in congress with the subjective gazes, the image attempts to speak of commiseration, remembrance, and mourning. This is most telling in the relationship between the motor car and the war-scarred Septimus Smith. Though the detail remains slight, both find themselves “unable to pass” within pages of one another: Septimus blocked by the car, by the sounds and the gazes surrounding him; the official car by an omnibus (*MD*, 14, 17). Woolf’s conscious repetition of this phrase—i.e., “unable to pass”—creates an affinity between them that develops, however subtly, after the car passes by the bus. Shortly before the scene shifts to Buckingham Palace, the narrator ruminates that the car had left a ripple

in its fulness rather formidable and in its common appeal emotional; for in all the hat shops and tailors’ shops strangers looked at each other and thought *of the dead*; of the flag; of the Empire. . . . Tall men, men of robust physique, well-dressed men with their tail coats and their white slips and their hair raked back . . . At once . . . stood even straighter, and removed their hands, and seemed ready to attend their Sovereign, if need be, *to the cannon’s mouth*, as their ancestors had done before them. (*MD*, 18, emphasis added)

The “unable to pass” attributed to Septimus and the car takes on a new meaning when read through these passages, for the visions that haunt Septimus and the mourning that breeds his disturbing madness awaken in others throughout the streets as the Queen/

Prince/Minister passes. Like poor Septimus, the images and horrors of the Great War cannot pass out of England, but unlike Septimus, the others watching the motor car only experience this image faintly, only adopt this desire for memorialization briefly. As a nigh silent image, the car's disruptiveness—in individual cases—remains a trifle: “no mathematical instrument . . . could register the vibration” (*MD*, 18). As Peter Walsh reminds himself later in the novel, “Still, the sun was hot. Still, one got over things. Still, life had a way of adding day to day” (*MD*, 64). This is not the case for Septimus Warren Smith, however, as the ripple experienced by most of the onlookers mutates for him into horrific, traumatic images: “The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames” (*MD*, 15). As a counterpoint to this picture of desired commiseration lost in the public image's inability to speak across the gap seduction opens, Woolf posits the subjective, unpassable cycle of madness and trauma for Septimus, a figure haunted by runaway images that continually accumulate for him yet eventually pass away for others.

Between the motor car and the aeroplane, Woolf posits a short scene that continues to play with the relationship between the public image and private eyes when it shifts to Buckingham Palace—framed by a crowd of onlookers, “poor people all of them.” However, this passage mostly serves to dramatize the subordination of the motor car as an image, to draw attention to its inability to create a lasting, individually profound vision of mourning and national fraternity. It fails to capture and bring a complete vision of the past before their present eyes. Instead, Woolf offers a crowd interested in a commodified form of royalty; the crowds stare at the palace, letting “rumour . . . thrill the nerves in their thighs at the thought of Royalty looking at them” (*MD*, 19). But even if it could present static, vivid images of the Great War (like those that terrorize Septimus), such photographic images—photographic in their vividness and persuasive account of a *once-was* presented as *now-is*—might transform temporary mass hypnosis to an unpassable madness, a mass schizophrenia attempting to make sense—as Septimus does—of horrific pictures.²¹ If public images mean to inspire a unity that navigates between hypnosis and madness, they need more than imagistic seduction.

At first it would seem that Woolf's aeroplane—shooting over the top of Buckingham Palace—manages to correct this impotency. Though it lacks a face (and with it an identity), this public image strikes one as more capable, more active: “[it] turned and raced and swooped exactly where it liked, swiftly, freely, like a skater . . . or a dancer.” As it dances, the official car enters the palace gates “and nobody look[s] at it” (*MD*, 21). What differentiates these pictures? The motor car *desires* commiseration, *wants* a communal sense of mourning. The aeroplane, on the other hand, overrides this sense of duty to authority (whether regal or state), overshadows the dreary hypnosis of the motor car, and inspires a duty to the awe-inspiring commodity, to toffee. It does so through a strategic blending of text and image, of reading and seeing.

In her short essay “Pictures” (1925), Woolf seems to want to keep such arts ultimately separate, ruminating on the skill of her contemporaries to incorporate vision into their novels without attempting to become painters. Likewise, she appreciates painters who remain silent, who do not attempt the novelist's knack for narrative and/or explanation:

544 “the portrait painter must not attempt to speak; . . . the utmost he must do is to tap on the wall of the room, or the glass of the aquarium; he must come very close, but something must always separate us from him.”²² This passage suggests, then, that—at least to Woolf—the aeroplane’s efforts are problematic. Emily Dalgarno, in her book *Virginia Woolf and the Visible World* (2001), argues that the skywriting “draws the reader’s attention to the process of signifying,” pointing out the tension between the “the various readings” of the crowd below and Septimus’s “recognition that the letters signal beauty and more beauty.”²³ When Lucrezia encourages Septimus to “look,” the poor man imagines that “they are signaling to” him in a language “he could not read” rather than in recognizable words (*MD*, 21). Tears fill his eyes as the melting shapes bestow “upon him their inexhaustible charity and laughing goodness one *shape* after another” (*MD*, 22; emphasis added). This picture, then, (i.e., the plane and frame) explicitly dramatizes a tension within *Mrs. Dalloway*—especially in this scene—between image and text, between looking (as Septimus does)²⁴ and reading (as most of the others do), and how both might be necessary in order for an image (or a text?) to approach effective expression.

It would seem, then, that the aeroplane—despite Woolf’s Lessing-like division between the novelist and the painter—wants to be read and seen, to take on the properties of an *imagetext*; or what Foucault terms a *calligram*, that is, “a composite text-image that ‘brings a text and a shape as close together as possible’” and implies “an alliance between the shapes and meanings of words.” According to Mitchell, such an alliance does not create a simple reversible opposition, but, rather, “the very identities of words and images, the sayable and the seeable, begin to shimmer and shift in the composition, as if the image could speak and the words were on display.”²⁵ By becoming an *imagetext*, then, the aeroplane strives to become clear presentation (as opposed to *re*-presentation), curving *away* from a realism, whether literary or commercial, and toward a reality.

Despite the potential creeping of reading and seeing into one another, however, Woolf’s picture seems to support her ultimate separation between the two mediums of word and image. Even Mitchell, despite his claim that “all arts are ‘composite’ arts (both text and image),”²⁶ admits that “deep fundamental differences [exist] between verbal and visual arts,” and this textual image, ironically, fails to overcome this difference, fails to become a text, to be clearly read (*WDPW*, 55). Though it attempts to communicate, the plane still becomes another object-turned-image; as a subaltern, its smoke-letters “lie still” only for a moment before “they [move] and [melt] and [are] rubbed out up in the sky” (*MD*, 20). In order to draw the attention of those below toward itself, the plane must literally draw (i.e., write) their attention in the sky again and again. Though the aeroplane does not lack any readers, these onlookers read its letters with varied success (only a few manage to spell out “toffee”). More generally, the aeroplane lacks proximity and permanence—that is, the aeroplane wants to be closer and to offer shapes that remain, that don’t dissolve, that don’t scatter into the misreadings of the aeroplane’s spectators.

What these images do, then, ultimately differs from what they want. The motor car joins and escapes the staring crowds, and yet it simultaneously desires to inspire a

mourning for horrors that seem unspeakable, horrors that—in two decades time—will beggar understanding. Likewise, while the aeroplane advertises toffee, it behaves as a Debordian spectacle where the only directly experienced thing becomes the fetishized commodity. However, it lacks a true voice and true proximity, an avenue into both discourse and representation that would allow its hold to last beyond the letters T, O, F, and E. Ultimately both the pictures of the motor car and the aeroplane lack a way to explain the new realities that befall Londoners, English citizens, Western culture, or the world after the fallout of World War I. Neither celebrity nor commodity can make sense.

Dalgarno draws attention to the early notes Woolf kept while when composing *Mrs. Dalloway*, noting that Woolf felt Clarissa and Septimus “linked together by the aeroplane”;²⁷ this seems odd considering that Clarissa never sees or reads the aeroplane. The third section of the novel opens with Clarissa asking, “What are they looking at?” (*MD*, 29) Just as the motor car passes through the gate unnoticed, just as the aeroplane draws attention away from the Palace and toward its smoky letters, the aeroplane escapes the notice of Woolf’s central character, whose concern rests solely with her party and—in this scene—with mending her dress. The next image, however, does not pass away so easily, does not reside within a single scene, and demonstrates how the new realities, the new perceptions of the world brought to light in the twentieth century cannot pass. They must be dealt with. Given this, then, what might the chiming clock tower want?

III

“Big Ben was beginning to strike, first the warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable.”

—Virginia Woolf (*MD*, 117)

As a recurrent public image, however, Big Ben turns out to be more troublesome than the motor car and the aeroplane. For instance, when the narrative alludes to the clock tower and its disruptive chimes, none of the characters in the novel actually see Big Ben; they only hear it. Therefore, I require a different approach to Big Ben’s frame. In addition, the tower and chimes do not simply vanish from the novel’s pages like the images already considered; they interject themselves into the narrative again and again. In other words, Big Ben presses against its ever changing frame suddenly and repeatedly, often surprising those who hear it as well as those of us who read it. Lastly, if I hope to question these images as subalterns, as silent *others* waiting to speak, how do I reconcile such a state of alterity – associated with femininity in both Mitchell and Baudrillard’s studies – with its connection to a very masculinized “tyranny of clock time”?²⁸ In short, Big Ben’s invisibility, its recurrence, and its association with oppressive and intrusive power, all confront and trouble the premise of reading Big Ben as an image that wants or lacks.

The most prominent difference between Big Ben and the two public images from the second section is the fact that, in the many passages where it intrudes upon the

546 narrative, none of Woolf's characters actually see it. How then can one discuss it as an "image," a corner of *Mrs. Dalloway's* obsession with visibility? *First*: certainly the tower and the bell (both commonly referred to as Big Ben), since they are monuments that have a firm position in the British (more specifically London) cultural consciousness, stand together as an eminent hypericon as well as the most readymade visible English symbol of time and its passage. *Second*: four times in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf repeats the phrase, "the leaden circles dissolved in the air" (*MD*, 4, 48, 94, 186). The first and last occur in passages devoted to Clarissa while the second and third occur in passages connected with Peter Walsh and Lucrezia Warren Smith respectively. Although these characters may only *hear* chimes from the massive tower, Woolf presents this cultural symbol as a visual image, an image that inspires a plethora of supplemental images both in the narration itself and in its streams of consciousness.

Lucrezia's "leaden circles" passage occurs halfway through the novel and is particularly useful in broaching the question, "What does the tower want?" After flashing back to the history of Dr. Holmes's visits with her husband Septimus, the chimes of Big Ben return her to the present:

It was precisely twelve o'clock; twelve by Big Ben; whose stroke was wafted over the northern part of London; blent with that of other clocks, mixed in a thin ethereal way with the clouds and wisps of smoke, and died up there among the seagulls . . . The leaden circles dissolved in the air. (*MD*, 94)

This paragraph also contains a quick return to Clarissa—who lays "her green dress on her bed." But rather than demonstrate the simultaneity of this passage, I want to draw attention to another passage back in the second section, a passage that takes place exactly one hour earlier. Shortly after the aeroplane appears, the narrator observes,

All down the Mall people were standing and looking up in the sky. As they looked the whole world became perfectly silent, and a flight of gulls crossed the sky, first one gull leading, then another, and in this extraordinary silence and peace, in this pallor, in this purity, bells struck eleven times, the sound fading up there among the gulls. (*MD*, 20–21)

Like the smoky letters that fade and assemble themselves "round the broad white shapes of the clouds" (*MD*, 21), the chimes of Big Ben—these "leaden circles"—fade into the sky, the face of nature, a site of disappearance that refuses to be a tablet. This repeated image, then, speaks of want, lack, and desire. Despite its stationary, erect body and its audible repeatability, Big Ben lacks permanence as an image in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and though Woolf often uses it as a textual or metonymic device for Time and "an analogue to the simultaneous composite view,"²⁹ as an *image* the clock tower and its main bell lack the kind of durability readers and characters might assume it has. The fact that it strikes and kills an "irrevocable" hour (*MD*, 4, 117)—i.e., irreversible, unchangeable, unrecoverable—suggests that what Big Ben lacks is exactly what it often inspires: the need to return; the need to remember.

The "leaden circles" alludes to a geometric circularity inherent in the very structure of the novel: characters go and return, the narrator disappears and reappears, the past

intrudes on the present yet the present always comes rushing back. It is this last item, the ability of the main characters, particularly Clarissa, to move between the present and past, that Big Ben desires. Its own depiction of time—that is, the rounding of a clock's face, the spinning of a clock's gears—creates a mere illusion of circularity. Its return to the numeric hours of every day just hides the fact that the “time” the clock keeps only has one direction. Time's arrow, for it and all other clocks that ding or chime in the novel, points forward. The spinning of its hands, the roundness of its face, and the repetitions of its chimes hide its inability to be truly reflexive, malleably circular. As an image, it wants this sort of circularity to replace the circularity of its appearance. Just as the aeroplane's attempt at language fades into the clouds and among the gulls, Big Ben's attempt at circularity, of calling Woolf's characters back to the present, certainly sounds yet ultimately fades and melts and dissolves, despite its “leaden,” material, metallic ring.

In his book *The Final Sculpture: Public Monuments and Modern Poets* (1985), Michael North writes, “The relationship of the monument to time, which might have seemed its clearest and least ambiguous attribute, is in fact troubled and uncertain.”³⁰ Though North's study focuses mostly on sculpture, Big Ben's relationship to time remains even more troubled and ironically uncertain given its function as a timepiece. Quoting an anonymous writer in *The Civil Engineer* (1839), North cites, “A public monument is a book opened for the perusal of the multitude; unless it declares its meaning fully, plainly, and sensibly, the main use is lost.”³¹ Of all monuments, Big Ben certainly declares its meaning, more than silent statues. Though the “tremors of [its] great booming voice” certainly repeat throughout the novel (*MD*, 49), leaving traces of its echoes in even the chimes of smaller clocks and bells, Big Ben's use *is* lost in a new age that requires a new aesthetic, new perspectives, new concepts of time and experiential reality. Though the clock tower serves to draw characters back to the present or to transition between characters that hear the bells simultaneously, often its sound comes parenthetically (as in the passage just cited). Often, its chimes seem to have little effect. Stuck in the present as a false marker of time's forward movement, it may draw characters' “time in the mind” back to the present, but it cannot keep their minds there. Objects, whether public or private, will inevitably spark another journey, whether expected or not, to the past.

The link that Hasler and others make between Big Ben and the masculine “tyranny of external time”—a construct that Hasler calls “an artifice of the intellect” and associates with male characters like Richard Dalloway, William Bradshaw, and Hugh Whitbread³²—is ultimately complicated when we consider Mitchell's claim that the “question of what pictures want . . . is inseparable from the question of what women want.” How does one reconcile the association of Big Ben with masculinity—need one point out its phallic shape?—with Mitchell's insistence that “the ‘default’ position of images is feminine” (*WDPW*, 35)? By recasting Big Ben as an image, this paper essentially feminizes this masculine monument, not merely reversing its gender (i.e., switching the opposition of masculine/feminine) but rather displacing the traditional, “masculine” opposition between male/female with “a femininity that incarnates revers-

548 ibility, the possibility of play and symbolic involvement.”³³ In other words, as it does with the motor car and the aeroplane, rethinking Big Ben and its listeners/onlookers as participants in a game of seduction allows for a reversible interaction between them, an interaction in which Big Ben’s desire to remember actually inspires memory and connection even as it calls others back from memories to its domain of the present.

In her essay “From Text to Tableau” (2006), Karthryn Stelmach celebrates Clarissa’s “magical ability to conjure moments from the past” and names the final occurrence of Big Ben’s “leaden circles” as “the most regenerative vision of ekphrastic enchantment in the novel.”³⁴ Near the end of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa separates herself from her party, pondering the significance of Septimus’s suicide, the death of a man she never meets, when she looks out the window and notices “in the room opposite the old lady” whom she had seen several pages earlier “star[ing] straight at her” (*MD*, 186).³⁵ After she watches the old woman put out her light, darkening her room even as the party continues, Clarissa feels an affinity toward Septimus:

She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun. But she must go back. . . . She must find Sally and Peter. (*MD*, 186)

In this scene, Big Ben does not play the part of the masculine tyrant of external time, but rather the feminine participant in a seductive game, one that manages to succeed in *creating* a vision of re-enchantment, potentially a lasting vision, as Stelmach writes, “in a desacralized world.”³⁶ In this “moment of being,” Big Ben desires participation in re-vising this new world—just as the motor car and aeroplane do—but unlike those images, Big Ben’s desire becomes partially satisfied. Far from merely breaking Clarissa out of her ‘time in the mind,’ the familiar sound of the striking tower encourages her to return, in spite of its own inability to remember, to the party with a new vision of the world, particularly to Sarah and Peter, and to honor the death of a young man she never knew.

Conclusion

W.J.T. Mitchell might also call these pictures—the car, the plane, and the tower framed by private eyes and ears—“metapictures.” In his book *Picture Theory* (1994), published ten years before *What Do Pictures Want?*, Mitchell explains that he “want[s] to experiment with the notion that pictures might be capable of reflection on themselves, capable of providing second-order discourse that tells us—or at least shows us—something about pictures.”³⁷ What, as a closing thought experiment, might the three images this essay unfolds tell or show us about pictures? First, they tell us that pictures rarely comprise images alone. In order to tell or show us anything, in order to cathect us *here and now*, images need a frame. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf employs a

frame that initially threatens the subjectivity she wishes to honor and explore, yet this very subjectivity turns out to be the very frame by which the images speak. The play of private eyes and public spectacles enacts a reversible game of seduction that exits the hierarchy of subordination and avoids the unilateral power structures in which text and subject lord over the image and object—or in which a fetishistic fascination with images rubs out or dilutes the complexity of a novel's narrative or characters. Second, as Mitchell argues in *Picture Theory*, the collection of images considered here—like all metapictures—“reveal[s] the inextricable weaving together of representation and discourse, the imbrication of visual and verbal experience.”³⁸ In other words, pictures and words (whether written or spoken) can also enter into a sort of reversible game; images and text remain ever immanent to one another, folded into one another, suffering similar limitations and bolstering one another toward a potential and powerful resistance. Third, the car and plane and tower all demonstrate that *we* too are “inextricably weaved together,” whether through the shared experience of a passing motor car, a flying aeroplane, a chiming bell, or another among the many imagetexts that form the “spider's thread” which connects us all (*MD*, 112). When we pause to interrogate silent images, particularly these public metapictures of *Mrs. Dalloway*, they teach us that “sounding the image” (again, not a rigid method but an open experiment) creates a condition of possibility from which one can respond creatively and ethically to changed and changing worlds—Virginia Woolf's as well as our own.

Notes

1. W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 55.
 2. Susan Dick, “Literary Realism in *Mrs. Dalloway*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 54.
 3. Jörg Hasler, “Virginia Woolf and the Chimes of Big Ben,” *English Studies* 63 (1982): 148–49. Hasler has in mind a passage from a later novel: “An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length, on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by one second. This extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and *time in the mind* is less known than it should be and deserves fuller investigation.” Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928; New York: Harcourt, 1956), 94.
 4. Sue Roe, “The Impact of Post-impressionism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 179.
 5. Jennie-Rebecca Falcetta, “Geometries of Space and Time: The Cubist London of *Mrs. Dalloway*,” *Woolf Studies Annual* 13 (2007): 115, 133.
 6. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. H.N. Fowler, in *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, 2nd ed. (New York: Bedford, 2001), 166.
 7. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 50, 52.
 8. In explicating the difference between narration (characteristic of nineteenth century realism) and description (characteristic of “modern novels”), George Lukacs identifies the ultimate consequence of this shift as a loss of literature's “capacity to depict the dynamics of life, and thus its representation of capitalist reality is inadequate, diluted and constrained.” “Narrate or Describe?: A Preliminary Discussion of Naturalism and Formalism,” in *Writer & Critic and Other Essays*, trans. Arthur D. Kahn (New York: Universal Library, 1971), 147.
- Andrew Higson claims that a characteristic feature of the heritage film—which is often an adaptation of an English novel—is the refocus from, or at least an ambivalence regarding, the original

- 550 novelistic narrative to one of detail: "To appreciate the meaningfulness of any text, I would argue, it is important to acknowledge its necessary ambivalence. Thus, although I've reworked my earlier arguments in various ways, I would still maintain that it is productive to view heritage films in terms of a tension between drama and *mise-en-scene*, between what they articulate and what they present visually." *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama since 1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 77.
9. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 12.
10. Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 12.
11. Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1, 32–3.
12. Consider Edith Wyschogrod's analysis of Barthes's term "punctum" as found in his work *Camera Lucida*: "Yet the real power of photographs is not lodged in reconciling viewer and image but rather in destabilizing the viewer through the picture's punctum, a detail in the photograph that functions as a partial object that wounds or punctures the viewer" (*CL*, 45). It is the punctum that forces the medium [of photography] to self-destruct as signification and that may work catachrestically as an absurd expression that unsays the whole or metonymically as a string of images that extend it. Yet the historian does not know the significance of what she sees if she has only the unretouched photographic record; she knows only that, there where the camera stood, it was thus. Comprehension cannot be identified with apprehending the world as it looks but rather through the narrative orchestration of events." *An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology, and the Nameless Other* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 78.
13. Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (New York: St. Martin's, 1990), 83.
14. W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 33; hereafter abbreviated *WDPW*.
15. Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 103
16. Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925; New York: Harcourt, 1953), 15, 20; hereafter abbreviated *MD*.
17. Relevant passages regarding such hypnosis: "mystery had brushed them with her wing," "Everything had come to a standstill," "Lucrezia herself could not help looking," "the crowd star[ed] at the motor car," "The motor car . . . proceeded towards Piccadilly, still gazed at, still ruffling the faces on both sides of the street" (*MD*, 14–16).
18. Jacques Derrida, "The Parergon," in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (1978; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 55, 61.
19. Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 81.
20. Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 67.
21. Some comments from Susan Sontag's relatively recent article "Looking at War" seem relevant here: "Harrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock. But they don't help us much to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us. Consider one of the most unforgettable images of the war in Bosnia, a photograph of which the *New York Times* foreign correspondence John Kifner wrote, 'The image is stark, one of the most enduring of the Balkan wars: a Serb militiaman casually kicking a dying Muslim woman in the head. It tells you everything you need to know.' But of course it doesn't tell us everything we need to know." "Looking at War," in *Best American Essays 2003*, ed. Anne Fadiman (New York: Houghton, 2003), 265. This photograph beggars meaning while simultaneously *demanding* meaning. And if left without help, the photograph—to borrow a phrase from Baudrillard—wears meaning out, "tire[s] it out," exhausts it. *Seduction*, 75.
22. Woolf, "Pictures," in *The Moment and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, 1948), 177.
23. Emily Dalgarno, *Virginia Woolf and the Visible World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 75–7
24. It is worth noting that Septimus Warren Smith is not the only character who *watches* the aeroplane-writing as opposed to *reading* the aeroplane's writing. Mrs. Dempster, for instance, thinks

of how she “always longed to see foreign parts” like her nephew the missionary (*MD*, 27). Mr. Bentley, while certainly offering a kind of *reading*, also appears uninterested in the smoky letters: “Away and away the aeroplane shot, till it was nothing but a bright spark; an aspiration; a concentration; a symbol . . . of man’s soul; of his determination, thought Mr. Bentley, sweeping round the cedar tree, to get outside his body, beyond his house, by means of thought, Einstein, speculation, mathematics, the Mendelian theory—away the aeroplane shot (*MD*, 28).

25. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 70, 68.

26. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 94–95.

27. Dalgarno, *Virginia Woolf and the Visible World*, 75.

28. Hasler, “Virginia Woolf and the Chimes of Big Ben,” 150.

29. Falchetta, “Geometries of Space and Time,” 123.

30. Michael North, *The Final Sculpture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 24.

31. *Ibid.*, 25.

32. Hasler, “Virginia Woolf and the Chimes of Big Ben,” 149–51.

33. Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 21.

34. Karthryn Stelmach, “From Text to Tableau: Ekphrastic Enchantment in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*,” *Studies in the Novel* 38 (2006), 312.

35. In this scene Big Ben also strikes, though Woolf does not repeat the “lead circles” image: “Big Ben struck the half-hour. / How extraordinary it was, strange, yes, touching to see the old lady (they had been neighbours ever so many years) move away from the window, as if she were attached to that sound, that string. Gigantic as it was, it had something to do with her.” It should be noted that the old woman does *not* see Clarissa; in fact she is “quite unconscious that she was being watched” (*MD*, 127, 126).

36. Stelmach, “From Text to Tableau,” 314.

37. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 38.

38. *Ibid.*, 83.

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