



## Community, Exposed Singularity and Death in *Mrs Dalloway*

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### ABSTRACT

This essay brings Virginia Woolf and Jean-Luc Nancy into dialogue, focusing on their similar critique of essentialized models of community and evocation of forms of being-with that derive from the experiences of singularity and death. It identifies two forms of community in Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). The first one corresponds to Nancy's conception of the immanent community, built upon essence and fusion, and in which death is provided with an ideological meaning. In Woolf's novel, this communitarian logic traverses the official, ritualistic way in which England has sublimated the death and loss caused by the First World War, and the repressive conventions and the authoritarian spirit of the governing classes. An alternative kind of community, however, is suggested in *Mrs Dalloway*, one that can be identified with Nancy's conception of the inoperative community: a community of singular beings who share their finitude, exposure and death. Blanchot's ideas on the transient community of lovers and Butler's theorization of a 'we' based upon common vulnerability and loss also shed light on this novel's concern with antisocial bonds between characters that escape traditional forms of affiliation.

**KEYWORDS:** Virginia Woolf; *Mrs Dalloway*; Community; Singularity; Exposure; Death; Nancy; Blanchot.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

As Rachel Bowlby has asserted, "just about everything Virginia Woolf ever wrote can come to seem to be about community, or the lack of it" (1999: 148).<sup>1</sup> Community, in Woolf, however, emerges in special and strange ways, with her novels suggesting the strong emotional, aesthetic or ethical value of bonds between characters that do not respond to conventional, recognizable patterns of sociability. Thus, in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925)—the novel this essay focuses on—readers are left wondering what it is precisely that draws Clarissa's attention towards the old

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woman in the house opposite hers, and what it is exactly that they have in common, as the novel hints at a special affiliation between them that is neither explained nor justified. The enigmatic nature of their connection is mirrored by the final, intense identification Clarissa feels with Septimus, a man she has never met, but whose death she somehow experiences as part of her own sense of self.

In order to engage with Woolf's puzzling evocations of community, this essay draws upon a critical tendency that in the last decades has invited us to reconsider the relation between the individual and collectivity in modernist fiction, showing the ways in which it may be said to offer a third way between "lonely individualism," on the one hand, and "oppressive socialization," on the other, borrowing Whitworth's terms (2005: 143). One of the most significant contributions in this sense has been that of Jessica Berman, who has argued that in traditional understandings of modernist narrative as inevitably built upon the fragmented and dislocated self, "the community is either fully absent, or significantly present as a looming, oppressive force" (2001: 2). As opposed to that trend, this critic has shown "that in much high modernist fiction we can already see community being imagined over and over again" (2). It is a type of community, however, that does not respond to communitarian ideals that identify community with the public realm, consensus, mutual recognition, shared values or an ideal form of communication. Instead, modernist fiction imagines community through interrupted and fragmented narratives that highlight "the constant making and un-making of human interconnections" (6). It is in this sense that she identifies a parallel between modernist evocations of community and Jean-Luc Nancy's theory of the inoperative community, conceived as "an essential condition of being" (14) that cannot be identified with any essence, commonality or political project.

Caroline Pollentier and Sarah Wilson have also emphasized the "interest in the name and practice of community in the modernist era" (2019: 2), pointing to the modernist rejection of "totalizing, repressive" models of community (2), together with the departure from the socialist and utopian impulses of late-Victorian and Edwardian approaches to community (4). Modernism favours, instead, interrupted, loose, evanescent forms of community, such as the ones to be found in aesthetic, cultural and literary collectivities, in cosmopolitan communities exceeding the national paradigm or in alternative modes of communal connection enabled by modern media such as film and radio. Similarly to Berman, Pollentier and Wilson argue—in even stronger terms—for a correlation between the modernist engagement with community and Nancy's community proposal, both of them being characterized by a dismissal of "immanent, consensual, and totalitarian communities" (8). By bringing Nancy and Woolf into dialogue in this essay, I see both of them as part of what Pollentier and Wilson identify as the crisis and rethinking of community (7) that began in the early twentieth century—exemplified by modernist writers such as Woolf, who reacted against Victorian national, ethnic, religious or military forms of community and their later fascist manifestations (2)—and that have gone

on in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century postmodern theories on community. I follow, then, Pollentier and Wilson in their approach to Nancy's "conception of community as a modernist legacy" (8) and in their consideration of the postmodern theory on community as "a belated commentary on the modernist crisis of community" (12).

Other studies have also pointed to the special affinity between modernist communities and postmodern conceptualizations of community, among which, together with Nancy's, we have to include Maurice Blanchot's proposal in *The Unavowable Community* (1984); it was in dialogue with Blanchot that Nancy developed his community proposal, and indeed, Blanchot's ideas on the community of lovers and on the traditional and elected community will also prove relevant for my analysis of Woolf.<sup>ii</sup> Thus, the collective volume *New Perspectives on Community and the Modernist Subject: Finite, Singular, Exposed* (2018), edited by Rodríguez-Salas, Martín-Salván and López, includes insightful readings of different modernist writers in the light of the Nancy-Blanchot debate. In particular, the chapter by López—drawing on Nancy's "Myth Interrupted"—explores Woolf's fascination with the possibility of a "common voice", borrowing her term in "Anon", associated with the figure of the literary creator or storyteller and with community. This is a communion that Woolf can only find in the (pre)medieval English village, as opposed to the isolation and fragmentation that characterizes the modern urban world as depicted in *Mrs Dalloway*. In his contribution to this volume, Rodríguez-Salas focuses on the community of women artists in Katherine Mansfield's life and literary production, paying attention to Mansfield's relationship of identification and camaraderie—but also rivalry—with Virginia Woolf. Very recent studies keep proving the multiple, rich ways in which the concept of community still resonates in Woolf's fiction. Fairbairn (2021) has argued that in *Between the Acts* (1941), art is shown as a form of unity that unifies its audience into a community, one, nevertheless, that does not work as a homogeneous whole, but that keeps its diversity. Cernat (2022) points to the connections between Woolf's feminist-pacifist stance toward war and her response to Romantic political thought, particularly Coleridge's, which allows Woolf to consider a conception of community that goes beyond nationalism and a restrictive perception of gender.

With my contribution, I hope to prove the ways in which Nancy can help us read Woolf and vice-versa, given the striking similarities between Nancy's and Blanchot's conception of a community with no essence, substance or communion and the enigmatic, ephemeral bonds between characters that populate modernist fiction—and in particular, Woolf's novels—, bonds that escape and resist the rituals and codes of essentialized collectivities.<sup>iii</sup> Specifically, I aim to show how Nancy's concepts of singularity, finitude and exposure—concepts that have not been systematically applied to the analysis of *Mrs Dalloway*—can illuminate the connections between characters that, in Woolf's fiction, emerge out of the dissolution and expansion of the stable self and the exposure to mortality. As we will see in the case of both Clarissa and Septimus, their sense of being and being-with can be comprehended as

exemplifying Nancy's understanding of singular existence as characterized by "dis-location" (1991: 25) and "exposure" to the other (30) and of the inoperative community as "the presentation to its members of their mortal truth" (15).

This inoperative community follows a completely different logic from the one Nancy identifies in the "immanent" community, characterized by "unity, intimacy, and autonomy" and "woven of tight, harmonious, and infrangible bonds"; a community dependent on "institutions," "rituals" and "symbols" (1991: 9). According to Nancy, one of the substances or essences upon which the immanent community may constitute itself is that of the nation (15). In *Mrs Dalloway*, the community conceived along national lines is identified with British upper middle-class society, patriarchy and the governing class, and is associated with a repressive and authoritative spirit whose main victim is Septimus Warren Smith. Septimus's experience of death as a traumatized war veteran shows the crucial difference, according to Nancy, between the immanent and the inoperative community. As for the former, death is endowed with a meaning, value or essence—as seen in *Mrs Dalloway* in the patriotic commemoration of the deaths caused by the First World War—while in the latter the inoperative community death works as "the unmasterable excess of finitude" (Nancy, 1991: 13). Community, for Nancy, is just the exposition of this finitude; it is the condition of finite and singular beings who, through their mortality, expose themselves to other singular beings (15).

My argument is that in *Mrs Dalloway*, Septimus and Clarissa are depicted as singular, exposed beings who are, thus, open to an experience of death, and hence, of community, that departs from the traditional and official one. This experience of mortality and community also resonates with Judith Butler's argument in *Precarious Life*, in which this thinker suggests a community built upon shared dispossession, vulnerability and loss. Butler's theorization of a "'we' ... traversed by a relationality" (2004: 22), in which the autonomy and control of the "'I' is called into question by its relation to the Other" (23), arguably sheds light on Clarissa's enigmatic connection with Septimus through the latter's death.

## 2. NATIONAL COMMUNITY, AUTHORITY AND DEATH

As numerous critics have argued (Ho, 2015; Saint-Amour, 2016; Whitworth, 2005; Zwerdling, 1986), *Mrs Dalloway* is a novel profoundly preoccupied with the social system and the national community in early twentieth-century England after the First World War, together with the role that individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds may play in such a collectivity. This leads Ho to place Woolf's novel within the specific narrative tradition of the social-problem novel, whose central question was "how individuals from different backgrounds may be brought together as members of a single collective 'social imaginary'; one invariably bounded by the territoriality of the nation-state," and which "faced the task of

imaginatively reconciling a national community increasingly fractured by the consequences of industrialization and modernity” (2015: 63).

The possibility of such a national community is associated early in the novel with the authority of the state and the governing classes, symbolized by the passing of an official car that attracts the attention of all passers-by. The car represents “the voice of authority” (Woolf, 1992: 15), personified by whichever power figure occupies it, whether the Prince of Wales, the Queen or the Prime Minister, and working as some kind of link between all the anonymous Londoners who stare at it along the streets, fascinated by its presence. Attention is also paid to a small crowd that gathers at the gates of Buckingham Palace, waiting to see the Queen go past. As the narrative voice reproduces their words and thoughts (20-2), it suggests an interconnectedness between Londoners, a sense of community built upon commonality derived from national identity and state authority. The continuous striking of Big Ben heard along the novel (4, 52, 103, 128) works in a similar way. Its repeated chiming, which establishes a common temporality bringing characters together, is orchestrated by the power and authority of the state that this clock symbolizes.

This authority, however—together with the communal feeling it generates—is very much problematized in *Mrs Dalloway*, in which authority emerges, borrowing Whitworth’s words, “as an institution that enforces conformity” (2005: 136). This critic explains how, following the Boer War and the First World War, there was a strong debate in England about “how far the state should be allowed to exercise its authority over the individual” (135). Focusing on such a context, “*Mrs Dalloway* raises the question of how far the power of the state radiates, and by what means it is transmitted; it asks who exercises power and who it is exercised over; and it asks how far it is possible to resist or evade the state’s authority” (136).<sup>iv</sup> I would add that, together with those questions, *Mrs Dalloway* asks what type of community derives from this power and authority—which is associated with nationalism, Empire and masculine power—and whether an alternative model of community may emerge in this context.

This community of authority which enforces conformity—but also other values such as convention and tradition—is represented in the novel by a set of characters that belong to the British upper-middle class and more specifically to what Peter Walsh calls the “governing class” (Woolf, 1992: 84), the most relevant of whom are Hugh Whitbread, Lady Bruton, Richard Dalloway, Dr. Holmes and William Bradshaw. For Zwerdling, “[s]olidity, rigidity, stasis [and] the inability to communicate feelings” are the main aspects characterizing this governing class: there is “something inflexible, unresponsive, or evasive in their nature that makes them incapable of reacting appropriately to the critical events of their time or of their own lives” (1986: 122). And as Zwerdling argues, the main event in the novel in this sense—the one that marked European history at the beginning of the twentieth century—is the First World War, whose shadow looms over the novel but whose traumatic consequences can only

be seen as affecting one character in the novel, the war veteran Septimus Warren Smith. The novel depicts a British society keen on forgetting and leaving behind the ugly reality of war, in the process of which it will not hesitate to push to the margins and even get rid of disturbing elements such as Septimus, who “is seen as a threat to governing-class value not only because he insists on remembering the war when everyone else is trying to forget it but also because his feverish intensity of feeling is an implicit criticism of the ideal of stoic impassivity” (Zwerdling, 1986: 131).

Septimus’s traumatized condition derives from an experience of death and finitude that is either repressed or sublimated in the official, state-sanctioned way in which the English nation is dealing with the devastation, loss and distress caused by the First World War. The novel thus suggests two very different experiences of death, which correspond to Nancy’s two models of community. On the one hand, as explained by Fynsk, the immanent community endows death with a meaning “lying in a value or cause transcending the individual. A society may well use it (in the celebration of heroes or the sacrificial victims)” (1991: xvi). *Mrs Dalloway* is pervaded by passages in which we see the patriotic value attached to the deaths caused during the First World War. One of these moments takes place when the passing of the official car attracts everybody’s attention on Bond Street, so that “strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of Empire” (Woolf, 1992: 19). The logic of the immanent community as theorized by Nancy is fully at work here. State power, represented by the car, awakens a feeling of “unity” and “intimacy” (Nancy, 1991: 9) in the crowd, one that is based on “the transfiguration of [the] dead into some substance or subject” (15): “the flag” and “Empire,” in Woolf’s words, or as put by Nancy, “homeland, native soil or blood, nation” (15).

There are other passages in the novel that describe the official remembrance and commemoration of the dead in a patriotic community in which death is “consigned to immanence” (Nancy, 1991: 13) and hence provided with both a political and religious meaning. One such moment is narrated from the point of view of an anonymous man hesitating about whether to enter St Paul’s Cathedral, “for within was what balm, how great a welcome, how many tombs with banners waving over them” (Woolf, 1992: 30). As the man goes on to think that the cathedral “invites you to membership of a society; great men belong to it; martyrs have died for it” (30-31), the suggestion again is of an immanent community that establishes its identity not only upon its dead, but also upon manliness, a concept that, as we will see, is also crucial to understand Septimus’s fate in the novel. Another relevant passage is told from Peter Walsh’s point of view, as he contemplates the boy soldiers that have just laid a wreath at Whitehall Cenotaph: “Boys in uniform, carrying guns, marched with their eyes ahead of them, marched, their arms stiff, and on their faces an expression like the letters of a legend written round the base of a statue praising duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of England” (55).

As the novel emphasizes the soldiers' youth, together with the idealistic notions motivating them, the reader seems to be invited to make a parallel with Septimus, who, in his joining the war, was similarly carried away by an abstract nationalist ideal: "He went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square" (94). Septimus can, thus, be seen as part of the "[g]enerations of citizens and militants, of workers and servants of the States [that] have imagined their death reabsorbed or sublated in a community, yet to come, that would attain immanence" (Nancy, 1991: 13). However, the experience of death that he actually has is totally different from the one espoused by the immanent community; death for him rather "exposes a radical meaninglessness that cannot be subsumed. And when death presents itself as *not ours*, the very impossibility of representing its meaning suspends or breaches the possibility of self-presentation and exposes us to our finitude. ... this exposure is also an opening to community: outside ourselves, we first encounter the other" (Fynsk, 1991: xvi; emphasis in the original).

It is the death of his friend Evans that exposes Septimus to this "radical meaningless" that "cannot be subsumed," and hence to an experience of community that departs from the accepted, conventional one. A radical experience of finitude and otherness provokes the feelings of terror, hallucinations and suicidal impulses that he suffers from. His condition, however, will not be recognized by the doctors who treat him. Dr Homes, who "brushed it all aside – headaches, sleeplessness, fears, dreams – nerve symptoms and nothing more" (Woolf, 1992: 100), suggests that he takes up some hobby, such as going to the music hall or playing cricket. In the case of William Bradshaw, he does arrive at a diagnosis of Septimus as suffering from "complete physical and nervous breakdown" (104) due to "the deffered effects of shell shock" (201). His prescription of a rest cure, so that Septimus can recuperate "a sense of proportion" (106), though, is made from "the impersonal and rationalized" point of view of the bureaucratic apparatus of the state that he represents (Ho, 2015: 72), which aims at controlling and repressing what are considered to be "unsocial impulses" (Woolf, 1992: 110). Bradshaw tells Septimus that "Nobody lives for himself alone" (107) and when Septimus desperately stammers "I – I –" (107, 108), he urges him "to think as little about [himself] as possible" (108). In this way, Bradshaw exemplifies the demand that the immanent community makes upon its members to submit themselves to a logic of fusion, conformity and repression of individual feeling.<sup>v</sup> It is a community, as described by Miller, in which "[e]ach separate individuality is bathed or encompassed in ... collective consciousness" (*Literature* 2005: 89).

In his experience of the meaninglessness of death, and hence of finitude and vulnerability, Septimus, then, comes to represent that which the members of the immanent community will not recognize in themselves and in others. As Miller argues, in most traditional communities, "[d]eath tends to be covered, suppressed, quickly forgotten" (2005: 89). Thus, in the specific post-war setting of *Mrs Dalloway*, "Septimus suffers from the patriotic expectation that he, like other Londoners, should suppress all sense of loss" (Katz, 2016: 400).

He at first complies with this expectation when, following Evans's death, he feels "very little and very reasonably" (Woolf 1992: 95), arguably a consequence of his having developed the "manliness" (94) that his nation and the war demand from him. However, once the war is over and he gets into panic as he cannot feel at all, he fully emerges as the victim of the stoic and military manliness upon which the English nation has defined itself, a logic under which both Septimus's poetic personality and his relationship with Evans cannot be subsumed. The exact nature of their relationship is never specified, which precisely contributes to the suggestion that, in its probable homoerotic component, it is one that resists dominant conceptualizations and escapes social laws and conventions. In this sense it can be seen as an example of the "elective community" or "community of lovers" as defined by Blanchot: "the strangeness of that antisocial society, always ready to dissolve itself, formed by *friends* or *couples*" (1988: 33; emphasis in the original).

The terms in which Septimus and Evans's 'togetherness' during the war is described invites such a reading: "They had to be together, share *with* each other, fight *with* each other, quarrel *with* each other" (Woolf, 1992: 94; emphasis added). To the extent that Septimus and Evans may constitute a community of lovers, it is one characterized not by sharing *something* in common, but by the act of sharing *with*, in line with Blanchot's definition of "the negative community," which "affirm[s] itself as the very act of sharing" (1988: 19). The repetition of the "with" in the passage quoted above, together with the emphasis on Septimus and Evans's being "together," suggests an inoperative community which, unlike the immanent community—which is constituted upon essence, substance or mystification—is calibrated upon the mere "being-together or being-with" of its members (Nancy, 1991: 14).

Death is what prevents this "being-together or being-with" from turning into a "fusional assumption in some collective hypostasis" (Nancy, 1991: 14), death experienced as the loss and impossibility of immanence. It is after Evans dies that Septimus's sense of self is destroyed, being plunged into a state of utter vulnerability and lack of control. The condition in which he finds himself could be well described borrowing Blanchot's elaboration on how the "call from or for 'community'" (1988: 5) responds to a particular dimension of our being, namely, "the impossibility of being itself, of subsisting as its *ipse*, or, if you will, as itself as a separate individual: this way it will perhaps ex-ist, experiencing itself as an always prior exteriority, or as an existence shattered through and through, composing itself only as it decomposes itself constantly" (6). The fact that it is the call from and for community that provokes the violent decomposition of Septimus's sense of self is first seen in the scene in St Regent's Part, when Septimus feels summoned by Evans's dead presence: "There was his hand; there the dead. White things were assembling behind the railings opposite. But he dared not look. Evans was behind the railings!" (Woolf, 1992: 27). As he feels continuously called by the voices of Evans and the dead (76, 102), Septimus's existence comes to resemble that of "the singular being" as described by Nancy (1991: 18), "exposed" and "abandoned" to



“*outside itself*” (emphasis in the original), to “an exteriority ... with which it entertains an essential and incommensurable relation” (Nancy, 1991: 18): “this last relic straying on the edge of the world, this outcast, who gazed back at the inhabited regions, who lay, like a drowned sailor, on the shore of the world” (Woolf, 1992: 101-102). The exposure to “an incommensurable outside” (Nancy, 1991: 18) is again highlighted when Septimus is about to commit suicide: “He was alone, *exposed* on this bleak eminence, stretched out” (Woolf, 1992: 159; emphasis added).

This exposure is one that also comes to be experienced by Rezia, who wonders “why should *she* be exposed” (71; emphasis in the original): “She was like a bird sheltering under the thin hollow of a leaf, who blinks at the sun when the leaf moves; starts at the crack of a dry twig. She was *exposed*; she was surrounded by the enormous trees, vast clouds of an indifferent world, *exposed*; tortured; and why should she suffer? Why?” (72; emphasis added). Similarly to Septimus, Rezia does not only feel exposed to a vast indifferent world, to a dangerous exteriority, but her own sense of self becomes one of exteriority and dispossession: “the experience of the outside” becomes “the outside-of-self” (Nancy, 1991: 19). In *Mrs Dalloway*, Septimus and Rezia are the two characters who experience the most blatant suffering, being exposed and abandoned to an experience of finitude and death that works as a fissure destabilizing and breaking up the communitarian logic of patriotism, emotional repression and “proportion” surrounding them. Septimus’s suicide partly suggests that this experience cannot have a place in such a community. At the same time, however, as analyzed below, his death also glimpses the possibility of a different kind of community, community understood as “the presentation to its members of their mortal truth” (Nancy, 1991: 15).

### 3. COMMUNITY, SINGULARITY AND VULNERABILITY

The experience of death and loss leads Septimus to take his own life. In his case, as put by Jiménez Heffernan, “exposure takes a step ahead into literal, suicidal thrownness” (2018: 31).<sup>v</sup> I would like to argue, however, that *Mrs Dalloway* also depicts an experience of singularity, exposure and finitude that does not lead to self-destruction, and which opens up a community that departs from the “oppressive socialization” (Whitworth, 2005: 143), authoritarianism and fusional logic associated with the governing classes. It is also an experience of community that departs from the official, ritualistic way in which England has repressed and sublimated the death and the loss caused by the First World War, and that is based, instead, on the recognition of shared vulnerability and loss.

Clarissa Dalloway is the character that most strongly represents such an experience of singularity and community. In this sense, she resembles many other characters from Woolf’s fiction whose sense of being is characterised by constant dissolution and expansion, by a porous existence that cannot be contained and which is thus continually exposed to other selves. The characters from *The Waves*—whose fluid identities constantly merge into each

other—are perhaps the clearest example of this conception of being as constitutively open to community.<sup>vi</sup> As put by Bernard, “I do not believe in separation. We are not single” (Woolf, 2000: 36). It could be argued, then, that being as described by Woolf evokes Nancy’s ontological proposal. For Nancy, community is revealed to “the *singular being*, which is not the individual” (1991: 27; emphasis in the original). Singularity, which “is not individuation,” is “exposed to the outside”; it is “finitude compearing” (29). Miller explains how these two opposing conceptions of being correspond to the two models of community we are tracing in this essay. In what Miller calls “the ordinary, commonsensical” (2005: 87) model of community, the individual is understood to be “a self-enclosed subjectivity” (91). Community is made up of “cohabiting subjectivities” who assume that “the other is like me” and that can communicate through a “common language” (88). In the model of community deriving from Nancy, Blanchot and others,<sup>vii</sup> on the contrary, community is constituted not by individualities, but singularities: “Each singularity is exposed, at its limit, to a limitless or abyssal outside that it shares with the other singularities, from the beginning, by way of their common mortality” (Miller, 2005: 91).

We have already seen how Septimus and Rezia are depicted in exactly those terms, as singularities exposed to an abyssal outside. Early in the novel, Clarissa emerges as a similar singularity, unbounded, exposed to an immeasurable outside, to mortality and to other selves:

Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself. (8-9)

The passage begins with an acknowledgement of finitude and death. At the same time, it is a finitude that “*co-appears* or *compears*” (Nancy, 1991: 28; emphasis in the original). The expansive, accumulative syntactic structure suggests Clarissa’s finite life as one spreading and sharing out. On the other hand, the use of the image of the “mist” to describe her openness to other selves underlines its non-substantial, ephemeral quality; it is not the kind of conventional relationship that works according to established social parameters. The fact that Peter is presented as involved in this process establishes him, together with Sally Seton—as the novel later shows—as aligned with Clarissa: the three of them, at one point or another, are shown as exposed to an experience of community that departs from the conventional one. This is not to say that they are outside the Establishment or that they do not follow prevailing social values and assumptions: Sally is a married woman with five boys, Peter has worked as a colonial

administrator and Clarissa's marriage to Richard—who is a conservative politician and perfectly embodies the British gentleman—has turned her into “the perfect hostess” (Woolf, 1992: 8), “car[ing] too much for rank and society and getting on in the world” (83). Yet, as argued by Zwerdling (1986: 133), Clarissa, Sally and Peter occupy some kind of middle ground between the two extremes depicted in the novel: on one side, characters such as Bradshaw and Hugh Whitbread are presented as completely identified with the values of the Establishment, and on the other, characters like Septimus and Doris Kilman represent the antithesis of the governing-class spirit. Clarissa, Sally and Peter belong to the upper middle class, but, as Zwerdling points out (1986: 133), the three of them underwent in their youth a rebellious phase in which they rejected the values associated with that world. And even if they have “surrendered to the force of conventional life” (137), their memories and their shared past, together with the emotional and ideological freedom they contain, permeate their present identities and place in the world, so that their relationship—one that arguably works according to a non-traditional model of community—exposes the unworking of the community in which they now find themselves.

The kiss between Clarissa and Sally, “the most exquisite moment of [Clarissa's] whole life” (Woolf, 1992: 38), evokes Blanchot's community of lovers. Its description as a “moment” underlines its transience and brevity, just as for Blanchot the community of lovers is “less a gathering than the *always imminent dispersal* of a presence *momentarily* occupying the whole space and nevertheless without a place” (1988: 33; emphasis added). Its homoerotic component, on the other hand, marks its “antisocial” (ibid) character: “the community of lovers no longer cares about the forms of the tradition or any social agreement” (47). The fact that it is through a kiss that the community of lovers is revealed in Woolf's novel is also worth noting, as the kiss is precisely chosen by Nancy as example of a communication that works as exposure and sharing: “the beating of a singular site against other singular sites” (1991: 31).

The relationship between Clarissa and Peter also departs from conventionality. It did not end in marriage, one of the main institutions that keeps the traditional community going on. The description that Peter makes of it works as a summary of a constant consideration in Woolf's *oeuvre*: the fact that those moments and people belonging to a hidden, secret dimension of ourselves, often coming from a past that keeps returning to us, may have infinitely more value and relevance than the people we share our everyday lives with and the concerns and activities in which we are apparently involved. Peter's and Clarissa's “actual meetings” have been “[b]rief, broken,” marked by “absences and interruptions,” and yet “the effect of them on [Peter's] life was immeasurable”: “There was a mystery about it” (Woolf, 1992: 168). Peter's and Clarissa's relationship is one that has developed “in absence, in the most unlikely places ... after years of lying lost” (Woolf, 1992: 168). Again, it is possible to draw a parallel between this enigmatic relationship and Blanchot's thoughts on community. To the extent that Clarissa and Peter may be said to constitute a community, it is an impossible,

absent one, a community that cannot “exist as such, but only as imminence and withdrawal” (Blanchot, 1988: 15).

As shown above, Peter reflects upon the mysterious quality of Clarissa’s effect on him, and in doing so, he acknowledges an otherness in her that he cannot encompass or subsume. This acknowledgement of a secret dimension in the self that cannot be known or shared also deviates from traditional assumptions about community, based, as Miller argues, upon the success and transparency of “intersubjective communication” (2005: 93). Community is thus essentially perceived as a “knowable community” (1973: 165) borrowing again Raymond Williams’s well-known words. Miller has analyzed the assumptions underlying Williams’s conceptualization about community, one of them being that “[m]y social placement exposes me entirely to other people, with no corner of private subjectivity hidden away from them” (2015: 5). Woolf’s fiction, however, continually dismantles such an assumption, pointing to the tension between social exposure and the dark, secret “cellar” in ourselves that no one will ever know (Woolf, 1992: 166) and that may give rise to a mysterious community that does not depend on knowledge. Clarissa Dalloway herself is an embodiment of this tension. On the one hand, the repeated association of her identity with her role as hostess emphasizes her “worldliness” (83), her compliance with social conventions. On the other hand, the novel continually suggests that she does have a way of knowing people and relating to them that departs from the conventional one: “Her only gift was knowing people almost by instinct” (9). A passage worth quoting in full elaborates upon this gift in Clarissa, who in a conversation with Peter describes her existence as a exposed singularity spreading out through death:

not knowing people; not being known. For how could they know each other? You met every day; then not for six months, or years. It was unsatisfactory, they agreed, how little one knew people. But she said, sitting on the bus going up Shaftesbury Avenue, she felt herself everywhere; not “here, here, here”; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere. She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that. So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places. Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to, some woman in the street, some man behind a counter – even trees, or barns. It ended in a transcendental theory which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe, or say that she believed (for all her scepticism), that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death. (167)

The “odd affinities” that Clarissa has with people she does not even know definitely point to an experience of community that cannot be subsumed by her social role as hostess and wife. Rather, in her constant evocation of other selves, her self seems to work according to

Bataille's "principle of incompleteness," as described by Blanchot (1988: 5): "The existence of every being ... summons the other or a plurality of others" (6).

The fact that these others will never be known, and will hence remain other, constitutes a thought by Sally towards the end of the novel: one can only jump to conclusions about people's lives and feelings, "for what can one know even of the people one lives with every day?" (Woolf, 1992: 211). It is revealing that Sally's reflection is produced in Clarissa's party, the social event *par excellence*, a ritual and a gathering working as the climax of the communitarian logic of the upper middle class. Yet death—in the form of inexplicable and unassimilable alterity—interrupts it: "in the middle of the party, here's death" (201). Deeply shaken by the news, Clarissa takes refuge in the small solitary room where the Prime Minister and Lady Bruton had been, a space where, through Septimus's death, Clarissa confronts her own finitude and mortality: "Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt" (201). While she is immersed in her thoughts, Clarissa watches the old woman living in the opposite building, who had already appeared earlier in the novel. But whereas in the previous scene, the old woman was seemingly not aware of her being watched (138-139), Clarissa is now surprised to see that the old woman is staring at her (203). As critics have pointed out, this old woman partly works as Clarissa's double. At the same time, this old woman also emerges, following Nancy, as a singularity that exposes Clarissa to the outside of the self.

The enigmatic connection between Clarissa and the old woman partly resembles the strange affinity that Clarissa suddenly feels with Septimus, a man she does not even know—"She felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself" (204) —, and in which we see the emergence of community in Nancy's terms: "Community is revealed in the death of others" (1991: 15). This interconnection in terms of finitude and exposure between Clarissa and Septimus had been anticipated earlier in the novel, when Clarissa feels that "[s]he sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day" (8-9). Clarissa perceives herself as fully exposed to a dangerous exteriority identified with the sea. This same sea, we assume, is the one that turns Septimus into "a drowned sailor" (102), overwhelmed by a feeling of vulnerability and loss that ultimately leads him to disintegration and death.

Through Septimus's death, then, Clarissa comes to fully confront the "mortal truth" (Nancy, 1991: 15) that had been haunting her throughout the whole novel: "A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death" (Woolf, 1992: 202) If there is community—"an embrace"—in death, it is

a “closeness” that draws apart and entails solitude. It is, hence, a community without fusion, communion or recognition. The communication this community of death entails differs from conventional communication, the one longed for by Septimus earlier in the novel: “Communication is health; communication is happiness. Communication, he muttered” (102). This healthy and happy communication arguably corresponds to the successful intersubjective communication of the traditional community, based on a shared language aligned with the community’s institutions and structures (Miller, 2005: 88). This common language allows us to tell our neighbours what we are thinking and feeling (Miller, 2005: 88), which is precisely what Septimus is unable to do—as his muttering, unfinished statement shows—and which determines his definite exclusion from the community. This healthy and happy communication tends to suppress the experience of death as non-imminence and exposure, and hence Clarissa’s characterization of it above as just “lies” and “chatter.” The communication derived from death can only be “an attempt to communicate.” It is communication, as described by Nancy: “interrupted,” “unavowable” (Nancy, 1991: 62).

As regards the argument I have been developing, concerned with the response to death and loss in the post-war British context depicted in the novel, Clarissa’s response to Septimus’s death radically differs from the official one represented by Holmes and Bradshaw and in general from the stoic, ritualistic way in which the English nation dealt the devastation and trauma caused by the First World War. Holmes and Bradshaw will not let themselves be affected by Septimus’s suffering; their response is one of cold, non-empathetic detachment. Clarissa’s reaction, on the contrary, very much resembles the effect of loss and grief as described by Butler: “Something takes hold of you: where does it come from? What sense does it make? What claims us at such moments, such that we are not masters of ourselves? To what are we tied? And by what are we seized?” (2004: 21). For Butler, community precisely arises out of this experience of dispossession, which manifests itself “in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control. ... the very ‘I’ is called into question by its relation to the Other” (23).

Clarissa’s experience of coming to terms with her own mortality through Septimus’s death evokes a previous passage in the novel, in which Peter had seen the ambulance carrying away Septimus’s dead body. Peter pays attention to how every cart or carriage moves away to let the ambulance pass: “Perhaps it was morbid; or was it not touching rather, the respect which they showed this ambulance with its victim inside – busy men hurrying home yet instantly bethinking them as it passed of some wife; or presumably how easily it might have been them there, stretched on a shelf with a doctor and a nurse” (Woolf, 1992: 165-166). The response to death depicted in the passage does not work according to a logic of ritualistic repression or sublimation: as people going home feel “how easily it might have been them,” they—just like Clarissa—recognize, through the other’s death, their own death. This passage takes us back to the first section of this essay, in which we saw Londoners remembering and paying honor to

the dead; the dead, however, perceived as standing for an alien, foreign experience. At the end of the novel, a different experience of death opens up a different experience of community: one in which the other's death seizes us and takes us beyond ourselves; a community in which "[w]e're undone by each other" (Butler, 2004: 23).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

As I have tried to show, Nancy's ideas on community, together with Blanchot's and Butler's, strongly resonate with Woolf's exploration of the ways in which our sense of being in the world and exposure to others may resist or depart from the fusional logic and immanence demanded by forms of affiliation such as marriage or the nation. As put by Cuddy-Keane, Woolf's fiction enacts a rejection of community as identified with "the kind of unity that she would deem unacceptable: the homogeneous identities inscribed by nationalism, religion, ethnicity, class" (2019: 94). Recent work by different critics has focused on Woolf's search for forms of community or being-with that do not entail assimilation, uniformity or homogeneity, but which are open to diversity, separateness or otherness. This essay has attempted to contribute to this still-open debate on community in Woolf by proving the essential role played by death as the force exposing Woolf's characters to the outside and to others; Woolf's fiction thus illuminates and enhances our understanding of Nancy's community of death, just as these thinker's thoughts on being-with help us come to terms with Woolf's articulation of perplexing forms of community.

Reading *Mrs Dalloway* through Nancy's lens also allows us to better understand what what can be seen as this novel's powerful critique of the immanent community, manifested in its preoccupation with the "destructive effects" of "aggressive nationalisms" (93) and with the emotional repression and "proportion" espoused by the governing classes in early twentieth-century England. Septimus is the main victim of this communitarian logic, being depicted in the novel as an exposed, vulnerable singularity that will not be tolerated by a stoic community that has sublated and repressed the death and loss caused by the First World War. In Clarissa's different reaction to death and finitude, one that entails an actual exposure to it, both as experienced in herself and in others, Woolf suggests an alternative way in which English society may face the meaninglessness of war and death: by placing loss, and not the repression of it, at the center of common experience; by accepting, borrowing Butler's words, that "[l]oss has made a tenuous 'we' of us all" (2004: 20).

"[A]ntisocial" (Blanchot, 1988: 33) relationships or "[o]dd affinities" (Woolf, 1992: 167) in Woolf illustrate Whitworth's point about her search for "forms of associated life other than the family" (2005: 144). For this critic, Woolf's exploration of forms of "simultaneous separation and connection" (147) is related to early twentieth-century works coming from sociology and psychology dealing with group consciousness and the crowd (144), and in

particular to the French school of writing of unanimism (145). My aim in this essay has been to demonstrate the great affinities between Nancy's concept of a community of singular and finite beings and the connections without essence or unity we find in Woolf's fiction, with mortality often working as the experience that draws characters together and simultaneously apart. This is the case of Clarissa and Septimus, but it is also what characterizes the sense of community experienced by the six friends of *The Waves* around Percival's death or the sudden bonds felt by characters in *Between the Acts*, due to their shared fear of the obliteration that the impending Second World War may bring. As one character puts it in this last novel, what they all share is "[t]he doom of sudden death hanging over us" (Woolf 1998: 103).

## NOTES

<sup>i</sup> See Hussey (1990: 143-144), Beer (1996: 2) or Marcus (2016: 30) for similar assertions about the centrality of community in Woolf.

<sup>ii</sup> We can point to other contributors to this debate on community such as Roberto Esposito, who, in *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community* (2010), analyzes community drawing upon the concepts of 'munus' and 'donum'.

<sup>iii</sup> We may think of a text like James Joyce's "The Dead," in which Gabriel's encounter with finitude and mortality as he learns about his wife's dead former lover leads to the final enigmatic image in which "all the living and the dead" (1992, 225) are joined through the snow. See Villar-Argáiz (2013) for an illuminating reading of this short story in the light of Nancy's and Blanchot's ideas.

<sup>iv</sup> Ho (2015: 59-84) also makes an analysis of Woolf's novel as concerned with a particular moment of British history characterized by growing state intervention. She focuses on two elements working as central manifestations of social reform: the ambulance that drives Septimus's dead body away and the figure of William Bradshaw.

<sup>v</sup> Gordon reads Bradshaw's urge to Septimus to submit himself to a logic of proportion from a similar communitarian perspective: Septimus must reorganize his self in order to be inserted into a well-organized, efficient, national community (2007: 145, 150).

<sup>vi</sup> See Jiménez Heffernan (2018) for a detailed philosophical elaboration of the concept of exposure and for an analysis of the relevance of this concept in modernist fiction, including *Mrs Dalloway*.

<sup>vii</sup> Drawing upon Julia Kristeva, Hinnov analyzes instances of what she calls "choran community" in *The Waves*, *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts*: "encounters between characters, denoting an expansion that also includes the wider interconnective community" (2007: 2; emphasis in the original). Utell (2008) also discusses community in *The Waves*, in relation to mortality and mourning.

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