

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Balance: Benefit or bromide?

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*Eds.:* This paper forms part of a Special Issue titled 'Beyond Virtue and Vice: Education for a Darker Age', in which the editors invited authors to engage in exercises of 'transvaluation'. Certain apparently settled educational concepts (from agency and fulfilment to alienation and ignorance) can be radically reinterpreted such that virtues can be seen as vices, and vices as virtues. The editors encouraged authors to employ polemics and some occasional exaggeration to revalue the educational values that are too readily accepted within contemporary educational discourses.

**Abstract**

There seem to be obvious virtues to keeping a sense of balance. In this paper, I consider some examples from ordinary life and education where the pursuit of balance would appear to be a benefit. Yet I also draw upon lines of thinking from John Stuart Mill and Adam Phillips to examine whether the apparent good sense of balance can be disturbed. I show how Mill's and Phillips' ideas extend into a consideration of the aesthetics of balance and the idea that there might be something deceptively alluring about balance. I seek to develop these lines of thinking in relation to a work of modernist literature that works to dissipate balance's beguiling allure.

**KEYWORDS**

Adam Phillips, balance, compromise, extremism, John Stuart Mill, Mrs Dalloway, moral education

**BALANCE AND ITS BENEFITS**

Speaking to The Mutual Improvement Society in 1834, John Stuart Mill remarked on how 'there seems to be something singularly captivating in the word "balance" ... as if, because anything is called a balance, it must, for that reason, be necessarily good'. Mill's words bring us to reflect on a certain image of balance as well as of human beings' relation to that image. Adam Phillips, citing Mill's words, comments on how balance is a central idea in our thinking of social and political matters today: 'we want a balanced economy, or a balance of power... people to make balanced judgements' (2010, p. xi). As Phillips also remarks, balance is a notion related to our conceptions of individual wellbeing and psychic health: 'we describe disturbing people as unbalanced, or ... that anyone who is troubled is suffering from a chemical imbalance' (2010, p. xi). There are ordinary ways in which balance appears to be a good thing in many aspects of our lives—and that it is. Moreover, there are growing worries that, as Adam Phillips (2010, p. 2) puts it, ours is an 'age of

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excess': of excessive wealth and poverty, of polarised politics, rising rates of problems like eating disorders (eating too much food, eating too little food). From this perspective, the idea of balance seems like a benefit, having the potential to address many of our contemporary ills.

When Mutual Improvement Societies were established in the 19th century, the idea was that they would offer instruction to working men by working men, and this instruction extended to the sharing of political discussion. They were, we might say, an informal education of the development and formation of citizens in the *polis*. Shortly, I will turn to consider an example from educational theory today that is concerned with moral and civic education as it takes place in more formal settings. The reason this account is interesting in the present context is, as we shall see, that it, too, appears to take balance to be predominantly a benefit.

Yet Mill's remarks on balance also introduce us to another possibility. The word 'balance', Mill suggests, is 'singularly captivating'. Is Mill here registering something of an *allure* in the very idea of balance here? Is he suggesting, moreover, that this allure could be deceptive—and in a way that might reveal more problematic tendencies that are contained in the captivity of balance? Later in the paper, I shall extend these questions into a consideration of the aesthetics of balance. But let us begin with the benefits.

## BALANCE AND MORAL EDUCATION

Mill is well known for a kind of political philosophy that appears to fit well with the idea that there is a good sense to balance. 'In one traditional version of the moral life as Mill knows', Phillips writes, 'it is balance that is sought. Indeed, it was part of Mill's liberalism to believe that we should be able to "enter into the mind and circumstance" of those with opposing views to our own' (2010, p. xii). A notion of balance connects political philosophy with the notion of tolerance. In recent years, some political and educational philosophers have sought to develop the conceptual connection between compromise and tolerance. Let us look a little more closely at this. It will help to unfold a certain picture of balance.

In his *On Compromise and Rotten Compromise*, Avishai Margalit argues that 'compromise and tolerance are for the liberal mind two sides of the same coin, and the icon of the liberal should be minted on both sides' (2009, p. 104). 'For the liberal mind', Margalit writes, 'the spirit of compromise is what should breathe life into politics.' At the same time, Margalit observes, compromise out of tolerance has something of a 'puzzling nature', and leaves the liberal open to certain challenges:

The liberal is attacked by the enemy for lacking all conviction, of readiness to dilute every position for the sake of accommodation. The liberal is a sheep in sheep's clothing. With the other tool, the liberal is attacked for being just another type of sectarian. This tool recasts the liberal as one who subversively promotes the spirit of compromise so as to impose her doctrine of neutral space: a space in which there is no room for the concept of the good, and no room for religious ideas of the good life. The liberal is a secular sectarian wolf in sheep's clothing. (pp. 104–105)

The charges Margalit introduces against the liberal here are complex. I will return to them in a different form a little later. For now, I introduce them as a way of contextualising the way the interest in tolerance and compromise in political philosophy is often framed. This is, more precisely, in relation to a discussion of the problems with extremism (what Margalit calls 'sectarianism'). Extremism is a topic that Adam Phillips also explores in *On Balance*. It is a theme that has received much attention in educational thinking in recent years as a result of certain controversial educational policies such as the 'Prevent' duty that was introduced in England and Wales.

One person who has worked on extremism and education is Michael Hand. In a recent discussion, Hand draws upon Margalit's work to argue that, to prevent extremism of belief, educators ought to seek to teach and cultivate 'readiness to compromise' among young people today. Let us look a little further at this. Hand defines compromise as:

the resolution of a disagreement by the making of concessions. In the simplest case, two people who disagree about a course of action (say, whether to spend the day hiking in the hills or lying on the beach) resolve their disagreement by settling on a course of action that partially satisfies the preferences of each (say, hiking in the morning and sunbathing in the afternoon). The parties to the disagreement split the difference or meet each other halfway. Neither gets exactly what they want, but they both get something of what they want and they are able to move past the disagreement. (2022, p. 4)<sup>1</sup>

Hand sees Daniel Weinstock's distinction between an 'integrative' compromise—such as those above—and a 'substitutive' compromise as important (where the resolution is formed by a different outcome being substituted for the preferences, rather than a 'meeting in the middle', Hand gives the example of a couple deciding where to eat for dinner). He also said that we are mostly in our lives concerned with compromises of an integrative kind. Our compromises can, Hand says in a further distinction, be either intrapersonal (within myself, 'my desires') or interpersonal (between parties or individuals with opposing viewpoints) (p. 4).

Hand argues that readiness to compromise can (and should) be taught both discursively and through experience (activities like 'model United Nations', perhaps). He says that literary texts can also be a great source for teaching children the benefits of compromise. He writes:

Pupils should be encouraged to reflect on the many and varied situations in which compromises can be struck, and on the differing fortunes of people (actual and fictional) who are and are not prepared to compromise. They should be given opportunities to talk about occasions on which they themselves have compromised or refused to compromise, and about the consequences of their choices. (p. 8)

Hand seems clear about what the outcomes of this would be. He writes that:

Bringing it about that pupils understand why aversion to compromise is undesirable and readiness to compromise desirable requires only that they are acquainted with a wide enough range of cases to see that, when preferences and purposes clash, the option of compromising is nearly always worth exploring and usually the best bet. (p. 9)

## THE AESTHETICS OF BALANCE

Hand's discussion will certainly be of interest and value for philosophical debates about extremism and education. The reason I am interested in this here is rather different—as a representative example of the stance Phillips invokes when he says, as quoted above, that 'in one traditional version of the moral life ... it is balance that is sought'. Moreover, I am interested in whether as an example it can help us to understand why for Mill (and Phillips) there is something problematic about seeking (a certain kind of) balance.

Let us return to Mill's conception that there is something 'singularly captivating' in the notion of balance. What does this mean? As Phillips suggests, it does not simply mean a denial of the good sense to balance. However, it does involve registering a different kind of thought about balance:

That it [balance] is an image—a picture of something, of somebody creating a kind of order—and that we are beguiled by it ... Justice with her scales is infinitely reassuring. (2010, p. xi)

In invoking the notions of the image or the picture here, Phillips helps us to see how Mill's words invite us to consider that there is an *aesthetics* to balance. We could, of course, connect this to the classical thought that beauty resides in harmony, proportion and perfect ratio. While it may appear that seeking balance is simply 'good sense', Mill's words

thus also invite the thought that we have been *captivated* by its sense. Balance, we might thus say, has a particular kind of *allure* about it. Phillips, employing his psychoanalytical perspective, goes on to read this allure in terms of an offer of 'reassurance'. He goes on to contrast the pictures of balance that are reassuring (the image of the scales of justice, of the person creating order) with the fear and horror invoked by precarious acts of balance, such as someone walking on a tightrope between two tall buildings. He also mentions how children may be *less* inclined to see balance as reassuring: He points to children's love for making themselves dizzy until they fall over.

What does this talk of the aesthetics and allure of balance mean for Michael Hand's discussion? It is interesting to see how Hand's own account is rather reassuring. The topic being addressed is potentially explosive: How to handle extremist beliefs in the classroom. But the style of the piece, the well-balanced tone and structure give us a sense of order and control of the issue. The particular nature of the examples that are developed to make the case, too, is worth noting: 'two people who disagree about a course of action (say, whether to spend the day hiking in the hills or lying on the beach) resolve their disagreement by settling on a course of action that partially satisfies the preferences of each (say, hiking in the morning and sunbathing in the afternoon)'. The picture that is created here is very reassuring. The metaphors for compromise that are used—'splitting the difference' and 'meeting halfway'—are, like the image of the scales of justice, stable and static images: They give us the thought of someone who is occupying the middle position (indeed, Hand goes on to advocate that a readiness to compromise is a 'steady state' that must endure 'across different domains' (p. 6)).

Is there anything *wrong* with any of this? Isn't it what we want in philosophy? Let me say something more about the examples Hand uses. Are the examples fitting, given the context of the discussion? The example cited above is of two adults, moreover, two adults who presumably have a certain shared level of values, beliefs and past experiences (it seems they are friends or perhaps a married couple). Moreover, what they are compromising about is a trivial matter. The example, therefore, seems a world away from a classroom of adolescents in an inner-city comprehensive school, coming from a wide variety of religious and socio-economic backgrounds, whom a teacher is trying to help learn how to compromise. Moreover, there seems to be very little discussion of *how* the compromise is achieved, in Hand's example, or recognition of the way that lingering, unreasonable thoughts might well seethe at the apparently tidy compromise that has been made ('why does he always have to have his way too? some men do anything *just* to make their wife happy!').

The point about the fittingness of the examples is again a point about the aesthetics of balance, and the way we can be lured into too tidy or too simplified a picture of what human life is like. Yet perhaps, it may be thought, that this is a little unfair. The example just invoked is, after all, introduced by Hand as 'the simplest case'. And, a large part of his case for the plausibility of compromise, is built on Hand's suggestion that:

Internally, each of us has a multitude of desires, goals and plans, some of them flatly incompatible, most just forced into competition by our limited stocks of time and energy. Externally, we have no choice but to engage in cooperative schemes with others whose interests, ends and values differ markedly from our own. In the world we actually inhabit, disagreements are unavoidable and frequent, and compromises are usually our best bet for resolving them. (p. 5)

But if we are *perpetually* conflicted and at odds with ourselves—as Hand here seems to suggest—doesn't that show even more that there is a problem in the aesthetics of balance and the tidiness it suggests?<sup>2</sup> At any rate, it would appear to disturb the steadiness and static nature of any balance we achieve.

Could we take these lines of thought further? Let us turn to a work that appears to disrupt the aesthetics of balance and the sense of tidiness it offers us. The work in question is a modernist novel: Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*.

## 'A SENSE OF PROPORTION'

*Mrs Dalloway* is Clarissa Dalloway, an upper-class woman and wife of Mr Dalloway, an influential politician. Woolf's novel covers a day in Clarissa's life in June 1923. Clarissa travels around London preparing for a party she is hosting that evening for her social circle. Clarissa's perspective is presented throughout the novel alongside other perspectives and narratives that intertwine. These parallel narratives include that of Septimus Warren Smith, a man in his thirties who has recently returned home to England after the end of the First World War. Before his return, Septimus had been stationed in Milan, where he had remained until the end of the war. After the Armistice, Septimus met a young Italian woman named Lucrezia (Rezia), and they were married. In appearance, Septimus has an 'intelligent, sensitive profile' (Woolf, 2000, p. 71), but other features that are 'loose' (ibid.). He is 'on the whole, a border case, neither one thing nor the other: might end with a house at Purley and a motor car, or continue renting apartments in the back streets all his life; one of those half-educated, self-educated men' (ibid.). The instability about Septimus as a character began early in his life: he was born in Stroud but felt frustrated there and moved to London as a young man, with the aspiration to become a poet. In London, he set out to improve himself through education (he had no formal education). He started to attend lectures by Miss Isabel Pole on Shakespeare, and he soon fell in love with her. While he was educating himself he also worked for the businessman Mr Brewer who rated him and was making big plans for Septimus' career. At the start of the First World War, Septimus enlisted in the army: 'he went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square' (p. 73).

Septimus went to war for Shakespeare and Miss Pole, but the experience in the trenches profoundly changed him. During his time in the trenches, he became intimate friends with his Officer named Evans, who was killed just before the end of the war. Septimus' reaction is to anaesthetise himself to what had happened. 'He congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him' (ibid.). Rezia tries to make a go of their marriage, but Septimus is distant and can take no pleasure in the everyday things of life. He continues to feel numbed towards life emotionally and physiologically: 'he could not taste, he could not feel' (p. 75). Back in England, Septimus eventually surrenders to the idea that 'people must be sent for' to help. The first person to treat him is the local General Practitioner Dr Holmes.

In his introduction to the novel, David Bradshaw writes how Woolf's novel is set within a society suffering in the aftermath of 'deep psychological wounds' (Bradshaw, 2000, p. 19). It portrays the way that events can emerge that displace the kind of calculative thinking and ordering of the world that was making people successful and comfortable—for example, the war is represented as something that 'threw out many of Mr Brewer's calculations' (Woolf, 2000, p. 73). Septimus survived the fighting on the battlefields, but psychologically he is in anguish and distress. He is described by Woolf as the 'double' of Clarissa Dalloway who is herself a pale and fragile survivor of the influenza pandemic (Spanish Flu), the other major event to have wounded society at that time (the pandemic began in 1918).

How is Septimus' suffering responded to? Dr Holmes' approach is a level-headed one. He comes to visit Septimus and tries to normalise what he is feeling: 'So you're in a funk' (p. 78). Holmes offers Septimus and Rezia practical prescriptions: 'when he felt like that', he tells Rezia, 'he went to the Music Hall ... he took a day off with his wife and played golf' (p. 77). He extolls the value of 'hobbies'—something that will divert Septimus' attention. Holmes believes that 'health is largely a matter in our own control' (p. 78), showing a supreme confidence in our power to control and regulate our ownbodies. And, he advises Septimus, if you are really stuck, 'why not try two tabloids of bromide dissolved in a glass of water at bedtime?' (p. 77)

Septimus is disgusted with Dr Holmes' and what he stands for about what Septimus calls 'human nature', and refuses to be treated by him any longer. Rezia, increasingly desperate, makes an appointment with a mind-doctor on Harley Street called Sir William Bradshaw. Sir William does not come cheap. But he has a reputation of 'lightening skill', 'infallible accuracy in diagnosis' and of 'sympathy; tact; understanding of the human soul' (p. 81). When Sir William meets Septimus, his skills are put into action:

How long had Dr Holmes been attending him?

Six weeks.

Prescribe a little bromide? Said there was nothing the matter? Ah yes (those general practitioners! Thought Sir William. It took half his time to undo their blunders. Some were irreparable).

You served with great distinction in the War?

The patient repeated the word 'war' interrogatively.

He was attaching meaning to words of a symbolic kind. A serious symptom to be noted on the card.

'The War?' the patient asked. The European War—that little shindy of schoolboys with gunpowder? Had he served with distinction? He really forgot. In the War itself he had failed.

'Yes he served with the greatest distinction,' Rezia assured the doctor; 'he was promoted.'

'And they have the very highest opinion of you at your office?' Sir William murmured, glancing at Mr Brewer's very generously worded letter. 'So that you have nothing to worry you, no financial anxiety, nothing?'

He had committed an appalling crime and been condemned to death by human nature.

'I have—I have,' he began, 'committed a crime—'

'He has done nothing wrong whatever,' Rezia assured the doctor. If Mr Smith would wait, said Sir William, he would speak to Mrs Smith in the next room. Her husband was very seriously ill, Sir William said. (pp. 81-82)

Sir William takes 'two or three minutes' to confirm his first suspicion, that Septimus is 'a case of complete... physical and nervous breakdown, with every symptom at an advanced stage' (p. 81). He tells Rezia that 'it is a case of extreme gravity' (ibid.). 'Sir William never spoke of "madness"; he called it not having a sense of proportion' (ibid.):

health we must have; and health is proportion; so that when a man comes into your room and says he is Christ (a common delusion), and has a message, as they must have, and threatens, as they often do, to kill himself, you invoke proportion; order rest in bed; rest in solitude; silence and rest; rest without friends, without books, without messages; six months' rest; until a man who went in weighing seven stone six comes out twelve. (p. 84)

Sir William shares with Dr Holmes the ideals of self-control and self-regulation. But Sir William has also taken these ideas to a more metaphysical level. Woolf's use of the capital 'P' when Sir William's sense of 'Proportion' is being referred to illustrates this. Sir William calls proportion an 'exacting science' (ibid.) By the end of the meeting, Sir William makes the decision that Septimus needs to be interned in one of his hospitals. Back at home, Dr Holmes arrives at the Warren Smith's house to finalise the arrangement for Septimus' institutionalisation. Septimus flings himself out of his bedroom window calling out 'I'll give it to you.' ... 'The coward!' cries Dr Holmes (p. 127).

## PROPORTION'S ALLURE

The complex story presented in Woolf's novel opens interesting lines of thoughts in relation to the ideas of balance we have been approaching in this paper. Sir William is no doubt a social and financial success in the novel. If we wanted to

employ Michael Hand's distinctions to this (in fact, as we saw above, Hand identifies literature as a means for teaching children to see that compromise is our 'best bet'), we could say that Sir William exhibits a good sense of 'intrapersonal compromise'. Indeed, Sir William can proportion his time appropriately. His work diary is shown to be organised around a carefully crafted timetable. He is also shown to maintain a good work/life balance. (As David Bradshaw notes in his introduction to the novel, Sir William's surname is Bradshaw, which associates him with the famous passenger train timetable produced around that time (Bradshaw, 2000, p. 32). Sir William's wife even exhibits the same capabilities—'she embroidered, knitted, spent four nights out of seven at home with her son' (Woolf, 2000, p. 84)—and the implication is that she has come to take on this approach as a result of her time with her husband.

That Sir William's life—and the life of proportion—equals success in society is shown loud and clear to those who darken his door. Sir William owns a sparkling sports car that is parked outside his own private offices, in London's Harley Street, no less! But looking a little closer, there is also a peculiar aspect to Sir William's taste. For, it seems, he has a penchant for grey: It is the colour of his sports car, and its leather interior, it is the colour of Sir William's office walls, of their carpets and their curtains. Is this just an interesting idiosyncrasy in character, or is it attesting to something more? As an adjective, 'grey' can be used to describe something without interest or character, something that is dull and non-descript (as a colour, grey is indeterminate, on the spectrum between black and white). Is the idea being suggested here that there is a certain lifelessness about the 'life of proportion'?

It may initially be hard to see how the life of proportion has held Sir William back from anything or made his life less vivid. Consider other aspects of Sir William's career. He said to be working with Clarissa Dalloway's husband, Richard Dalloway, a politician, to get a law passed through the Commons that pertains to the treatment of the mentally ill. As was noted above, at the time Woolf was writing *Mrs Dalloway*, society was just recovering from the aftermath of the war and a flu pandemic. This may help to contextualise why someone in Sir William's position could become influential in politics (it is perhaps less hard for an audience a century later to conceive of the ways health and politics can come to influence each other).

Sir William's sense of proportion therefore not only makes him a success in the world of health but also a person influential in the political world. Is society, as we find it in *Mrs Dalloway*, also under the spell of proportion? Yet although Sir William's penchant for grey implies a kind of blandness that stands over the life of proportion, when extended as a principle to stand over society, this seems to take on a darker dimension:

Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion. (p. 84)

Sir William works with someone who runs schools in Surrey 'where they taught ... a difficult art—a sense of proportion' (p. 86). These schools, more specifically, are reserved for those with 'unsocial impulses' to be taught how to keep themselves 'held in control' (ibid.). The characters are reformed in 'appropriate virtues' such as things like 'family affection; honour; courage' (ibid.). Perhaps, we might think, this does not sound so ominous—after all, in one model of education schools should be preparing young people to be good citizens in society and developing their character. But as the above quotation reveals, Sir William's 'sense of proportion' appears also connected to a penchant for *correction* and the dominating forms this can take (bringing into line, regulation, forced conformity).

The unfortunate individuals interned in Sir William's schools are said to be there on account of their unruly nature that has been 'bred more than anything by the lack of good blood' (ibid.). In a scene that takes place not long after Septimus' meeting with Sir William, one of Clarissa's acquaintances, Lady Bruton talks about Emigration, and has become fixated on the idea of sending well-born young people to Canada (also an English colony at that time) for the sake of the population. Bruton, like Sir William, is considered highly socially respectable—Clarissa describes her as having 'a perfectly upright and stoical bearing'. But this pillar of respectability is also clearly a eugenicist. Brutality hides in her name.

'Proportion', Woolf writes, 'has a sister, less smiling, more formidable ... Conversion is her name' (p. 85). Conversion is a kind of reformation that brings people into line with a particular system of beliefs or values, while masking as something beneficial or kind. As Woolf makes clear, this process is connected to what happens in the colonisation of countries, and particularly occurred in the British Empire (which was alive and well at the time of *Mrs Dalloway*). Sir William's *worshipping* of proportion suggests an idealisation of conformity and regulation that is on a par with the darker deity of conversion, which is said to be a matter of 'dashing down shrines, smashing idols, and setting up in their place her own stern countenance' 'in the heat and sand of India' and the 'mud and swamps of Africa' (as well as in 'the purlieus of London' itself). (Perhaps today we might consider how far *inclusion* has become proportions more recent step-sister, insofar as inclusion too operates on a logic of balance as well as of bringing into the same, in ways that can be oppressive.)

These darker and oppressive elements connected to the sense of proportion are also thematised in the novel through the work of certain mechanisms and tools. A particular motif is that of clock time, in particular, the swinging dumb-bells of Big Ben (which is located in Westminster, like Harley Street):

[S]hredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing, the clocks of Harley Street ... counselled submission, upheld authority and pointing out in chorus the supreme advantage of a sense of proportion. (p. 87)

Clock time makes, divides and regulates. It puts lived time—time in its phenomenological sense—onto a common scale. The image invites us to think of the ways that certain mechanisms and tools in society can channel us into the life of proportion. The apparently self-evident benefits of these mechanisms mean that their influence can be exerted upon us in surreptitious ways.

Does *Mrs Dalloway* disturb the apparent good sense to balance? Does it, moreover, work to show up the elements that the good sense to balance can hide from us, make us blind towards?

## MODERN MINDS

Before going any further, it is worth raising a sceptical question. *Mrs Dalloway*, it could be said, is a work of fiction. The character of Sir William is a dystopian representation of the life of balance or proportion—but does it have to be like that? Should we be careful about any conclusions we can draw about the life of balance from this one example, one that itself appears rather extreme?

I agree that we ought to take care of our thinking. It is indeed helpful to recognise Sir William as a dystopian and extreme example. Yet at the same time, there are sure to be aspects of what is shown in *Mrs Dalloway* that speak to us—and in ways that bring us to question the conditions and forces that may shape what may seem to be a naturalised sensibility and aesthetic. To borrow Adam Phillips' phrasing in relation to what psychoanalysis does for balance, to novel, like the analyst, can 'ask us to ask: why would anyone want to be a well-balanced person: what [are] the conditions—familial, political, economic—that might produce this as an ideal?' (2010, p. xiii).<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps some may still not be convinced. To take this further then, let us ask more directly what is it, specifically, that the life of proportion is supposed to cover over. And why, exactly, is this problematic? We will do well at this point to turn to the character of Septimus. Septimus, as we saw above, is someone who has witnessed horrific things in war, including the death of Evans his close friend (and, although this is not overtly stated in the novel, potentially also his lover). His views on the world and society have become radically altered as a result. Previously, he felt love for Miss Pole and for Shakespeare—but he now sees only 'loathing, hatred, despair' (Woolf, 2000, p. 75). As Wyatt Bonikowski (2016, p. 133) puts it, Septimus is alienated from society in radical ways—he is cut off from his sense of self, home, from the rest of humanity, from sociality, relationships and from language. He cannot speak in the terms that are offered to him by others. While Septimus is encouraged by Sir William to accept the description of himself as 'serving with great distinction', he speaks rather of 'appalling crimes' and of being 'alone, condemned' (Woolf, 2000, p. 79). The language



Septimus does have available to him appears to speak on an altogether different scale to the balanced register of Sir William. (Does it seem a more fitting way of speaking of the atrocities faced in the trenches?)

Septimus eventually kills himself by flinging himself from a bedroom window and becoming impaled on the spikes of railings on the street below. It must have been a horrific scene. But the image is neatly tidied up by Sir William and Richard Dalloway, when they speak about it at Clarissa's party: 'Some case, Sir William was mentioning, lowering his voice. It had its bearing upon what he was saying about the deferred effects of shell shock. There must be some provision in the Bill' (p. 180). The suicide is turned into an issue to be addressed—through the creation of a new health policy, no less. The use of the term 'shell shock' here is interesting. This is a diagnostic label. It conveys a certain security of understanding: it bestows order and clarity onto what has happened to Septimus.

Yet 'Shell shock' was a term introduced after the First World War. Doctors at that time were struggling to treat new forms of traumas and neurosis. But, like many psychiatric terms, it is not a 'diagnoses' or clear-cut explanation of what is going wrong. Rather, it serves as a catch-all term to cover varied invisible injuries of modern warfare that appear to unseat the mind. *Mrs Dalloway* thus serves as a reminder of the fragility of our lives in society, and of the ways generations are affected by new and different struggles that require new forms of response. Characters such as Septimus, viewed from this perspective, may not be so rare and extreme, or confined to a particular moment in history. In our own generation, there will be new kinds of struggles, new conditions for disturbance (which include new wars and new 'flu pandemics').

Interestingly, as Wyatt Bonikowski (2016) has explored, it was around the time *Mrs Dalloway* was set that Freud started to reconsider his original account of psychic economy. In fact, this was partly influenced by the trauma experienced by returning soldiers—although it was not confined to their experience alone. Freud's revision to his theories culminates in his landmark essay 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'. In short, while Freud had previously claimed that the psychical economy is governed by the striving for pleasure and avoidance of pain—and hence the achievement of a balance in psychic life—Freud, in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', proposed that human psychical life *began* with trauma 'something that not only questions [pleasure's] primacy but threatens to destabilise the delicate balance it helps to create in the psyche' (2016, p. 40). Trauma, as Bonikowski suggests, should here be understood as something that has always already happened to the human being. In Lacan's terms, it is the 'structural' trauma of entry into language.

We are moving here into quite complex thoughts. But let us risk taking things a little further here and noting how these lines of thinking connect with what Adam Phillips has to say in the preface to his *On Balance*, as we were considering earlier in the paper. For Phillips writes:

The first psychoanalysts, who wanted to think of themselves as scientists, considered psychoanalysis as a kind of laboratory for the study of unbalanced views; it wasn't long before they began to believe that everyone, including themselves, hadn't merely lost their balance, they never had it. And that everyone, by nature, as it were, was in disarray, was riven with conflict. (2010, p. xiii)

Again, these thoughts are quite complex. But what seems to come through here are ideas that help to flesh out the notion of the 'structural trauma' that comes to determine Freud's conception of human life. Indeed, the idea that we are, by nature, in disarray and riven with conflict speaks to this. But as well as this, Phillips' suggestion of the discovery that, in psychic life, we *never had balance*, also gives us the thought that balance is just not a good picture for us to work with. And here we come to approach a central idea in Freud's revised account: that our psychic life does not comprise multiple forces sitting at different ends of a scale—in ways that suggest they could be balanced out, or made to 'meet in the middle'. We are rather under the guise of a different kind of economy altogether: not pairs of opposites that stand apart but rather of a dynamic tension that cannot be undone. Hence, as Bonikowski (2016) puts it, Freud's discovery of the *unheimlich* in the *Heimlich*, of insanity *within* sanity, of death *within* life. There is no question, then, of resolving tensions and settling matters. The tension is what constitutes our psychic life itself.

This picture of psychic life is not too far away from the one Woolf's own novel reveals.<sup>4</sup> And, at the risk of moving even further ahead with this, perhaps we can say that literature itself is well placed to reveal such structures given its medium is language—what, on a certain psychoanalytic picture, constitutes the 'structural trauma', sustains our riven nature. As we might put it in Derridean terms, in language we are always already both at home and not at home. This can be seen from even the everyday experience in which words can feel so close to us, so fully our own, but at the same time seem to somehow get away from us. A tension is, therefore, built into language and meaning—to be what they are and function as they do, words cannot be settled and fixed. This is not a tension we can resolve, but one that we can learn to live within.

Earlier, I posed the question of whether Sir William's penchant for grey is a metaphor for the lifelessness of the life of proportion. We are perhaps now in a position to see more fully what is at stake in this. It may be worth reminding ourselves at this point that there are aspects of language that Sir William cannot tolerate:

He [Septimus] was attaching meaning to words of a symbolic kind. A serious symptom to be noted on the card. (Woolf, 2000, p. 81)

The 'symbolic' nature of meaning connects to the unruliness of language just mentioned. Sir William understands unruliness as a problem that can be corrected. His principle of proportion would suggest the need to tidy up our language, in the same way as he tidies up Septimus' suicide, and aims to clean up the streets. But what has been shown here about the nature of language and our psychic economy suggests that adopting the principle of proportion gives only a *semblance* of order. It is a *deceptive* allure—a captivating thought that makes us blind to the tensions in which our lives are ordinarily led. Proportion is therefore much like the bromide prescribed to Septimus by Dr Holmes: it sedates, anaesthetises us and blocks certain kinds of experience from being possible. (Bromide was a common drug given to British soldiers during the First World War to curb sexual urges—it has been said to cause impotency.) Interestingly, in his introduction to the novel, Bradshaw points out that bromide is a term also used to refer to a trite remark (Bradshaw, 2000, p. 18). This invites the thought that the life of proportion, in its blocking of the tensions, draws us instead towards blandness and mediocrity. And what might we say of our institutions of education in this regard? It is alluring here to consider whether education is the kind of 'institutionalisation' we practice with the intention of creating an orderly way of imparting values to aspiring adults, who, like Septimus, could be aspiring poets or otherwise. Yet, those who fling themselves out of education are, like Septimus, often thought of as cowards, hence as failures in a system. Might they instead be attestations of the failures of the systems we use?<sup>5</sup>

## EDUCATION OFF BALANCE

When John Stuart Mill was 20 years old, he suffered a deep personal crisis and fell into a depression. Mill's own education was conducted under the influence of Jeremy Bentham, his father's close friend. Benthamite utilitarianism suggests that moral decisions can be made by weighing and measuring actions and their consequences against each other, in accordance with the overall balance of the pleasure and the pain that could be caused by a particular action (or the establishment of a rule or a practice more generally). There are resonances here, perhaps, with the ways of thinking being envisaged in the forming of a compromise, at least as this has been discussed in recent political philosophy and moral education. Mill's own education left him with highly developed powers of logic and reasoning—but it had also left something under-developed and un-addressed. Mill's personal experiences lead us to wonder: was it balance that drove him to depression?

Mill's source of treatment from the depths of this depression was the Romantic poets. The Romantic poets were a forerunner to the ideas of the human explored in this essay in connection with psychoanalysis and post-structuralism. Many Romantic poems attest to our lives as caught within tensions that are unresolvable. As Bonikowski points out,

this is also a feature of Woolf's own modernist fiction, which can be read as 'preferring to emphasise the complex and uncanny nature of trauma rather than point in the direction of "recovery" or "cure"' (2016, p. 136).

Note that none of what is being said here is intended to valorise the life of Septimus or Mill's depressive episode as an alternative offering to the life of proportion and balance. Certainly, we can agree that Septimus—and others who suffer—need help. But for those who would accept the conception of psychic economy and of our lives in language presented in this essay, then perhaps it is time to realise, 'like Mill', to cite Adam Phillips, 'that balance—or more specifically the idea of the balanced mind—[is] no longer a useful picture for modern people' (2010, p. xii). Moreover, it is perhaps time for those in education to pay more attention to the beguiling nature of balance. This can, of course, be even more difficult nowadays, as new mechanisms propel us increasingly towards the good sense of balance (Woolf wrote about Big Ben in this regard; we might think of the teacher who must now balance the marks of an essay across multiple 'marking criteria'). Balance lures us towards mediocrity. It tempts our attractions towards order and domination. Tensions are what we must learn to live with. On balance: benefit or bromide?<sup>6</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Michael Hand for permission to quote this paper, which was delivered as a talk at the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain Seminar Series (London Branch), and is forthcoming in the journal *Educational Theory*. All page numbers cited refer to a word-file of the final, accepted version of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Hand is of course willing to accept that this is particularly the case for extremism, as he follows Cassam in understanding extremism as a multifaceted phenomenon. Yet he maintains that aversion to compromise is an attitude that can be countered in the way described above.

<sup>3</sup> As this is a work of fiction, does it produce an argument? It depends on whether we see fiction as merely illustrating points we know 'only too well' or if we see works of fiction as themselves being generative of thought. Following thinkers like Derek Attridge (2015), I would suggest we need to disturb more straightforward divisions between philosophy and literature.

<sup>4</sup> I am talking here at the level of plot, but as Karen Zumhagen-Yekle points out, this is also there in the structure of Woolf's work, its mode of presentation itself: 'Woolf's intersubjective mode of free indirect style allows her masterfully to enter imaginatively ... into the conflicting, overlapping thoughts of her cast of characters ... under the guidance of Woolf's stream-of-consciousness narrative strategy. Woolf's free indirect style allows her to stand at a distance from the narrative while enabling her readers to observe her characters—participants in that narrative—by presenting us with fragments of their private musings, their communicative interactions, and a sense of the ambivalence with which they regard the conflict between pain of separateness and the need for solitude. Woolf traces the pattern of her characters' shifting moments of intimacy and detachment, perceptiveness and prejudice, expansiveness and impenetrability that give shape to their thinking lives' (2020, p. 110).

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this connection. The condition of mediocrity is expressed powerfully in Nietzsche's image of the 'Last Man':

... They still work, for work is entertainment. But they take care the entertainment does not exhaust them.  
Nobody grows rich or poor anymore: both are too much of a burden. Who still wants to rule? Who obey?  
Both are too much of a burden.  
No herdsman and one heard. Everyone wants the same thing, everyone is the same: whoever thinks  
otherwise goes voluntarily into the madhouse.  
'Formerly all the world was mad' say the most acute of them and blink.  
... They still quarrel, but they soon make up—otherwise indigestion would result.  
They have their little pleasure for the day and their little pleasure for the night: but they respect health.  
'We have discovered happiness', say the Last Men and blink (1974, pp. 46–47).

<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to the editors of this Special Issue, Karsten Kenklies, David Lewin and Phillip Tonner, for their very thoughtful and insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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