

WOOLFIAN BORDER POETICS AND CONTEMPORARY CIRCADIEN NOVELS

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Virginia Woolf's 1925 novel *Mrs Dalloway* famously opens with an episode describing the act of crossing a border:

Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.

For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer's men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning – fresh as if issued to children on a beach.

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like a flap of a wave; a kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there in the open window, that something awful was about to happen [...]

She stiffened a little on the kerb, waiting for Durnall's van to pass. A charming woman, Scrope Purvis thought her (knowing her as one does know people who live next door to one in Westminster); a touch of the bird about her, of the jay, blue-green, light, vivacious, though she was over fifty, and grown very white since her illness. There she perched, never seeing him, waiting to cross, very upright.

For having lived in Westminster – how many years now? over twenty – one feels in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable.

The actual threshold marks the border between inside and outside, the Dalloways' quiet house in Westminster and the noisy London street, though we are not explicitly told that Clarissa steps over it. In the fourth paragraph she is simply outside and being observed by a neighbour while waiting at the kerb to cross the street. Clarissa's consciousness rather than the physical act of walking out the door is the focus of the opening paragraphs. At the moment of leaving her house she recalls the past in a way that reminds us of the very *lack* of a definite border separating present and past. Clarissa remains in the present while plunging (as the text has it) into the past, and it is the "synchronicity" (a term I will return to) between the "here-and-now" and "then" that constitutes her consciousness. As the editors of a recent selection of conference papers titled *Woolfian Boundaries*, point out, it is exactly this

“transitional aspect of boundaries” that seems to have particularly fascinated Woolf (Burrells, 2007, ix).

Scholars have long referred to the image of border-crossing when discussing Woolf’s representations of consciousness, however. In an essay about her use of memory as an aspect of consciousness, Susan Dick, for example, underscores “[t]he continual blurring in the minds of characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* of the border separating present from past” (Dick, 1983, 186). In J. Hillis Miller’s well-known formulation, it is the fluidity of the borders that makes the present in a novel like *Mrs Dalloway* appear as “the perpetual repetition of the past”. As he explains:

In one sense the moment is all that is real. [...] In another sense, the weight of all the past moments presses just beneath the surface of the present, ready in an instant to flow into consciousness, overwhelming it with the immediate presence of the past. [...] So fluid are the boundaries between past and present that the reader sometimes has great difficulty knowing whether he is encountering an image from the character’s past or something part of the character’s immediate experience. (Miller, 1982, 184)

The language of the novel’s opening passage reflects the transitional or “in-between” nature of Clarissa’s consciousness in two ways, most obviously in the verb tenses. As Dorrit Cohn has shown, it is the shift from the pluperfect (“had [...] seemed”, “had burst open”) to simple past tense (“was”) that makes us recognise the passage in the third paragraph as narrated memories (Cohn, 1978, 128). But the collapse of boundaries between present experience and memory is also expressed syntactically, as in the third paragraph: “What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, *when*, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air” (my emphasis). Here “when” introduces a subordinate clause whose verb appears after the prepositional phrase describing the sound that connects present and past, “now” and “then”, and the relative clause explaining the link.

In other words, the novel’s eponymous heroine is poised on a double threshold: not only between inside and outside, private house and public street, but also between “now” and “then”, present and past – the latter signalled by the conjunction “for”. Note the repetition: “For Lucy had her work cut out for her” / “For so it had always seemed” / “For having lived in Westminster – how many years now? over twenty”. As Melba Cuddy-Keane has argued, “for” here is a conjunction that connects past and present and pits both on “equal footing”. Though it establishes a “pattern of infinite regression”, this pattern does not involve, in Cuddy-Keane’s words, “receding further and further back but receding over and over again” (Cuddy-Keane, 2008, 102).

Cuddy-Keane’s focus is on what she calls “beginning’s ragged edge”, that is, the lack in Woolf’s novels of a single point of origin to which their narratives can be traced. Read in terms of what Johan Schimanski calls “the processual and embodied perspective of the border-crossing narrative”, however, it becomes obvious that the “pattern of infinite regression” is consistently expressed through recurrent images of

borders and thresholds (Schimanski, 2006, 41). In *Mrs Dalloway* repeated border-crossings endow a single day with extreme density “through the ever-expanding traces of the past” (Cuddy-Keane, 2008, 102). By collapsing spatial and temporal movements, not only for Clarissa but for the other central characters as well, Woolf narrates each moment of consciousness as an evolving boundary state in which the present moment is continually intersected and expanded by mental images of the past.

But my concern in this essay is less with *Mrs Dalloway* itself than with some of its many successors, novels clearly inspired by both its circadian scope and its border poetics. Hence they suggest the continued relevance of Woolf’s sense of human consciousness as fluid and encompassing. The three novels I have in mind – Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours* (1998), Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (2005) and Gail Jones’ *Five Bells* (2011) – are all important works in their own right, and in each case it might be argued that the text is enhanced rather than diminished by its intertextual relationship to Woolf’s novel. In an interview, Cunningham has underscored that *The Hours* ought not to be viewed as an attempt at rewriting *Mrs Dalloway*: “What I wanted to do was more akin to music, to jazz, where a musician will play improvisations on an existing piece of great music from the past – not to reinvent it, not to lay any kind of direct claim to it, but to honour it and try to make other art out of an existing work of art” (qtd. in Schiff, 2004, 367). This statement has equal relevance for *Saturday* and *Five Bells*. Although they are less explicitly linked to *Mrs Dalloway* than *The Hours* (which not only foregrounds its dependence on *Mrs Dalloway* via the title, Woolf’s original, but also imitates parts of its plot and quotes from it extensively), all three clearly pay homage to Woolf via their use of the one-day format to reveal whole lives and show how those individual lives are both interconnected and entangled in history through shared time and place. As Gillian Beer phrases it in a discussion of communality in Woolf’s novels from *Mrs Dalloway* onward, “To be alive on the same day in London may be a deeper bond [...] than any of the individual choices of love and friendship which narrative fiction ordinarily privileges” (Beer, 1996, 48).

All three novels allude to Woolf’s novel in a variety of ways, structurally as well as thematically. In all private preoccupations are played out – as in *Mrs Dalloway* – against a common background of public catastrophes: in *The Hours*, the United States aids epidemic of the 1990s is presented as the contemporary equivalent of Woolf’s First World War in its impact on a generation of young men; in *Saturday* a similar role is played by the so-called war on terror, and the novel is set in London on 15 February 2003, the day on which hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in protest against an invasion of Iraq; *Five Bells*, set in Sidney on a hot Australian summer Saturday in January 2008, likewise contains many references to the Iraq War, while for one of the novel’s four central characters the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the 1960s has had a more devastating effect. All, moreover, contain details that rework images or episodes from *Mrs Dalloway*. In *Saturday*, for example, McEwan’s protagonist Henry Perowne, like Clarissa, goes out shopping for a party (though he buys seafood rather than flowers), and an aircraft on fire (actually a Russian transport plane making an emergency landing) that evokes fear of a terrorist attack in the wake of 9/11, is clearly an updated version of Woolf’s

skywriting plane that first frightens people because they are reminded of the German bombing of London during the war, but then turns out to be advertising toffee.

Finally, and most importantly in this context, all three signal their allegiance to *Mrs Dalloway* and its mingling of past and present by transposing to different locations Woolf's unforgettable boundary figure, the "battered old woman" whose primal syllables "ee um fah um so / foo swee too eem so", uttered in "the voice of an ancient spring sprouting from the earth; which issued, just opposite the Regent Park Tube Station", connect modern urban life with prehistory or the natural world (69). In *The Hours* another old woman, "in a dark neatly taylor'd dress" and stationed under the Arch in New York's Washington Square, "sings, tunelessly, *iiiiiii*" (14); in *Saturday* yet another is a fixture of the Fitzrovia square where Perowne and his family live. Here she is a "ruined old lady with her wild, haunting calls. Go away! she'll shout for hours at a time, and squawk harshly, sounding like some marsh bird or zoo creature" (5). In *Five Bells* she is reinvented as an Aboriginal busker, playing the didgeridoo with an electronic backbeat for tourists on Sydney's Circular Quay, heard by one character as "*boum-boum; boum-boum; boum-boum*", a sound dissolving in the air "thick and newly ancient" (2); by another, newly arrived in Australia from London, not as the "wearisome, uniform thrum" that she had imagined beforehand, but instead as "a set of nuanced tones, at times like a human voice, distant, misremembered, at others like wind, or blown rain, or the amplified sighing and heartbeat one hears during illness or lovemaking" (123).

As these diverse incarnations of Woolf's "battered old woman" indicate, Cunningham, McEwan and Jones are all interested in the temporal dimensions of the spatial aesthetics that informs not only *Mrs Dalloway* but all Woolf's fiction (cf. Thacker, 2003, 152–3). Adapting Woolf's border tropes – particularly the windows, doors and thresholds introduced in the opening paragraphs of *Mrs Dalloway* – to representations of contemporary realities, they all suggest how each moment of lived experience is deepened "when backed by the past", as Woolf puts it her memoirs (Woolf, 2004, 108); that is, when the present is not only interrupted by past memories but felt simultaneously as both re-enactment and renewal, continuity and change. Like Woolf they use narratives of space to create a sense of synchronicity between present and past.

The term "synchronicity", which is so useful in this context, has been adapted from a recent study by Steve Ellis of Woolf's ambivalent relationship to the Victorian past. For Ellis synchronicity, as a "mode of retrieval", is one aspect of the "complex relationship of difference and debt" that characterises her Post-Victorianism, that is, an innovative and dissenting modernity combined with an enduring sense of piety towards the English nineteenth century expressed in what he calls "the obsessive Woolfian retrospect" (Ellis, 2007, 4–9). The term itself, though, is drawn from the biographer's observation in Woolf's mock-biography *Orlando* (1928) that "the most successful practitioners of the art of life [...] somehow contrive to synchronize the sixty or seventy different times which beat simultaneously in every human system so that when eleven strikes, all the rest chime in unison" (291). In other words, *Orlando* suggests that the experience of each moment represents an unnarratable complexity, and it might be argued that Woolf has "solved" this problem in *Mrs Dalloway* by reducing the number of different times from sixty or

seventy to merely two or, at most, a few. Clarissa's most significant memories, moments she relives again and again throughout the novel, are of the summer when she was eighteen and made the choices that would determine the course of the rest of her life. The other central characters likewise return to specific past moments, sometimes in ways that indicate that people are linked less by actual encounters than by a common, albeit idiosyncratically remembered, past.

While *Saturday* and *Five Bells* – like *Mrs Dalloway* – narrate the events of one specific day, *The Hours* deals with three days many years apart, in three separate locations and under three headings, “Mrs. Dalloway”, “Mrs. Woolf” and “Mrs. Brown”. But the repetition of and variations on certain motifs give the text an analytical structure that makes it seem as if the earlier days are absorbed into a single layered day, in contemporary New York, which the events of the two earlier days deepen and explain. The main border trope in *The Hours* is Woolf's novel. Both as physical object and narrated universe it functions as a structural threshold that gives access to the past for Cunningham's “Mrs Dalloway”, Clarissa Vaughan, an editor in her early fifties, as well as for the reader. Like her precursor, this Clarissa is “an ordinary person (at this age, why bother trying to deny it?), [who] has flowers to buy and a party to give” (10). The party is planned as a celebration for an old friend, Richard, a poet and novelist suffering from AIDS, who is due that evening to receive a prestigious literary award but instead commits suicide by throwing himself out of a window. Though named after Clarissa Dalloway's husband, as a character he is an amalgamation of her old friend Peter Walsh and the traumatised war veteran Septimus Warren Smith, whose suicide Clarissa learns about from a guest at her party. While this homogenising move dispenses with Woolf's challenging parallel plots of “the world seen by the sane & the insane side by side” (Woolf, 1978, 207), it creates a different kind of interpretative challenge by linking Clarissa Vaughan both to a fictionalised Virginia Woolf and to “Mrs Brown”, an earlier reader of *Mrs Dalloway* who shares the name of the old lady who personifies human nature in Woolf's famous modernist manifesto, “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” (1924) (Woolf, 1988, 430).

The collapse of three days and three narrative strands into one is less obvious in the novel itself than in Stephen Daldy's 2002 film adaptation (based on a screenplay by David Hare). Here cross-cutting, particularly in the opening, so to speak superimposes three lives – three alarm clocks ringing, three women waking up, three bouquets of flowers being arranged in vases – making them seem parallel while at the same time using settings and props to emphasise a temporal distance between them. The opening, moreover, concludes with a sequence of three brief scenes that suggest the reverberation of the past in the present as well as the foundational role of Woolf's novel. First we see Woolf herself in an easy chair (in her study in Richmond in 1923) with a writing board in her lap, composing its first sentence while saying it aloud to herself; next we see Laura Brown, a suburban housewife – Richard's mother, we later learn – in bed (in Los Angeles in 1951) opening the published novel and repeating that sentence; finally we see Clarissa Vaughan fifty years later dressed to go out and calling to her partner: “Sally, I think I'll buy the flowers myself.” The implication, as in Cunningham's text, is that Woolf's novel and the historical insight

about women's lives that it offers provide a lens through which both later developments and their present predicament may be interpreted.

Ian McEwan's *Saturday* closely follows the single-day format of Woolf's novel, but reinvents it in terms of a meticulous contemporary realism. And unlike *Mrs Dalloway*, which uses the dual-voice position of free indirect discourse to explore connections between a series of interlinked characters, its third-person narration is entirely confined to the consciousness of the protagonist, Henry Perowne. He is a successful neurosurgeon with a strong sense of professional identity, which convincingly accounts for the almost pedantic precision of both his observations of the present and his analysis of the past. McEwan follows Woolf in using doors and windows as spatial-temporal border tropes throughout, but whereas Woolf emphasises openness and fluidity, he repeatedly uses transparent borders, windows especially, to indicate Perowne's combination of intellectual curiosity and emotional disengagement. In the novel's opening scene, for example, Perowne watches events unfolding in the London square below from the upstairs bedroom of his house as if they were scenes in a play. Likewise, rather than walking the city streets and surrendering himself to what Woolf in her essay "Street Haunting" (1927) calls their "vast republican army of anonymous trampers" (Woolf, 1994, 481), he prefers to move about London rather grandly ensconced in his silver Mercedes S500 with a Schubert trio on the sound system (75–6). Needless to say, however, although Perowne does his best to prevent both the lives of others and past failures from impinging too much, the physical and mental barriers he wants to control are threatened – in a very literal sense, when his car is hit in a narrow street by a red BMW whose thuggish and volatile owner later breaks into his house during a dinner party for his daughter. The latter is a border-crossing that forces Perowne to confront how his precarious sense of self has been maintained by futile attempts to disengage from uncomfortable memories, an effect not unlike that of the news of Septimus' suicide on Clarissa Dalloway.

While *Saturday* is a close examination of a single individual, Gail Jones' *Five Bells* explores the meaning and experience of the past in a variety of ways. Its title, like *The Hours*, refers both to time and to a famous literary text. In Jones' case it is taken from the Australian poet Kenneth Slessor's elegy, "Five Bells" (1939), written for a close friend who had drowned in Sydney Harbour and well-known as the inspiration for John Olsen's large mural in the Sidney Opera House. Among other things the poem is a meditation on different meanings of time, both clock time (as signalled by the ship's bell that rings every half hour of a four-hour sailor's watch) and limitless time, time as immersion, as in the four lines used by Jones as an epigraph:

Where have you gone? The tide is over you,
The turn of midnight water's over you,
As Time is over you, and mystery,
And memory, the flood that does not flow.

Five Bells is divided into six chapters roughly following the chronology of a summer Saturday, each made up of separate sections that via free indirect discourse trace this

particular day from the perspectives of four characters, two of whom have known each other since childhood but not met for twenty years, while the other two meet only briefly and in passing. They do, however, have a “deeper bond” than love or friendship. Like Septimus and Clarissa Dalloway, both Catherine, a young Irish journalist, and Pei Xing, an ageing Chinese woman, connect to the past and each other via a common affinity to a specific work of literature. Whereas some lines from Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*, “Fear no more the heat o’ the sun / Nor the furious winter’s rages”, which so to speak reverberate through *Mrs Dalloway*, link Septimus and Clarissa, Pei Xing and Catherine keep returning to Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* (1957). For Pei Xing, whose father translated the novel into Chinese before the Cultural Revolution, in which both her parents were killed and she herself was imprisoned for two years, *Doctor Zhivago* represents her life in sum. While in prison, she kept it as a secret “whispered not into the air, but into the cardinal recesses of her heart” (155), and in the present she reads it aloud to her former prison guard to “reattach to that history” through forgiveness and reconciliation (113). For Catherine likewise, though she doubts the present relevance of the novel’s “romance” and “epic perspective on history” (131), it actualises past moments of intimacy and love.

The day for all four central characters in *Five Bells* contains new and indelible experiences – three, for example, encounter Sidney’s famous Circular Quay with its iconic Harbour Bridge and equally iconic Opera House for the first time. But it is also for all “a haunted day” (173), interrupted by the “unbidden recall” of personal histories (48). The oldest of the four, Pei Xing, represents them all – and could have spoken for Clarissa Dalloway too – when she reflects that consciousness is “borderless continent” (40) and that her own life “would always be this circling round an irrepressible past” (76). In fact, both the bridge and the opera house function in the novel as boundary figures that encountered in the “*here-now*” not only inspire memories of the past but collapse the distinction between the actual present and past images (1, 5).

To paraphrase Slessor’s poem, the characters in *Five Bells* are all continually flooded by memories as they walk around in the city, and these memories and the loss they represent are as real and important to them as events in the present. While for three of them “the encumbering past” (197) is a source of strength and joy, as well as of pain, the fourth and only man – like Woolf’s traumatised war veteran – is literally pulled under by its heavy weight. He drowns after sliding over board from one of the ferries between Sidney and the outlying islands (a fictional re-enactment of the death of Slessor’s friend 80 years earlier as well as a re-enactment of Septimus’ suicide in *Mrs Dalloway*) because he’s unable to “release himself from the pressure of absent others” (203).

The archaeological metaphors Woolf used in her diary while working on *Mrs Dalloway*, “about excavating the spaces behind the present”, were an acknowledged source of inspiration for Jones (Keenan, 2011). Perhaps one could argue that in *Five Bells* she explores, extends and explicates Woolf’s notion of “caves” dug out behind literary characters (Woolf, 1978, 263). For Woolf this was a “tunnelling process, by which I tell the past by instalments, as I have need of it” (Woolf, 1978, 272). Like McEwan and Cunningham, Jones makes Woolfian border poetics more accessible to readers by explicitly foregrounding the transitions between present and past, as well

as the separateness of her characters. At the same time, *Five Bells* is closer than both *The Hours* and *Saturday* to Woolf's lyric narrative prose, and the novel beautifully captures the fullness of what it calls "the dense here-now" (141) when it encompasses the past.

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Summary

Virginia Woolf's circadian novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) has inspired many successors, some of them important works in their own right. Although few of these novels are as explicitly linked to *Mrs Dalloway* as Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998), more recent novels such as Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) and Gail Jones' *Five Bells* (2011) clearly pay homage to Woolf's use of the one-day format to reveal whole lives and show how those individual private lives are entangled in history. The essay highlights one particular aspect of these three works, their imaginative and often transformative reworking of elements of Woolfian border poetics, particularly the predominance in *Mrs Dalloway* of boundary tropes – windows, doors, thresholds – that create a sense of synchronicity between present and past. Adapting Woolf's boundary tropes to representations of contemporary realities, all three novels in different ways suggest how the present is deepened "when backed by the past", as Woolf puts it her memoirs; that is, when the present is not only informed by a remembered past but experienced in terms of both re-enactment and renewal, continuity and change.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, Michael Cunningham, Ian McEwan, Gail Jones, circadian novel, border poetics, boundary tropes, synchronicity