Groundings Undergraduate Academic Journal

University of Glasgow | Glasgow University Union

Life Breaks In: Entropic Modernism in *Mrs Dalloway & The Secret Agent*

Author(s): Josie Rogers

Source: Groundings Undergraduate, November 2017, Vol. 10, pp. 120-130

Published by: Glasgow University Dialectic Society, University of Glasgow

ISSNs: 1754-7474 (Print) | 1755-2702 (Online)

Life Breaks In: Entropic Modernism in *Mrs Dalloway* & *The Secret Agent*

Josie Rogers

This essay takes as its framework the concept of entropy, a thermodynamic principle which describes the degree of disorder in a system. As entropy is always increasing, so is the intensity of destruction, decay and chaos in the systems of the modernist text. The essay uncovers the entropic compulsions implicit in Joseph Conrad's The Secret Agent, and Virginia Woolf's high-modernist work Mrs Dalloway, using theory and criticism from Georg Simmel to J. Hillis Miller. Some of the traditional aesthetic features of literary modernism – epistemological crises, temporal distortion, and the trauma of industrial modernity – are considered in terms of the advancing thermodynamic theory of the fin-de-siècle. Such theoretical scientific innovation is shown to permeate individual and collective consciousness in the literature of the period. The essay posits the presence of an entropic modernist textuality; vibrations beneath the surface which denote a gradual decline into total disorder.

The second law of thermodynamics states that the entropy of the universe is always increasing, entropy being a measure of the degree of disorder of particles in an isolated system. The theory explains why we get older but never younger, and why a glass of spilt milk will never un-spill: entropy is a direct function of time, and time does not move backwards. Within a narrative, however, and especially a modernist narrative, time can move in ways which defy the laws of physics. The narratives of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* both concern shifting temporalities and anxieties of death, destruction, and decay. The textual malleability of time goes some way to disorganise and delay the unremitting forward-thrust of entropy in narratives which are terrorised by both past trauma, and trauma yet to come. Formalised in 1874, the theory of entropy can also be used as a lens through which to explore modernist tropes such as the human consciousness, the metropolis, and the ramifications of modernity and industrialisation. To fully investigate, this essay will consider three enclosed entropic systems: the individual; the city or a wider collective of individuals; and the text itself.

Both texts explicitly and implicitly differentiate real 'objective' time from biological time. Theoretical biologists Longo and Montévil assert that humans are not programmed to adhere to a model of time embodied by a steadily ticking clock: 'biological rhythms [do] not seem to have an adequate counterpart in mathematical formalization of physical clocks, which are based on frequencies along the usual, possibly oriented, time'.[1] They posit that human life is 'paced' by certain rhythms – circadian and metabolic – but that 'the addition of a new (compactified) dimension for biological time is justified by the peculiar dimensional status of internal biological rhythms'.[2] The words 'pace' and 'dimension' suggest a pattern of movement which involves a degree of fluidity, but which also occupies a bounded space, namely, the human body. The body often works in syncopation with objectively demarcated time. To further complicate the matter, human perception of time can be distorted from both chronological and biological time. The nature of narrative reflects this: novels do not generally follow days minute by minute, but are regulated by a communication between chronological time and time as it is perceived by the characters and the narrative consciousness. The bells of Big Ben punctuate the text of *Mrs Dalloway,* but the hours delineated by its ringing do not correspond to equal segments of time in the minds of the characters. In *The Secret Agent*, Conrad affords multiple paragraphs of text to Winnie's murder of Mr Verloc, so that the actual reading time of the passage exceeds the time of the action itself. At this point Winnie notices that her perception of time has become blurred, and suspects the anthropomorphised clock of having malicious intent:

> Nothing moved in the parlour till Mrs Verloc raised her head slowly and looked at the clock with inquiring mistrust. She had become aware of a ticking sound in the room. It grew upon her ear, while she remembered clearly that the clock on the wall was silent, had no audible tick. What did it mean by beginning

---

JOSIE ROGERS graduated with a degree in English Literature. This essay was the first research essay she wrote for a course on British and Irish modernism, and was inspired by a radio programme on the history of thought surrounding the concept of perpetual motion. Her research interests include 20th century fiction, Irish literature, literary theory, contemporary poetry and creative writing. Josie hopes to begin a Masters in the field of Critical Studies in 2018.

[1] G. Longo & M. Montévil, *Biological Time, Symmetries and Singularities: Perspectives on Life* (Berlin, 2014), 16.
[2] Ibid.

> to tick so loudly all of a sudden? ... Mrs Verloc cared nothing for time, and the ticking went on.[3]

Time is a constant in entropic systems, and we can consider the individual consciousness to be a single system which inhabits a world populated by other differentiated systems – that is, other people inhabiting other bodies which perceive time uniquely. The text following Mr Verloc's death is characterised by 'immobility'[4] and stasis because Mr Verloc's death denotes the death of his consciousness and thus of his perception of time. Time itself lives on however, in Winnie's consciousness and in the larger dimension of reality, represented by the ticking clock. Stevie's habit of drawing concentric circles indicates his consciousness to be explicitly entropic: its mode of expression not only resembles but builds up to the disintegration of his body, which is violently exploded and scattered in the most extreme physical disorder imaginable. It is destruction in its purest form: consciousness is rent from body, particle from particle. A single discrete system is disintegrated and forcefully re-integrated with the world around it.

Allen MacDuffie's description of entropy, a 'cosmic narrative of universal energy loss',[5] lends itself to the idea of decay, a word which personifies the dark, labyrinthine London of *The Secret Agent*. Decay is a destructive force obscured by protracted, regular deterioration; Winnie's mother reflects that 'everything decays, wears out, in this world'.[6] Consequently the tragedy of life is its defining feature: the inexorable decline into chaos and death. The degree of tragedy accorded to a death is a matter of temporality. Stevie, Winnie, Mr Verloc and Septimus Warren-Smith die prematurely; the natural entropy is brutally accelerated and thus rendered more terrible. Chief Inspector Heat expresses this sentiment:

> The shattering violence of destruction which had made of that body a heap of nameless fragments affected his feelings with a sense of ruthless cruelty though...the effect must have been as swift as a flash of lightning. The man...had died instantaneously; and yet it seemed impossible that a human body could reach

[3] J. Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (Cambridge, 1990), 198.
[4] Ibid.
[5] A. MacDuffie, 'Victorian Thermodynamics and the Novel: Problems and Prospects', (2011) 8:4 *Literature Compass*, 1.
[6] Conrad, *The Secret Agent,* 124.

> that state of disintegration without passing through the pangs of inconceivable agony.[7]

Stevie's untimely detonation also metonymically anticipates the violence at the heart of *Mrs Dalloway*: the legacy of the Great War and the huge wastage of young life it caused; a wastage of potential energy, the pathos of which is magnified by its cruel immediacy.

Conversely, J. Hillis Miller argues that 'Clarissa and Septimus seek the same thing: communication, wholeness, the oneness of reality, but only Septimus takes the way sure to reach it'.[8] He figures the dichotomy of life and death in *Mrs Dalloway* as one reflective surface, saying that 'reality, authenticity, and completion are on the death side of the mirror, while life is at best the illusory, insubstantial and fragmentary image of that dark reality'.[9] To die is to succumb to the entropy which is inescapable anyway, thus the actions of Septimus and Winnie display a cosmic defiance of decay. In the essay 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', Sigmund Freud states that 'two kinds of processes are constantly at work in a living substance…one constructive or assimilatory and the other destructive or dissimilatory'.[10] In humans this translates as a desire to die, to return to a state of un-being and total dissolution. Matthew Wraith declares that this 'death drive' is 'a psychic co-operation and compliance with entropy's diktats',[11] acceding Miller's position that death is not so much a gruesome inevitability but a logical co-dependent of life.

Likewise, Freud also says that 'the pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death instincts',[12] as the id instinctively seeks pleasure to fulfil psychological and biological needs, and death is undeniably a necessary consequence of life. Conrad personifies the entropic aspect of death through the character of the Professor, and more broadly, the concept of anarchy. While the definition of anarchism as a political movement is somewhat more nuanced than a mere desire for chaos and contempt for authority, the use of the word 'shattered' with regard to the Professor's thoughts on the 'established social order'[13] is reminiscent of the dissolutive,

---

[7] Conrad, *The Secret Agent,* 71.
[8] J. Hillis Miller, 'Repetition as the Raising of the Dead', in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Mrs Dalloway: Modern Critical Interpretations* (New York, 1988), 98.
[9] Ibid.
[10] *The Freud Reader,* P. Gay (ed.), (London, 1995), 618.
[11] M. Wraith, 'Throbbing Human Engines' in A. Enns & S. Trower (eds.), *Vibratory Modernism* (Houndmills, 2013), 104.
[12] Gay, *The Freud Reader,* 615.
[13] Conrad, *The Secret Agent,* 78.

fragmentary action of entropy. The Professor accepts his status as an entropic system, and thus does not fear death. His nihilistic willingness to blow himself up at any moment affords him dominance over others: 'he meditated confidently on his power...the supreme guarantee of his sinister freedom'.[14] Anarchism also advocates the idea of autonomy of the self whereby people are considered discrete entities, harmonious with the concept of the individual as an enclosed system which is therefore subject to entropy.

For Matthew Wraith, the modernity wrought by the industrial revolution has rendered us not merely discrete entities, but 'human engines'. He reasons:

> It was from the study of engines in the nineteenth century that the scientific theory of entropy first emerged...stating that all energy in the universe was destined towards this degenerate and useless state. This applied to every possible energy process, including not only engines but also organic systems like our own bodies... The throbbings and rattlings of the modernist's engines gave them a kind of quasi-life...not so much the experience of living, but the experience of dying which only the living can know.[15]

Wraith's exploration of the symbolism of vibrations in modernism posits that the act of quivering, shivering, quaking and vibrating in humans is fundamentally entropic due to the nature of energy conservation. To tremble is to communicate visceral, human energy with the external condition of oscillating machines. The commonality of vibration discloses the fate of eventual degeneration in both human and machine. In these texts, shaking signals an intensity of feeling which emphasises the vividness of life. Clarissa, when feeling shock 'made the moment in which she had stood shiver, as a plant on the river-bed feels the shock of a passing oar and shivers: so she rocked: so she shivered'.[16] Similarly, when the Professor feels anger 'his little bald head quivered, imparting a comical vibration to the wisp of white goatee'.[17] Entropy and time being directly related, Woolf's suspension of time causes stasis, an absence of vibration: 'silence falls on London; and falls on the mind. Effort ceases. Time flaps on the mast. There we stop; there we stand'.[18]

---

[14] Ibid., 67.
[15] Wraith, 'Throbbing Human Engines', 100.
[16] V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (Oxford, 1992), 25-26.
[17] Conrad, *The Secret Agent,* 38.
[18] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 42.

The modernist awareness of the humanity of machines, or indeed, the mechanics of humanity, is concentrated at the epicentre of industrialisation and urbanisation in the early twentieth century, the city. Wraith claims that 'we gather together in cities to share energy in the face of its relentless dissipation into the thermal background... [and] its entropic drift towards disorder'.[19] This evokes a move from the quantum to the molecular; from the atomic human consciousness to the larger enclosed system of the city. An Italian Futurist manifesto of 1910 declares that the 'people around you in a rolling motor bus are in turn and at the same time one, ten, four, three; they are motionless and they change places; then come back and sit before you like persistent symbols of universal vibration'.[20] Modernisation and industrialisation exert an entropic power over the city, personified by a proliferation of technology and information. People in the homogenised crowds of urban spaces collide with increasing energy like the molecules of slowly heated water.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, the enclosed system of the city of London has a shared, chaotic consciousness. The free indirect discourse of the narrative makes the interiority of each character equally visible to the reader: even the inner thoughts of incidental passers-by are made available. The bells of Big Ben are scattered sporadically throughout the narrative of this shared consciousness, reminding the reader and the characters of the presence of a time which is separate from their own perception, at once familiar and alien:

> Shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing, the clocks of Harley Street nibbled at the June day, counselled submission, upheld authority, and pointed out in chorus the supreme advantages of a sense of proportion, until the mound of time was so far diminished that a commercial clock, suspended above a shop in Oxford Street, announced, genially and fraternally, as if it were a pleasure to Messrs. Rigby and Lowndes to give the information gratis, that it was half-past one [21]

Here the clock itself is defamiliarised and anthropomorphised, yet also holds 'authority'. In his celebrated essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', Georg Simmel argues that 'the technique of metropolitan life is unimaginable without the most

[19] Wraith, 'Throbbing Human Engines', 112.
[20] U. Boccioni *et al.,* 'Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto' in U. Apollonio (ed.), *Futurist Manifestos* (London, 2009), 28.
[21] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 87.

punctual integration of all activities and mutual relations into a stable and impersonal time schedule'.[22] Simmel sees standardised time as an attempt to counteract the inclination of the city toward entropy, a regulatory - if perhaps futile - force superimposed over the fluidity of 'personal' time.
The enforcement of global, standardised time was introduced in 1884, two years before *The Secret Agent* is set. The narrative revolves around the Greenwich Royal Observatory and meridian line, a tangible geographical space embodying Greenwich Mean Time. Mr Vladimir cites astronomy as the target of the Greenwich bombing, saying:

> I defy the ingenuity of journalists to persuade their public that any given member of the proletariat can have a personal grievance against astronomy [...] And there are other advantages. The whole civilised world has heard of Greenwich. The very boot-blacks in the basement of Charing Cross Station know something of it.[23]

However, in accordance with Simmel, an attack on the location at the heart of international standardised time would work with the tendency of entropy by undermining the globally unifying effect of Greenwich Mean Time and creating anarchic disorder. An attack on time is an attack on the highest authorities – the civic and capitalist systems which rely on synchronicity - but one which would permeate the class system in a trickle-down manner evocative of the energy loss of entropy.

Standardised time was originally introduced in the UK to regulate the new railway system of the 1840s. Technologies of high-speed transport permitted the movement of people at unprecedented velocity. In theoretical terms, the increased speed of such 'particles' increases the entropy of the system they inhabit. On observing the omnibuses at Piccadilly, Clarissa 'felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged'.[24] This association implies that the possibility of a vehicle which allows humans to progress through space at an essentially inhuman speed also inspires a feeling of transcendence of the normal boundaries of time:

---

[22] G. Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' in Michael Whitworth (ed.), *Modernism* (Oxford, 2007), 185.
[23] Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, 31-32.
[24] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 7.

> [I]n the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June. [25]

Woolf's prose is a rich conflation of speed, movement, noise, the city, and the exaction of a moment in time. Ross Chambers figures noise as one incarnation of the entropic atmosphere of a city because:

> the word noise today designates all the static or interference that arises in channels of communication, and by extension the entropy that similarly affects all functioning systems and makes their smoothest operations secretly inefficient, a parasitic presence that is both necessary to life and the consumer of our energy and being.[26]

The London of these novels reifies the buzzing sense of productivity and multiplicity which characterises urban modernity. The city itself projects an energetic presence which is diffracted throughout the body of the text.

Chambers calls this atmosphere a 'disorderly energy, the "electricity" of the crowd,' but also asserts that this collective experience is a location of 'alienated encounters…failures to connect'.[27] Mr and Mrs Verloc's failure to connect is painfully explicit to the reader as they are shown the grotesque deficit between Winnie's feelings on Stevie's death, and Mr Verloc's assumptions about her feelings. According to the narrator, 'it is universally understood that, as if it were nothing more substantial than vapour floating in the sky, every emotion of a woman is bound to end in a shower',[28] the kinetic energy of rainfall symbolising the apex of the couple's miscommunication, and showing the text of the book itself to be subject to entropy along the normal axis of time. This degenerative destruction is also rendered in Winnie's physiology, as in the first chapter 'her hair was very tidy'[29] but when tormented by thoughts of Stevie's death, her 'whole being was racked by that inconclusive and maddening thought…in her bones, in the roots of

[25] Conrad, *The Secret Agent,* 31-32.
[26] R. Chambers, *An Atmospherics of the City: Baudelaire and the Poetics of Noise* (New York, 2015), 4.
[27] Ibid., 6.
[28] Conrad, *The Secret Agent,* 182.
[29] Ibid., 10.

her hair',[30] and after she kills Mr Verloc 'a slimy dampness...clung to her hair'.[31] Woolf's free indirect discourse also magnifies miscommunication between the characters. Clarissa's proclivity for gathering people together for parties is an ordering, organisational force; even her name, as the title of the book, is the commonality which unites the characters. Despite this, it is an echo of the miscommunication of true feeling between Clarissa and Peter which closes the book, as Peter considers that it is Clarissa who fills him with 'ecstasy' and 'extraordinary excitement'.[32]

'It is Clarissa, he said. For there she was'.[33] The use of the past tense emphasises the nostalgia which pervades the text: the characters constantly reflect on the past in an attempt to obstruct the linear progression of time and thus the drift towards disorder, destruction, and death. In *The Secret Agent*, narrative time lurches backwards to before the detonation of the bomb. Mr Verloc tells Winnie '"What's done can't be undone"',[34] but the rewinding of the text paradoxically 'undoes' Stevie's death and its entropic consequences, both physical and textual. Narrative has the power to re-order time and, according to J. Hillis Miller, the narrative of *Mrs Dalloway* 'possesses the irresistible and subtle energy of the bell of St. Margaret's striking half past eleven'.[35] Woolf describes the sound of the bell as 'something alive which wants...to disperse itself, to be, with a tremor of delight, at rest',[36] evoking the diffusion of energy as it travels through time and further towards entropic disarray. As such, Miller argues that the repetition of a word in *Mrs Dalloway* transports the reader back to the situation of the first instance of the word. He cites the use of the word plunge on the first page - 'What a lark! What a plunge!'[37]- and its repetition towards the end as Clarissa reflects upon Septimus's death - 'this young man who had killed himself – had he plunged holding his treasure?'[38] - as an illustration of *Mrs Dalloway*'s dichotomy between positive and negative, rising and falling, life and death. To extend further, the word plunge now holds a cathartic association of positivity for the reader; a textual remembrance. This is the role of the fleeting and hybridised temporalities of the narrative: by

[30] Ibid., 186.
[31] Ibid., 202.
[32] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 165.
[33] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 165.
[34] Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, 182.
[35] Miller, 'Repetition as the Raising of the Dead', 81.
[36] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 42.
[37] Ibid., 1.
[38] Ibid., 156.

moving between times and tenses, time and thus entropy are arrested in order to suspend the chaos of the future. These metaphorical pauses give the narrative space to meditate on events unfettered by the advancing tidal force of time. Miller points out that 'the cogito of the narrator in *Mrs Dalloway* is, "[T]hey thought, therefore I am"',[39] and indeed, 'nothing exists for the narrator which does not first exist in the mind of one of the characters'.[40] Furthermore, the substance of the narrative is constructed from the thoughts of the characters, but the characters themselves are only rendered real by their textual production by the narrative: this dynamic of mutual creation and co-dependence expands the inert, timeless spaces in the text.

Ultimately, the narrative consciousness of *Mrs Dalloway* manipulates time in order to allay its anxiety of death and disorder. The narrative moves between the minds of the characters, emphasising their status as differentiated systems, yet simultaneously illustrating the shared consciousness of Woolf's London. The characters of *The Secret Agent* unravel with variable force as time goes on, revealing themselves to be unwilling subjects of the power of entropy, catalysed by the curiously named Chief Inspector Heat, who provides the surge of energy which finally results in the deaths of Mr Verloc and Winnie. Death, destruction, and dissolution are shown to be the inevitable climax of life, but the co-dependence of the terms are key: Virginia Woolf wrote in her personal diaries: 'I meant to write about death, only life came breaking in as usual'.[41] This cohesion between life and death is unavoidably bound by the will of entropy and its relation to time, but is represented differently in the two novels. In *The Secret Agent*, Winnie's suicide is the culmination of a proliferation of chaos, recalling the perfect destruction of entropy at its maximum, and the final page shows the Professor walking the streets of London with only one objective: to maintain his status as 'unsuspected and deadly'.[42] *Mrs Dalloway*, on the other hand, reminds the reader that death cannot exist without life, and Clarissa and her party guests continue to occupy that indeterminate dimension, suspended in a narrative which refuses to completely dissolve in the space of just one June day.

[39] Miller, 'Repetition as the Raising of the Dead', 83.
[40] Ibid., 82.
[41] *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, A. O. Bell (ed.), 5 vols (New York, 1979–85), ii, 167.
[42] Conrad, *The Secret Agent,* 231.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

U. Boccioni *et al.,* 'Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto' in Umbro Apollonio (ed.), *Futurist Manifestos* (London, 2009)

R. Chambers, *An Atmospherics of the City: Baudelaire and the Poetics of Noise* (New York, 2015)

J. Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (Cambridge, 1990)

P. Gay, *The Freud Reader* (London, 1995)

G. Longo & M. Montévil, *Biological Time, Symmetries and Singularities: Perspectives on Life* (Berlin, 2014)

A. MacDuffie, 'Victorian Thermodynamics and the Novel: Problems and Prospects' (2011) 8:4 *Literature Compass*, 206-213

J. Hillis Miller, 'Repetition as the Raising of the Dead' in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Mrs Dalloway: Modern Critical Interpretations* (New York, 1988), 79-103

G. Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' in Michael Whitworth (ed.), *Modernism*, (Oxford, 2007), 182-190

M. Wraith, 'Throbbing Human Engines' in A. Enns, S. Trower (eds.), *Vibratory Modernism* (Houndmills, 2013), 96-114

V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (Oxford, 1992)

V. Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Anne Olivier Bell (ed.), 5 vols (New York, 1979–85), ii.