Beyond Modernist Shock: Virginia Woolf’s Absorbing Atmosphere

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Shock has long been the dominant paradigm for theorizing urban modernism. Virginia Woolf’s representations of the city demand an adjusted framework: absorption is also a critical point of intersection between Woolf’s historical, psychological, and formal concerns. Mrs. Dalloway (1925) tells the story of a post-war metropolis that has absorbed the shocking blows of recent history. The novel also turns absorptive processes into a distinct narrative procedure: Woolf’s free indirect discourse allows the narrator to absorb and be absorbed by the novel’s extensive cast of characters. Woolf moves beyond the matter of how the psyche absorbs shock and trauma to consider how the urban atmosphere itself functions as shock absorber, a kind of affective repository for the past. Form and history meet in Woolf’s understanding of what is “in the air.”

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FROM SHOCK TO ABSORPTION

Shock has long been the dominant paradigm for theorizing urban modernism. The relevance of shock to twentieth-century narrative makes a good deal of sense: as a physical process, it plays out in the speed and clashing violence of modern technology; as a psychological mindset, it captures the distractions of urban life; as a formal procedure, it shapes the quintessentially modernist aesthetic of fragmentation. But what about absorption? We often encounter the two concepts

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together—shock absorbers, shock absorbency—but either despite or because of that proximity, absorption receives less critical attention.

In this discussion, I argue that when reading Virginia Woolf’s urban modernism, we need to adjust the frame: absorption is also a critical point of intersection between Woolf’s historical, psychological, and formal concerns. In one of Mrs. Dalloway’s (1925) opening scenes, Clarissa navigates the bustling London streets and reflects: “She knew nothing; no language, no history; she scarcely read a book now, except memoirs in bed; and yet to her it was absolutely absorbing; all this; the cabs passing; and she would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that” (8; emphasis added). Notice how Woolf associates absorption with both domestic and urban settings here. First, the passage alludes to an image of Clarissa reading memoirs in her bedroom. Sleeping and reading both invoke the temporary surrender of self that characterizes an absorptive experience. But as soon as the passage mentions absorption, the focus shifts back to the crowded city streets. One might suggest that Woolf puts these two images in quick succession to accentuate their differences: on one side of the “absolutely absorbing” clause, a sleepy and solitary Clarissa is tucked away in her private bedroom; on the other side, our protagonist is wide awake and intensely present in the vitality of urban life. Yet I would argue that the absorbing clause is a connecting bridge conceptually as well as grammatically. In other words, Woolf aligns these images to shed light on their similarities. Sleeping and reading prime us to see city dwelling as an experience in which the subject vanishes into the objects of her interest. This is the peculiar nature of absorption: mental presence pushed to its furthest extreme actually becomes a kind of mental absence. Clarissa is so thoroughly embedded in the urban milieu that she loses the distance necessary to situate herself according to semantic or social systems of classification: “no language, no history”; “she would not say . . . I am this, I am that.”

Woolf’s writing consistently associates urban life with such out-of-body experiences. In “The Mark on the Wall,” the protagonist describes omnibus riders in terms of a “vagueness, the gleam of glassiness in our eyes” (85) and writes of the desire “to slip from one thing to another without any hostility . . . to sink in deeper” (85). In “Street Haunting,” the city-dweller is a kind of sleepwalker drifting through a ghostly world: “wrapt . . . in some narcotic dream,” (185) hypnotized by the “smooth passage . . . glossy brilliance” (179) of the city’s visual delights. Mirroring the passage we began with, that story’s night wanderer loses herself in the metropolis much as she loses herself in a book. On city streets and around dark corners, she encounters strangers who disappear almost instantly; stepping into a bookstore, the experience is oddly similar, “forming sudden capricious friendships with the unknown and the vanished” (4).

Michael Fried’s Absorption and Theatricality enacts this precise alignment by studying paintings of subjects deep in scholarly concentration alongside paintings of subjects lost in mental reverie or stupor. While Fried is largely unconcerned with the city and his historical subject is different, the approach of putting activity and inactivity on a shared spectrum offers a way of understanding how the city’s
frenetic vitality might tip over into a kind of drowsy dream. Fried writes that the “condition of rapt attention, of being completely occupied or engrossed” (10) itself takes on an “almost somnambulistic character” (11), a kind of “self-forgetting, an obliviousness to [one’s] appearance and surroundings” (10).

In the Mrs. Dalloway passage we began with, that kind of self-effacement plays out even on the level of syntax. In the phrase, “to her it was absolutely absorbing,” it is difficult to say who or what is doing the absorbing and who or what is being absorbed. One might consider absorption a force acting on Clarissa—a kind of overwhelming magnetic pull to which she passively succumbs. But one could just as easily read Clarissa as the active subject, voraciously swallowing up the world around her. The problem is that we keep losing Clarissa in the larger absorptive experience: names and proper nouns are all centripetally pulled into that ambiguous “it.” The fact that Clarissa cannot step out of the experience underscores its affective immediacy, the kind of “prepersonal” or “asignifying intensity” that affect theorists distinguish from emotion.1 The part of speech associated with absorbing remains just as unclear: is it a verb describing an event or is it an adjectival description of how Clarissa perceives the world around her?

The very fact that we find ourselves in such a grammatical predicament proves the point: absorption wipes away sharp differences. This prospect of seamless integration is one striking implication of theorizing the modern city in terms of absorption rather than shock. With shock as the prevailing paradigm, the individual is at odds with the city, clashing with its many disruptive and jarring technologies. Emphasis falls on shock’s violence—its capacity to bounce off of surfaces, its very etymology from the French choque, indicating a violent blow or collision between opposing forces2—while absorption at least creates the illusion of a capacity to smooth over differences. This observation does not absolve absorption of the charge of violence—absorption’s reliance on forced submission and surrender is an issue we will look at later. But it does mean that a well-entrenched critical narrative privileging shock needs to be reassessed.

The familiar narrative, in its briefest and admittedly simplified form, goes something like this: shock encapsulates subjective experience in a fast-paced, technologically mediated, and constantly changing urban milieu. The subject is bombarded with novel sensory stimuli, in the words of George Simmel, at “every crossing of the street” (11). In his reading of Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin similarly suggests “traffic involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions. At dangerous intersections, nervous impulses flow through him in rapid succession, like the energy from a battery” (175). The individual adapts by maintaining a vigilant posture of self-defense. Without some sort of protective cushion to soften the blows of modern city life, the mind would simply fall apart. Freud proposes that the psyche acts as this much-needed shock absorber, with the outermost layer serving as “protective shield” (33). Psychic armor prevents most stimuli from ever “breaking through” (30) to the deeper recesses of the mind and memory. Shocks are intense, but they fade away just as swiftly as they appear (and if they
do penetrate that barrier, they are lodged away deep in the unconscious). In some accounts, this concept of shock is generalized to indicate modernity's tendency to shake up older social, political, or aesthetic conventions. Others focus on the rhythmic attunement between city life and mental life as evidence of the individual falling into step with the temporalities of industrial work and capital. For Benjamin, both the city and factory demand a mode of automatic reactivity: the "shock experience which the passer-by has in the crowd corresponds to what the worker 'experiences' at his machine" (176). In a similar vein, Simmel characterizes urban life in terms of a distinct "tempo," one that provides a "deep contrast with the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of . . . small town and rural existence" (11).

In these accounts, there is a fairly tight parallel between shock as a technological process and a psychological experience. As a result, theorists tend to attribute shock and distraction to the modern city while reserving states such as absorption or contemplation for the rural setting of a past era. This is why we might feel more comfortable thinking of absorption in connection to the romantic genius deep in contemplation or the pastoral poet who is profoundly attuned to the natural world. By contrast, in an urban environment, the need to remain on guard and to respond to perpetually changing stimuli prevents absorption in the contemplative sense—"There is no daydreaming surrender to faraway things in the protective eye," Benjamin writes ("Motifs" 191). Indeed, distraction has long been hailed as the quintessentially modernist mindset. Siegfried Kracauer writes of cinema as a "cult of distraction" (94) and Benjamin upholds the modern value of "reception in a state of distraction" ("Work of Art" 240).

Yet what I want to point out—and what I think Woolf detects submerged in the work of her contemporaries and brings to the surface more explicitly in her own writing—is that absorption is not antithetical to distraction. In fact, absorption does not really have an antonym at all. Absorption is best characterized by the peculiar way it combines concentration and distraction. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin draws a sharp distinction between concentration and distraction. Yet he makes absorption central to both processes. Consider how Benjamin distinguishes between a viewer absorbed by an artwork and the masses who automatically absorb it:

Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art. (239)

The partition Benjamin draws here is not necessarily intuitive. It is a bit surprising that the seemingly passive "absorbed by" should be aligned with concentration while the potentially more voracious act of consumption—"absorb it"—gets paired with automatic reception and distraction. However, Benjamin shows that the seemingly passive construction "absorbed by it" ultimately engenders the more active aesthetic encounter—"he enters into this work of art . . ."
This is absorption in its contemplative sense. We allow ourselves to be absorbed in one object rather than fleetingly touching on many. In this form of absorption, we commit to an examination of depth. The phrase "absorbed by it" helps clarify the kind of suspended stance necessary to concentration.

While Benjamin assigns the active verb form of absorbing to the masses, their act of consumption is the more passive sort. They are moved, yes, but that is because they are carried along. The masses allow themselves to be flooded and thus swept away—in other words, distracted. They are unable to pause. Thus while it is tempting to read Benjamin's emphasis on distraction in the modern world as the antithesis of absorption, he quite explicitly makes absorption a central component of both distraction and concentration. The smoothness we have come to associate with absorption surfaces here in connection with the experience of being swept away in the fast-paced current of modern life. Even in a writer who sees modernity through the lens of distraction, absorption is still very much a part of that psychological profile. Thus while the concept is similar to terms such as contemplation or concentration, its small differences make a case against simply leaving absorption behind in, say, the Romantic era.

Jonathan Crary's *Suspensions of Perception* further dismantles the oversimplification of modern distraction by making a compelling case for the historically specific significance of attention around the turn of the century, particularly in terms of its susceptibility to social norms and modes of technological manipulation. Crary locates capitalism's exaltation of productivity, efficiency, and self-control at the center of this new kind of "attentive subject." At the same time, he suggests, this emphasis on attention opened up opportunities for resistance and subversion, such as "intensive states of deep absorption and daydreaming" (4). Like Fried, Crary notices that the most intense and transfixed sort of attention often dissolves into something that begins to resemble distraction. Crary's historicized account of attention is an essential starting point for understanding Woolf's interest in absorption. After all, we can notice the recurrence of absorption in Woolf's writing, but the observation amounts to little without a sense of what work it does in and for the narrative. As we look closer, it becomes clear that Woolf exploits the peculiarity of absorption not simply because it is a fascinating psychological state in and of itself, but because it poses urgent questions in her particular historical moment.

A post-war novel by its very nature engages with the notion that shocks have a long afterlife, and that there is violence involved not only in the discrete events that jolt us but also in the gradual assimilation of shock into daily life. This is a moment that demands confrontation with shocks not just in the moment of violence but also in the (seemingly) more peaceful aftermath of that violence. The question of how violent disruptions are registered, dampened, and redistributed is urgent in technological and historical matters both large and small: this is the moment of the motor-car, with its shock absorbers designed to soften travel on a bumpy road. The period following war is also a time to assess how affective experiences are collectively registered and distributed.
Thus Woolf's interest in absorbency does not refute the significance of shock; rather, it follows shock to its logical conclusions. Part of that means thinking about how an entire city or nation absorbs shocking blows. Another part means delving into matters of temporality; Woolf realizes that shocks do not necessarily strike and then bounce off or fade away just as quickly. In the second part of my discussion I will elaborate on the connection to trauma studies, but here it is sufficient to point out that Woolf's interest has less to do with the exceptional experience of one individual's traumatic past experience, and more to do with a diffuse atmospheric absorption of shock across the city on a thoroughly typical day. My discussion is thus in conversation with affect theorists who have argued for the need to look at how history plays out at the level of everyday.

Clarissa's sense that it is "dangerous to live even one day" (8) speaks to a particular kind of post-war psychological vulnerability. Clarissa is not haunted by one traumatic memory from the past; instead, she senses danger within the exuberant vitality of an ordinary June morning. The city is fast-paced and full of diversions; its capacity to absorb its denizens seems like a kind of death. It is therefore misleading to associate absorption only with the slow life a bygone era. Absorption by its very nature speeds up time: hours pass like minutes, days like hours. When we snap out of an absorptive state, we are surprised to see how much time has passed. The pleasures of absorptive experience thus paradoxically align with a kind of mortal danger. In this way, the city induces a kind of spellbound state in line with Crary's discussion of the spectacles that captivated nineteenth and early twentieth century audiences: hypnosis, trance, sleeping walking. This sense of vulnerability helps illustrate one particular point where attention and absorption diverge.

While attention implies a methodical kind of surveillance, absorption precludes that kind of hyper-vigilance. In other words, the absorbed cannot also be on guard. Take the following example:

Then, as the sound of St. Margaret's languished, he thought, She has been ill, and the sound expressed languor and suffering. It was her heart, he remembered; and the sudden loudness of the final stroke tolled for death that surprised in the midst of life. (50; emphasis added)

Particularly striking here is the way that absorption precedes shock. In the conventional modernist narrative, shock comes first, with absorption following as a way of smoothing things out. But in the passage above, absorption actually paves the way for shock. It is the absorptive mindset that makes the clock's tolling feel "sudden," a "surprise." In this way, absorption not only precedes but provides the necessary precondition for shock to feel shocking. One is shocked when one's guard is let down, when attention is unexpectedly seized. If death can creep up upon the absorbed subject, vigilant attention becomes attractive not because it prevents death, but because it defends against the shock and surprise of death. Freud makes a similar point in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Fright, he writes, is "lack of any preparedness for anxiety" (36). Fright thus distinguishes itself on the
basis of temporal sequence rather than mere content. Indeed, throughout Woolf's novel, we can track the worry that absorption might be the kind of diversion that allows death to sneak in unnoticed. The mind occupied elsewhere leaves itself vulnerable to sudden invasion or seizure.

The use of a sonic cue is indicative of the kind of shock that, borne out of absorption, can creep up when our backs are turned. Optical clarity might provide a more comforting sense of control: one can anticipate the encroachment of a threat, close one's eyes to avoid what is unpleasant, scale the world according to the parameters of a first-person perspective. Indeed, philosophers have traditionally metaphorized attention as a kind of spotlight or searchlight. While a spotlight radiates out from within, lighting a continuous passageway from mind to perceptual objects, an auditory model of attention more forcefully stages discontinuity. The sound of Big Ben emphatically signals an experience that is already underway, proof of time's steady progression with or without our conscious awareness. It is a kind of wake-up call from the absorptive dream of harmony between self and world. Thus, throughout the novel absorption signals an uncomfortable mismatch between phenomenological pleasure and existential terror. The joy of losing one's self in the city is much like the experience of being caught up in a good book, but the persistent worry nags: when do we wake up?

The shadow that seems to hang over absorption is a reminder that seamless integration is often merely an illusion. Absorption creates the impression of a smooth surface, but that is only because it seals up cracks and glosses over rough spots. The danger of being swept up in all this smoothness is a corresponding inability to step back or sense shock coming. At the same time, this proximity provides significant opportunities. Woolf's narrator seizes on this feature of absorption in the way that she discretely slides between different minds and different spheres. The persistence of the narrator's familiar diction, even as she picks up fragments from the mouths of her characters, helps smooth over the cracks and crevices between various voices.

For Woolf's characters, absorption similarly blurs the line between being drawn in and drawn out. Consider Peter Walsh: midway through the afternoon, he stops at his hotel for a bit of respite from the hot and crowded city streets. There, he weighs two options: "he might go to Clarissa's party, or he might go to one of the Halls, or he might settle in and read an absorbing book" (157). The choices on either side of the seemingly exclusive conjunction "or" echo the passage we began with in terms of the seeming contrast between solitary reader and the more socially inclined urban dweller. That distinction, however, soon crumbles. Peter's thoughts gradually begin to indicate the role of absorption in both solitary and social contexts:

He never knew what people thought. It became more and more difficult for him to concentrate. He became absorbed; he became busied with his own concerns; now surly, now gay; dependent on women, absent-minded, moody, less and less able (so he thought as he shaved) to understand why Clarissa couldn't simply find them a
lodging and be nice to Daisy; introduce her. And then he could just—just do what? just haunt and hover (he was at the moment actually engaged in sorting out various keys, papers), swoop and taste, be alone, in short, sufficient to himself; and yet nobody of course was more dependent upon others (he buttoned his waistcoat); it had been his undoing. He could not keep out of smoking-rooms, liked colonels, liked golf, liked bridge, and above all women's society. (158)

At first glance, it seems that absorption activates distinctly inward tendencies: it is a matter of “settling in;” Peter is “moody,” “busied with his own concerns,” longing to be “alone . . . sufficient to himself.” It is as if attention's finite resources have all been diverted to this state of absorption, resulting in an inability to concentrate. Peter is absorbed not just with his thoughts, but in them. The very process of self-absorption infuses thoughts with an irritable moodiness. Absorption's affective charge has overtaken its cognitive utility.

At a certain point, hyper-focus disintegrates from cognitive overdrive into emotional meltdown, and the focus is lost somewhere along the way. Yet while absorption is initially posited as thoroughly anti-social—absorbed in a book, absorbed in one's thoughts—by the end of the passage, the absorptive mindset leads outward rather than inward. Peter follows his moody thoughts deeper and deeper, but he ultimately comes out not in some buried recess of the psyche but outside, realizing how utterly “dependent [he is] on others.”

We see here how a state of inner absorption does not necessarily close off the world. In fact, it opens new points of access to it. If that seems surprising, we should remember that this is a novel in which the self is less a hermetically sealed interior and more like a “mist [that] spread ever so far” (9). It thus becomes possible to see how self-absorption can actually lead towards socialization. In this way, Peter's experience resonates with scholarship that has followed Heidegger in detaching mood from individual interiority. Jonathan Flaherty sums it up when he writes that “moods are an atmosphere, a kind of weather . . . moods are not in us; we are in them” (22) and that “we find ourselves in moods that have already been inhabited by others, and that have already been shaped or put into circulation” (5).

In this way, Peter's drifting in the turbulent currents of a mood becomes an act of participation rather than seclusion. His feelings are not exclusively his own, but rather part of a larger circulating affective climate. Peter slips from absorption in his own mind to absorption with the wider world, once again troubling the conventional divide between solitary and urban contexts. While initially Peter's mind and body are completely at odds, by the end of the passage, the mental and physical realms merge: Peter buttons his waistcoat while his thoughts concern themselves with society. It is only here and only temporarily that the content of his thoughts and the form of his actions find unity.

The split between mind and body throughout much of this passage also tells us something about how a narrator represents absorptive processes. Because Peter is so absorbed for much of the passage, he lacks the ability to step back and observe his own actions. The narrator has to fill us in on details such as the movement of
Peter's hands because he completes those tasks with the automatic obliviousness of one whose thoughts are occupied elsewhere. In this way, the narrator's attention provides compensation for Peter's attentional blind spots: while the character is elsewhere with his thoughts, the parentheticals intervene to narrate his various tasks. Woolf's use of free indirect discourse provides a fuller picture than a first-person narration ever could. In other words, the best vantage point for perceiving a mental state such as absorption or attention is not necessarily within the subject himself. As Paul North suggests in *The Problem of Distraction*, "to attention attention cannot be paid" (4); "[a]ttention can possess anything but itself" (3). One's own attention cannot be attended to from within the structure of first-person experience. In this regard, we get the image of Peter's mental state only because the narrator herself refuses to be fully absorbed by it. The parentheses are abrupt interruptions that fight against the hypnotic tug of absorption.

I have alluded to the fact that Woolf absorbs the voices and perspectives of her characters, but here I can point out that absorption is not a strategy Woolf embraces wholeheartedly at every turn. It would be more accurate to say that absorption is key to the narrator's struggle, to her ability to pull off a delicate balancing act. In this situation, a narrator who is not absorbed might be in the best position to depict a character who is. While absorption creates an impression of equality, the very fact that it smooths out unevenness should remind us that there is a power differential at work. The individual or thing that is absorbed is subsumed into something larger. Absorption thus commits its own kind of violence, but unlike shock, it covers its tracks. Woolf's narrative style performs a difficult balancing act: to selectively absorb elements of one's characters without being absorbed or swallowed up by those characters.

The essential insight here is that absorption is not just part of the historical story but also a key element of Woolf's formal innovation. Free indirect discourse is a narrative strategy driven by the logic of absorption: the narrator absorbs and is absorbed by the voices of the novel's extensive cast of characters. Rather than immersing herself fully in one consciousness, Woolf incorporates the moods, tones, and linguistic particularities of many into one narrative voice. Narrative voice is "in the air," moving between subjects and drifting in the rhythms and currents of city life.

This airborne mode of narration is more than just a way of capturing a huge range of individual characters. Woolf is interested in representing atmosphere itself. That interest betrays still another step in Woolf's departure from a more standard model of shock absorbency. Thus far, we have seen that, from being banished from Woolf's modernism, absorption plays a critical role both formally and thematically. Moving forward it becomes imperative to consider another revision to the prevailing narrative: Woolf transports the process of shock absorbency from the individual psyche to the wider atmosphere.
FROM PSYCHE TO ATMOSPHERE

Turn-of-the-century physicians tended to treat shock as a physical injury: railway and motor accidents were cited as prime examples of the body's literal collision with new technology. Initially, thinking about wartime shell shock followed a similar logic. Early diagnosis forms required a precise measurement of the victim's proximity to an explosion as a way of proving direct neurological damage (Armstrong 62). Gradually this physical conception of shock gave way to a more broadly psychological one. While the distinction between shock and trauma is not a hard and fast one (and is historically variable), modern conceptions of trauma tend to think of shock or “brain damage” in the more figurative sense of a lasting damage to the mind (Freudians note its Greek etymology as a kind of wound). I see this expansion of shock from “brain” to “mind” as significant but incomplete. The additional step is from psyche to atmosphere.

My reading of an atmospheric shock absorber in Mrs. Dalloway both draws on but also departs from prevailing theorizations of trauma. The common thread here involves temporality, the sense that shock has a long afterlife. The difference, however, concerns the way shocks are encoded and preserved. In one major line of trauma theory, extending from Freud to Cathy Caruth's Unclaimed Experience, trauma differs from shock in the way it so powerfully and unexpectedly breaks through psychic defense mechanisms. While shocks are experienced consciously in real time through the jolt produced by this psychic clash, the thinking goes, trauma penetrates into the psyche with such violent directness that the experience is missed and can be accessed only retrospectively. In this way, trauma theory is all about retrieving lasting traces of the past on the inside. By contrast, the prospect of atmospheric shock absorbency means looking for those affective traces outside. Instead of assuming that missed experiences will be found deep within us, this approach means taking seriously the possibility that some experiences remain on the outside, registering not upon any single mind but at the level of our environment and the shared air we breathe. It means that the individual is not necessarily the privileged site for theorizing shock absorbency.

Mrs. Dalloway consistently thematizes the idea of missed experiences. In so doing, it provides a certain degree of freedom to think about experiences in the absence of subjects. For example, while Septimus is to some extent the quintessentially shell-shocked soldier, his experience is largely detailed in the language of failed impact. Fighting on the front lines of the Great War, he survives precisely because “the last shells missed him” (96). This bodily sense of near-miss resonates at the level of affective experience as well: “he watched them explode with indifference... He could not feel” (96).

How could we possibly think of the front-line soldier in terms of a lack of direct experience? Peter Sloterdijk's Terror from the Air provides much-needed historical and philosophical scaffolding here. Sloterdijk argues that the unprecedented nature of twentieth-century war and technology stemmed from its assault on atmosphere rather than an individual target; he cites poison gas as a prime
example. Chemical agents moved modern warfare beyond not only hand-to-hand combat but also the very idea of violence directed against individual bodies. While historically warfare had been characterized by “direct shots” (13) and a “targeted object” (13), modern war is an “[a]tmospheric war . . . enveloping the enemy . . . within a noxious cloud” (18). Sloterdijk goes so far as to suggest that atmospheric manipulation is the single most distinguishing feature of twentieth century modernity: “The 20th century will be remembered as the age whose essential thought consisted in targeting no longer the body, but the enemy’s environment” (14).

Following Sloterdijk, I propose we consider not just the experiences characters have, but also those that they miss, paying attention to how the affectively charged experience of absorption plays out at the level of atmospheres and not just human subjects. Sloterdijk’s examples of atmospheric innovation — ranging from poison gas to air conditioning to gas chambers — help us see that the twentieth-century preoccupation with experiences “in the air” is more than just a figurative one. The affectively charged residue of the past often materializes in the air, rather than as a dredged-up memory. The wind is described as an “eternal breeze” (81). Sound is an “invincible thread [that] wound up in the air” (82). Clarissa feels that the sky “held something of her own in it . . . this sky above Westminster” (185). It is not just the psyches of Woolf’s characters that provide storage for something of the past; the atmosphere, too, is a kind of affective repository for history.

Let’s take a look at an affective experience that takes place in the air rather than on the surface of one individual mind. Mrs. Dalloway features a much-discussed scene in which the sudden sound of a backfiring car produces the kind of jarring shock one would associate with the battlefield and conventional accounts of shock. I want to focus on what happens next — the experiences of those who do not register the shock directly but rather experience it in more gentle, more mediated form:

... 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 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. (18)

The words “surface” and “agitation” connote the direct tactile contact we might expect from a shocking encounter in the conventional sense. But the other something — “something very profound,” “something [that] had happened” concerns not the direct impact of that shock on any individual consciousness but rather the collective shock waves that create invisible currents of connection across the city (and indeed the Empire). After all, this is a novel about the
post-war city, not just one post-war mind. We tend to think of shock in terms of a discrete location, both spatially and temporally. But here the atmosphere’s absorption of shock is all about a spreading out in space and time, the way that different affective and sensory fragments are prolonged and redistributed: “the car had gone . . . it left a slight ripple which flowed through glove shops and hat shops and tailors’ shops.”

These characters do not register the initial shock and indeed they do not have to. What they sense is more like a subtle change in atmospheric conditions. Echoes in particular highlight the mediating nature of air: invisibility creates the illusion of direct experience for what is actually filtered transmission. The coupling of “frail” and “whispering” with “expansion” helps emphasize how a shock thinned out on the dimension of intensity is at the same time spread out on the dimension of spatial reach. The passage’s reference to “something” is therefore deliberately vague: it captures the way subjects become attuned to affect in the present moment, before the imposition of semantic and linguistic systems. In contrast to the violence of shock, registered as a distinct event, the experience here is felt gradually, like a change in the weather. The implication is that large collectives, such as the city or the nation, are forged not only through shared events but through shared atmosphere.

Indeed this language—“something happened”—captures the precise sense of affective living history emphasized by theorists writing in the tradition of Raymond Williams’s “structures of feeling” (128–135). Kathleen Stewart writes that we sense atmosphere when “the sense of something happening becomes tactile” (445). We do not experience our historical moment as a clear chain of discernable events, she writes, but rather sense it as “something coming into existence” (446). Lauren Berlant similarly writes that “trauma produces something in the air without that thing having to be more concrete than a sense of the uncanny-free-floating . . . the becoming-event” (80). Surprisingly, “something” is the most specific and carefully chosen word Woolf uses in the passage.

This is precisely what recurs throughout the novel—affect experienced as a kind of pervasive yet fluctuating weather. It is no accident, for instance, that Mrs. Dalloway takes place on a summer day in which London is overwhelmed by a heat wave. The atmosphere absorbs the sun’s hazardous rays—another instance of an atmospheric rather than psychological shield. Yet for all its defensive functions, atmospheric intervention itself comes to pose a certain kind of threat. Feelings are routinely described in terms of “turbulence,” “thunder-claps” (101), “pressure” (87)—all atmospheric conditions. Characters register the heat as cumulative effect rather than single blow: “the weight of the day . . . had exhausted him with its heat, its intensity” (152). In this sense, it is a shared experience that gradually sinks in. Indeed, absorption can be slow; it is impossible to put a precise date and time on the moment when Peter’s skin absorbed sufficient sunlight to make him sunburned (but Woolf mentions that he is).

Yet the optimism implied by a “shared atmosphere” belies the degree of stratification that structures such ostensible sharing. In the post-war city, the
distribution of affect is not egalitarian—it flows but it also gets stuck, rerouted, even hoarded. While Septimus cannot feel, his noncombatant boss is overcome by feeling when talking about the war: he “could not finish, so pleasurable was his emotion” (88). This affective stratification is imagined in explicitly aerial terms. Septimus takes his last breath in the novel—a “suffocation of blackness” (184); by contrast, Doctor Bradshaw’s high society guests “breathed the air of Harley Street with rapture; which relief however was denied to his patients” (101).

Atmospheric diffusion can result in affective amplification for some, but also a troubling degree of affective deprivation for others. This reading insists that we take seriously the idea of non-experience or partial experience—a far cry from the “jolt” of shock that so loudly announces itself as experience, as event. Many characters experience or drift through something that cannot quite be categorized as firsthand or direct impact—yet what they never experience as an event, they do nonetheless experience as lived environment. In other words, for many, the shocks of modernity are quotidian rather than exceptional, and as such they are assimilated into the fabric of everyday life. Woolf is interested in what it is like to live, day in and day out, in an atmosphere that has been saturated with shock and affect, regardless of what one’s individual biography might include. Thus, even the violence of recent history becomes an enveloping climate rather than sharply delineated four year period—less a punctuated moment and more like the air one breathes.

The shift in scale from psychic to atmospheric has significant implications for narrative voice. The narrator’s object of concern is an entire affective climate rather than individual mind. Free indirect discourse is thus essential to understanding how Woolf constructs atmosphere. Far from being tethered to a distinct subject position, the narrator’s voice is airborne, free to cross subjective boundaries and drift in London’s affective weather. Woolf’s narrator readily absorbs the particularities of her characters, but she insistently refuses to be wholly absorbed by them. In this way, an atmospheric lens offers a new way of integrating historicist and formalist accounts of Woolf’s narrative experimentation.

To illustrate, the following passage thematizes absorption in connection to a sort of post-war existential dread, but it also provides insight into the formal work of absorption:

But she feared time itself, and read on Lady Bruton’s face, as if it had been a dial cut in impassive stone, the dwindling of life; how year by year her share was sliced, how little the margin that remained was capable any longer of stretching, of absorbing, as in the youthful years, the colours, salts, tones of existence, so that she filled the room she entered, and felt often as she stood hesitating one moment on the threshold of her drawing-room, an exquisite suspense, such as might stay a diver before plunging while the sea darkens and brightens beneath him, and the waves which threaten to break... (30; emphasis added).

Rather than complete immersion—a kind of unselective and open floodgates for raw experience—the passage describes an aesthetically discriminating process
of careful selection and guarded restraint. We are immersed in many things, but we find certain things absorbing. Absorption allows one to sift through the components of raw experience, to gradually receive experiences as they accumulate rather than in one blunt impact. There is often a leisure in this type of absorption, as indicated by its association with youth here. The language here explicitly invokes aesthetic discernment: “the colours, salts, tones of existence.” We can use this passage to explore the subtle differences between absorption and immersion by considering Woolf’s contrasting images of the hostess or diver hesitating on a threshold and the diver who has plunged into the sea. While the diver is fully immersed in the water, the figure who hesitates on a threshold incorporates select elements from a distance. One is drenched and surrounded by sea water, the other absorbs particles of sea air.

This image also captures the essential features of narrative voice in this novel. Like the figure hesitating on a threshold, the narrator gains privileged access to her characters by hovering around them instead of simply plunging into them. The narrator is rarely fully immersed in her characters. Instead, she is more like that hesitating figure whose access to sea air simultaneously represents greater distance and greater intimacy—a focus on aura rather than object.

This kind of selective absorbency is particularly appropriate for the kind of subtle affective shades and tones that Woolf wishes to capture in this novel. Full immersion in one character at a time would overwhelm not only the narrative voice but also the more subtle shades and tones of a given character. Woolf’s use of free indirect discourse is itself a process of “absorbing . . . the colours, salts, tones of existence.” The narrator prevents herself from being fully absorbed by her characters; her attention jumps but it is far from undiscriminating, and something of her familiar voice and diction always reemerges. In this way, the narrator herself seems to anxiously guard against the possibility of being drowned out—in both the aural and existential senses of that phrase. Thus the narrator’s efforts to absorb as well as her notable resistance to being absorbed work in tandem to construct atmosphere. Absorption is far from a simple “good”: it is central to this novel because it is a problem and a possibility at the same time.

The final scenes of the novel illustrate how Woolf’s absorbing atmosphere spans thematic and formal concerns. Clarissa’s party is itself an aesthetic project aimed at cultivating a certain atmosphere. It is also an event that spans the domestic and urban spheres we have seen crisscross throughout this discussion. Hovering by the windowsill at one point, the narrator is uniquely poised to pick up on selective elements from interior and exterior spaces. The setting also provides a variation on the thresholds we have seen throughout: the hesitating diver, the hostess in her drawing room, the novel’s many figures loitering at corners, curbs, doors, and windows. When a gust of wind blows into the house, Clarissa is tremendously relieved by the reaction of a guest: “The curtain with its flight of birds of Paradise blew out again. And Clarissa saw—she saw Ralph Lyon beat it back, and go on talking. So it wasn’t a failure after all! It was going to be all right now—her party. It had begun. It had started” (170). That the curtain not only
“blows in” but is “beaten back” reinforces the bidirectional nature of absorption: the domestic space absorbs city air just as the city absorbs the air of Clarissa’s household.

There is a clash of forces at work here, and yet this turbulence does not register with the violence of shock. To the contrary, it is nearly invisible. The curtain materializes the image of ironing out a wrinkled texture. Clarissa’s satisfaction stems from this smoothing effect, the triumph of having seamlessly assimilated different spheres. Ralph’s reflex-like response suggests that the disturbance—or potential distraction—is nothing like the jarring shifts of gear we have come to associate with shock. In contrast to the dramatic halt or jerking movement resulting from a shocking interruption, this intrusion facilitates fluid incorporation. Clarissa’s relief involves not just this physical mode of absorption but also the implied absorptive mental state. The curtain blowing in alarms Clarissa because it threatens to disrupt and distract. Yet Ralph beats it back with the kind of absent-minded gesture we have come to associate with absorption. He goes on talking, barely conscious of what his hand is doing. In other words, he is too absorbed to be bothered by the curtain.

Noticing the centrality of absorption here means venturing a revision of the standard account of the party’s key moment: the utter shock that comes with the news of Septimus’s death. Readers tend to focus on the way that the news shakes Clarissa, yanking her out of her current mindset. It is a moment that has all the expected characteristics of shock—the flow of the party breaks down at a punctuated moment. Even the language echoes an earlier passage we looked at. Then, it was, “death that surprised in the midst of life” (50); now, it is “in the middle of my party, here’s death” (183). Yet in both cases, shock has the effect that it does precisely because of the way it emerges from the absorption preceding it. On either side of shock, we find absorption. In some ways, that is what makes absorption as disturbing as it is reassuring: for a moment the death is shocking, but then it, too, is incorporated into the larger atmosphere. Septimus’s death might be stunning for a moment, but during most of the party it exists only through slight affective traces permeating the party’s atmosphere—the chatter about war, the mood of nostalgia. The fact is, death is always in the midst of Clarissa’s party, but most of the time absorption conceals its rough edges.

Free indirect discourse allows Woolf to navigate these various thresholds and points of intersection. The reader in turn must tune into the subtlety with which such collisions take place. While the transition from one character to the next occasionally has the abruptness of a shock, more often it is smooth enough to evade immediate detection. At any given moment, the experience of one character is colored by her absorption of the wider atmosphere.

Let’s look at one final illustration, this time when Peter senses

... windows lit up, a piano, a gramophone sounding; a sense of pleasure-making hidden, but now and again emerging when, through the uncurtained window, the window left open, one saw parties sitting over tables, young people slowly circling, conversations
between men and women, maids looking idly out (a strange comment theirs, when work was done), stockings drying on top ledges, a parrot, a few plants. Absorbing, mysterious, of infinite richness, this life. And in the large square where the cabs shot and swerved so quick, there were loitering couples, dallying, embracing, shrunken under the shower of a tree; that was moving; so silent, so absorbed, that one passed, discreetly, timidly, as if in the presence of some sacred ceremony to interrupt which would have been impious. That was interesting. And so on into the flare and glare. His light overcoat blew open, he stepped with indescribable idiosyncrasy, leant a little forward, with his hands behind his back and his eyes still a little hawk-like; he tripped through London, towards Westminster, observing. (163; emphasis added)

The structure of this passage is a perfect inversion of the party scene: from outside, Peter looks in to a party. This window does not have a curtain, and yet at the end of the passage, Peter’s own coat “blows open”; we see the effect of air from the other side as it flows out of rather than into a home. Just as Clarissa finds herself transfixed in the moment when the curtain is beaten back, so does Peter feel that this is the kind of experience that comes about only “now and then”; and when it does come about, he finds himself similarly arrested by the experience. Thus it is not just shock that elevates individual moments—absorption similarly creates a distinctly heightened sensation even in the absence of the overtly sensational. In contrast to the shocking urban language that has become all too familiar—“cabs shot and swerved so quick”—both minds and air drift gradually. The “loitering,” “dallying” couples as well as the “discrete” and “timid” approach of the spectator stand in stark contrast to the jerks and jolts of those cars. The sense that “to interrupt...would have been impious” further underscores this mode of gradual incorporation rather than violent confrontation.

In both scenes, Woolf is registering a kind of turbulence in the air that does not amount to a violent break or shock. These instances should prompt us to rethink the way Woolf’s narrator drifts between her characters. Woolf’s movement in the air between characters is as significant as her move into them. In constructing atmosphere, Woolf finds a way to represent an affective metropolitan climate that is more than the sum of the city’s many mental parts. One might associate atmosphere with a painterly impressionist aesthetic, but Woolf uses the specifically literary technique of free indirect discourse. One also might expect atmosphere to emerge at moments of vague indistinction. Woolf’s atmosphere instead materializes at sharply defined points of intersection. It is by narrating the ensuing absorptive processes, rather than by painting full psychological portraits, that Woolf captures the atmosphere of London one day in June.

My discussion forces us to confront the possibility that we have been looking for traces of a violent past in all the wrong places—or at least, in not enough places. The convention has been to look at rupture, disintegration, fragmentation. But if the modernist period is distinct for the way absorption follows shock, we need to give the smooth textures the same scrupulous attention we bestow on the overtly bumpy ones. Instead of confining our attention to the individual mind
or the discrete episode, we need to feel around for affective traces that have been woven into the fabric of quotidian life. This is what makes recent scholarship in affect theory and the everyday so exciting, and so promising for revising our understanding of modernist shock. Perhaps the next step will involve a clearer articulation of the readerly consequences of the turn from shock to absorption. It might help to recall one moment when Clarissa redefines the self as something aerial and diffuse rather than concrete and individual: "not 'here, here, here'; and she tapped the back of her seat; but everywhere" (152).

Notes

1. Massumi translates "Affect/Affection: Neither word denotes a personal feeling (sentiment in Deleuze and Guattari). L'affect (Spinoza's affectus) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act. L'affection (Spinoza's affectio) is each state considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body (with body taken in its broadest sense to include 'mental' or ideal bodies)" ("Notes" xvi).

2. The Oxford English Dictionary locates the origins of shock in the French choquer ("shock").

3. Parkes historicizes the aesthetics of shock in relation to modern warfare and terrorism in the early twentieth century; see 10, 99, 118. Parkes recounts how new aesthetic practices were received as a shock to the senses as well as moral sensibilities. Impressionism was "frequently seen as an assault on the audience," he writes. Parkes quotes critics' use of violent language: "[Manet] had declared war on beauty" and "[Whistler] had 'thrown a post of paint in the public's face.'" Parkes also points to the newspaper and sensationalized journalism to argue that twentieth century life was characterized not only by immediate sensory shocks but something he calls "the shock of information."

4. Lauren Berlant directs our attention to "crisis ordinariness . . . crisis is not exceptional to history . . . but a process embedded in the ordinary" (10). She writes, "[i]n an ordinary environment, most of what we call events are not of the scale of memorable impact" Kathleen Stewart urges "atmospheric attunement" to "the rhythms of living" (445).

5. See Crary as well as Mole, Smithies, and Wu.

6. For examples see Massumi, "Autonomy", Brennan; and Anderson.

7. See Armstrong as well as Freud

8. See Caruth as well as Freud.

9. This combination of "proximity and distance" aligns with Walter Benjamin's conception of the aura. See Benjamin 217–238.

Works Cited


