

'Experimenting with voices: Virginia Woolf's fiction as a risky kind of life writing'

**By Professor Patricia Waugh, Durham's Department of English Studies
The Chapel at St Chad's College, Durham
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This public lecture by Professor Patricia Waugh features as part of our afternoon symposium 'Literary Minds' from 1 – 5pm, which explores the representation of voice-hearing in the work of Virginia Woolf, Charles Dickens, and Samuel Beckett.

Virginia Woolf is one of the most widely read and famous of literary voice hearers; she is also one of the most distinguished literary experimentalists with voice and narrative in her fiction. But as well as fictional writing, she also left a rich archive of childhood writing, journals, diaries, memoirs, letters, essays and polemical political writing informed also by philosophical, scientific and medical ideas of her time, that resonates closely with her fictional oeuvre. Indeed, one contemporary described her as the most effective political pamphleteer alive. Much has been written about the traumas of her life: the unexpected death of her mother when she was 13, the many family deaths that shortly followed, the incestuous sexual and other kinds of abuse she suffered as a child and a young woman, her various periods of psychotic breakdown and her experiences of voice hearing. Also widely acknowledged is that she displaced, reworked and wrote many of these traumatic experiences into her fiction, most famously perhaps recreating her own psychotic experience as that of Septimus Smith, the returning soldier from WW1, in *Mrs Dalloway*. She used her writing as self-therapy and 'did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients'. Despite the huge secondary literature on Woolf, however, no-one has so far examined in detail quite how she developed an effective process self-therapy in conjunction with her literary experimentation nor how she used this formal and existential experimentation to change her own beliefs and come to terms with traumatic memories, or how this relates to the precise forms that her fictional experiments took or why such strategies sometimes failed her during periods of psychosis and before her final suicide.

In this lecture, I will examine some of the current therapeutic approaches to trauma, depression and distressing voices that draw on current cognitive and neuroscience research on memory, including cognitive methods for memory restructuring and reconsolidation and more associative and imagistic methods of controlled exposure that draw on theories of different memory pathways. In particular, I will look at the now widespread and effective use in therapy for trauma and depression of EMDR (eye movement, de-sensitisation, and reprocessing) first developed in the early 1990s. The lecture will go on to explore how Woolf's

fascination with her own memory and creative processes, her interest in the new somatic aesthetics of Roger Fry and reflections on creative thinking of writers such as Graham Wallas, the early ideas of the new rhythm analysis that would be named as such by Gaston Bachelard in 1935, the influential writings of Pierre Janet on dissociation, trance and memory reconstruction, allowed her gradually to cultivate and manage an approach to her own creative process that also gave her unique insight into the workings of memory, creativity and trauma that are only now being understood in similar terms by researchers in the cognitive sciences and psychiatry. Woolf dismissed the numerous distinguished physicians and neurologists appointed to 'cure' her perceived 'neurasthenia' or hereditary madness or manic-depression; she used her enforced periods of 'rest cure' to mind-wander and become therapist to herself, in the process also reshaping negative beliefs about her own identity as a woman into a political framework that became the basis for modern feminism.

Woolf's varied and voluminous writings provide fascinating and unique insights into how an ongoing experiment in and minute reflection on memory-based practices of creativity not only produced some of the most formally innovative poetic writing of the last century, but also genuine epistemological insights into the working of memory, creative processing and trauma therapeutics and a robust political platform for a feminist identity politics that would resonate through the twentieth century.