The Geometric, Angular, and Cubist Elements of *Mrs. Dalloway*

In reading *Mrs. Dalloway*, many of us have been struck by the geometric, angular, and cubist elements of the novel. The novel was published not long after the end of WWI (1914-1918). Many men returning from the war experienced PTSD and substantial injuries, the British empire began to fall apart, and the structure of society began to change—with the upper classes taking the greatest proportional change. Immediately following the war, there was the 1918 Pandemic, which lasted from February 1918 to April 1920. This pandemic infected about a third of the world’s population and killed approximately 10-20% infected. We see in *Mrs. Dalloway* a society that has been shattered like a pane of glass—now composed of shards and pieces—trying to reconstruct itself.

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Mrs. Dalloway looks at herself in her attic mirror: “That was her self—pointed; dartlike; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together…”

Septimus looks at the trees: “And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned 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. Sounds made harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds. A child cried. Rightly far away a horn sounded. All together meant the birth of a new religion—”

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In the journal article *Geometries of Space and Time: The Cubist London of “Mrs. Dalloway”* (2007), Jennie-Rebecca Falcetta explores the idea of *Mrs. Dalloway* as a cubist novel. Following are some excerpts from this article. To read it in its entirety create a free account at jstor.org

The cubist lynchpin of *Mrs. Dalloway* is London as it was in June, 1923. The city appears in pieces and fragments as its streets and buildings, sounds and crowds catalyze the characters’ internal monologues. Woolf renders her characters’ experiences as plural realities of the same geographical space, moment in time, event, or phenomenon, thus asserting the presence of dynamic, simultaneous perspectives. Like the Cubist painters, Woolf’s cubist fiction maintains the integrity of the thing represented (in this case, the living city), revealing its qualities and essence instead of a fixed homogenous view. Her achievement in *Mrs. Dalloway* reveals her apprehension of Cubism’s inherent epistemology, as articulated by poet and proponent of Cubism Guillaume Apollinaire: “One does not have to be a cultivated person to realize that a chair, for example, never ceases to have four legs, a seat, and a back, no matter how we may look at it” (219). Virginia Woolf enacts this same truth in the construction of her fiction: her characters never cease to have pasts, memories, consciousnesses, sense impressions, and private thoughts, no matter how they may appear to others. As she herself attested in September 1924, in the thick of completing *Mrs. Dalloway*, “All this confirms me in thinking that we’re splinters & mosaics; not, as they used to hold, immaculate, monolithic, consistent wholes” (*D2* 314). Humanity’s perception of itself had altered, and Woolf realized that a novel about the remembered past and the subjective present required a form comprehending individual lived time and memory in its very architecture. In Cubism Woolf found a useful blueprint.

In its depiction of multiple subjective Londons, *Mrs. Dalloway* exhibits qualities attributed by Robert Hughes to Cubist paintings: “As description of a fixed form, they are useless. But as a report on multiple meanings, on process, they are exquisite and inexhaustible: the world is set forth as a field of shifting relationships that includes the onlooker” (32). The terms “process” and “relationship” clearly seconding Berger’s summation of Cubism’s innovation, Hughes also emphasizes the dynamism of perception and the viewer’s complicity in constructing the view—principles which translate readily into the realm of fiction. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, I argue, Woolf puts to work Cubist ideas about structure, continuously locating, dislocating and relocating her characters within this “field of shifting relationships.” She deliberately populates the novel with characters who are not only socially Other—shell-shocked Septimus, Rezia the foreigner, Maisie Johnson the Scot—but also Other in the city, unsure of how to negotiate the urban space. Their experiences of dislocation within the English capital stand in high contrast to Clarissa Dalloway’s intimate, personalized relationship with the city. Furthermore, the reader must accommodate and synthesize the multiple unstable views to participate in the creation of *Mrs. Dalloway*’s narrative discourse.
Not surprisingly, critical attempts to “map” Mrs. Dalloway have revealed a highly patterned, almost mathematical, geometry undergirding the narrative, lending support to a cubist analysis. In Susan M. Squier’s reading, Clarissa’s Bond Street flower purchase, Septimus’s walk down the same street to Regent’s Park, and the short trip of Peter Walsh from the Dalloways’ house to Regent’s Park, function as three legs of a triangle (95). Charting the main characters’ movements within 21 episodes, Avrom Fleishman maps circular trajectories which for him embody the novel’s recursive treatment of time and point up Woolf’s evocation of death’s inevitability. The overlap which occurs as the figures traverse the same streets and parks, I would add, constitutes a cubist narrative infrastructure, a geometry of place. Superimposing the “leaden circles” of Big Ben’s regular chime over the triangles and circles of physical movement, Woolf appears to follow Cézanne’s famous admonition to Émile Bernard, taken to the extreme by the Cubists: “treat nature by the cylinder, the sphere, the cone” (Cézanne 19). Woolf, however, treats time and subjectivity—greater abstractions by far than Cézanne’s material “nature”—and thus requires an architecture more precise, actualized, and multivalent than the precepts of Post-Impressionist painting could anticipate.