

# Cyclical Time as the Liminal Space of Suffering and Denial in the Narrative of Septimus Warren Smith

JUDIT ANNA BÁNHÁZI

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*Abstract: Through comparing and contrasting studies from philosophy and mainly contemporary literary theory, this paper aims to outline how a complex temporal paradox is refigured in Septimus Warren Smith's fictive experience. It is the argument of the article that we can detect the presence of a divergent, modern variant of the concept of Eliade's archaic cyclical time in this experience, battling with a predominantly linear temporal paradigm, presented through the fictional society of the novel. I argue that linear time is inherently paradoxical as it simultaneously builds and corrodes the individual and that, in Septimus's experience, cyclical time serves very similar purposes. I observe how Septimus's fictive modern cyclico-linear time compares to Virginia Woolf's "moments of being" and isolate three types of moments pertinent to Septimus's experience: the traumatic profane, the psychotic sacred, and the collective haunted. Through defining these three temporal concepts and underlining their presence in the narrative experience of Septimus, I aim to outline how the concept of cyclical time itself becomes a dark, intangible zone in the novel where transcendence is manifested as a consequence of trauma and denial. Septimus immerses himself in the liminal space of dark cyclical time both in hopes of healing, as he tries to amend his fragmented self, and out of necessity, as the post-war society's denial banishes him into a hellish terrain of endless repetition. Tragically, through the ignorant effort of self-healing through denial, the novel's society abandons its function to reintroduce Septimus to linear temporal experience. Hence, Septimus finally succumbs to be completely consumed by the liminal space of dark cyclical*

*time. He fulfils both society's unspoken wish to disappear and his own need to be free from his trauma—all the while an oblivious fictional world moves on in time.*

The argument of this essay is that, through analysing the fictive temporal experience of Septimus Warren Smith, we can witness a particular re-cyclicalisation of a modern, predominantly linear time. This transition is the result of a complex individual experience of trauma and a completely inappropriate collective response to it. The horrors which finally consume Septimus create a liminal space of the dark, twisted, modern rendition of the temporal paradigm Mircea Eliade called “primitive cyclical time,” as referred to throughout *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, “primitive” meaning “archaic.” I argue that this dark cyclical time loses most of its original transcendent properties, albeit in Septimus’s fictive experience some of these are retained, for the most part this theoretical temporal paradigm introduces a different, modern, self-consuming dark transcendence, resulting from underlying trauma. As such, it is a metaphysical experience inescapably bound together not with religious vocation but with psychological distress.<sup>1</sup> Transcendence in Septimus’s temporal experience does not arise from believing in (or claiming to be a part of) acts of god(s), but witnessing acts of man that are of godly measures, more devastating than what the human mind can ever comprehend.

Since the original act which resonates in Septimus’s fictive experience is one that equally belongs to the domain of fiction and our shared collective reality, the dark cyclical time provokes numerous connotations pertaining to lived temporal experience. Despite the obvious limitations embedded in fictive refiguration, Septimus’s character has been extensively studied in light of the particular pathologies he exhibits. Albeit a fictional character, he keeps facilitating discussions about what is now known as a standalone medical, psychiatric condition, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).<sup>2</sup> “Post-traumatic stress disorders and related stress response

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1 Elyse Graham and Pericles Lewis note in the context of the novel that “[i]n this modern London, the symbolic position of the cross, which represents the spirit’s transcendence over the claims of the flesh, has given way to that commercial instrument and weapon of war, the airplane” (89).

2 “The term post-traumatic stress disorder was first coined and published in 1980 by doctors hoping to legitimise pain and suffering reported by Vietnam veterans” (McDonald 5). “The essential feature of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to one or more traumatic events. ... The clinical presentation of PTSD varies. In some individuals, fear-based re-experiencing, emotional, and behavioural symptoms may predominate. In others, anhedonic or dysphoric mood states and negative cognitions may be most

syndromes are especially interesting because they demand attention to both durable personality structures and major life events that may traumatise the individual” (Horowitz 33). As I will highlight, Septimus’s *present* experiences (related to events taking place in the novel’s present) and *past* recollections (memories he recalls within the narrative) paint numerous plausibilities to study the ramifications of undergoing trauma not only too severe to process individually, but also left completely untreated by the surrounding collective. I propose to isolate and outline three modern distortions of the Eliadean model of the sacred and the profane in Septimus’s experience: the psychotic sacred time, the traumatic profane time, and the collective psychoanalytical (or simply, haunted) time. These are literary analytical propositions based on the refiguration of time, to borrow the expression from Paul Ricoeur, in the novel, and as such, pertain to the domain of the novel. However, if we relate *the experience* of these temporal propositions back to extratextual temporal experiences in a similar psychopathological context, we can continue to underline why reading (or re-reading) Septimus is of such pivotal importance in understanding our present.

COSMOS, EXPERIENCE, AND COSMIC FICTIVE EXPERIENCE

Modern societies, predominantly nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western society, were heavily burdened by the fear of immanence and the loss of transcendence (Ungvári 168). Immanence heavily pertains to the linear temporal experience, as the linear temporal experience includes the notion that our lives have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Clarissa Dalloway’s character, weary of this immanence and described as an atheist in the novel (90), fears precisely this linear end: her being less present each day, her gravitating towards cessation. Archaic societies kept erasing history precisely to avoid this looming sensation of the irreversibility of events (Eliade 74–75). However, through erasing history, these societies constantly kept erasing the idea of individual and personal timelines as well. The linear temporal paradigm, which records history, was fundamental to the birth of the individual: “even in the simplest human societies, ‘historical’ memory, that is, the recollection of events that derive from no archetype, the recollection of personal events (‘sins’ in the majority of cases), is intolerable” (Eliade 75). However, if we juxtapose

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distressing. In some other individuals, arousal and reactive-externalising symptoms are prominent, while in others, dissociative symptoms predominate. Finally, some individuals exhibit combinations of these symptom patterns” (*DSM-5* 274).

the Eliadean idea with the Bergsonian argument that linear time is a uniform, spatialised construct, which cannot properly account for the experience of time in consciousness (Bergson 89–91), we face a fundamental temporal paradox: the same linear temporal paradigm which is necessary to sustain the individual seems to simultaneously corrode it. There would be no individual accounts of time-consciousness without linear time, yet linear time does corrode and corrupt the pure, individual experience of time. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the all-pervasive reliance on a predominantly linear physical time (more precisely, industrial clock-time, a particularly harsh example of what Bergson's *temps* entails) escalated the feeling of immanence.<sup>3</sup> To this society, already weary and fearful of the idea of individual and collective cessation, the Great War was a sledge-hammer blow. Septimus Warren Smith's character presents us with a pivotal opportunity to contemplate the consequences of experiencing such a grand-scale tragic event.

Henri Bergson, one of the most extensively quoted philosophers in connection with Virginia Woolf's *oeuvre*, consciously takes into account the psychological and scientific advancements of his era,<sup>4</sup> along with almost all the divisions of philosophical thought (Dolson 48). However, our scientific and psychological knowledge on time and memory has changed a lot since Bergson, in effect, partly owing to him. My article, as the title also suggests, cannot wholly align itself with the Bergsonian system since my approach includes spatialising a temporal dimension which, at least according to Bergson, does not have any spatial properties and cannot be defined with such measures (Bergson 102). Bergson famously contrasts *temps* (objective, measurable time, which entails a cause-effect order) and *durée* (duration, in which there is none), and debates Albert Einstein's theory of relativity on account of it reducing time to a mere dimension. However, I do contend that contemporary contributions to the topic of cosmic time and the time of the universe, stemming from the Einsteinian thought, do have their place in literary theory and the analysis of Woolf's *oeuvre*. This approach, as I aim to demonstrate, can actually complement the Bergsonian thought as opposed to challenging it.

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3 Mark Hussey, in accordance with Paul Ricoeur and the majority of Woolf analysts, notes that clock time “threatens an individual's sense of continuity, because it takes no account of the lived experience of time” (122).

4 Bergson was acutely aware that new theories of time are originating not from philosophers but mainly from mathematicians to meet the needs of physics (Bigelow 156), even if he also argued that “any ‘geometrical’ or mathematical or logical-conceptual analysis of time is a falsification of time” (Hoy 22), which ultimately underlines his whole theory of *durée*.

The canonised theory concerning the time of the universe is Stephen Hawking’s linear model, nicknamed the Big Bang theory. This theory suggests that there is a potential linear temporal narrative superimposed on our lives, which incorporates the idea of an end, not only for us as individuals, but for planets, galaxies, and even the universe as a whole. This theory suggests that the Universe had a beginning (Big Bang), has a certain life span, and will have an end (Big Crunch), and as such, suggests that there is an innate linearity embedded within the fabric of the universe. I argue that this temporal directionality vitally influences our subjective experience of time and the world, even if at the end of the day, it may not be as unappealable as even Hawking himself once suspected it to be. We need to be aware that later in his life, Hawking began suspecting that there is possibly another cosmological narrative: the universe has finite boundaries, but no beginning and no end, just like a globe, or a *perpetuum mobile*. This idea, also known as the Hartle-Hawking “no boundary” proposal, introduces the concept of the so-called imaginary time:

In real time, the universe has a beginning and an end at singularities that form a boundary to space-time and at which the laws of science break down. But in imaginary time, there are no singularities or boundaries. So maybe what we call imaginary time is really more basic, and what we call real is just an idea that we invent to keep us describe what we think the universe is like. (Hawking 158–159)

Hawking’s opposing theories suggest that unanimous agreements regarding the true nature of time are, at this point, lacking even in science. This fundamentally paradoxical quality of time allows Eliade’s and Bergson’s seemingly contradictory ideas about linear time and the individual to be considered both valid, and it is a paradox that persists in Septimus’s fictive experience. Septimus is stuck with the experience of being completely denied what makes him an individual in time (his war memories, his war trauma, or even his love for Evans). However, this denial is the product of a society which *exists* through consciously tracking history, historical remembrance, and individual remembrance. By escaping to cyclical time, albeit mainly through paranoid re-iterations and symbolic visions, Septimus can keep remembering himself, yet cyclical time fundamentally remains the domain

which constantly erases what makes an individual—a hellscape with no chance of resolution and no end.

The notion of an end can be terrifying, but at least the linear narrative of the universe is still based on a cause–effect order, as referenced by Stephen Hawking and contemporary memory studies (Hawking 164), which fundamentally defines every single act in the universe,<sup>5</sup> along with how we are able to perceive, conceive of, and experience life as human beings. Even if the existence of an underlying cause–effect order does not entail any sort of elusive meaning, there is still a somewhat reassuring sense of logic in it (something happens *because* of something else). However, when it comes to a global act of destruction, such as the Great War, we can only intellectually trace a cause–effect order between events, or find a certain crude logic behind the acts committed. There is hardly anything that *feels* logical in the *experience* of mass murder and mass destruction. It is a rupture in both individual and collective experience and remembrance.

#### THE “SACRED” AND THE “PROFANE” VERSUS “MOMENTS OF BEING”

In Eliade’s reading, the linear temporal paradigm became increasingly dominant in the composition of “modern” societies,<sup>6</sup> which abandoned the previously reigning “primitive” cyclical temporal paradigm. The primitive cyclical time was divided between moments taking place in either the sacred or the profane time (35). Sacred time denotes the liminal terrain of meaningful, transcendental experience, while profane time is the void of meaningless, forgettable acts. As already mentioned, Eliade’s argument underlines that the primitive cyclical temporal scheme did not allow for a sense of individuality to be conceived in archaic thought since these societies were not recording history. Eliade notes that, for societies “for whom time is recorded only biologically,” time recorded as history reveals “its corrosive action being able to exert itself upon consciousness by revealing the irreversibility of events”

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5 Hawking argues that (linear) time has an “arrow,” emphasising its direction, moving as it does from the past to the future, from birth to death. To explain the possible reason as to why time’s arrow points in the direction it does, he names three factors or three supposed types of arrow: the psychological arrow (the direction in which we actually perceive it to pass: we remember the past and anticipate the future, but not the other way round), the thermodynamic arrow (the direction in which entropy or disorder increases), and the cosmological arrow (the direction of time in which the universe is expanding and not contracting) (Hawking 164).

6 In Eliade’s terminology, modern refers to anything existing during or after the conception of the Bible.

(74–75). For suffering to remain tolerable, archaic societies constantly gave it a magico-religious meaning: “suffering proceeds from the magical action of an enemy, from breaking a taboo, from entering a baneful zone, from the anger of a god, or when all other hypotheses have proven insufficient from the will or the wrath of the Supreme Being. The primitive—and not the primitive alone, as we shall see in a moment—cannot conceive of an unprovoked suffering” (97). Septimus’s tragedy consists of the idea that in a linearly temporal modern society, burdened by immanence, suffering becomes devoid of meaning: “And in our day, when historical pressure no longer allows any escape, how can man tolerate the catastrophes and horrors of history—from collective deportations and massacres to atomic bombings—if beyond them he can glimpse no sign, no transhistorical meaning; if they are only the blind play of economic, social, or political forces?” (Eliade 151).

Death was not generally considered to be an act of suffering in primitive cyclical time, since in cyclical time, everything keeps renewing itself and returning, even life. In cyclicity, life has no real end, and the “death of the individual and the death of humanity are alike necessary for their regeneration” (Eliade 88). However, a linear temporal understanding entails a definite end point to life, both individual and cosmological. In the novel, both Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith utilise fictive “moments of being” to combat the part of this end paradigm which troubles them: for Septimus, it is the almost cosmic, apocalyptic end envisioned through war trauma; for Clarissa, it is the individual end—aging, fading from existence and from being *present*.

I keep using the expression “moments of being” to refer back to the term coined by Virginia Woolf. In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf notes that moments of being in her own lived experience are akin to a sense of “shock” (*Moments of Being* 72) or a “sledge-hammer force of ... blow” (72). She recalls that as a child, she feared that moments of being would be “random manifestations of some malevolent force” (Schulkind 17) but later came to realise that a moment of being is “a token of some real thing behind appearances” (Woolf, *Moments of Being* 72). Moments of being carve themselves out from a mass of forgettable moments, resulting in a mystical, individual memory. First comes the shock, then the moment gains meaning retrospectively. Woolf’s experience, even if the end result is similar (cf. Eliade) unfolds partially by opposing the primitive sacred circularity. Sacred moments in primitive societies consisted of rituals such as praying, hunting, eating, mating, or any sort of action through which the individual can project itself into a mythical time,

and unite with the universe and others around them (Eliade 35). Eliade claims that “[a]rchaic consciousness accords no importance to personal memories” at all (47). Sacred moments only served to dissolve one’s identity into the collective haze. They do not carve out individualism, rather, they carve out a hive mind where a sense of collective consciousness takes shape, as in a beehive or a formicary.

As opposed to the archaic idea, Woolf’s moments of being serve to anchor the individual in the self-assurance of individual experience, albeit in connection with the vast and often mystical universe. I use the word “connection” since words such as “fusion” or “unity” would not suffice to clarify the experience in question, as Woolf contended that “transcendent unity is unattainable” (Chen and Lai 230). Hence, she “focuses on consciousness in a search for individual transcendence” (230). In Woolf’s sacred time, it is not the selfless individuals who carve out a hive mind, but the self is the hive mind, composed of a myriad of fragments. In Ruth Porritt’s words, “the self is actually a plural phenomenon which uses multiple discourses or ‘voices’ to constitute meaning” (qtd. in Chen and Lai 231). Moments of being reinforce a sense of self all the while acknowledging its mystical dissolution. It is a temporal experience imbued with contradiction. However, this contradiction is not alien to temporal understanding at all. In fact, Woolf’s simultaneous need to reinforce a sense of self in time all the while constantly losing it is inherently cyclico-linear, echoing an experience akin to Hawking’s cosmological uncertainty.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa Dalloway deliberately wants to keep integrating her prominent past moments of being into her present, to keep feeling alive, to carry that exuberant feeling of livelihood over into a present where she has to deal with more and more anxieties over feeling less present. Clarissa needs to keep feeding on the past to create a certain emotional coherence in her life, to be able to claim a coherent knowledge of herself. In a way, Septimus, whom we can also view as a dark doppelgänger to Clarissa Dalloway,<sup>7</sup> tries to achieve similar goals by letting his vile past protrude from the under the fabric of his present. Driven by the unverbalisable urge of the trauma survivor, he is trying to regain a continuous self-narrative by attempting to integrate the traumatic past into the present. In lived experience, his process is mirrored when trauma survivors are trying to re-integrate episodic memories (in Bertrand Russell’s words, “[t]his happened,” qtd. in Bermúdez 188) into autobiographical memories (“This happened to me in my past”). Bermúdez argues that

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7 Cf. “A more clinical way of putting it is this: she recognises that he is the id to her ego. In that sense I take him as her double and see them ‘merge’ at the end” (Page 123).

an “autobiographical time frame is a linearly ordered sequence of events in the life of a person. This is in contrast to the cyclical perspective on time” (188). I believe it can be deduced from his argument that, in lived experience, autobiographical memories of any given event strengthen the individual’s ability to partake in and conform to linear time, whilst abstaining from or being denied these memories, as it is illustrated equally by the fictive case of Septimus, potentially weakens these ties.

CYCLICAL TIME AS THE LIMINAL SPACE OF SUFFERING

Septimus is denied his memories, and through his memories, his experiences as well, by almost every single character he comes to interact with in the novel. As often mirrored in our lived reality, expressing his specific trauma (“government-inflicted violence” and war) is taboo, “secret, forbidden, or unacceptable” (McFarlane and van der Kolk 25). In the novel, this denial is directly mirrored in, for instance, the attitude of the medical professionals treating Septimus: Dr. Bradshaw argues that Septimus is not mad, he just lost his sense of proportion (Woolf, *Collected Novels* 104) and “must be taught to rest” (141). Holmes proclaims with his “forty years’ experience behind him” that as opposed to lying in bed depressed, Septimus should just go outside and start to “do something” (100). Yet, it is not just the doctors who are in denial: the people in London live their fictive lives busy with adoring airplanes spelling out letters, pondering mysterious authority figures in cars, or buying flowers, almost as if the war had never happened.<sup>8</sup> But Woolf’s fictional universe is not a Uchronia—the Great War did happen just as it did in our reality. Hence, the efforts of Bradshaw, Holmes, and every other character in Septimus’s plotline, including on a broader level, the whole fictional society, simply push war trauma into what Eliade denotes as “profane time” in the cyclical temporal scheme.

I contend that this temporal domain is profane precisely in the original Eliadean, primitive cyclical sense. Through a collective denial that completely dissolves individual narratives, war becomes an act completely forgettable, hence meaningless and not worth being noted. It is history, which needs to be deleted, erased because it only reveals, to quote Eliade once again, time’s “corrosive action being able to exert itself upon consciousness by revealing the irreversibility of events” (74–75). This

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8 There are resonances between society and the memory of war pronounced both in case of the car and the airplane; yet, these are so feeble when contrasted with Septimus’s reaction that, if anything, they just underline the collective denial.

urge is even more potent since society becomes a mere spectator of this monstrous history unfolding in front of it (Levenback 75) and remains unwilling to submerge in the experience of those who were part of the destructive event. War is no longer a cosmic act for this society, which is in stark contrast with the individual war survivor, Septimus Warren Smith's experience. Septimus's experience, as I argue, treats war as an original primitive sacred act, although not by the virtue of exalted archaic stance, but due to the burden imposed by trauma.<sup>9</sup> While the predominantly linearly temporal society, shocked by what its own linearity entails (apocalyptic measures of cessation)<sup>10</sup> paradoxically sinks back to archaic cyclicity for reassurance, this ignorant self-healing drive also pushes Septimus further into cyclical time. Albeit for him, this domain can only reveal hell, as it constitutes a collective denial of his individual remembrance. Denying remembrance equals to denying the formation (or in his case, reconstruction) of a coherent sense of self in time.

Through Bradshaw and Holmes's actions and words, the novel illustrates how denying Septimus the source of his suffering (ironically, by the very professionals tasked with helping him heal) escalates his confusion and feelings of isolation.<sup>11</sup> In the context of the novel, Karen DeMeester outlines that the societal paradigm which destroys Septimus is "a culturally prescribed process of post-war reintegration that silences and marginalises war veterans" (649). Kristin Czarnecki emphasises that Western societies are particularly prone to isolating unfit members, to pretend that they do not exist by incarcerating and setting these individuals apart (53). This idea is directly mirrored in Woolf's narrative: Septimus is not understood and no attempts are made to understand him; hence, he becomes isolated. As a result, both him and his partner Rezia feel a damning sense of loneliness.

Quoting Todd, Czarnecki argues that combat trauma is "inscribed on [the] mind, emotions, and the body" (55). In Woolf's fictional universe, the trauma, inscribed on the mind and emotions of Septimus, keeps resurfacing over and over again. On the one hand, it is reiterated through bizarre, incoherent-seeming musings and exclamations, often repeated over and over (e.g. about "the truth" which only

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9 Graham and Lewis emphasise that Septimus "makes plans to found a new religion" (91) which underlines my comparison: as opposed to Clarissa, who looks for individual transcendence, Septimus turns his suffering into a sacral quest, a basis of an exchange between man and God. From Clarissa's world, God, as pertaining to religion, is missing.

10 Antoine Compagnon defines two possible outcomes of the linear model: utopia or apocalypse (5).

11 Rezia recalls that Bradshaw even physically attempts to isolate Septimus from her: "Bradshaw said they must be separated" (*Collected Novels* 141).

Septimus is aware of [82, 98–99, 136], being consumed by flames [43, 90, 136], the brutality of human nature [105, 101, 136], or the existence of universal love [82, 142]). The recurrence of these ideas can be understood in the context of his trauma. However, the mode of expression spikes fear in the heart of Rezia, who feels that her husband is slipping into madness. Indeed, an understandable fear: as DeMeester quotes John Johnson, “a language wrenched free of its social functions and hence no longer obsequiously obedient to ‘discourse’ turns out to be intimately close to madness” (652). Septimus’s ideas sound increasingly more senseless as his intent to express his trauma continues to be met with external resistance in the novel. Yet, in the context of my analysis, it can be argued that what the society of the novel considers insane is simply a mode of expression devoid of its canonised functions in causal social discourse, pertinent to societies with a predominantly linear temporal experience.<sup>12</sup>

One of the most important aspects of primitive cyclical time is the act of repetition. An act becomes a part of sacred time through repeating its mythical original (Eliade 5, 22). The act of repetition reinforces the temporal experience of cyclicity. Cyclicity constantly renews and erases time and through this process, individuality is also constantly erased. The fictional society of *Mrs Dalloway*, whilst suppressing the efforts to integrate war trauma into individual and collective remembrance, banishes Septimus into a vicious temporal circle, as he needs to keep reliving his trauma without any hope of resolution or even acknowledgement in the view.<sup>13</sup> Septimus is denied any chance to re-construct his coherent self-narrative as he is stuck in a loop and that profoundly affects his ability to communicate as well. Societal repudiation escalates the need for verbal and mental repetition, without order or causality.

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12 Levenback argues that “Septimus understands that language merely objectifies relation” (77), which can underline the idea of “cyclical communication,” since the objectification of relation is not alien to linear temporal understanding as a whole (e.g. through clocktime).

13 Real-life war veterans likewise need to act upon their urge to remember, however unpleasant their memories are, because they are trying to re-construct a coherent, linear narrative of their lives and integrate the trauma into lived experience, just as Septimus does in his fictive experience. The trauma itself is so shocking in both cases that it completely distorts the individual’s coherent, linear self-narrative (Horowitz 24). We can look at the traumatic distortion Horowitz talks about as a sort of temporal wedge in the fabric of the individual’s own personal timeline. It makes it impossible for both the fictional character Septimus and real-life soldiers with PTSD to move on with life as ordinary humans move from day to day, reassured in the dynamism of time and the constant fluctuation between past, present, and future.

This manic repetition is the only form of expression available to a mind banished into circularity, which yields nothing more than futile repetition without resolution. Septimus, in a dark and twisted way, acts just as Eliade's primitive men did: via the act of repetition, he keeps reinstating the original, *sacred* event that stands above and beyond linear time. The novel's modern, primarily linear society paradoxically contributes to this "de-linearisation" by attempting to erase history, as their efforts turn shell-shock and war trauma into a cyclical enigma, which cannot be resolved and healed because its existence is simply not acknowledged.<sup>14</sup> Yet, Septimus is so deeply driven by the dire need not to forget the real horrors that he goes further than just repeating the original "sacred" act. Septimus also calls forth an apparition belonging to sacred time: the ghost of his dead comrade, Evans. Evans is the mythical reassurance, provoked by Septimus's disintegrating mind (sinking into post-traumatic psychosis through societal denial on repeat) that his experiences and his trauma are real, that the horrors did happen.<sup>15</sup> The above-mentioned repetitive proclamations and revelations of Septimus, along with Evans's spectre, originate from what can be called "psychotic sacred time." Psychotic sacred time

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14 Graham and Lewis reflect on how this essentially turns the very dire reality of death at war into a sort of mystical event too: "The deaths of soldiers in the war were real deaths, on behalf of the nation. The problem that Woolf singles out—a practice the novel teaches us throughout to view sceptically, from the early scene where the Bond Street crowds wax sentimental over thoughts of 'the dead; of the flag; of Empire'—is turning these real deaths into a myth" (106). As Levenback remarks, Septimus is only a hero as long as he is at war: once he returns, society turns away from him, because "the only real heroes were the dead" (75).

15 This allows us to observe the fictive "pre-refiguration" of another psychiatric condition which was unaccounted for at the time of the novel's conception, now known as Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder (*DSM-5* 790). This disorder is usually comorbid with PTSD. "Persistent complex bereavement disorder is diagnosed only if at least 12 months (6 months in children) have elapsed since the death of someone with whom the bereaved had a close relationship (Criterion A). This time frame discriminates normal grief from persistent grief. The condition typically involves a persistent yearning/longing for the deceased (Criterion B1), which may be associated with intense sorrow and frequent crying (Criterion B2) or preoccupation with the deceased (Criterion B3). The individual may also be preoccupied with the manner in which the person died (Criterion B4)" (*DSM-5* 790). PCBD can also cause social disruptions for the individual such as "[a] desire to die in order to be with the deceased. Difficulty trusting other individuals since the death. Feeling alone or detached from other individuals since the death. Feeling that life is meaningless or empty without the deceased, or the belief that one cannot function without the deceased. Confusion about one's role in life, or a diminished sense of one's identity (e.g. feeling that a part of oneself died with the deceased). Difficulty or reluctance to pursue interests since the loss or to plan for the future (e.g. friendships, activities)" (*DSM-5* 790).

is the liminal space where the dark “meaning” unfolds after a moment of shock. In the case of Septimus, this terrain becomes a self-consuming tragic reminder of trauma, haunting itself in endless repetition of erasure and regeneration.

The moment that I call “traumatic profane” can be almost directly correlated with what psychology calls a post-traumatic stress trigger in lived experience:<sup>16</sup> however, my objective is to observe how traumatic profane moments manifest in the particular context of Septimus’s narrative and what the fictional refiguration of a PTSD trigger signifies in this context. The first time we switch to Septimus’s point of view is right after Clarissa and everyone in that particular spot and moment in London are startled by a backfiring car because for the first instance, it sounds as if someone had fired a gun. I call this a traumatic profane moment for Septimus. It is an everyday, otherwise forgettable instance, which loses its profanity for the traumatised mind. The refigured moment here carries the same significance as its counterpart in lived experience. As Giotakos describes it, “a situation that is perceived as ‘dangerous,’ such as a person that resembles an offender or a startling sound in the middle of the night, activates the hypersensitive amygdala to initiate an alarm reaction and a normal stress response accompanied by a feeling of fear” (163). It immediately shifts Septimus out of the linear flow of time and opens the gateway for partaking in psychotic sacred time.

Yet, no matter how similar the meaning of the moment is to its double in lived experience, it is the generative virtue of fiction which allows us to define this moment as “traumatic profane.” The trauma *and* the profanity can unfold side by side as Woolf’s narrative describes not only Septimus’s experience, but a variety of visceral reactions focalised through different observers of the event side by side. This approach conveys a sense of simultaneity, an experience both individual and collective. It subtly contrasts the difference in the perception of the war survivor Septimus, and everyone else in the novel, only indirectly affected by the war. Woolf’s treatment allows for a smooth transition between the sound of the car, the collective startledness, and the collective and individual echoes of the moment

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16 “Intense psychological distress ... or physiological reactivity ... often occurs when the individual is exposed to triggering events that resemble or symbolise an aspect of the traumatic event (e.g. windy days after a hurricane; seeing someone who resembles one’s perpetrator). The triggering cue could be a physical sensation (e.g. dizziness for survivors of head trauma; rapid heartbeat for a previously traumatised child), particularly for individuals with highly somatic presentations” (*DSM-5* 275).

in the thoughts and actions of Clarissa, the passers-by, and Septimus. For the latter, fear provokes a sacred epiphany.

Septimus shifts into the psychotic sacred time right after experiencing the traumatic profane moment. In his epiphany, witnessing the accumulating traffic and everyone suddenly being busy with the car and the mysterious authority figure in it, orders the universe to perform a sort of *danse macabre* towards the centre of hell:

Traffic accumulated. And there the motor car stood, with drawn blinds, and upon them a curious pattern like a tree, Septimus thought, and this gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him. The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames. (43)

This psychotic sacred moment can be interpreted as a doomsday epiphany, a vision of apocalypse. Except it is not simply a vision of the future: it is equally a haunting reminder of the past, a backwards-looking epiphany, which is projected on the present reality as a possible future scenario. It is a moment which is inherently devoid of linear causality, it is both simultaneous and repetitive, hence, cyclical. This doomsday epiphany of Septimus's is the negative counterpart of Clarissa's joyous union with a cyclical scheme which overrules the profanity of linearity:

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. (39)

Regardless of the anxieties which plague Clarissa, I argue that the act of her partaking in cyclical time is ultimately a positive experience. It is the consequence of both the joy of life, and the fear and anxieties of living. Clarissa, aware of the threat of the individual's end, combats her fears by ultimately contemplating the possibility of connecting with a larger metaphysical reality after but also prior to death. Mark Hussey notes that the whole day the novel covers "is circumscribed by an aura of mystery that promises a revelation that will console Clarissa (in particular) in her perception of the 'emptiness of the heart of life.' The 'inner meaning' only *almost* expressed, but it is enough to sustain Clarissa's faith in life and renew her efforts to find a solid purpose of it" (Hussey 100).

Clarissa's narrative allows us to gain insight into the spatio-temporal unison that can be sustained along the fringes of existential threat between the individual and society, life and death, being and non-being. Septimus's narrative emphasises alienation, the rifts between the war survivor and the society surrounding him. However, there are moments when this society experiences residuals of Septimus's trauma on a profound, emotional level: I call these moments "the collective psychoanalytical" or "the haunted." As previously argued, the society of the novel turns the experience of war into a cyclical enigma, an inexpressible secret. This, in my reading, also means that in this fictional universe, any and every recognition of war horrors can only happen in collective, preconscious, individually inexpressible moments. Here, fiction's virtue lies in being able to describe these moments, while retaining the idea that the moment is not individually verbalisable:

The car had gone, but it had left a slight ripple which flowed through glove shops and hat shops and tailors' shops on both sides of Bond Street. For ... something had happened. Something so trifling in single instances that no mathematical instrument, though capable of transmitting shocks in China, could register the vibration; yet in its fullness rather formidable and in its common appeal emotional; for in all the hat shops and tailors' shops strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of Empire. In a public house in a back street a Colonial insulted the House of Windsor which led to words, broken beer glasses, and a general shindy, which echoed strangely across the way in the ears of girls buying white underlinen threaded

with pure white ribbon for their weddings. For the surface agitation of the passing car as it sunk grazed something very profound. (45–46)

“The haunted” are unverbalisable, collective “moments of being” in fictive experience, bursts of fear, angst or grief from that void, that black hole, into which society banished its own war trauma. These moments resonate and gain individual meaning and expression retrospectively through the individual characters experiencing them. However, the original moment of the experience is a collective, quasi-sacred ritual, which is, in itself, not interpretable. Hence, moments of “the haunted” in the novel are expressed through an omniscient narrator as opposed to focalised characters. The resonance of the haunted moment and the meaning it acquires through individual characters can be focalised, but not the original moment itself.

#### THE RETURN OF THE ARCHAIC “SACRED”

Woolf’s novel occasionally describes “sacred” moments which can feel akin to Eliade’s original idea of primitive sacred time. Such is the moment of the airplane appearing above the sky. When the plane starts spelling out the letters, through multiple focal characters, we can grasp a sense of confusion provoked by the indecipherability of the moment through the actual indecipherability of the letters. Different characters read different things into the puffs of smoke dissolving in the sky. The indecipherability signals that this, again, is a shared, collective moment which is non-verbalisable for individual characters. The moment is outside of the linear universe and ordinary means (such as causal verbalisation) which can describe ordinary linear reality. However, I do not consider this moment as haunted. It could, in theory, be argued that the appearance of the airplane reminds people of the war trauma in a similar way as the backfiring car does, but the novel does not spend too much time underlining this. It can also be argued that—for at least Septimus, who directly experienced the war—this moment is necessarily traumatic, even if on the surface, the joy of connecting with others overshadows the moment’s innate reminder of the horrors of war. This could explain why, during the experience, he technically begins drifting into what can be called a “psychotic state” even if he initially articulates a sense of joy. However, I contend that in this precise instance in the novel, the moment is first described as a shared experience of awe and mystery, almost transcendental. Hence, it can be defined as reminiscent

of original sacred moments. Septimus rejoices in the experience with the crowd. Yet this much needed connection remains stuck in an intuitive, preverbal state: Septimus's joy of unity immediately takes manic undertones, reminding us that he is not free from the clutches of the dark cyclicity. For him, cyclical time offers no real mystical unison with others, no healing and no resolution. His joy over partaking in such a magnificent moment is accompanied by delusion and ideas of a sort of paranoid faux-causality in a dire attempt to generate logic and meaning while being stuck with the experience of senselessness.

#### CONCLUSION

Septimus, like any war survivor, keeps shifting between the dire need to find meaning and the harrowing experience of there being none. His fictive experience outlines how experiencing war trauma can erase the convictions of linear logic, cause and effect, action and consequence from the mind, no matter how deeply these convictions may be engraved in us.<sup>17</sup> "In the post-war world, Septimus has learned that there is no relation and no direct communication" (Levenback 78). The linear patterns are further corroded by the novel's society, which turns cyclical time into a no man's land to dump all memories and reminders of the Great War into. Septimus's fictive temporal experience echoes in a liminal space which is like a dark twin zone of the archaic, mystical cyclical thought. This liminal zone consists of modern variants of the Eliadean concept of primitive cyclical time: the psychotic sacred, the traumatic profane, and collective haunted moments.

Clarissa's journey demonstrates that, albeit it is terrifying, it is possible to consolidate modern linear time with archaic circularity as her arc peaks at the party she had been planning all along.<sup>18</sup> Septimus channels the rifts, the irreconcilability, the tragedy of the isolation and invisibility of the archaic cyclical tenets in a modern, linear society. This society, plagued by immanence, strips cyclical time from its mythical transcendence and grants it a different, dark transcendence

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17 By now, humanity (or at least a part of it) is aware of the idea that time is multi-faceted and warped. Woolf's society only began to understand it. Yet, I contend that, on the grand scale of everyday life, our convictions of time are still predominantly linear.

18 A celebration is a sacred act even in the original Eliadean sense but it equally qualifies as such in Woolf's modern circular linearity: "To find her 'self' in such a universal soul, Clarissa would try to remove the boundaries by bringing people together. Her party allows people to temporarily forget about their disjointed selves" (Chen and Lai 242).

through the controversial treatment of suffering. If Evans is the ghost haunting Septimus then Septimus is the ghost which haunts a society in denial. Septimus is stuck between what he knows (the extent of his suffering) and what he is being told (the denial of it): “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, *Collected Novels* 169). The only solace offered to Septimus is that in his death, he consolidates the maddening paradox: he both fulfils society’s unspoken wish to disappear and his own need to put an end to his suffering. This is the only actual profound re-alignment he can make with the linear temporal paradigm, as Hussey notes that “however much the moment is expanded, the past recreated, or a sense of being outside time achieved, the actual fact of death circumscribes all effort” (125). At least for the linearly aligned fictional society, Septimus is gone. Life, Clarissa’s party goes on. Septimus’s tragic fate only keeps echoing in the liminal space, like some cyclical pre-utterance, which never turns into an actual act of communication between the two characters, let alone Septimus and the novel’s society.<sup>19</sup>

Using an interdisciplinary lens to observe the mechanisms and effects of these so-called dark cyclical moments allows us to discuss more than simply a fictional character’s experience. Through defining the fictional liminal space of the dark cyclical time, observing both the individual and collective experiences and attitudes which sustain it in the novel, we can perhaps one day learn to avoid sustaining its counterpart in our lived, shared experience. Our understanding of Septimus’s tragedy can help avoid the all-consuming ostracism of real-life war survivors into the dark cyclical time. The novel shows us that we need to listen, no matter how terrifying the reckoning with their experience is, and continuing to do so is more timely than ever. Further than provoking the ethical dimension, interdisciplinarity can also highlight how and why *Mrs Dalloway* can and should be the continuous subject of research, as our understanding and knowledge on the topics it tackles keeps evolving not only in the literary, but also in the philosophical and scientific contexts. The true virtue of Woolf’s narrative is that just a year short of its 100th anniversary, it continues to enter into exchange with us. It sustains a boundlessly flourishing dialogue between its poetic refiguration of experience and our own lived experience of time, memory, and trauma. Be it through the analytic lens of Henri Bergson or Mircea

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19 Cf. “This communication argues for an abstract ‘reality’ in which the soul can find rest and continue to exist, but not in the mode of actual life, and not within the scope of language” (Hussey 125).

Eliade, perhaps *Mrs Dalloway* will never exhaust the possibilities of discussion and interpretation—like a luminous halo, forever circulating in time.

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## JUDIT ANNA BÁNHÁZI

### CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Judit Bánházi is a PhD candidate and screenwriter based in Budapest, Berlin, and Paris. She is completing her doctoral studies at ELTE Eötvös Loránd University's Modern English and American Literature and Culture Doctoral Programme. She is researching non-linear temporal experiences mainly in nineteenth- and twentieth-century British and American fiction; her dissertation is about non-linear temporal experience, trauma, and memory in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*.