

## ***Memento mori* on the D string**

GEORGIA HALLIDAY

**“D**o not cut down trees. There is a God.”

Fragments of a broken mind, these two sentences are among many repeated by Septimus Warren Smith, a central character in Virginia Woolf’s novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. Septimus, a former soldier, is endearing but demonstrably insane. Woolf’s narrative style takes us inside his head, where we encounter dizzying images of dogs becoming men and birds that scream in Greek of everlasting life. Aside from such nightmarish visions, Septimus’s consciousness mostly consists of simple, ringing statements: “Do not cut down trees. There is a God.” I have written and rewritten these two sentences so many times I think I may be going mad too. I am obsessed with Septimus—with his thoughts, his fears, his visions, and his suicide at novel’s end. But my fascination resonates far beyond Septimus himself.

Psychologist Carl Jung describes a hierarchy of human thought. On the surface is the conscious mind. Beneath lies the personal unconscious, which contains thoughts that were once conscious, but have been forgotten or repressed; this domain is the one that populates our dreams. But there is another level, even deeper below the surface, like the depths of the ocean into which the sun never penetrates: the collective unconscious. Here reside the characters of our mythology and our fairy tales, the allegories that arise again and again, across cultures and eras. The images in the collective unconscious, which Jung names *archetypes*, are universal, and our knowledge of them is instinctive, not learned but inherited (“Relation”).

An archetypal manifestation in the conscious mind often serves as a source of recognition, causing us to grasp at something just beyond the outer edges of our vision (“Archetypes” 40). It is this moment of recognition that fascinates me—the feeling we experience when we encounter something new, yet formed of ancient knowledge, the feeling I had when Septimus came along and captivated me.

Recognition is only the first and perhaps the most basic of the feelings that accompany these moments. But recognition alone cannot be the end of

the story. Simply seeing someone you recognize on the street might make you pause and stare for a moment, or walk down the street chewing your lip and wondering if he was in your *Intro to Psych* lecture, but you wouldn't create works of art about him. There is something more urgent about the way Septimus calls to me, and this urgency arises from within *me*, not from Septimus, who does not know that I exist. It is akin to the resonance between strings on my cello.

Every note produced on an instrument is composed of a theoretically infinite series of partials. A bowed low D on a cello vibrates exactly 146.83 times per second. This is the frequency that we hear because it's the loudest. But the string is also, simultaneously, vibrating at twice that rate. And at four times that rate. And at eight times that rate. And on and on. What this means is that the cello is not just playing a low D—although that is what we hear—but also, very softly, a D one octave higher, and an A above that (and a D, F#, A, B, and upward into inaudibility). Those two notes happen to be the exact frequencies of the two highest strings on the cello (Suits). If one plays a low D on the cello with perfect intonation and good tone, it is possible to see, very clearly, the D and A strings vibrating of their own accord, responding to the hidden notes in the lower frequency. This is called sympathetic vibration. It only works when the low note is exactly the right frequency. It occurs because of something intrinsic to the nature of sound, the fact that it replicates itself in a many-layered structure.

The appearance of an archetype in art or nature causes a response within me that feels uncannily similar to the sympathetic vibration of the D string. A force is called from within me, not because Septimus is reaching out to find it there, but because the natures of the externalized archetype and the internalized one correspond. The two share something essential, something sympathetic, that arises at the appearance of the external. But correspondence isn't enough for me. I want to search for a message within this resonance. I want it to mean something beyond an equals sign. We often feel that great art not only resonates with us but *speaks to* us. What does it say? When I encounter an archetype, as well as a feeling of recognition and resonance, I feel as though I have been *called to*; I feel that someone has spoken a commandment to me. I have been promised something. I have heard a prophecy.

"Promise" suggests "an indication of a future event or condition . . . a precursor, a harbinger." This definition, which the *OED* calls *poetical* and *rare*, very closely resembles a more common definition of "prophecy": "an indication or foreshadowing of a future event, person, etc; something which forms or may form the basis of a prediction; a presage; a portent." Prophecies and

promises are much more than the equivalence of sympathetic vibration. They declare; they make true; they guide; they affirm.

Every word Septimus speaks is a prophecy. “Men must not cut down trees. There is a God . . . Change the world. No one kills from hatred” (24). “Beauty [is] everywhere” (68). “Universal love: the meaning of the world” (144). The simple language of these exhortations is powerful. The fragmentation and fragility of Septimus’s mind also make them seem precious. Though Septimus is, from an objective standpoint, the least reliable person in *Mrs. Dalloway*, his prophecies seem, paradoxically, the only reliable and worthwhile declarations in the novel. We trust him instinctively despite his apparent insanity.

Septimus’s character draws on two familiar figures from mythology: Jesus and Cassandra. As he sits in the park with his wife, Septimus declares himself to have been “taken from life to death, the Lord who had come to renew society, who lay like a coverlet, a snow blanket smitten only by the sun, for ever unwanted, suffering for ever, the scapegoat, the eternal sufferer” (37). Later, the novel’s title character, Clarissa Dalloway, hears of Septimus’s death, and though she has neither met him nor heard of him until that moment, the news brings her a strange kind of redemption.

Cassandra was a doomed prophet, cursed by a jilted Apollo to make prophecies that nobody believed but that always came true. Her wisdom concealed within insanity, she has inspired many modern interpretations. We are fascinated with Cassandra because she engenders a certain anxiety in our minds: if, indeed, God speaks to the Septimuses and Cassandras, what of us, who call them mad and lock them up? How can we ever know that we are sane and they are not? How can we feel reassured and safe when the foundation of our lives could be upended by one schizophrenic? Every time Cassandra shows up, she tells us: *you can never know for sure*. Despite our fascination, we fear her.

There are eight notes that have the power to strike fear into the heart of anyone who has grown up in Western society. They comprise the opening phrase of the *Dies Irae*, a plainchant hymn from the Middle Ages. The *Dies Irae* is a part of the Requiem Mass that prophesizes the day of judgment. The opening lines read *dies irae, dies illa, solvet saeculum in favilla*: the day of wrath, that day, will dissolve the world in ashes. The notes, F-E-F-D-E-C-D-D, are instantly recognizable despite their simplicity, and this melody has been used and quoted in countless musical works and film scores, from the terrifying fifth movement of Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique*, Gounod’s *Faust* opera, Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd*, to Hans Zimmer’s score for the final battle scene in

the *Lion King* (Haringer). It is used over and over again because composers know that it strikes a reliable fear in our hearts. Because it is used so very often in association with death, destruction, and drama, we learn to fear it all the more.

This fear goes deeper. Like the doomed prophet's ramblings, the truth of the *Dies Irae* transcends whatever temporal trappings it happens to wear, and we hear its inner nature. It is a prophecy, and it promises us: *memento mori*, remember you will die. If we were simply *told* this, we could brush it off easily: yes, of course, everybody dies, we know this. But the *Dies Irae* makes us *feel*, causes to vibrate the string within us that is tuned to our own mortality. The dread that the *Dies Irae* inspires comes from within us. It is bone-deep, primordial, inescapable.

But the *Dies Irae* is also part of the Requiem Mass, the service *for* the dead. Such services are primarily intended to create order from the chaos and fear that come with loss. The Requiem Mass organizes death, sets it into its place in the cycle of life. It tells of God's grace, of eternal life in heaven; it asks for peace for the departed soul. Even in the passages describing the horrors of Judgment Day, there is still the implicit promise of heaven for those who escape the flames. A requiem is supposed to console the living, to place the dead in God's hands, to assuage the terror of death and the unknown. It is not only the words that comfort and alleviate, but the music; the Requiem Mass requires some of the most intricate and skilled compositions in the whole liturgy. It is a prayer, but it is also a work of art.

The most glorious moment of John Berger's essay "The White Bird" arrives near the end. Berger establishes that art is a permanent incarnation of the transient beauty in nature—transient because nature on the whole is cruel and indifferent to our existence, and beauty only appears *in spite of* the evil and suffering of the world. In the essay's penultimate paragraph, Berger's statements rise in waves, like a sermon: "Art is an organized response to what nature allows us to glimpse occasionally. Art sets out to transform the potential recognition into an unceasing one. It proclaims man in the hope of receiving a surer reply . . . the transcendental face of art is always a form of prayer" (9). The entire essay is about correspondences, the "double affirmation" of recognizing and being recognized (8), and so I now act on such correspondences and suggest this: if art is a form of prayer, prayer is a form of art. This chant, this *Dies Irae*, is a prayer, a song, a form of art. And though the message it conveys is terrifying, the very fact that we recognize its haunting beauty "proclaims" us—not in death, but in life, just as Septimus's death proclaims Clarissa.

We feel the vibration within us responding to the one outside us, and we know that the two depend on one another. We have come back to the recognition, to the resonance, to the equals sign, which has turned out to be yet more powerful than we had imagined. What the resonance tells us is this: we both exist. I and Septimus, I and the Day of Wrath, the D and A strings, together. So even as we feel ourselves tremble with mortality, we are simultaneously confirmed in life. A reminder that we will soon cease to exist necessarily confirms our existence; something cannot *cease to be* unless it *is*. And thus, the promise is a pair, a point-to-point correspondence, like prayer and art, Clarissa and Septimus—at once a curse and a blessing: Remember you will die, know now that you live.

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