

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*: "A Well of Tears"

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The Great War of 1914-1918 is also on occasion referred to as "The Great War for Civilization." It was a commonly held belief that this was a war to save civilization from destruction and, in effect, to preserve and to strengthen the foundations of Europe's legacy to the world. By the end of the war and stretching well into the 1930s, the noble word civilization was increasingly replaced by another word, a word signifying bleakness and heartbreak: "Disenchantment," which was often used to describe the social, physical, and moral horrors that came to pass once the conflict came to its ignominious end on November 11, 1918.

The British writer C. E. Montague (1867-1929) poignantly describes this debasing process in an acclaimed book that appeared in 1922, *Disenchantment*. To read Montague's text regarding his own personal experiences in the war and how "handsome and boundless illusions" transformed into cynicism, dejection, disappointment returns us to Ezra Pound's earlier famous words in his poem, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), describing how "The Men of 1914" had "walked eye-deep in hell/ believing in old men's lies, then unbelieving/ came home, home to old lies, and new infamy." Montague astonishingly replicates Pound's feelings about the magnitude of losses and the spirit of lostness, and underlines an equivalent tone of dismay and despair in these words: "The lost years, the broken youth, the dead friends, the women's overshadowed lives at home, the agony and bloody sweat—all had gone to darken the stains which most of us had thought to scour out of the world that our children would live in."¹

Montague's words help to gauge the temper of the modern world as it would be rendered in remarkable poems and fiction written in the English language during the early decades of the twentieth century. A

novel that communicates this temper in general and the feelings of disenchantment in particular, in personal and sociological and one could even say epochal contexts, is Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). This novel also tells us much about the war and the postwar years, about human feelings and relationships, and about the malaise that would afflict individual and collective life in the era between the two world wars.² In this novel the reader is able to gauge the mood of the times, in terms of both the human personality and the historical situation, as these were inevitably intertwined. What we recognize above all is a broken world and broken sensibilities impelled by the annihilative effects of war on both the human consciousness and the human soul. And, too, we witness the human condition in crisis in an epochal context of debasement and deterioration.

How inner human emotions, and particularly how love and death evince the consequentiality of a murder-war, is clearly a heart-word in the literature of disenchantment that Woolf registers in her novel, in which feelings of forlornness, desperation, deprivation are prevalent, and in which, to employ a Dickens phrase, we see how "a crestfallen, disenchanted man" emerges to characterize the modern age in transition. Romanticism itself, it can be said, comes of age in a world now abruptly shorn of illusions, dreams, promises of greatness. Human destiny, it seems, is arrested as men and women now confront their own souls—and their innermost *angst*.

History in life and life in history are irreducible phenomena in these years of crisis. The English novelist focused on in this essay ultimately provides a tragic vision of a society and culture not only under violent physical attack but also in moral disarray and dissolution. The men and women we meet in *Mrs. Dalloway* are casualties of their time, physically and emotionally wounded, and badly paralyzed by the power of might that is beyond comprehension. Disillusionment is akin to a sentence of death that has no surcease and that pervades their thoughts and actions, from "sickness unto death." Their demons of fate roam in the dissimulative shape of those invidious forms of disenchantment that