Avoiding Self-Definition: Julia Kristeva and Mrs. Dalloway

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Avoiding self-definition: In defense of women's right to merge (Julia Kristeva and Mrs Dalloway)

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In many twentieth-century novels by women the protagonists, and, one assumes, their authors, too, affirm a sense of self in flux, traversed by changing currents of feeling and spreading beyond Western culture's definition of a contained ego to merge with what is outside. The female characters don't rush to define what is inchoate and amorphous in themselves, but welcome the chaos of a diffuse self for its promise of change and celebrate the possibility for renewal in the experience of merging. Often, as in The Awakening, Mrs Dalloway, The Waterfall, Surfacing and Housekeeping, water or ocean images signal the character's immersion in life processes beyond the individual. Using Julia Kristeva's theories together with examples from Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway, I will argue here that a return to an undifferentiated state of being is not merely regressive, as Freudian developmental charts based on male patterns of growth would have us think: viewed in a context of female experience, the capacity for opening up to identification and fusion reveals revolutionary and renewing powers.

In Civilization and Its Discontents Freud describes the diffuse and undefined state that is our original sense of being as the "oceanic" feeling. (Mrs Dalloway, I hasten to add, described becoming one with the world in ocean images four years before the publication of the first chapter of Civilization and Its Discontents in 1929.)
An infant at the breast does not, as yet, distinguish his ego from the external world. ... originally the ego includes everything, later it separates from the external world itself. Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunk residue of a much more intense—indeed, an all-embracing—feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it. If we may assume that there are many people in whose mental life this primary ego-feeling has persisted to a greater or less degree, it would exist in them side by side with the narrower and more sharply demarcated ego-feeling of maturity, like a kind of counter-part to it. In that case, the idealistic concepts appropriate to it would be precisely those of limitlessness and of a bond with the universe—the "oceanic" feeling.

Notice that Freud does not make value judgments on the two ways of being he describes here: they exist as alternative states of mind in the same individual, available to him/her throughout life. But in other texts Freud made the oral (nurturing) stage the first in a series of psychosexual stages. In the hands of Freud’s followers his description of growth becomes prescriptive, and earlier stages are dismissed as primitive. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, for example, takes Edna, the protagonist of Chopin’s The Awakening, to task for her desire to fuse with the world around her:

A psychologically mature individual has to some extent satisfied these oral desires for limitless fusion with the external world; presumably his sense of oneness with a nurturing figure has given him a sense sufficient to move out of the need for complex satisfactions... Edna’s hidden self-peace for reassurance and nourishment,... It is an orally destructive self, a limitless void whose needs can be filled, finally, only by total fusion with the outside world, a totality of sensuous engulfing. And this totall means annihilation of the ego.

Wolff assumes that a first ego, set off from the surrounding world, and connection limited to a genital relationship, are the prizes of maturity, the only adult kind of being and relating. Freud’s description of development has been frozen into steps up a marble staircase that must be taken in order, and only for the purpose of getting to the top, "a genuine genital relationship."

Norman Holland, who follows Freud’s developmental scheme, too, in constructing a “Dictionary of Fantasy,” similarly implies that the desire to fuse with one’s surroundings is primitive and must encounter a healthier impulse, the desire for separation. “The single most common fantasy-structure in literature is phallic assertiveness.
balanced against oral engulfment.14 Taking over the male paradigm of development from Freud, Holland assumes fusing is the loss of self (engulfment), so that it must call up a defense of autonomy in the symbolic form of the phallus (characteristically, Holland overlooks the plight of those without one). The male literary examples of merging Holland chooses to cite, such as Poe’s stories of being buried alive or devoured, are tinged with terror. What is remarkable about fantasies of merging in women’s fiction, however, is that fusion seems desirable, indeed natural: characters in women’s novels seem to feel as if they had regained their natural state rather than losing it; in place of fear and frantic defense, female characters experience joy and fullness of being.

Carol Gilligan has pointed out that most developmental theories—Freud’s, Erikson’s, Kohlberg’s—are based on men’s interpretations of data drawn predominantly or exclusively from studies of male subjects. These theories assume that the stages of male development are the norm and fault women when they depart from them. Gilligan suggests that what fails is not women, but the theory that measures them. More specifically, girls’ persistence in defining themselves in relationship has been considered a failure in individualization.

The quality of embeddedness in social interaction and personal relationships that characterizes women’s lives in contrast to men’s... becomes not only a descriptive difference but also a developmental liability when the milestones of childhood and adolescent development in the psychological literature are markers of increasing separation. Women’s failure to separate then becomes by definition a failure to develop.

Nancy Chodorow, in her encyclopaedic compilation and interpretation of psychoanalytic theory on mothers and daughters, The Reproduction of Mothering, demonstrates that because of the institution of exclusive mothering, girls follow a different developmental track from boys. In the nuclear family structure that psychoanalytic theory assumes as the basis of early childhood experience— in which childcare is the principal job of the mother— all infants go through stages of primary identification and symbiosis, when mother and infant feel fused. After these early stages, mothers tend to perceive their sons as male others, reinforcing their efforts to differentiate. But they
unconsciously define their daughters as extensions of themselves. The confusion of "you" and "me" shows up in projections of their own feelings and needs onto their daughters and overinvestment in areas that are properly their daughters' own—bodily functions such as eating, for example. Girls have corresponding problems recognizing themselves as separate from their mothers; issues of individuation and differentiation are not confined to the first stages of childhood, as the developmental charts say they should be, but extend into adolescence. Even as young adults, even as they function in the world as autonomous beings who cognitively recognize their separateness, "most girls...in relation to their mothers...experience themselves as overly attached, undivided, and without boundaries."[6]

The effects of growing up with a definition of self in relationship are both positive and negative. The cases reported by Jean Baker Miller of autonomous women successful in their own right who feel their experience is meaningless without a man to witness it demonstrate the crippling effect of feeling one is nothing outside relationship.[7] But women are also more skilled at empathy, more capable of feeling—or believing they feel—what others feel. And because girls "fuse the experience of attachment with the process of identity formation,"[8] because they feel continuous with their first environments longer than boys, they can more easily transcend the limiting boundaries of the isolated self to feel at one with the world.[9]

To be sure, there are exceptions to this gender-specific model: witness male religious mystics and, among male writers, Proust, who establishes a sense of identity laboriously, and always in relation to his immediate environment; but then Proust, as much as any female child, felt fused to his mother—indeed, to his whole maternal line—so that he experienced his mother's absence as a loss of self. In psychoanalytic theory's description of normative male development, though, the addition of erotically tinged oedipal love to the boy's primary identification with his mother makes her such a toweringly powerful figure that she seems to threaten his separate existence altogether;[10] in order to separate from her and identify with men, always more distant than the ever-present mother, the boy cuts himself off sharply from his mother and—a deformity that Chodorow blames on the institution of exclusive mothering—from his own internalized maternal qualities.
of tenderness and desire for intimacy. Although Holland presents his examples of literary fusion as universal, they are marked by the threatening presence of "an all-powerful, maternal woman" and the fear of engulfment.11

Of course, girls also feel ambivalent about merging with an all too close mother.12 But one may theorize, with many twentieth-century novels bearing out the theory, that women are more comfortable vaulting over ego boundaries to fuse with what is outside than are men because what Freud calls the "oceanic feeling" is built into their primary definition of self; they are more apt to experience expansion into the environment as a "bath of bliss"13 than as drowning.

Carol Gilligan's argument encourages us to look at old definitions of what is valuable in human development from new perspectives grounded in women's experience rather than borrowed from male models. I wish to confront Wolff's and Holland's Freudian assumptions about what progress means in human development with Julia Kristeva's theories of change. Change is more chaotic and continual in Kristeva's theory than in Freud's model of measured progress through a fixed succession of stages. Kristeva thinks of the mature human being as embodying a dialectic between the semiotic self and the symbolic self — more process than progress. She neither disparages the diffuse sense of self and the urge to merge associated with infantile oral drives nor endorses a sharply defined ego as the goal of human development. Rather, drawing on Jacques Lacan's rereading of Freud, she presents the coherent ego as an artifice, constructed first on the model of the alienated image the infant sees in its mirror reflection, then on the representation of the self in the field of language. Both models are distinct from the real, corporeal experience of the child. As the mirror image is a mirage, so is the notion of a self-contained ego based on it. Similarly, "I" is not a product of my shifting experience of sensations and feelings, but a construction imposed on that inchoate reality by the communication system's need for a unitary source of speech. "I" leaves out everything particular to me, reduces me to an abstract term, the same for everyone. "I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object," says Lacan.14 Kristeva maintains that "the subject is merely the subject of predication, of judgment, of the
sentence." I create myself as an independent entity by forming a sentence around the subject "I"; "I" am therefore in continuous production, generated by my statements. When "I" establish my position as subject, I differentiate myself from the objects I talk about: speech generates not only "I," the speaker, but "them," the objects that language requires I treat as separate from myself. The "symbolic" self, then, is a momentary position in the field of language. But "a symbolic system corresponds to a specific structuration of the speaking subject within the symbolic order." Since the social and language systems that construct the symbolic self insist on the fixity of their categories, the symbolic self is also rigidly defined and compartmentalized and reflects the pretense to permanence of the social institutions in which it is embedded.

Such a symbolic self-construction leaves out the "semiotic," a mode of being rooted in infancy, less a distinct entity than an undifferentiated field across which the instincts play. Kristeva picks up Freud's emphasis on the contradictory nature of the primary impulses that govern the semiotic: the urge to assimilate what is good and the environment, the urge to expel what frustrates, cause tension. The heterogeneity of the instincts destroys any status what characterizes the semiotic self is fluidity, produced by drives that change constantly both in nature and in aim. Although when the child enters language s/he must give up the open-ended, diffuse self for the fixed position of speaker, the semiotic continues to circulate beneath language, disrupting free time to time the symbolic identity of the speaker. The ever-changing intensities of the body's impulses explode the illusion of a static circumscribed ego, leaving us for a time just a field for fluctuating impulses — until the need to represent ourselves in the social field of language requires the reformulation of a unified symbol for the self. Unlike Wolf and Holland, then, Kristeva celebrates the resurgence of oral instincts because they destroy and cause the transformation of a seemingly static social identity, throwing social systems that rest on the unity of the individual citizen into question, too.

Mrs. Bánkáthy implies that alone, without the social scaffolding of discourse, we are diffuse, not just internally — subject to the changing currents of impulse and feeling — but externally as well: without firm boundaries, the self merges with its surroundings. Clarissa on her
morning walk through London loses her separate identity to
the ebb and flow of things ... [she was] part of the trees at home; of the house there ... part of people she knew best, who lifted her on their brazen noses as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life; herself.22

Joy floods her as the ocean image signals her expansion beyond ego boundaries to merge with the world. When she is forced into separation, defining herself "against" the June morning rather than immersed in it, despair robs her of life:

she stood alone, a single figure against ... the shore of this ... June morning ... feeling herself suddenly stilled, aged, barren, the grinding, blowing, flowering of the day out of doors, out of the window, out of her body and brain which now failed.23

Far from fearing the loss of self in merging that Holland cites in male fictions of fusion — a fear which apparently accompanies the sense that the ego must be clearly defined and defended — Clarissa loses life when she can't merge.

In solitude, Clarissa's consciousness resembles Kristeva's definition of the semiotic self, an amorphous field composed of the succeeding intensities of primitive drives: the urge to incorporate beloved surroundings, the desire to expel what produces internal tension (here, the image of Clarissa's hatred, Miss Kilman, an internalized monster who "grubs at the roots" of Clarissa's soul).24 Although I agree with Phyllis Rose that "there is no way felly to explain or analyze the lift of the spirit that occurs when one reads certain parts of Mrs. Dalloway,"25 I hazard the guess that we willingly overlook Clarissa's classbound superficialities, her snobism, her overinvestment in social success and failure, because the novel hits us not at the level of our social selves, but at the level of our primitive oral impulses: in Clarissa's blissful merging we experience our own desire to escape entanglement in a circumscribed ego, to reinstitute our original boundless sense of a self merged with the world; and in her despair at the loss of connection we feel again the pain of our original separation from the enfolding world — cast out, alone, into an alien universe.

The rhythms of the ocean surge through the passages describing the loss of clear distinction between the self and the world, calling up in the reader a semiotic level of self.
Quiet descended on her, calm, content, as her needle, drawing the silk smoothly to its gentle pause, collected the green folds together and attached them, very lightly, to the belt. So on a summer’s day waves collect, overbalance, and fall; collect and fall, and the whole world seems to be saying “that is all” more and more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says too, that is all. Fear no more, says the heart. Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burdens to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrow, and renew, begins, collects, lets fall. And the body alone labors to the passing bee; the wave breaking, the dog barking, far away barking and barking.26

Prose becomes incantation, working on the reader’s susceptibility to rhythm; it imitates the ocean’s repetitions in persuading the reader, too, to give up the burden of the structured symbolic self who decodes abstract words for the sensual self who lets the words’ rhythms play across her/his body as the regularity of the waves’ breaking plays on the body that lies in the sun on the beach.

According to Kristeva, a text can precipitate a takeover by the semiotic in the reader.23 When the rhythmic patterns become the organizing principle of a text, edging out grammatical order, words begin to strike the reader as sounds rather than conveyors of meaning. We respond to words as we did in infancy, when we registered the sound, rhythm, music of words rather than their significance. The position of detached analytic reader structured by the conventions of the realistic text disappears, and we become semiotic, responding to words with what is left out of the socialized “I”: fluctuating instinctual responses. Since this state of being has its source in a period of time when we did not distinguish ourselves from our environment, semiotic language also recalls a self without firm ego boundaries. The reader is thus encouraged to imitate the dissolution of Clarissa’s social self into a rhythmical space played on by oceanic patterns of alliteration and repetition.

If a female reader is more accustomed to lose the distinction between herself and her surroundings as a result of her prolonged lack of differentiation from her first maternal environment, does she respond more readily to this appeal to give up the separate detached self and merge with the rhythms of the novel than a male reader does? Is she quicker to surrender the detached self of the analytic reader and dissolve into the flux of sensations called up by such an appeal to the semiotic level of her experience? The psychoanalytic picture of female
development as formulated by thinkers like Gilligan and Chodorow suggests that she might be more comfortable with a personality in flux, more able to shift to a diffuse reader who is simply a sequence of responses.26

Kriseva conceives the self as process: the semiotic self, a succession of intensities originating in the drives, must make way for the symbolic self which we are all obliged to consolidate into a single shape in order to represent ourselves to others; but drive energy overwhelms and shatters the unitary self, causing a reformulation. Clarissa similarly moves from being a receptacle for fluctuating intensities — joy, love, hate, fear — to a socially defined unitary personality. But while the fluctuating, unbounded self of her morning walk comes naturally andxls her with vitality, she must labor to create a unified ego:

collecting the whole of her at one point (as she looked into the glass), seeing the delicate pink face of the woman who was that very night to give a party; of Clarissa Dalloway; of herself... She pursed her lips when she looked in the glass. It was to give her face point. That was her self — pointed, dartlike, definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting-point, a radiance no doubt in some dull lives, a refuge for the lonely to come to, perhaps.27

Woolf anticipates Lacan in her choice of props for Clarissa’s moment of self-definition: the mirror, which returns a unified if alienated image ("the delicate pink face of the woman"); her name, indisputably singular; her role as hostess; the woman who was that very night to give a party; and the self-contained image of her that others see ("one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting-point"). The discrete entity “herself” is not an intuitive certainty, but a laborious reconstruction of her “point” in the network of family names and social rules. Society requires that people be circumscribed individuals so they can play the singular parts designed for them by social systems. As Linda Miezelski points out in a perceptive Whiteheadian analysis of Mrs Dalloway, it is “for the world only” that Clarissa feels compelled to gather herself together, “because the world cannot comprehend the multiple, contradictory, expanded selves, events and processes we really are.”28 The clearly demarcated self-contained ego is a construct, Woolf implies: Clarissa needs all the
resources of naming and placing that social systems can provide to force the heterogeneous facets of her self to one point in the social network, one "diamond," artificially dazzling but inorganic in contrast to the living mobility of Clarissa's consciousness.

Justposing Kristeva's theories with Woolf's novel gives rise to questions rather than leading to conclusions. Do we operate in two widely different modalities in solitude and in dialogue? If the structured social self is a product of speech and social intercourse, does it disappear when we cease speaking? Without the social scaffolding of conversation, do we lose structure and become fluid, a succession of feelings and intensities? If so, is the self in solitude the authentic one, multiple, diverse, fluctuating, while the coherent ego is fundamentally an illusion, a social artefact constructed by language systems? Do men and women have fundamentally different conceptions of themselves based on differences in their primary experience with their mothers? Is the model of a clearly demarcated separate ego a male paradigm of individuality based on the male child's need to cut himself off sharply from continuity with an overwhelmingly powerful mother? Although Kristeva does not specify the gender of her model, is her notion of a self in process in fact closer to the way women perceive themselves?[20] Certainly her contemporaries, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, picture woman as diffuse and undefined, "a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble, a cosmos tirelessly traversed by Eros," in the words of Hélène Cixous.[21]

It is difficult to argue for Cixous' description of woman as permanently "undifferentiated, unbordered, unorganized ... incoherent, chaotic."[22] As Kristeva says, to remain in the semiotic mode, to be merely a flux of drive energy, would be to remain in "an underwater, undermaternal dive;"[23] unable to act or think effectively, a prey to violent impulses; what imparts vitality and change, Kristeva maintains, is the alternation of oral self and speaking subject. Dread of losing the self forever is implicit in the metaphors Holland uses to describe male literary fantasies of merging: "being engulfed, overwhelmed, drowned, devoured, or ... buried alive."[24] Indeed, Septimus' death in Mrs Dalloway by merging seems to confirm the fear that if one's identity is undefined and continuous with the environment, one disappears into it. I would like to propose a model like
Kristeva's: an "underwater dive" followed by emergence. Clarissa can merge with the "ebb and flow" of life in the London streets because her "little room" offers her the possibility of reconstituting self-containment. On the other hand, if Clarissa were self-enclosed all the time, on the model of the clearly demarcated ego at the top of Freudian developmental charts, she would not be open to the renewal and impetus for change that come from merging with different lives. Because she can identify completely with Septimus, because she can "lose herself" in the process of living — but "only to find itself again" — her self, porous and open to the lives of others, can absorb parts of their experience to expand in a way closed off to rigidly crystallized ego.

She emerges from fusion with Septimus radiant with new vitality and expanded awareness. In Mrs. Dalloway and the twentieth-century women's fiction generally, merging sustains and expands the self rather than destroying it.

Notes
3. Wolff, p. 213.


12. Chodorow thinks girls turn to their fathers not so much because of the sexual issues Freud emphasizes as because an alliance with him is the only alternative available to the nuclear family structure to a depersonalized relationship with the mother (pp. 117-129).


21. Woolf, Mrs Dalloway, p. 45.

22. Woolf, Mrs Dalloway, p. 77.


27. Woolf, Mrs Dalloway, pp. 54-55.


33. Holland, p. 35.

34. Woolf, Mrs Dalloway, p. 282.