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John K. Young
“Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*”

The famous skywriting scene in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* owes more to 1920s advertising culture than has been previously recognized. In their rapt reading of the “Kreemo” aerial ad, the London pedestrians create both a commentary on consumerism and a model of collaborative, modernist reading.

The London pedestrians wonder first at a mysterious car, which they imagine holds a royal passenger, but then shift their collective attention to the skywriting plane overhead, as it produces an advertisement reading “A C E L,” “KEY,” “GLAXO,” or, most likely, “KREEMO.” This shift from car to plane mirrors the history of technology as well. Cars in 1924 were becoming more affordable to the middle class, but they were still a luxury item (the Woolfs could not afford their first automobile until 1927, after the strong sales of *To the Lighthouse*). Although airplanes became more common during and after World War I, they were still throughout the 1920s exotic machines employed only by governments and corporations. In 1925, skywriting was a new phenomenon, supplanting leaflets dropped from aircraft and slogans painted over the markings of military planes. E. S. Turner explains in *The Shocking History of Advertising!* that “painting slogans on aircraft was too primitive a method of advertising; moreover, aircraft had to be flown dangerously low for the messages to be read. And the public gradually tired of the novelty of scrambling for colored leaflets fluttering from the skies” (305). Skywriting made its debut at the 1922 Derby, when the *Daily Mail* hired a plane to write, naturally, “DAILY MAIL.” The paper claimed an audience of three million for the spectacle, which stretched over ten miles. On the downside, the pilot needed ten minutes to produce the letters, and five minutes later they had disappeared (Turner 305-06). Far from

causing a public nuisance, as earlier methods of aerial advertising had done, Turner reports that “it could be--and was--argued that skilled pilots were kept in training at no cost to the State. It was also hinted that the Air Ministry was keenly interested in the signaling and smoke-laying possibilities of the invention” (306). The *Times* exulted that skywriting had become “a spectacle that obviously thrills and fascinates everybody who sees it. [. . .] Vast as the possibilities of advertising by sky writing are, that is only one of the many purposes to which it may be put, and there can be no doubt that in the near future, generously developed, it might easily rival the tape-machine and wireless telegraphy for the dissemination of news” (“Sky Writing”). (The paper speculated that many aircraft flying in concert could form brief news messages, such as identifying the winners of elections and horse races.) Like the royal car, then, Woolf’s skywriting plane functions in public discourse as a reminder of Britain’s military and technological might.

The readings Woolf offers for the inscrutable message also locate her characters firmly within the consumer consciousness of 1920s London. Glaxo, a popular brand of dried milk since 1913, was among the best known products of the day, thanks to its famous slogan “Glaxo Builds Bonnie Babies.” By 1920, *Advertising World* claimed that “today it is not an exaggeration to say that every mother at least knows about Glaxo” (qtd. Davenport-Hines 42).¹

¹ The company’s original name, “Lacto,” was rejected by the Trade Marks Office, so a series of lexical manipulations eventually produced Glaxo (Davenport-Hines 27). The company is now Glaxo-Wellcome, an international pharmaceutical conglomerate. The slogan “Glaxo Builds Bonnie Babies” became even more popular through “a music-hall quip of the time about the young husband who was supposed to have asked: ‘Who takes it-me or the wife?’” (Stiling 20). Some British editions of *Mrs. Dalloway* have printed “Blaxo,” beginning with Hogarth’s 1947 reprint. See G. Patton Wright, “List of Textual Variants,” *Mrs. Dalloway: The Definitive Collected Edition*, ed. Wright (London: Hogarth, 1990). In Woolf’s original draft of the scene, the plane is clearly advertising Kreemo toffee. See “*The Hours*”: *The British Museum Manuscript of Mrs. Dalloway*, ed. Helen M. Wussow (New York: Pace UP, 1996): 279.

In Woolf's scene, Mrs. Coates, "gazing straight up," guesses that the plane is writing "Glaxo," while "her baby, lying stiff and white in her arms, gazed straight up" (20). Both mother and child are frozen in their gazes. The pedestrians reading "Kreemo" respond similarly:

"Kreemo," murmured Mrs. Bletchley, like a sleep-walker. With his hat held out perfectly still in his hand, Mr. Bowley gazed straight up. All down the Mall people were standing and looking up into the sky (20).

These references to skywriting, dried milk, and toffee clearly satirize both military and commercial capabilities to produce a "key" for reading the world (20). But the plane also invokes an important split along class lines: Clarissa, believing that she alone can identify the car's royal passenger, ignores the plane, asking her maid, "What are they looking at?" (29).² Woolf points here to a community of readers, who may not agree on a single interpretation, but who nevertheless provide a profound response. When the plane returns, writing "KREEMO" more clearly this time, it creates: "a bright spark; an aspiration; a concentration; a symbol (so it seemed to Mr. Bentley, vigorously rolling his strip of turf at Greenwich) of man's soul; of his determination, thought Mr. Bentley, sweeping round the cedar tree, to get outside his body, beyond his house, by means of thought, Einstein, speculation, mathematics, the Mendelian theory" (28). Mr. Bentley takes the ad's sense of a deeper significance literally, finding in its key not a banal product endorsement but the revolutionary implications of modern technology. In this

² The otherwise excellent film adaptation misses the point of this scene, first by omitting the car as the site of public attention, then by representing the plane clearly writing "Kreemo," and finally by including Clarissa among the plane's spectators; indeed, in the movie she even points out the aerial ad to Lucy.

loose association of relativity, genetics, the stock market, and “thought,” the plane becomes a thoroughly modernist icon: While offering the usual hope to “get outside” ordinary life, the aerial ad also suggests the need for a collaborative reading set against the kind of stable textual authority Clarissa sees in the car but ignores in the plane. Woolf thus transfers the image of authority to a community of readers, exemplified by Mr. Bentley.

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