

# Against Euphemism in *Mrs. Dalloway*: Virginia Woolf, the Psychiatrist, and the Lies\*

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## I. Sinister Euphemism

Published on April 3, 2008 in the New York Review of Books, David Bromwich's article, titled "Euphemism and American Violence," alludes to Tacitus's *Agricola*. "To Robbery, butchery, and rapine, they give the lying name of 'government'" enters the article (Bromwich 28). Bromwich then raises the issues of euphemism and American violence in the 21 century. By exploring how acts of violence have been concealed in the euphemistic words of our time. He writes:

The frightening thing about such acts of renaming or euphemism, Tacitus implies, is their power to efface the memory of actual cruelties. Behind the façade of a history falsified by language, the painful particulars of war are lost. Maybe the most disturbing implication of the famous sentence "They create a

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desolation and call it peace” is that apologists for violence, by means of euphemism, come to believe what they hear themselves say. (Bromwich 28)

Bromwich argues that the euphemizing of language arises from the intent of deception. However, in his view, the effect of using these euphemisms is more complicated than simply concealing an uncomfortable truth from people because they play a critical role in actually changing our attitudes toward the things that they are meant to cover.

As Bromwich points out, euphemism can be used to efface the cruelties of power. In “Words, War and Terror” (2008), Geoffrey Hughes raises the same issue concerning euphemism. Hughes points to changes in the language of war over the centuries, and introduces the new euphemistic words used in the twenty-first century, such as “weapons of mass destruction” (WMD), “shock and awe,” and “mission accomplished,” which were coined by the Bush administration during the Iraq War (2003-2011) to mean war and weapons that can kill a large number of people. Hughes stresses that the use of euphemism can directly affect the way we see war and violence. In this respect, Judith Allen suggests that both “*The New York Times* and National Public Radio (NPR) refused, until late in 2009, to use the word ‘torture,’ finding ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’ quite satisfactory” (8).

The appropriation of public euphemism reminds us of the famous British writer George Orwell, who denounced sinister euphemisms disseminated in the interwar and postwar periods. In his essay “Politics and the English Language” (1946), Orwell suggests governments had promulgated euphemisms on behalf of their “defense of the indefensible” (370). According to him, politicians engage euphemistic terms in attempting to evade criminal acts such as the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, and the dropping of atom bombs on Japan, which are “too brutal for most people to face” (Orwell 370). Orwell describes: “Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification” (370). He goes on to say, “Millions

of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers” (370). “People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called elimination of unreliable elements” (370), Orwell writes. Behind the façade of a history manipulated by language, as Orwell notes, the traumas of war are made invisible.

Despite visible differences, the modernist writer Virginia Woolf shares with the explicitly political writer Orwell that she opposed the style of euphemism harnessed to disguise the true qualities of traumatic events. Woolf wrote her major works after World War I, a historical event which produced a range of euphemistic expressions that hide the horror of war and wound. As Paul Fussell indicates in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1977), during the First World War, the British nation witnessed the visible progress of political euphemism. Influenced by censorship and “the British tendency towards heroic grandiosity about all their wars,” the British politicians and social elites invented a euphemistic style in which the horror of war is diminished or concealed (Fussell 174-75). The British authorities, for instance, “relied on euphemism to keep truth from others—the French mutinies of 1917 became acts of ‘collective indiscipline’—the troops relied on it to soften the truth for themselves” (Fussell 177). Fussell addresses that “[o]f course there was a whole set of euphemisms for getting killed” (177). Such examples of euphemism are “going west,” “to be knocked out,” “going out of it,” and “going under,” among others (Fussell 177).

As a historical witness who saw the terror of the Great War and the progress of public euphemism in the early twentieth century, Woolf attacked the political usage of euphemism, especially in terms of war and trauma. Composed in the 1930s, *Three Guineas* (1938) conveys Woolf’s critique of euphemism most explicitly among all of her works. Early in *Three Guineas*, the female narrator receives a letter from an anonymous English man, a privileged British male elite. The letter contains the educated man’s question about how to prevent war.

Speculating on the question, the narrator recalls what she saw in a newspaper—photographs of damaged bodies of soldiers in the Spanish War. She argues that the wounded human bodies are “not arguments addressed to the reason” but truths that we must face (*Three Guineas* 165). The bodies are “horror and disgust” and war is “an abomination” and “a barbarity” (*Three Guineas* 165). Woolf may have thought that to evoke a visual image of the wounded bodies can be more honest and sincere in order to express the violence of war than to make lengthy, conventional, and euphemistic speech. To prevent war, rejection of political euphemism is an essential task for Woolf.

This paper seeks to explore Woolf’s critiques of war-related public euphemism, a particular form of euphemism valorized to conceal the cruelties of war and re-victimize the patients traumatized in war. The focus of this paper lies on Woolf’s major novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), a postwar fiction displaying the harmful effects of euphemism on vulnerable characters affected by illness and trauma in the postwar climate. In approaching the matter of public euphemism, the novel offers two divided groups of people, patients and doctors, and presents distinctions between their rhetorical styles: the doctors depend on euphemism while the patients avoid it. The doctors’ usage of euphemism stems from sinister desires—the intention to hide the wounds of World War I and the intention to neglect ethical obligations toward patients and war victims. What is worse, the dominant British society pressures wounded patients to adopt euphemism in their own language. Serving to reinforce national ideologies, the professional users of euphemism neglect their patients, including Septimus Warren Smith, traumatized war veteran. Their euphemism displays a sign of ethical complacency and political negligence.

One assumption in this paper is that Woolf’s sexual trauma and the post-traumatic illness might have affected her complex attitudes toward war-related euphemisms, which are delicately exposed in *Mrs. Dalloway*.<sup>1)</sup> With the assumption

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1) The matrix of war and sexual violence is explicated in Woolf’s works, in particular, such as *Three Guineas* and *The Years* (1937). Judith Herman offers an extended discussion of Woolf’s trauma by attending to the link between domestic abuse and political violence.

that Woolf aligned sexual violence with war, the first section of the following discussion begins to examine Woolf's autobiographical writings. Her personal records are worth noting because they raise the conjoined issues of sexual aggression, a form of "war," post-traumatic disease, and euphemism. Turning to *Mrs. Dalloway*, the section proposes that the novel's wounded characters, like Woolf, want to escape the prison of euphemism; although Woolf used euphemistic expressions as a tactic for writing, she refused them when her illness deteriorated to an incurable level. The rest of the paper attends to the British psychiatrists in *Mrs. Dalloway*, who champion euphemism. While offering the examples of their euphemism, my discussion aims to uncover what lies behind their usage of euphemisms.

## II. What Virginia Wants: Escaping the Prison of Euphemism

During her life, Woolf had a ceaseless conflict with various types of mental disorders and pathological symptoms. George Savage, a psychiatrist who believed that Woolf's illness was rooted in her family genetics, diagnosed her illness as "neurasthenia," which means "nerve weakness," and he attributed it to her father's side of the family (qtd. in Caramango 11). In *The Flight of the Mind: Virginia Woolf's Art and Manic-Depressive Illness* (1992), Thomas C. Caramango traces the illness across three generations of Woolf's family. He identifies "five depressiveness, two nonspecific psychotics, two manic-depressives and one cyclothymic" (111). Her father, Leslie Stephen, was afflicted by "nonpsychotic mood swing of cyclothymia" (103), and in 1895, after the death of Julia Stephen, his second wife and Virginia's mother, he suffered serious bouts of depression. Julia Stephen also suffered from depression, as did Woolf's elder sister, Vanessa Bell, who had a serious depressive episode after a miscarriage.

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See Herman's *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic, 1992).

These hereditary factors could have engendered Woolf's mental illness; however, Woolf's lifelong disease can be attributable to childhood trauma. Woolf was sexually abused by her half-brothers, George and Gerald Duckworth, for nine years. These traumatic experiences caused Woolf to suffer from pathological symptoms related to manic depression, such as fainting, nightmares, and breakdowns.<sup>2)</sup> Louise A. De Salvo, in *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work* (1990), identifies Woolf's traumatic childhood experience as the factor triggering her mental illness. De Salvo supports the notion that traumatic experiences exist in a kind of time lag. He claims that the sexual abuse that she suffered at the hands of her half-brothers played a critical role in her manic-depressive condition. As Patricia Moran elaborates, the traumatic events "are not experienced fully by the victim at the time of the trauma, yet they recur with startling intensity, with a compulsive force over which the victim is powerless" (183). In other words, traumatic memories "may involve belated temporality and a period of latency between a real or fantasized early event and a later one that somehow recalls it and triggers renewed repression or foreclosure and intrusive behavior" (LaCapra 89). Such memories become "body memories" involving pathological symptoms (Culbertson 178).<sup>3)</sup> They are "encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images" (Herman 31).

I do not intend to dwell on the biographical aspects of trauma in Woolf's life, which have been much discussed among literary scholars. Instead, I want to focus on how Woolf verbalizes her memories of sexual abuse, a kind of "war" happening

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2) According to Joseph Ballester-Roca and Neolia Ibarra-Rius, three major episodes of her illness occurred after the sexual abuse. In 1895, when Woolf was thirteen, she underwent severe breakdowns, and they "left her convalescing for over six months and forced her to stop writing her diary, which she had started four years before" (223). The second episode, in 1904, led to her first suicide attempt; the most acute period in her disorder extended from 1913 to 1915.

3) Roberta Culbertson notes that the body memories involve the numbness at the time of victimization, the absorption of the perpetrator's message, and the reduction to a survival mode of existence (178).

in her domestic realm. In “A Sketch of the Past” (1939), collected in *Moments of Being* (1976), Woolf describes her memory of Gerald’s molestation which occurred when she was thirteen:

Once, when I was very small, Gerald Duckworth lifted me onto this, and as I sat there he began to explore my body. I can remember the feel of his hand going under my clothes; going firmly and steadily lower and lower. I remember the feel of his hand going under my clothes; going firmly and steadily lower and lower. I remember how I hoped that he would stop; how I stiffened and wriggled as his hand approached my private parts. But it did not stop. His hand explored my private parts too. I remember resenting, disliking it—what is the word for so dumb and mixed a feeling? (*Moments of Being* 69)

Woolf’s autobiographical writing about the disturbing past relies heavily on a style of euphemism. In refusing to verbalize the traumatic event in a direct manner, Woolf employs euphemistic words that imply the sexual harassment. To speak about the aggressor’s sexual abuse, she chooses the euphemistic verb “explore,” rather than “rape” or “touch.” While desiring to talk about the rape, she moves toward euphemism. By referring to “my private parts,” she intimates the violent qualities of the childhood event; yet, she never specifies which parts of her body were molested.

Why does the autobiographical writing about the traumatic event come to engage such euphemistic words? Perhaps, Woolf might fear being too explicit about her experience, because using direct expressions may aggravate the pain of her illness by dredging up uncomfortable memories of her past. Caramanango also points this out by emphasizing that “[l]ike Rhoda in *The Waves*, the depressed Woolf feels naked and vulnerable, stripped of all illusions, as empty on the inside as the world seems to be one the outside” (67). Self-conscious of “the dividing line between madness and sanity,” Woolf often preferred to evade stressful and disturbing memories (Caramanango 211). For instance, Woolf did not want to show “Septimus’s madness” explicitly, for she dreaded that such a straight representation

of mental illness would affect her own mental breakdown (Caramango 211). This interpretation would be valid, provided that Woolf projected her illness into the character.

It is also worth considering that Woolf felt a sense of shame in relation to the sexual trauma that she suffered. In a letter on the same memory, Woolf confessed that she felt a sense of shame after this violation (*Letters* 6 460). As critics note, shame can be identified as “the vicarious experience of the other’s negative evaluation” (Lewis 107). It is emotional affect produced before the chastising gaze of the other. The sense of shame raises “the distressed apprehension of the self as inadequate or diminished” (Bartky 86). Molested as a child, Woolf was afflicted with a sense of shame. The connection between sexual assault and shame is made visible in Woolf’s novel, *The Year* (1937), where Rose is shocked to encounter a male exhibitionist on the street, and keeps silent about the experience out of shame (26-27).<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, it is unfair for the female victim to have felt shame. In a patriarchal culture, however, sexually wounded females are so often led to have a negative self-image as if they were to blame. Because Woolf was self-conscious of her society’s chastising gaze toward sexually traumatized women, she might have controlled her language in trying to describe her sexual abuse. In an oppressive culture where women are pressured to be silent when it comes to sexual assault, euphemism could be adopted as one strategy to write about female sexual trauma.

Interestingly, Woolf’s mental disorder—post-traumatic stress disorder triggered by her sexual abuse—was euphemized by her doctors. Her doctors diagnosed her illness as “influenza” to mean mental illness (Ghalandari and Jamili 487). Believing that there is a connection between the breakdowns and physical stressors caused by influenza, her doctors termed Woolf’s mental illness as influenza during the period of her treatment; yet, Woolf came to know that the euphemistic word “influenza”

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4) *The Years* portrays the scene as follows: “[h]e put out his arm as if to stop her. He almost caught her. She dashed past him. The game was over. She was herself again, a little girl who had disobeyed her sister, in her house shoes, flying for safety to Lamley’s shop” (26-27).



refers to mental disorder. This euphemism is also employed to characterize Clarissa, a main character in *Mrs. Dalloway*: it depicts her as having been affected “by influenza” (4),<sup>5</sup> which might imply mental disease. Woolf existed in a culture where mental illness is associated with shame. In England, from the early nineteenth century, mentally ill patients “came under psychiatric control by being locked away in lunatic asylums” (Porter 118). One of Woolf’s doctors, Savage, also advised her to undergo “a version of the ‘rest cure’ in Jean Thomas’s rest-home in Twickenham” (Porter 119). The so-called “rest cure” was “invented as a treatment for neurasthenia, one of the two or three accepted categories of mental illness in women in the late nineteenth century” (Whitworth 170). Until the early twentieth century, the mentally invalids were considered either untouchable or socially unproductive.

Through threatening both male and female patients, mental illness was seen as a particular challenge for women. The cultural norms of a patriarchal society promulgated an ideology of femininity in which women ought to perform “domestic duties of bringing up children, of being angels in the home and guardians of virtue” (Porter 118). Woolf felt that “her illness and her femaleness both threatened her with a profound sense of powerlessness and depersonalization” (Caramango 15). In this cultural environment, Woolf was forced to use euphemistic words in order to verbalize her sexual abuse and illness. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa embodies the writer’s socialized self: the upper-class female character understands the ways in which women’s illnesses are euphemized. Walking along Bond Street in June 1923, Clarissa encounters Hugh Whitbread, the husband of Evelyn, who has been ill for a long time. Concerned about her, Clarissa asks, “Was Evelyn ill again?” (6). Hugh euphemizes Evelyn’s illness, as he enunciates: “she had some internal ailment, nothing serious” (6). Clarissa “would quite understand without requiring him to specify” (6). The conversation between Clarissa and Hugh alludes to the British society where a woman’s disease is euphemized as if it were a source of shame.

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5) Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (San Diego, Harcourt, 1981). Further references to this work are incorporated in the text, with page numbers appearing in parentheses.

Differentiated from Woolf's writing about her sexual trauma, her final letter, which was written when she felt extremely ill, becomes non-euphemistic. The writer appears simply desperate to deliver her message. Before killing herself, she wrote a letter to her husband, Leonard Woolf:

Dearest, I feel certain that I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and I can't concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have given me the greatest possible happiness. You have been in every way all that anyone could be. I don't think two people could have been happier till this terrible disease came. I can't fight any longer. I know that I am spoiling your life, that without me you could work. And you will I know. You see I can't even write this properly. I can't read. (Bell 226)

Woolf's farewell letter is devoid of euphemism. Every diction and sentence within the quotation is so plain and direct that the writing can simply express the writer's suffering. Without hiding anything about her disease, she writes, she is going "mad," the word that the doctors within *Mrs. Dalloway* avoid verbalizing, as I shall describe later. Having gone through the most precarious phase of her life, Woolf called her suffering simply a "terrible disease" (Bell 226). Absent of euphemistic expressions, which are used in the quoted passage in "A Sketch of the Past," the above letter lets us consider how one's intensified suffering might influence his or her style of language. The distinction between the two examples evokes Dominick LaCapra's illustration of trauma and writing. He writes: "[w]hen the past becomes accessible to recall in memory, and when language functions to provide some measure of conscious control, critical distance, and perspective, one has begun the arduous process of working over and through the trauma . . ." (LaCapra 90). When Woolf was in "the arduous process of working over and through the trauma" (LaCapra 90), she used some methods of controlling language, by using euphemistic terms. However, a euphemistic style is not engaged in her final letter, which was written when she was the most vulnerable in her life.

The close link between trauma and euphemism is suggested in *Mrs. Dalloway*. The fiction hints at that it is difficult for a severely ill patient to use euphemism while a relatively “healthy” patient is able to use it. Woolf divided her own trauma into two main characters, Clarissa, the upper-class housewife who adopts euphemism, and Septimus, the shell-shocked war veteran who rejects euphemism. Provided that both Clarissa and Septimus are wounded, they would be conspirators. In fact, Woolf herself wrote that “Septimus and Mrs Dalloway should be entirely dependent upon each other” (*Letter 3* 189). To be specific, the British returned soldier, Septimus is a mentally ill patient who has pathological symptoms influenced by the shock of the Great War. Woolf leads Clarissa to meditate on Septimus’s death. When Clarissa hears the news of Septimus’s suicide, she leaves her party and retreats to an empty room. To Clarissa, Septimus’s suicide elicits a notion of self: “A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life. . . . This he had preserved” (184). It would be a hasty interpretation that Clarissa reaches full understanding of Septimus, the actual victim of the war; however, it is plausible to say that Clarissa’s experience of being ill and her ability to be affected by a wide range of experiences might lead her to sympathetic imagination toward another ill person.

Pairing Clarissa and Septimus, the novel shows that Clarissa is wounded by mundane events. She is affected by the mocking words of Peter Walsh, who called her “the perfect hostess” (62) when she was eighteen. Clarissa is wounded by the hatred of Miss Doris Kilman, the history tutor of her only daughter, Elizabeth Dalloway. She is shocked by the unkind manner of Lady Bruton, the upper-class woman who invites her husband, Richard Dalloway, to a lunch party without her for a political purpose. Clarissa has struggled with a traumatic event, although she does not reveal it. Peter Walsh recalls that Sylvia is abruptly killed by a falling tree. “To see your own sister killed by a falling tree . . . before your very eyes, a girl too on the verge of life, the most gifted of them, Clarissa always said, was enough to turn one bitter” (78), he speaks.

While bonding Clarissa with Septimus by indicating each of their traumatic

experiences, at the same time, *Mrs. Dalloway* displays gaps between the two wounded characters. If Clarissa is a relatively healthy character, who takes up “the arduous process of working over and through the trauma” (LaCapra 90), Septimus is a mentally impaired patient who suffers from war trauma and post-traumatic injuries. Despite her wound, Clarissa can endeavor to find a balance in her internal life with the external world mainly through hosting parties. She prepares for her party in attempt to give meaning to her shattering experiences and to organize post-traumatic chaos (Froula 129). She believes that her party creates a moment of unity, a scene “that wrenches her guests from the dullness of habitual activity and serves as a stage for moments of heightened consciousness” (Henke 142). Clarissa’s party allows her to forget her wounded self. The novel points to the positive function of her party by saying that “[e]very time she gave a party she had this feeling of being something not herself, and that everyone was unreal in one way, much more real in another” (170-71). Clarissa pursues a sense of joy through remembering Sally Seton, a female friend who kissed her on the lips when she was eighteen years old. Clarissa has cherished Sally’s kiss as a moment of bliss in which she felt “the whole world might have turned upside down!” (35)<sup>6</sup> Through inventing the methods of comforting and consoling herself, Clarissa tries to recover from trauma.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, Septimus functions to embody the extremely sick Woolf and “patient” who feels almost incapable of maintaining a balanced mind and body. He has been through traumatic events during the war, including the death of his commanding officer and friend, Evans. Upon his return to England he suffers from hallucinations, believing that the trees have a special message to convey to him.

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6) Clarissa’s earlier narrated memories focus on meeting Sally at Bourton, the moment which “infuses the formal, repressive atmosphere with a vibrant female energy” (Abel 31). Elizabeth Abel reads Sally as a vicarious mother for Clarissa, who feels a sense of loss after her mother and sister died.

7) It is worth reminding that Sylvia’s death—apparently the most violent event in her life—is recalled by Peter rather than Clarissa. Such a narrative technique points to Clarissa’s tendency of selecting memories.

Woolf, familiar with the symptoms of mental disorder, depicts Septimus through the vivid signs of impaired self-perception. The traumatized war victim is unable to choose words and memories for recovery. Unlike Clarissa, who understands how to use euphemism, Septimus cannot employ any kind of euphemism. The traumatized patient can produce only simple and unfiltered words. The examples of Septimus's language are "I will kill myself" (16), "Evans, Evans!" (93), "You brute! You brute!" (93), and "Communication is health; communication is happiness, communication—" (93).

Likewise, Septimus's Italian wife of five years Lucrezia, does not (and cannot) use euphemistic styles. Lucrezia's ultimate desire is to express her suffering directly. Taking care of her invalid husband, who is feeling alienated from her, Lucrezia is confused and exhausted physically and mentally, although she still loves him. While taking Septimus to see Sir William Bradshaw, the famous British doctor who runs a clinic on Harley Street, Lucrezia finds a crowd of people focusing on a motorcar, what is presumably the Prime Minister's motorcar. She wants to express her suffering to the British people. The novel remarks: "People must notice; people must see. People, she thought, looking at the crowd staring at the motor car" (15). Elsewhere in the fiction, she cries: "[i]t's wicked; why should I suffer" (65); "No; I can't stand it any longer . . ." (65). Feeling vulnerable, Lucrezia becomes anxious to offer her message to the imagined audience. Wishing to expose her pain, the marginalized foreign woman comes to reject any euphemistic style, not simply because she is unfamiliar with euphemistic English vocabulary, but because she is incapable of self-consciously monitoring and sophisticating the style of her own language. By depicting the non-euphemistic language of Lucrezia and Septimus, *Mrs. Dalloway*, written about two decades before Woolf's suicide, transfers the author's understanding of the limitation of euphemism, the awareness that would be enhanced as she approached the end of her life. Albeit subtle, the fiction proposes that for severely suffering people, euphemistic verbal signs cannot but fail to express the true qualities of their states. While embracing a variety of euphemistic styles, recognized as silence and evasion, as exemplified from Clarissa's manner of

language, the novelistic writing also insinuates the writer's desire toward more straightforward forms of expression.

### III. The Lies of the English Doctors in *Mrs. Dalloway*

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw champion euphemism. Bradshaw euphemizes the patient's illness by calling it "depression." Bradshaw insists, "We all have our moments of depression" (97). Holmes also persists that Septimus has no serious problem. He argues that such states may occur in every person, not simply Septimus. Lucrezia recalls, "Dr. Holmes might say there was nothing the matter" (23). Both of the English doctors try to evade the obvious fact that Septimus has a severe illness. Holmes prescribes that Septimus only has to pay attention to the outer world and find some hobbies for himself. He advises him to go to the theater and golf and attempt to gain weight by overfeeding. In this way, Holmes treats Septimus's illness as if it were under his own control. Bradshaw never speaks of "madness." He diagnoses Septimus as "not having a sense of proportion" (96), which is a euphemistic phrase that substitutes for the word "madness." Bradshaw conceives that Septimus is mad, as he says internally, "this is madness" (96); yet, he does not utter it.

Interpreting the two doctors' use of euphemism as such, Caramango claims that "[t]he temptation to deny the reality of mental illness is strong (212). Caramango selects the word "temptation," to show that the doctors are tempted to ignore the seriousness of mental illness afflicting Septimus, rather than simply overlooking serious symptoms of the disease, taken as PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Born and educated within the Victorian period, the middle-aged English doctors in the 1920s could have not attained sufficient and accurate knowledge about pathological symptoms caused by war, for studies of war trauma had been seldom researched before World War I, during which traumatized soldiers in England began to report medical symptoms after combat. The academic research on

psychological and physical effects of shell shock, which inflicts Septimus, has been made only since the Great War occurred, through investigating the traumatic experience of war victims.<sup>8)</sup> Although finding scientific evidence of shell shock in war veterans' brains is a recent breakthrough, *Mrs. Dalloway* displays that the fictional doctors' ignorance of Septimus's illness comes from their intentional avoidance of seeing and understanding the truth about war and its aftermath.

*Mrs. Dalloway* makes visible that Septimus's illness is divergent from a common mood disorder or mere "depression." As a consequence of shell-shock during the First World War, Septimus hears voices, sees ghosts of dead soldiers, and creates fantasy worlds. Traumatic experiences the war veteran underwent during the war dissociate him from the past by shattering his prewar assumptions about himself and the nation that had previously given order and meaning to his life. The narrator refers to the Great War, which caused Septimus's illness:

The War had taught him. It was sublime. He had gone through the whole show, friendship, European War, death, had won promotion, was still under thirty and was bound to survive. He was right there. The last shells missed him. He watched them explode with indifference. (86)

Damaged to a great extent, Septimus finds it impossible to give meaning to his suffering. He seems to undergo "existential frustration" or "existential vacuum," which is alleged to cause neurosis (DeMeester 83). Facing the existential chaos caused by war, Septimus has lost faith in his prewar beliefs and values, and shows mental disorder. His ability to feel with others is deprived. When his wife is crying, he feels nothing (90). Sensory perceptions also change. "Even taste . . . ha[s] no relish to him" (87). Developing a set of pathological symptoms, Septimus seems

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8) See Peter Leese's *Shell Shock: Traumatic Neurosis and the British Soldiers of the First World War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). Tracing the history of understanding the effects of shell shock, Leese argues that studying shell shock expands "our understanding and interpretation of the human experience of industrial labor, of the Great War, and of cultural change in British society" (10).

“unable to create forward movement toward recovery” (DeMeester 80). Septimus emerges as a traumatized patient who demands special care for recovery.

It is therefore ironical and suspicious for the doctors to diagnose Septimus as having no serious problem. Intimating Woolf’s critique of public euphemism overused by educated Englishmen, *Mrs. Dalloway* presents ignorant doctors as the ethically irresponsible subjects who inhibit the patient’s recovery and aggravate his mental disorder. Although the medical professionals are called on to discover the true nature of the patient’s illness, they do not acknowledge the reality of war trauma, and conceal its violence through creating the seemingly inoffensive linguistic façade, euphemism. Their use of medical euphemism, like “depression,” misrepresents Septimus’s fatal disease by generalizing it, thereby making invisible the particular pain of war trauma. Misusing the word “depression,” the doctors serve to translate “intense experiences into language that is habitual” (Walkowitz 88). The doctors employ euphemistic words with sinister intentions. The intention of Holmes and Bradshaw’s euphemisms in treating Septimus is twofold: they want to avoid seeing the cruelties of war, which has triggered the mental illness of Septimus, and they desire to sustain their social status by perpetuating a social, political, and economic structure that victimizes an entire generation of young men of the First World War.

Bradshaw diagnoses his patients as lacking “a sense of proportion,” a medical term substituting “madness,” as if sick people were immature children who need to grow up. Through using this euphemism, Bradshaw reinforces the social value and system that make him prosperous. In his relation to Septimus, he attributes the patient’s trauma and recovery to his personal problems. Similarly, Holmes blames Septimus by calling him a “coward” (149) when he finds the patient to have just killed himself: the doctor sees his suicide as a consequence of losing a sense of balance and moral strength. Becoming one of the most famous psychiatrists in London, Bradshaw regards himself as superior to his friend, Holmes, who is more likely to echo a stereotypical Victorian doctor whose medical knowledge about mental disease is undoubtedly limited. Woolf, however, lets us recognize the two



doctors as identical, through depicting them as great liars who deceive their patients and themselves. They neither diagnose mentally ill patients correctly, nor acknowledge that they are responsible for the war-related disease.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the war becomes the immediate trauma shared by all characters. Trauma, particularly in the case of war, is a communal experience. “London has swallowed up many millions of young men called Smith” (84), the narrator says; the characters “bear the weight of a common past sealed in statues, buildings, roadways, and stored in the memories each privately preserves as they walk those open ways” (Beer 53). Septimus externalizes war trauma most explicitly through becoming a deeply wounded patient whose symptoms are so visible to readers and other characters in the novel, except the fictional doctors. As the novel suggests, it is the national community which triggers the illness of Septimus. The older generations, those who absorb national ideologies, are described as particularly responsible for having sacrificed and destroyed young men. Before going to war, Septimus was educated to have patriotic ardor and jingoist ideals. One of the discipliners is Mr. Brewer, a managing clerk at Sibleys and Arrowsmiths, who tries to be “paternal with his young men” (85). Mr. Brewer thought “very highly of Smith’s abilities,” prophesying that “he would, in ten or fifteen years, succeed to the leather arm-chair in the inner room under the skylight with the deed-boxes round him only ‘if he keeps his health’” (85). In seeking to develop Septimus into a well-balanced English male, the self-made businessman encourages Septimus to work hard and promote manliness; he advised “football” (86), for instance.<sup>9)</sup>

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9) My article, “Escaping Schools: Disobedient Bodies in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*” (2018) examines Woolf’s critique of the British society’s cultural formation of masculine athletic bodies. In the previous study, my discussion focuses on how English schools in Victorian and Edwardian periods sought to discipline both male and female bodies with a particular focus on physical education. Woolf’s 1931 novel *The Waves* “defies the socially constructed distinction between the superior and the inferior, and the normal and the abnormal,” I argued, and the fiction “emerges as a generous body embracing multiple forms of marginalized bodies, including the body recognized as physical disability or ugliness” (Lee 107). If *The Waves* subtly presents the British educational system focused

Septimus accepted the senior British man's advice, which is based on the British tendency towards heroism and the myth of *bildungsroman*, spread and overvalued in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Learning to cultivate himself as a desirable English middleclass man, Septimus also possesses romanticized views of war. Septimus became "one of the first to volunteer" (86), says the narrator. He "went to France to save an English which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square" (86). During the war, however, Septimus saw "humanity stripped of the trappings of civilization and witnessed its primitive nature and its potential for evil and destruction, which is merely constrained—not eradicated—by civilized order" (DeMeester 82-83). Disillusioned by his prewar anticipation to be a heroic Englishman, Septimus confronts the painful fact that war is barbaric, through enduring illness.

As social elites and medical doctors, Bradshaw and Holmes are obligated to aid war victims in order to overcome trauma and illness, no matter how difficult the curing process would be. However, both of the characters defend the established social order and national ideologies. Sustaining the British ideologies of war and hero, the doctors want Septimus to repress the discoveries made during the war. Without understanding the true qualities of war trauma, Holmes provides Septimus with incorrect suggestions. Holmes's advice to Lucrezia to encourage Septimus to look at "real things, go to a music hall, play cricket" echoes Mr. Brewer's advice to Septimus to play football in the prewar time.<sup>10</sup> In the postwar time, Holmes fails

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on physical education, *Mrs. Dalloway* more directly refers to the British society's admiration for athletic male bodies. In Trafalgar Square, Peter Walsh looks at athletic young men marching together. Although Peter is considered a social rebel and outsider in the mainstream English society, he, an alumnus of an English public school, is immediately attracted to the spectacle created by the "boys in uniforms, carrying guns" (51).

10) Woolf's doctor, Dr. George Savage also "identified sanity with social conformity" (Caramango 16). Like Holmes and Bradshaw, he defined her illness as nerve weakness and not an important illness.

to address the origin of Septimus's mental illness: the Great War. What the doctor pursues is a comfortable life and food. "If Dr. Holmes found himself even half a pound below eleven stone six, he asked his wife for another plate of porridge at breakfast" (91), says the narrator. This is one point that Woolf makes in *Mrs. Dalloway* to display the inappropriate relationship between the doctor and the patient. The patient can receive no benefit from the doctor who desires to satisfy his own appetite.

Like Holmes, Bradshaw wants to preserve the social order because he advocates the national paradigm of the English hero, and also because he can obtain economic advantages by protecting the status quo. The novel depicts Bradshaw as the owner of a luxurious "grey motor car" (94). Referring to his wife, the novel depicts: "Certainly Lady Bradshaw in ostrich feathers hung over the mantelpiece, and as for his income it was quite twelve thousand a year" (99). Bradshaw is presented as a worshipper of "proportion," as the novel remarks: "Proportion, divine proportion, Sir William's goddess, was acquired by Sir William walking hospitals, catching salmon, begetting one son in Harley Street by Lady Bradshaw, who caught salmon herself and took photographs scarcely to be distinguished from the work of professionals" (99). Woolf suggests that Bradshaw's respect of proportion is a political and ethical problem. She writes: "Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion" (99). This passage refers to asylum, the place where the socially underprivileged patients were secluded; however, Bradshaw and Holmes use the euphemistic word "home" in planning to separate Septimus from his home, and lead him to a sanatorium. Bradshaw tells Septimus, "We have been arranging that you should go into a home" (97). He adds, "One of my homes, Mr. Warren Smith, . . . where we will teach you to rest" (97). Using euphemistic words, the doctors deceive their patient and disguise the true qualities of the social institution, what the narrator presents as the nation's cruel system having "secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair" (99).

By celebrating proportion and confining the socially underprivileged patients to margins of society, which he calls “home,” Bradshaw has gained material benefits while his patients suffer. The radically different situation where the doctor and the patient echoes Walter Benjamin’s critique of the history of civilization, which, according to Benjamin, necessarily involves an act of “barbarism” (256). In his essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940), Benjamin argues that society’s accumulation of “cultural treasures” is a consequence of horrible exploitation because the products of civilization “owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also the anonymous toil of their contemporaries” (256). Resonant with Benjamin’s critique of the terrifying civilization, during the Great War, the ostensibly civilized English doctor, Bradshaw hoards resources for a comfortable life by occupying the relatively safe zones, the doctor’s office and home, detached from military trenches,<sup>11)</sup> while anonymous soldiers fight and die in war battles. After the war, Bradshaw exerts will to ignore the “anonymous toil of their contemporaries” (Benjamin 256), and further thrives on the spoils of the Great War, which brought about a number of English mental patients, including Septimus, who comes to visit his private hospital.

We, as readers, are induced to see Bradshaw as far distant from being a “good” doctor, for Woolf intended to show him as unsympathetic toward the patient. In the fiction, however, people in London generally respect Bradshaw for several reasons. Bradshaw “had worked very hard; he had owned his position by sheer ability (being the son of a shopkeeper); loved his profession” (95). Bradshaw’s appearance and style of speech influenced his generally good reputation as a medical doctor. He “made a fine figurehead at ceremonies and spoke well—all of which had by the time he was knighted given him a heavy look a weary look (the stream of patients

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11) *Mrs. Dalloway* suggests that there is no zone immune from the influence of the First World War in postwar London. The tenuous line between the safe and the dangerous is implied from the opening of the novel. Excited to host her party, Clarissa visits a flower shop, and is enchanted by the beauty of a bouquet of flowers. At this moment, however, Clarissa is disturbed by “the violent explosion” of a motor car (14), which she depicts as “a pistol shot in the street outside” (13), an image evoking war.

being so incessant, the responsibilities and privileged of his profession so onerous) . . .” (95). This appearance, “together with his grey hairs, increased the extraordinary distinction of his presence and gave him the reputation . . . not merely of lightning skill, and almost infallible accuracy in diagnosis but of sympathy; tact; understanding of the human soul” (95). The fiction does not specify why people consider Bradshaw “sympathetic,” but at least, it suggests that they would like the doctor’s style of speech based on euphemism. They seem to believe that the doctor’s use of euphemistic terms when referring to illness is a sign of politeness and sympathy.

Right after delineating the external qualities of Bradshaw, *Mrs. Dalloway* turns to a dialogue between Bradshaw and Septimus. Taking place in the doctor’s clinic, the dialogue between the two characters clarifies that Bradshaw’s euphemistic style springs from not a sense of sympathy but his will to evade the violence of war. Interrogating Septimus, Bradshaw produces a euphemistic style in terms of speech and manner. Significantly, the doctor not only uses euphemistic words but also evades the issue of war trauma:

“You served with great distinction in the War?”

The patient repeated the word “war” interrogatively.

He was attaching meanings to words of a symbolical kind. A serious symptom, to be noted on the card.

“The War?” the patient asked. The European War—that little shindy of schoolboys with gunpowder? Had he served with distinction? He really forgot. In the War itself he had failed. (96)

It is Bradshaw who controls the above conversation. Well-versed in the rhetoric of the dominant culture, Bradshaw encourages Septimus to accept and confirm the jingoist ideals. He asks, “You served with great distinction in the War?” (96). Sustaining a different view of war, Septimus has forgotten what “distinction” means because he no longer celebrates the rhetoric of military heroism. “Distinction” becomes a word whose meaning is uncertain in this situation. Rather than accepting

Bradshaw's assumption of war, Septimus refers to the Great War as "that little shindy of schoolboys with gunpowder" (96). The wounded soldier's satirizing remark suggests that "his war is not Sir William's war" (Walkowitz 95).

Toward Septimus, who rejects Bradshaw's idea of heroic war, the doctor does not give any proper and ethical response. He poses a set of codified questions, which are designed to advocate national ideologies and patriotic zeal and discourage thinking and speaking. The goal of Bradshaw is to distract Septimus from the memory of the war. The doctor is neither interested in what Septimus wants to say about the war, nor concerned about how to help him overcome war trauma. By robbing Septimus of the possibility of verbalizing his war experiences, the doctor destroys his chance to recover from illness. Without officially assuming government affairs of the British nation, the English doctor functions as a politically sinister conspirator. In the professional sphere, the doctor promulgates a string of words which are oppressive to the patient, and therefore, aggravates his illness to the point that he kills himself only three hours after the consultation begins at the doctor's clinic.

#### IV. Coda

In closing, I would emphasize that Woolf's essential desire lies in speaking in an honest and sincere manner. In the post-World War I period, Woolf recognized that so many words were tainted and manipulated by cultural and political forces. She hoped to resuscitate vital forces of words, and imagined how to liberate words from the constraints of rigid convention and political influence. In the process of revealing the vital force of words, Woolf found it necessary to reject a set of political euphemisms, dramatically disseminated in the post-World War I period. She took such euphemistic terms as disguising the cruelties of power and the true qualities of war. Reflecting Woolf's political consciousness, *Mrs. Dalloway* embodies the writer's resistance to public euphemism valorized to reinforce a

condition of oppression. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the British medical doctors champion euphemism. Loving jingoism and heroism, the doctors depend on euphemistic words, to suppress the cruelties of the Great War. By using euphemistic terminologies in diagnosing Septimus, Bradshaw and Holmes provide him with the wrong advice, thereby preventing his recovery. On behalf of their own material gains, the doctors keep using sinister euphemisms rather than creating meaningful and honest conversations. The British doctors do not know why Septimus is unable to employ euphemistic words, although readers are led to witness that Septimus's rejection of euphemism stems from extreme pain and illness. Finally, while illuminating the British doctors' sinister appropriation of euphemism, *Mrs. Dalloway* makes one more point. The fiction suggests that there are a host of people who are naively deceived by public euphemism. They regard Bradshaw as a good doctor, with the belief that he shows both "infallible accuracy in diagnosis" and a sense of "sympathy" towards patients (95). By presenting the people's naïve trust in the doctor's euphemistic words and manners, *Mrs. Dalloway* encourages us to question what lies behind a euphemistic style or an ostensibly sophisticate facade.

(Chonnam National U)

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**Abstract**

Against Euphemism in *Mrs. Dalloway*:  
Virginia Woolf, the Psychiatrist, and the Lies

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During the First World War, British social elites invented a style of euphemism in which the horror of war is concealed. As a historical witness who saw the terror of the Great War and the progress of euphemism, Virginia Woolf attacked the political usage of euphemism, especially in terms of war and trauma. Composed in the post-World War I period, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) conveys Woolf's opposition to euphemism harnessed to disguise the true qualities of war and wound. In approaching the matter of euphemism, the fiction offers two divided groups of people, patients and doctors, and presents distinctions between their rhetorical styles; the doctors depend on euphemism while the patients avoid it. The novel suggests that the doctors' usage of euphemism stems from sinister desires: the intention to hide the wounds of World War I and the intention to neglect ethical obligations toward patients and war victims. By focusing on *Mrs. Dalloway*, this paper examines Woolf's critiques of war-related euphemism, a particular form of euphemism valorized to conceal the cruelties of war and re-victimize the patients affected by illness and trauma in the postwar climate. One assumption in this paper is that Woolf's sexual trauma and the post-traumatic illness might have affected her complex attitudes toward war-related euphemisms. In the process of illuminating the link between trauma and euphemism, the present discussion also attends to Woolf's autobiographical writings which raise the convoluted issues of war, post-traumatic disease, and euphemism.

■ Key words : Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, euphemism, World War I, trauma, psychiatrist, patient

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