

Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death, here's death, she thought.

—VIRGINIA WOOLF, *MRS. DALLOWAY*

IN HIS RECENT work on international feelings, Bruce Robbins looks to contemporary novels about fascism, imperialism, and world war to investigate “the proper tone” of cosmopolitanism. The novel, Robbins proposes, is “a place where such matters of tone are most searchingly experimented and reflected on.”²¹ Robbins’s gambit is telling in three important ways. First, it suggests that any philosophy or ethics of cosmopolitanism must have a “tone,” a way of thinking about people whose lives are geographically or culturally unrelated to one’s own and a way of acknowledging, though not only acknowledging, the ethical or affective compromises that go with that thinking. Second, it suggests that there are many possible “tones” (sympathetic, indifferent, arrogant, tolerant, outraged) that need to be examined and tested. Third, it directs the project of tone to the project of the novel and thus suggests that the tradition of narrative in the twentieth century has helped to develop existing strategies of cosmopolitanism. The echoes of this tradition have become increasingly audible in old and new essays about international conflict and wartime patriotism; while some of the authors of these essays are trained as literary critics, as Robbins is, others are importing the techniques and metaphors of narrative—and of modernist narrative, in particular—into disciplines such as philosophy and performance studies. Judith Butler, for example, has argued that U.S. patriotism, as it was formulated after the World Trade Center attacks (“9/11”) demands a “first-person point of view” that precludes “accounts that might involve the decentering of the narrative ‘I’ within the international political domain.”²² To conceive a just role for U.S. foreign policy, one that acknowledges the global underpinnings of local conditions, Butler asserts, “we will need to emerge from the narrative perspective of

U.S. unilateralism and, as it were, its defensive structures, to consider the ways in which our lives are profoundly implicated in the lives of others" (181). Butler proposes that a more responsible view of global history requires less coherent, less exclusive perspectives.

Fred Moten has argued similarly that the rhetoric of terrorism promoted by the U.S. government has generated a new political "homogenization," which is based on the "equality" of suffering and fear, and not on the equality of persons.³ This is manifest, Moten proposes, "not only as the liquidation of dissent or of whatever marks the possibility of another way of being political, but even as the suppression of alternative tones or modes of phrasing as well" (189). Moten takes the title of his essay, "The New International of Decent Feelings," from Louis Althusser, whose early treatise on "The International of Decent Feelings," first published in 1946, argues that the proper tone of internationalism after the catastrophe of the Second World War is not a "moralizing socialism" of equality in suffering but an analytic, antagonistic socialism of judgment and differentiation.⁴ Wanting to preserve the class struggle against postwar existentialism, Althusser argues that the rhetoric of universal suffering by all tends to obscure the significance and reality of social and economic suffering by some. And these generalizations about class struggle allow him to see other generalizations about international violence and world politics. He shares with Butler and Moten a critique of self-absorbed "decency." Butler and Moten contest the assumptions of universal or "planetary" cosmopolitanism: that all people in the world have the same relationship to international events; that all people living in a single nation should have the same views about these events; that any one view is unambivalent and unchanging; that decent feelings are more important than dissenting thought.⁵

Decentering the first-person point of view, rejecting tones of comfort or confidence, and risking indecency: arguably, these are the principal hallmarks of modernist fiction. The tension between decent feelings and dissenting thought is especially visible in the writing of Virginia Woolf, but also in the work of many early-twentieth-century artists who, like Woolf, sought to imagine models of social critique that would resist social codification. Early-twenty-first-century theorists of humanism, such as Edward Said and Jacques Lezra, see in Woolf's fiction a model of what Lezra has called, after Said, "critical heroism": the attempt to "[operate] in the world with sympathy toward the richness of the past, [while] preserving a posture of resistance and critique towards that richness and towards the institutions in which its study is enabled and its value measured and propounded, and maintaining that sympathy, and that critical and resisting stance, without end."⁶ Said proposes that "the practice of humanistic service" in which Woolf and other modernists engaged "always entails a heroic unwillingness to rest in the consolidation of previously existing attitudes."⁷ Yet, as Said and Lezra acknowledge, it is not easy to be both critical and heroic.

How does one resist social postures of euphemism and blinding generalization—postures, Woolf felt, that lead to acts of imperialism and militarism, such as the First World War—without resorting to literalism or narrow description? How does one resist inattentiveness if one's attention can never rest, if one must always look away in order to keep looking? As these questions suggest, as the phrase "critical heroism" implies, one must risk being bad—uncertain, inconsistent, and unsuccessful—in order to keep being good.

Focusing on the past and on the margins of social activity, useless pleasures but also invisible labors, Woolf directs her readers to notice aspects of British society that have gone almost unseen: the mundane activities of upper-class women, but also the activities and existence of servants, immigrants, homosexuals, divorced women, educated working women, the insane, and the disident or angry.⁸ Offering only glimpses of servants, immigrants, and others on the margins of upper-class life, Woolf emphasizes the social conditions of blindness rather more than she rectifies invisibility. Indeed, Woolf will purposefully exclude significant episodes—a suicide, an engagement, the breakup of a relationship, the destruction of bodies during wartime, and the procedures of colonial efficiency—in order to highlight quotidian experiences of unsocialized pleasure, as well as echoes, tangential effects, and memories. In the past, critics have argued that Woolf's fiction is quietist and insufficiently patriotic because it speaks of fascism and war but fails to address those topics directly or appropriately: she mentions a newspaper but does not tell us what the headlines say; she describes someone thinking of war but does not describe a battle. For these reasons, M. C. Bradbrook called "the style of Mrs. Woolf" self-indulgent and "evasive," arguing that her books give primary attention to minor events, such as a party, and only indirect attention to major events, such as war and death.⁹ Writing in the inaugural issue of *Scrutiny* in 1932, Bradbrook condemned Woolf's novels for failing to express unambiguous political values and then attributed this opacity to a "trick of style": namely, Woolf's tendency to disrupt or qualify narrated thoughts with dependent clauses and frequent asides. Woolf is evasive, Bradbrook explains, in refusing to devote her novels, or even her sentences, to any single topic and in refusing to limit her topics to those that seem pertinent or suitable to war.

As a woman, an artist, and a pacifist, Woolf saw herself as an "outsider," and in this way she was a traditional cosmopolitan, detached from her country but attached to artists and to other pacifists and to a community of "educated men's daughters," as she put it in *Three Guineas*.¹⁰ Yet for Woolf, being an outsider also meant that she could be a different or limited kind of insider, and that she could challenge the values that the usual insiders upheld: she could consider comparatively and "in her own case" what words like "patriotism," "foreigner," and national "superiority" meant (*Three Guineas*, 233). In these ways, Woolf's

cosmopolitanism differs from the traditional gestures of supranational affiliation and demystifying reflection.¹¹ Not belonging to the university, the military, or the government, Woolf lacked political efficacy, and she did not romanticize this lack. But she did reject the protocols of unwavering attention that she attributed to her country's most powerful social institutions. This led her to develop in place of those protocols more agitated, more modest forms of attention that were less effective, perhaps, but from her perspective also less complacent. I argue that Woolf used the analytic resources of aestheticism—thinking of perception as a social process; valuing transient communities and experiences; cultivating a posture of distracted or limited participation—to treat politically, historically, and internationally literary values such as euphemism and argument.

To be certain, the claim that Woolf was uninterested in the political urgencies and civic debates of her day no longer dominates modernist studies.¹² Work on *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* has emphasized Woolf's involvement with public issues of education, militarism, literary value, and the role of women in political life.¹³ Melba Cuddy-Keane has argued that even Woolf's essays that do not address education or politics in explicit ways are "pedagogical" and political in the "intellectual challenges" they pose to the ordinary reader, and new work on Woolf's most experimental novels has emphasized their social engagement.¹⁴ I share Cuddy-Keane's belief that "Woolf's commitment to independent, critical thinking . . . was the foundation for the model of social equality that she upheld" (9), but I propose in addition that Woolf often expressed this commitment by developing narrative forms that are *evasive* rather than *explicit* or even *utopian*. Woolf may have participated in civic endeavors and written directly against war and gender inequality, but her project remains challenging and often disturbing because she suggests that international sympathy and national dissent are nourished in part by those evasions of syntax, plot, and tone that qualify, unsettle, and redirect enduring habits of attentiveness.

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In the 1930s, the critique of Woolf came from both sides of the political aisle: the socialist writer R. D. Charques submitted that Woolf found "refuge or immunity from the worst in contemplation of—what shall we say?—a mark on the wall," while the right-wing Wyndham Lewis argued that Woolf represents "mere personality" instead of "ideas."¹⁵ Q. D. Leavis, in a scornful review from 1938, asserted that Woolf's writing lacks the characteristics of true argument and thus achieves only "argument" ("Caterpillars," 205; the word appears in quotation marks in Leavis's text).¹⁶ These writers contended that Woolf seemed too vari-

ous in her sympathies, too distracted in her commitments, and too cosmopolitan in her analogies between the psychology of marriages and the philosophy of treaties, between the world of parties at home and the wars of fascism abroad. The early critics of Woolf's style believed that art should be unwaveringly attentive, that any failure of attention led not only to bad writing but, worse, to "nasty," "preposterous," and "dangerous" writing (Leavis, "Caterpillars," 204). In Leavis's view, Woolf's work is dangerous because it refuses to generalize (about Germany) and because it generalizes too much (about misogyny and sexism). Decrying what she sees as Woolf's evasion of important matters (for example, her apparent failure to emphasize the risk of German militarism), Leavis is also critical of what she sees as Woolf's fixation on matters overly narrow, literal, or petty (for example, her observation that Hitler's efforts to limit women's roles in public life resonate with the sentiments of many English politicians).

The point here is that those who identify evasiveness in others assume some agreement within a community or among readers about the topics that deserve attention and the kinds of attentiveness that are attentive enough. For Woolf, there is no such agreement. She examines in her fiction the literary classifications that many of her critics take for granted, and she asks readers to see that interpretive judgments operate historically: that they help to shape the boundaries and meanings of British society and that they are, in turn, shaped by social contestations. Woolf's writing represents conflicts about international action and national culture as conflicts about literary forms of attentiveness. This is true not only of the work that seems to focus on domestic minutiae but also of the work that seems to focus on peripheral spaces (*To the Lighthouse*, *The Voyage Out*), education policies (*A Room of One's Own*), and the relationship between fascism and gender (*Three Guineas*). Her point is not simply to create a new ideal of attentiveness, more expansive and extensive, but to display the customs and conventions, social and psychological, that control what can be seen and what can be said.

Woolf's novels and essays return, over and over again, to problems of comparison and to conflicts about tone: How should artists present sociability or pleasure in the context of international catastrophe? How does one display systemic conditions without seeming to ignore the particularity of events or diminish their singular importance? How can one offer fresh comparisons among different experiences without seeming to treat the experiences as the same? For Woolf and her contemporaries, as Michèle Barrett has argued in an essay on modernism and memory, these questions were prompted not only by the task of looking backwards but also by the social and geographic conditions of the First World War: the spatial proximity of the trenches in France and gentleman's clubs in London, such that an officer might spend his morning in one place and his evening in the other; the horror of devastating losses at the

front reported in newspapers side by side with racing results and other commonplace records of everyday life.¹⁷ Is it more appropriate for artists to rectify the confusion of tones by representing only the direct, violent experience of war in the trenches? Or should artists represent a more expansive, more entangled conception of war, one that includes the spaces of newspaper, gentleman's club, trench, and racetrack?

Woolf begins to engage these questions in her very first published story, "The Mark on the Wall." Given her subject matter—the value of questioning in a time of unsatisfactory answers—it is perhaps not surprising that this story has been central to Woolf's reputation as an evasive writer. "The Mark" occasioned this review from E. M. Forster: "Mrs Woolf's art is of a very unusual type, and one realizes that quite good critics, especially of the academic kind, may think it insignificant. It has no moral, no philosophy, nor has it what is usually understood by Form. It aims deliberately at aimlessness."¹⁸ While Forster may have recognized the purposeful "aimlessness" of Woolf's literary project, other critics have transformed "The Mark" into a metaphor of futility and lassitude: they invoke the story to assert the naïve myopia of Woolf's entire oeuvre. This is the implication of Charques's claim that Woolf finds "refuge or immunity from the worst in contemplation of . . . a mark on the wall," as if the story's title represents all that Woolf contemplates and as if it merely replaces the contemplation of other, more serious concerns. Charques proposes that looking at a mark on the wall allows one to avoid social and political circumstances that are otherwise legible and definitive. In his quip, Charques pretends to speculate ("what shall we say?") about Woolf's interests in much the same way that Woolf is said to speculate about the mark: he imagines that Woolf's writing, once it ignores "the worst," might focus on anything at all, that its aimlessness has no aim whatsoever.

Charques implies that those who write speculatively in a time of catastrophe help to perpetuate catastrophe by refusing to address it directly. Theodor W. Adorno would later argue that this criticism, which targets a literary style, promotes a rigid politics of affiliation and exclusion. Adorno provides an important context for Woolf's work because both writers share the conviction that social norms are embedded in traditions of literary style and that literary style is embedded in the politics of national culture. Adorno makes these connections explicit. Like Woolf, Adorno asserts throughout his career that the homogenization of writing—at the level of narrative structure, diction, and syntax—helps to produce the homogenization of culture, which Adorno associates with fascism. Adorno addresses the dangers of a project such as Woolf's in an essay on literary form, in which he claims that the demand for literalism and directness in political writing is a demand for legible and consistent social classifications:

The person who interprets instead of accepting what is given and classifying it is marked with the yellow star of one who squanders his intelligence in impotent speculation, reading things in where there is nothing to interpret. A man with his feet on the ground or a man with his head in the clouds—those are the only alternatives. But letting oneself be terrorized by the prohibition against saying more than was meant right then and there means complying with the false conceptions that people and things harbor concerning themselves.¹⁹

Adorno proposes that those who suspend the work of classification become themselves classified; they are marked as traitors, outcasts, and degenerates. The "yellow star" is compensatory: it creates proof where self-evidence is no longer visible. Refusing to classify a mark on the wall, Woolf's narrator shows how intellectual speculation, because it thwarts compliance, resists the passivity of wartime.

"The Mark on the Wall" was published in July 1917, bound with Leonard Woolf's "Three Jews" in a pamphlet entitled *Two Stories*.²⁰ Circulated privately among friends and literary colleagues, *Two Stories* inaugurated the Woolfs' new Hogarth Press, which was later to publish all of Virginia Woolf's remaining novels, T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*, the collected writings of Sigmund Freud, English translations of Dostoevsky and Gorky, and many other important works of British modernism.²¹ Most readers know "The Mark on the Wall" from its third publication in *Monday or Tuesday* (1921), the only volume of short stories published during Woolf's lifetime, and from its later republication in posthumous volumes assembled by Leonard Woolf after the Second World War.²² The 1917 publication is significant, however, because Leonard's "Three Jews" orients readers of Virginia's story to the production of national collectivity.²³ Both stories remind readers that there are diverse ways of being British, even or especially during wartime, and both stories imply that one must resist the pressure to assimilate. The 1917 publication presents Virginia Woolf, unmistakably, as the wife of a person both British and Jewish, a person of both national and international affiliations; and it presents Woolf's literary project within a social context of anti-Semitism and strong international feeling about the relative patriotism of British Jews.²⁴

Leonard's story relates a conversation between two Jewish men, who wonder together whether they can be part of the "orderly English way," or whether they can have or should have only their own, separate order.²⁵ The story focuses on the difference between wishing that England "belongs to us" and wishing that we "belonged to it" (emphasis in original). These are two models of assimilation: in the first model, English Jews change what counts as "English," while in the second model, English Jews accommodate religious and social norms whose characteristics are static and definable (8). One of the two characters

tells of an acquaintance, the story's third Jew, who decides that his son no longer belongs to his family because he has married a Christian servant. The son is disinherited not because he has married a Christian, however, but because he has married a servant, which is to say that the father makes himself more English, he imagines, by emphasizing class as a standard of exclusion. The story thus asserts that exclusion can be a characteristic of Jewish as well as English belonging, though it ends, inconclusively, with one character observing to the other that "times change" (18). This may mean that the standards of national belonging merely shift from one category to another over time, as in the anecdote, but it may also mean—and the story's ironic tone points to this unachieved but preferable outcome—that belonging could come to have fewer, or less rigid standards: England could belong to "us" because the meaning of England changes, from a homogeneous community defined by manners or race to a heterogeneous community defined by location or citizenship.

While Leonard Woolf's story reminds wartime readers that national collectivity tends to impose cultural norms, Virginia Woolf's story focuses on social rules of attentiveness, feeling, and thought to address, more specifically, cultural norms about war. The 1917 publication of "The Mark on the Wall" is significant not only because Virginia's story echoes Leonard's topic—England's diversity—but also because it examines an ongoing historical event: the story depends on the progress of war for the drama of its ending and for its effect of evasive thought and entangled spaces. "The Mark" is narrated in the first person by a woman remembering a day in the recent past ("it was the middle of January in the present year" [83]) when she saw a mark on the wall above the fireplace. Sitting in her living room, she imagines what the mark might be, though she does not get up to see what it is for certain; neither the narrator's name nor the specific location of the house is ever given; the entire episode, we learn explicitly at the end, takes place during a war, whose damnation ("Curse this war; God damn this war!") by an unnamed person addressing the narrator is the most dramatic activity and only conversation that the story relates.²⁶ Contentiously and self-consciously, "The Mark" is a story about the refusal to act without thinking. It is about the refusal to *substitute* patriotic comfort or static outrage for critical anger and curiosity, and the refusal to *separate* the political "facts" of a European war (casualties and official reports) from the disarray of a living room in England. These are related gestures: redirecting outrage and yet refusing comfort, the story suggests, allows the narrator to consider how the social history of attentiveness creates the conditions for wartime complacency.

"The Mark" may serve as a metaphor for evasion (evading the "fact" of the mark on the wall; evading the "fact" of the war), but it is also a story that considers directly what evasion evades. First of all, "The Mark" is in a sense narrated

backward: although one might paraphrase the story as a tale about a woman who is trying not to think about the war, the context of wartime is announced only at the end of the story, when a comment disrupts the narrator's thinking about the mark. This disruption makes the reader notice, really for the first time, that the story is trying to represent the experience of wartime thinking. Of course, anyone reading the story in 1917, as British casualties continued to mount, would have known this from the beginning. And there are clues at the beginning, even if one needs the ending to make them fully legible: in the first paragraph, seeing the mark interrupts the narrator's "fancy of the crimson flag flapping from the castle tower," which she imagines when she looks at the burning coals in the fire before her (83). The narrator is relieved to have this vision disrupted: this is the story's first image of militarism, and it gestures toward the fighting not many miles away. One imagines that the narrator is relieved because thoughts of war are distressing in themselves, but she attributes her relief to a more specific distaste: the narrator calls her vision of war "an old fancy, an automatic fancy"; it is a vision shaped by worn images of heroism and chivalry rather than by personal experiences or singular thought (83).²⁷

Evading automatic fancies, Woolf's narrator is evading "generalisation," which she associates with the social rituals and fashions of the past. The narrator criticizes the generalizations of British culture and then attempts to avoid generalizing rhetoric: as she speculates about the future of the novel, how it will tend to omit the description of reality in favor of reality reflected in the minds of individuals, she breaks off, dismissing "these generalisations" as "very worthless" and then invoking "the military sound of the word" (85–86). Woolf criticizes "standard" interpretations and pious rules by first dismissing generalization and then engaging in it. She shows, by speaking abstractly and theoretically about genre, that all rhetorical terms have social contexts:

The military sound of the word is enough. It recalls leading articles, cabinet ministers—a whole class of things indeed which as a child one thought the thing itself, the standard thing, the real thing, from which one could not depart save at the risk of nameless damnation. Generalisations bring back somehow Sunday in London, Sunday afternoon walks, Sunday luncheons, and also ways of speaking of the dead, clothes, and habits—like the habit of sitting all together in one room until a certain hour, although nobody liked it. There was a rule for everything. (86)

The military sound of the word is enough to remind the narrator that speculative thought can diversify a single perspective and also that a single perspective makes it difficult to think speculatively at all. Moreover, by noticing the *sound* of "generalisation," the narrator refuses to take the word literally; she refuses the

efficiency of meaning in favor of sensation, poetry, and art. This strategy, insisting on sound rather than meaning, turning poetry against efficiency, will be important to Woolf's later work—not because she values the play of the signifier, although she does, but because she uses the provocation and vitality of figurative language to invigorate and replace what she sees as deadened thought.

Woolf demonstrates in "The Mark," as she will elsewhere, that to critique euphemism, which translates intense experiences into language that is habitual and therefore invisible, one must also critique literalism, which proposes that there is only one objective experience to present. She demonstrates also, however, that the critique of euphemism and literalism will have to involve gestures that are in some ways both euphemistic and literal because writing a novel or making an argument or maintaining a friendship requires moments of purposeful blindness as well as moments of direct attention. To put it another way, Woolf cannot reject generalization outright because she actually values some of the things that generalization facilitates: new analogies, strategic overlooking, parties, and even, I will suggest, national monuments. Nevertheless, we might distinguish Woolf's use of euphemism and literalism from the uses she criticizes by her effort to treat these styles politically, to show that civic language (the rhetoric of leading articles, ways of speaking of the dead) and literary classifications (generalization, evasion) help to shape the social meanings of war, colonialism, and education.

By the time of the story, as the narrator tells it, the "standard things" of childhood have been replaced by Whitaker's Table of Precedency and its list of the peerage, whose official order complements the informal rituals of upper-class life. If as a child the narrator mistook a "class of things" for the repertoire of all things and thus was unable to see that there was anything that she had neglected to notice, as an adult the narrator observes that Whitaker's tends to minimize thought by providing the "comfort" of precedency:

The Archbishop of Canterbury is followed by the Lord High Chancellor; the Lord High Chancellor is followed by the Archbishop of York. Everybody follows somebody, such is the philosophy of Whitaker; the great thing is to know who follows whom. Whitaker knows, and let that, so Nature counsels, comfort you, instead of enraging you; and if you can't be comforted, if you must shatter this hour of peace, think of the mark on the wall. (88)

The surprising logic of this passage is that thinking of the mark on the wall provides not a refuge from discomfort but an alternative, implicitly superior way of shattering peace. The narrator has "contempt for men . . . [who] take action as a way of ending any thought that threatens to excite or pain," but

she puts an end to those "disagreeable thoughts" by thinking of the mark on the wall (88): that is, for the narrator, the discomfort of thinking about the mark works to combat the discomfort of thinking about the blind comforts of others. It is action without thought that the narrator finds complacent. It is habitual patriotism that the narrator finds contemptible. Yet the story does not suggest that one should rest in this contempt: while acknowledging rage as the appropriate response to obsequious order and anesthetizing action, the narrator prefers the wandering unpeacefulness of agitated thinking (the form and content of the story) to the static unpeacefulness of sheer frustration (the desire to classify the mark).

The story ends with a disruption: the narrator's thoughts are broken when the voice of practicality arrives, like some person from Porlock, to announce, "I'm going to buy a newspaper" (89). The unnamed person introduces the story's conclusion, providing the cause of the mark, the political context of the narrator's thoughts, and the facts of a newspaper. Official reports thus replace speculation and the production of official knowledge:

Someone is standing over me and saying—

"I'm going out to buy a newspaper."

"Yes?"

"Though it's no good buying newspapers. . . . Nothing ever happens. Curse this war; God damn this war! . . . All the same, I don't see why we should have a snail on our wall."

Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail. (89)

Woolf contrasts the contention that "nothing ever happens" with the happenings of the story: she resists the passive experience of war by making thought happen and by arguing that what "happens" in the world involves not only the events that newspapers report but also the daily sociability that shapes, interprets, opposes, and ignores those events. With "The Mark on the Wall," Woolf introduces a central trope of her career, speculating about what "happens" while war is happening or while war, in its violence and its precedency, keeps one from noticing that anything else does happen.

"The Mark" does not observe a sense of order: its narrative progresses by way of association rather than by way of cause or efficiency; it tends to stop, change direction, turn in on itself. While Leonard Woolf contests the orthodoxy of national culture, Virginia Woolf contests the habits of wartime attention. Speculating instead of accepting what is given, Woolf marks out the lines of entanglement between the public, official, and faraway spaces where men fight and the small, private, enclosed spaces where women think. Woolf's

narrator uses private speculation and poetic language to introduce new topics and tones of cosmopolitanism.

In "The Mark," Woolf is critical of traditional narrative aims, those of realism and linear narrative progress, because she finds them all too comfortable, like euphemism, in a time of radical discomfort and international crisis. And yet a wide range of literary and cultural observers today—filmmakers such as Marleen Gorris as well as scholars such as Alex Zwerdling—have suggested that Woolf's hostility to social euphemism means that her approach to war, to patriotism, and to individual desire must repudiate indirection or artifice as symptoms of ethical complacency and political negligence.²⁸ Woolf addresses the tension between euphemism and literalism in her major novel, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Extending the subject and style of "The Mark on the Wall," Woolf rejects the kinds of attentiveness that she associates with national triumphalism.

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In her 1997 film adaptation, *Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway*, Marleen Gorris adds transparency and explicitness to Woolf's project by rearranging the plot of her novel. While the book begins with Mrs. Dalloway's trip through London to buy flowers for a party in the evening, Gorris's film begins with Septimus Warren Smith's experience of trench warfare: the camera focuses on his terrified face as mortars and gunfire explode chaotically around him. Woolf's novel begins in London, in 1923. Gorris's film begins in Italy, in 1918. The time and place of the film's beginning are announced by a caption superimposed on a single shot of Septimus: we watch Septimus, who watches (the camera does not show what he sees) the death of his friend, Evans, who is killed by a mortar or a mine. The film seems to remedy what it establishes as a problem both of equation (death and a party) and of evasion (having a party instead of thinking wholly of death). The film tries to make good on Woolf's politics by clarifying the novel's concerns. Gorris's image of good modernism is a modernism matched to narrative clarity, direct representation, and achieved ethical priorities.

Of course, the first line of the novel is not a beginning but a middle: "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself."²⁹ The first scene of the film has been added by Gorris—it exists nowhere in the novel—and it preempts the trip to the flower shop, which now follows in the echo of the war. It is worth noting these differences, not so much to complain that Gorris has deviated from a sacred original as to emphasize that the new scene seems to correct Woolf's omission. The invention of the scene in the trenches and its placement at the beginning of Gorris's film introduces the war as a preeminent topic: it comes first, and it is the only historical episode presented as an objective past rather than as a remembered one. Gorris's film reverses the structure of "A

Mark on the Wall": it shows a conventional scene of war, not an unconventional reflection; it starts with war, not with thinking; it gives priority to casualties, trenches, and men at the front, not to women in living rooms or in flower shops or at parties. By beginning her film with the war in Italy instead of a shopping trip in London, by beginning her film with a war that we see directly rather than through the memory or consciousness of one of the characters, Gorris's film gives Woolf's narrative a sharper, more definite face. Gorris contrasts a style of euphemism—common among most of the upper-class characters in the story, including Clarissa Dalloway—with a style of transparency, which is visible in the film's commitment to show what is made to seem like everything, even those scenes that Woolf chose never to describe.³⁰ Gorris's adaptation of Woolf seems to argue that social indifference and national triumphalism, which Woolf criticizes in her novel, are best defeated by a narrative style that is linear and unequivocal.

For Woolf, however, it is unequivocal style that generates upper-class euphemism. The face that Gorris gives to her film—a focused, objective image of war—is similar to the face that Clarissa Dalloway gives to herself, as Woolf describes it:

How many million times she had seen her face, and always with that same imperceptible contraction! She pursed her lips when she looked in the glass. It was to give her face point. That was her self—pointed; dartlike; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting-point, a radiancy no doubt in some dull lives, a refuge for the lonely to come to, perhaps; she had helped young people, who were grateful to her; had tried to be the same always, never showing a sign of all of the other sides of her—faults, jealousies, vanities, suspicions, like this of Lady Bruton not asking her to lunch; which, she thought (combing her hair finally), is utterly base! Now, where was her dress?

(37)

Between looking into her mirror and looking for her dress is an account of single-mindedness that Clarissa's mind labors to assemble. The face is the result of compositional effort, the "contraction" of many parts and varieties of the self into one "pointed; dartlike; definite" image. Woolf presents this image as the face of social decorum: Clarissa displays only one self and also makes sure to conceal that there are any other selves to display. Woolf registers this sense of concealment in the doubling of selves: "that was her *self* when . . . some call on her to be her *self* drew the parts together." Clarissa's socialized face promises

socialized thoughts and conceals the emotional intensity that Clarissa remembers from her youth. Later in the novel, Woolf will suggest that English patriotism, also, has a pointed, dartlike face, which in turn conceals the multiple attachments and unruly desires of cosmopolitan Britain. At the same time, Woolf will acknowledge that contraction makes possible those communities that serve as alternatives or supplements to patriotism: in the novel, communities of friendship; in Woolf's milieu, the subcultural community of pacifist artists and the imagined, transnational community of women. Indeed, Clarissa's euphemism of self, as grim as it may be, allows her to assemble the party that concludes the novel—a party that occasions the comparison of selves and the acknowledgment of unresolved differences.

To meet the demands of marriage and upper-class propriety, Clarissa generates a consistent, public self that does not reflect her many momentary, private desires. Her contracted face is marmoreal: not only definite but also unchanging, like the marble faces of the uniformed boys whom Peter Walsh, just returned from India, admires in the London street: "Boys in uniform, carrying guns, marched with their eyes ahead of them, marched, their arms stiff, and on their faces an expression like the letters of a legend written round the base of a statue praising duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of England" (51). Less purposeful than Clarissa, Peter allows his thoughts of a rebellious past to be "drummed" into step by the "regular thudding" of young men marching past him. Peter's thoughts are regularized in theme and in style: they become like the concrete letters written "round the base of a statue"—"like" these letters both because Peter has some sympathy for the specific praise of duty and because his sympathy is as automatic as the legend's cliché. Peter's agitated, recursive thoughts of the past are replaced by the deadened march of syntax, by the march of feet, and by the forward momentum of certainty and progress. Like Clarissa's social world, which requires contraction, the march of British triumphalism requires "renunciation," as Peter reports: "on they marched, past him, past every one, in their steady way, as if one will worked legs and arms uniformly, and life, with its varieties, its irritances, had been laid under a pavement of monuments and wreaths and drugged into a stiff yet staring corpse by discipline" (51). It is through renunciation, Peter explains, that the marching boys come to resemble the military heroes whose statues they pass; having "trampled under" the temptations of life, the boys likewise achieve "a marble stare."

In this important passage, only a few pages after Clarissa's encounter with the mirror, Woolf indicates that public triumphalism requires an unagitated attentiveness: a face that is stiff and recognizable, that shows no "varieties" or "irritances." Moreover, Woolf presents triumphalism as a style of history. Whereas the boys march steadily forward, never looking back, Clarissa and Peter remember moments from the past that change and develop and disorder

the narrative progress of living. Clarissa's relationship with Sally Seton, for example, occasions "the most exquisite moment of her whole life" (35). Unlike the boys "drugged into a stiff yet staring corpse," Sally is remembered by Clarissa as a person of "abandonment, as if she could say anything, do anything; a quality much commoner in foreigners than in Englishwomen" (33). Woolf knows that a style of consciousness that abandons predictable conventions will tend to seem foreign, and she also knows that the decorum of gender—how women and men are expected to behave—is crucial to the definition of national culture. Sally is one of the many English characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* who are said to seem or act like foreigners: there is Miss Kilman, who loves Clarissa's daughter and whose friends and family are German; Peter Walsh, who has been living in India and who has fallen in love with a married woman; Septimus, whose thoughts are in Italy and not with his Italian émigré wife. Abandonment, like agitation, leads to improvisation and flexibility, but also to surprise and pain. The heroic past, captured in marble, is familiar and etched in stone; the momentary past, on the contrary, is "a present, wrapped up," which one uncovers slowly over time (35–36).

Resisting imperceptible contractions and the march of progress, Woolf extends the grammar of parataxis—in her novel, not only the lists of phrases and images that appear within a single sentence but also the many scenes that follow without immediate rationale—to the insubordinate arrangement of political imperatives and everyday pleasures. Adorno describes parataxis as "artificial disturbances that evade the logical hierarchy of a subordinating syntax."³¹ In *Mrs. Dalloway*, parataxis serves to evade "a sense of proportion," which functions in the novel as a rule of thought, society, and speech (96). Proportion is the social theory promoted by Sir William Bradshaw, the specialist physician who treats Septimus for shell shock on his return from the European war. The symptoms of Septimus's condition, as Sir William identifies them, are disorders of thought and language: Septimus overinterprets and overelaborates; he distrusts the normative meanings of words and shows an unwillingness to follow conventional patterns of expression. Septimus's symptoms, like Woolf's strategies of evasion, serve to resist the "logical hierarchy" needed for patriotism and normative masculinity. One should see, also, that Woolf's critique of "logical hierarchy" extends to the foundations of British society, represented by imperial conquest and compulsory marriage: as agitation interferes with patriotism, so "susceptibility" makes Peter Walsh a mediocre colonial administrator and so remembering threatens to derail Clarissa's studied social poise (151).

During times of international crisis, Woolf proposes, boundaries of thought are patrolled even more rigorously than boundaries of land. Sir William exists to correct women like Miss Kilman, whom he never meets in the novel but

whose forceful heterodoxy would conflict with his own, more socially acceptable kind of pushiness. Kilman tutors the Dalloways' daughter in history after being fired from the girls' school where she taught at the beginning of the war; her position lost because her family was of German origin and she had German friends, her career ruined as a result of patriotism, she feels "bitter and burning" much of the time (124). Though she tries to feel "calm" (124), having learned to think of God, she is "stricken once, twice, thrice by suffering" (133). Miss Kilman's bitterness seems too much for Woolf, who values pleasure as well as anger and has little sympathy, at least here, for the critique of economic privilege. Yet Woolf uses Miss Kilman's story to show that the control of independent women and shell-shocked men in England helps to prepare the control of independent cultures abroad.

Sir William's desire to discourage thinking is legible in his diagnosis of Septimus, whose illness he pronounces after "two or three" minutes of questioning (95). As Sir William interrogates Septimus, Woolf's narrative shifts from the doctor's point of view to the point of view of "the patient":

"You served with great distinction in the War?"

The patient repeated the word "war" interrogatively.

He was attaching meanings to words of a symbolical 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.

(96)

Septimus's wife, Lucrezia Warren Smith, answers Sir William's question on Septimus's behalf, as if the doctor had asked for a fact that Septimus could not remember. She assures Sir William that, "he served with the greatest distinction" and "was promoted" as a result (96). But Septimus has forgotten what "distinction" means; he no longer values the rhetoric of valor and military heroism. He says "he had failed" not because he did not fight but because "he did not feel" (91). "War," "failure," and "distinction" are words whose meanings are no longer certain. By repeating the words, Septimus insists that he does not assume, as Sir William does, that he and the doctor are talking about the same idea of war or that there is only one idea of war to talk about. Sir William identifies the multiplication of perspectives, even the fact of perspective at all, as a sign of illness: "He was attaching meanings to words of a symbolical kind." In the shift of perspective from Sir William to Septimus, from "the patient" and "the War" to "the European War" and "that little shindy of schoolboys with gunpowder," Septimus recites the several names for which Sir William

has only one name and, moreover, invents a new name along the way. Septimus insists that his war is not Sir William's war and also refuses to call his event a war at all; for Septimus, "war" celebrates without analyzing; it finalizes without modifying.

While Septimus suggests that words might have multiple, contested meanings, Sir William invokes euphemism, making words mean as little as possible. Euphemism is the opposite of symbolizing because it does not "attach" one meaning to another but replaces one meaning with a muted, more comfortable interpretation. The point of euphemism is to make what is replaced and the act of replacement invisible. Sir William explains to Rezia, who wants to know if Septimus is "mad," that "he never spoke of 'madness'; he called it not having a sense of proportion" (96). Septimus shows, through deflation, the fatuous spectacle that "war" covers up (a "little shindy of schoolboys with gunpowder"), while Sir William gives "madness" a new name so he does not have to speak of it at all. Giving uncomfortable experiences new names and embracing these names in lieu of discomfort, euphemism demonstrates a sense of proportion. Of course, it is perfectly true that Septimus's response is also in some ways euphemistic: he does not speak of bodily destruction, the death of friends, or the intensity of remorse. Yet unlike Sir William's euphemism, Septimus's deflation creates greater discomfort: speaking of the war sarcastically, he declines explicitness, to be certain, but he also declines mythification. That Septimus does not share Sir William's sense (meaning) of war is a sign that he lacks sense (sanity) altogether. Woolf explains that Sir William's method works by excluding any element that would challenge his views: "Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded its lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion" (99). Proportion requires seclusion and prohibition: it makes things fit by calling them "unfit" until they do.

By fighting proportion as a system of representation, Woolf is fighting to reverse the contraction of individuality and antagonism within civic debates about national and international thinking. To do this, Woolf promotes several strategies of thought that correspond to strategies of writing: poetic language, nick-naming, excitement, stammering, revision, and parataxis. These strategies are crucial in *Mrs. Dalloway*, where Woolf develops an analogy between symptoms of shell shock and tactics of social critique, but they are also noticeable throughout Woolf's writing: Rachel Bowlby describes the feminist logic of "Woolf's equivocations" in *A Room of One's Own* and other essays (70), and Michèle Barrett proposes that Woolf's use of parentheses and square brackets "form part of a general writing strategy that represents the really important things for Woolf—the war, death, grief, the meaning of life, as well as love—

only obliquely."³² Barrett argues persuasively that the "strange withdrawal of obvious affect in the writing of Woolf" (195-96), part of what I have been calling "evasion," demonstrates Woolf's commitment to the multiple, transient self, as opposed to the contracted, marmoreal self required by proportion, conversion, and triumphalism.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf promotes metaphor ("that little shindy of school-boys with gunpowder") against heroic clichés and against the presumption that any experience has one consistent and conclusive interpretation.³³ Similarly, "excitement" and "exquisite joy," which Septimus, Clarissa, and Peter experience in moments of intense, though not necessarily "comfortable" feeling, serve as alternatives to the march of ordered existence and the flood of "tolerable" circumstance (55).³⁴ Both of the physicians who treat Septimus, Dr Holmes and Sir William, tell Rezia that Septimus must avoid "excitement" (140). Septimus's observations, as Rezia describes them, are much like Woolf's prose, full of disparate ideas whose association depends more on inspiration than on logic: "Some things were very beautiful; others sheer nonsense. And he was always stopping in the middle, changing his mind; wanting to add something; hearing something new; listening with his hand up" (140). The parenthetical thought ("stopping in the middle"), the semicolon and its accretion of metaphors ("wanting to add something"), the visibility of thought in process ("hearing something new; listening with his hand up") are all strategies of thought that evade certainty and marmoreal knowledge.

Woolf evades marmoreal knowledge through poetic language and stammering; these, too, are "symptoms" of social dysfunction that Sir William aims to cure. When Sir William returns from telling Rezia that Septimus will need to be "secluded" in a "home," he finds his patient "muttering messages about beauty" (97). Informed of Sir William's intentions, Septimus asks, purposefully, "One of Holmes's homes?" Instead of keeping quiet or rejecting the doctor's advice, Septimus refuses to allow Sir William to dictate his behavior or to dictate the terms in which his distress should be articulated. Instead of taking Sir William seriously and respecting his authority, Septimus makes a little rhyme out of Sir William's cure ("Holmes's homes"), focusing on the sound rather than the meaning, allowing the sound to stand against Sir William's unspecified intentions. Sir William would replace the stark fact of enforced institutionalization with the euphemism "home," but Septimus draws attention to the term and to the fact of replacement, making Sir William's language sound ridiculous rather than sane. For Sir William, however, making art instead of "sense"—making art *against* sense—is a sure sign of proportion's absence.

Septimus finds it difficult to communicate in a language that his doctors are willing to hear: he speaks in metaphors and in rhymes, and he stammers:

"I—I—I—" Septimus stammered.

"Try to think as little about yourself as possible," said Sir William kindly.

(98)

Here, Woolf gives physical manifestation to social and psychological estrangement. The stammering is not purposeful, as were the rhyme and the metaphors; rather, it shows that Septimus is unable to speak as if he knows his desires and as if he has confidence that his listeners will understand him. Septimus stammers because he is uncertain about what he has to say and because his beliefs keep changing:

Love, trees, there is no crime—what was his message?

He could not remember it.

"I—I—I—" Septimus stammered.

(98)

Stammering is a well-known symptom of shell shock: on the one hand, it is the result of imposed censorship, a displacement of the protest or distress that is otherwise prohibited; on the other hand, it is the result of self-censorship, an unconscious refusal to say, or to say easily and with conviction, what is socially required. Soldiers lose the ability to speak because they are faced with situations that are unspeakable within the context of military discipline.³⁵

Septimus performs the only literal stammer in *Mrs. Dalloway*, but Woolf's novel also stammers in its own way, by resisting the language of continuous, confident narration and by describing a national capital full of foreigners and foreign attachments. Gilles Deleuze presents stammering not as an unconscious failure of speech but as a willful and difficult achievement of writing.³⁶ "A style," Deleuze argues, "is managing to stammer in one's own language" (4). When Deleuze speaks of "a style," he means the specific projection of unorthodox, unsocialized thought. For this reason, he will say that "style" belongs to people "of whom you normally say 'They have no style'" (4); it belongs to people like Septimus, whose manners do not correspond to an appropriate, invisible fashion. Among his list of writers whose novels "stammer," Deleuze includes Kafka and Beckett because they are "bilingual even in a single language" (4). Deleuze proposes that "multilingualism is not merely the property of several systems each of which would be homogeneous in itself: it is primarily the line of flight or of variation which affects each system by stopping it from being homogeneous" (4). Any intellectual committed to social critique, Deleuze argues, should write "like a foreigner" and thus make the process of communication both more vexed and more visible (5).

Woolf produces the effect of stammering by describing the process of thought, and this is a strategy that Adorno would later echo in "The Essay as Form." Compare, for example, Woolf's call for stream of consciousness in "Modern Fiction" (1925) with Adorno's assertion that the essay as a genre should describe "intellectual experience."³⁷ Promoting a novelistic prose that aspires to critical reflection, Woolf asserts: "Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness" (150). In turn, defending a critical style that aspires to the novelistic, Adorno defines "the essay" as the record of thought in process:

The word *Versuch*, attempt or essay, in which thought's utopian vision of hitting the bullseye is united with the consciousness of its own fallibility and provisional character, indicates, as do most historically surviving terminologies, something about the form, something to be taken all the more seriously in that it takes place not systematically but rather as a characteristic of an intention groping its way.

("THE ESSAY AS FORM," 18)

Adorno's definition of the essay is useful for a reading of Woolf's fiction not because his definition is new—essayists since Montaigne have described the effort to record thinking—but because it helps to show that the genre of the essay, in its strategies of self-reflection, informs Woolf's new project for the genre of the novel.³⁸ For Adorno as for Woolf, modernist writing should generate a new condition of thinking, a "pattern however disconnected and incoherent." Uniting an aim with the risk of aimlessness, Adorno proposes that risk is constitutive of the essay's achievement: only by avoiding systematic thought can the essay avoid the inevitable result of preconditioned thinking. Through techniques of coordination rather than subordination, "cross-connections" among elements rather than "conclusive deductions," Adorno seeks to "violate the orthodoxy of thought," to risk the accusation of evasiveness, so that something "becomes visible which it is orthodox's secret and objective aim to keep invisible" (22–23).

Like Adorno's "orthodoxy," the "sense of proportion" that Woolf attributes to Sir William is characterized above all by disguise and invisibility: disguise, because individual experiences are replaced and covered up by a single, standardized account; and invisibility, because the mechanism of disguise is kept out of sight. Sir William's renaming of "madness" and his presumption of shared, transparent language ("war," "distinction") serve to make opinions that are merely conventional into thoughts that are necessary and unequivocal. This is proportion's "secret": it makes contraction natural. In two of the essays she wrote in the final years of her life, "The Artist and Politics" (1936) and "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid" (1940), Woolf transforms the too-easy

rhetoric of distinction (the distinction between Britain and Germany) into a stammering, agitated language.³⁹ The key element in Woolf's strategy is "camouflage," which Woolf appropriates as a metaphor.⁴⁰ Woolf aims not to eradicate camouflage—she does not think this is possible, or even desirable—but to make it less hidden.

In "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid," Woolf proposes that it is necessary during wartime both to fight and to think (243–44). "To make ideas effective," Woolf argues, one must "put them into action"; one must engage in what Woolf calls, after Blake, "mental fight," which means "thinking against the current, not with it" (244). Woolf addresses the relationship between fighting and thinking by describing her experience of trying to think while planes fly overhead and guns explode nearby. Thinking about the opposition between "peace" and "war" that the essay's title seems to promise, Woolf comes to consider the similarities between "tyranny" at home and "tyranny" abroad (245). Woolf refuses in this essay to separate a discussion of Hitler's dramatic, genocidal tyranny from a discussion of militarism and imperialism in Britain; risking a naïve pacifism in the context of Hitler's threat, Woolf proposes that there is complexity between Germany and Britain, that what looks like liberalism can contain elements of fascism, that "guns" are sometimes concealed beneath "the hues of autumn leaves" (245–46).⁴¹

One might find Woolf's argument uncomfortable, if not impractical, in the face of Hitler's aggression, but Woolf's intention is neither comfort nor practicality. Woolf's project is this: to show and resist the kind of "thinking" that is encouraged by "fighting" by appropriating the strategies of war. Woolf transforms the physical impotence of wartime, being on the ground during an air raid, into "mental fight" and into "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid," the title and subject of an essay. One should notice the implicit analogy between the passivity and helplessness that soldiers in the trenches experienced during the First World War and the experience of women beneath an air raid during the Second World War. While Septimus returns from the war unable to think or feel, Woolf seeks to retain her sanity by refusing peaceful thoughts. Woolf transforms the everyday objects of passive resistance—"a gas mask," for example—into metaphors of rhetorical aggression: "Down here, with a roof to cover us and a gas mask handy, it is our business to puncture gas bags and discover seeds of truth" (244–45). Insisting that "thoughts," if they lead to peace, constitute "the only efficient air-raid shelter," Woolf uses metaphor to supplement military efforts ("fighting with the mind," while servicemen fight with guns) and also to examine the "freedom" that these efforts claim to protect (243). Given the conditions of international crisis and the real danger of Hitler's triumph, Woolf's argument may seem trivial in its concern with domestic issues and in its contention that domestic issues are also international ones. However, as Jessica Berman has

argued in her study of Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938), one kind of inaction may make other kinds of actions possible (*Modernist Fiction*, 115). If Woolf focuses in her late essays on "the question of how people like her—artists—should act politically," as Michèle Barrett has proposed, she also questions how acting "politically" should be defined.⁴²

* * *

Appropriating camouflage to write against war and against patriotism, Woolf's work specifies the different objects whose comparison camouflage regularly conceals. Woolf assembles objects and ideas that are neither homogenous nor entirely distinct, refusing both the logic of replacement and the logic of equivalence.⁴³ Woolf's aim is entanglement, which means displaying self-consciously, perhaps aggressively, topics that will seem inconsequent alongside those that, traditionally, are thought more significant. The contrast between the inconsequent and the significant is pivotal to Erich Auerbach's canonical account of the "minor, unimpressive, random events" that Woolf emphasizes in her novels.⁴⁴ For Auerbach, whose essay on "the brown stocking" in *Mimesis* hails Woolf as the exemplary figure of modernist fiction, the "random moment" is a defining characteristic of Woolf's work and of the commitment to subjective impression that Woolf shares with Marcel Proust and James Joyce (541–44). Writing during the Second World War, Auerbach embraced randomness as a promise of intellectual refuge and transcendent humanity that is "comparatively independent of the controversial and unstable orders over which men fight and despair" (552). For Woolf, however, the "random moment" is made up of thoughts and experiences whose perceived inconsequence is inseparable from war and from the social institutions that legislate priority. While "randomness" may describe Woolf's refusal to embrace what is necessary or conventional, it withholds in the language of chance the evaluation and comparison that Woolf is eager to provoke.

Perhaps the best account of this provocation and of its social implications comes in Georg Lukács's important essay "Narrate or Describe?" which was published in 1936, the same year that Woolf published "The Artist and Politics." Lukács argues that the narrative technique of "description," which he traces from naturalist writing in the late nineteenth century to contemporary "subjectivist" (stream of consciousness) writing in the beginning of the twentieth century, demonstrates a failure to prioritize.⁴⁵ Because it is focused on observation, Lukács argues, description values the refusal to evaluate. Lukács criticizes texts that fail to make significance and causality explicit; in this failure, these texts obscure the evidence of class struggle and capitalist exploitation. Whereas narration provides "a proper distribution of emphasis and a just accentuation of

what is essential" within a novel's social world (126), Lukács contends, description will not affirm that things have an order: "Narration establishes proportions, description merely levels" (127). By leveling, Lukács continues, description does not establish boundaries and may in fact lead to "something much worse": "a reversed order of significance, a consequence implicit in the descriptive method since both the important and the unimportant are described with equal attention" (131). Lukács is right to see that writing such as Woolf's obscures causality and actively refuses to emphasize only "what is essential," but he is unable to see that Woolf's work serves to challenge the rules both of relevance and of essence.

Lukács opposes "description" to "epic" and argues that the leveling of attention and objects suspends the mechanism of priority—what Mikhail Bakhtin in his study of epic calls the "world of 'firsts' and 'bests'"—and the possibility of consensus.⁴⁶ The most important aspect of epic, Bakhtin explained in 1941, is not the rendering of "actual facts" but the expectation of their "absolute" acceptance; the epic is distinguished by "its reliance on impersonal and sacrosanct tradition, on a commonly held evaluation and point of view—which excludes the possibility of another approach—and which therefore displays a profound piety toward the subject described and toward the language used to describe it, the language of tradition" (16–17). Lukács argues that the world represented in fiction should seem like "something not invented, but simply discovered" (126); not intention groping its way but experience realized.

For her part, Woolf tries to resist the hierarchy of objects she associates with patriotic thought. She contests the war by rejecting its models of attention. Woolf approaches the war parenthetically, never erasing its violence but not allowing violence to absorb, in the total attention violence demands, the partial attention that resists it. *Mrs. Dalloway*, in particular, reproduces a conflict about attention at several levels (syntax, theme, and plot). The novel shuttles between remembering and forgetting, between the rejection of complacency and the suspicion of prescribed action, whether this action involves forgetting or remembering to the exclusion of everything else. With the arrival of Sir William at her home, Clarissa hears that Septimus has killed himself: "Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, her's death, she thought" (183). If one thinks that the gravity of death means considering death first and by itself, and not in the middle of a party, and not in the middle of a sentence about a party, then Clarissa's thought may seem insensitive and unsympathetic. But there may be something valuable in a reiterated "thought" that equates the significance of a party with the significance of death—that places these topics, syntactically and ethically, on the same plane. Clarissa recognizes in Septimus "an attempt to communicate" (184). She admires his death because he has done something unreasonable. He has rejected the "corruption" of life: "A thing there was that mattered; a thing,

wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved" (184). As for herself, Clarissa reports: "She had schemed; she had pilfered. She was never wholly admirable" (185). Clarissa's party may facilitate chatter and perpetuate exclusion (Miss Kilman and Septimus were not invited), but it creates opportunities also—for measuring the past, recognizing friends, and saying "things you couldn't say anyhow else, things that needed an effort" (171). Presenting death in the middle of a party, Woolf refuses to accept the structure of choice—war or peace; party or death; reasonableness or insanity—that Clarissa's milieu takes for granted. The refusal of linearity and choice is a signal characteristic of Woolf's modernism, and it is one of the reasons why aesthetic success in her terms often seems like political failure.

Arguably, *Mrs. Dalloway* achieves its climax not at the party, where Septimus's suicide is announced and considered, but at the start of the novel's penultimate section, in which Peter Walsh calls a passing ambulance "one of the triumphs of civilisation" (151). Woolf places this sentence in Peter's thoughts only sentences after Septimus has killed himself and Dr. Holmes has disclaimed all responsibility. While Peter's comment does refer to the ambulance, it seems also, by proximity, to describe the scene of suicide that comes—in the novel—immediately before (though it is not known to Peter). Woolf uses Peter's interior monologue to register both the cruelty and the kindness of civilization's triumph and to suggest that technologies of kindness, which arrive in the novel as a doctor or as an ambulance, may generate cruelty in their wake. Throughout *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf makes the monuments of English civilization into symbols in the very sense Sir William uses: progress, an ambulance, war, and a wedding ring, all of which at first seem to have definitive meanings, no longer convey an unequivocal achievement.

In the novel's sudden shift from death to "triumph," we see right away that even in an ambulance there is nothing "wholly admirable." Peter sees the ambulance as a triumph because it functions as an agent of rescue and as an example of imperial "efficiency" and "communal spirit" (151). It symbolizes both English society at its most humane and the beneficence of this superior nation's rule elsewhere (as in India, from whose colonial service Peter has just returned). While the first may seem to us far more appealing than the second, Woolf would have us notice, by the nearness of the ambulance and the suicide and by Peter's clanging words (he repeats the word "civilisation" several times), that the very doctors who tend to the injured may be those who have driven Septimus to his death. Peter's triumphalism is made possible by three kinds of blindness: he does not know about the suicide of Septimus, or even that the treatment of shell shock is causing rather than correcting injury; he cannot recognize that the "communal spirit" at home, which he unreservedly admires, has been financed

by the exploitation of communities abroad; and he cannot see that the social values he admires (progress, efficiency, usefulness) are continuous with those that led Clarissa to marry Richard, making Peter "more unhappy than I've ever been since" (42). In this scene, Woolf proposes forcefully what she has suggested elsewhere: that English manners have a "cosmopolitan geography"; efficiency and "communal spirit" are made possible—and belied—by colonialism on the one hand and by European war on the other.

Peter's thoughts of efficiency may distract readers from the contemplation of Septimus's mangled body and his wife's misery, and from wondering whether it is, indeed, Septimus whom the ambulance carries. Yet turning away from death, the novel brings to light the uncivil, unwavering attention of triumphalist thought, represented in the novel by the affective priorities of upper-class marriage, colonialism, and patriotism. By creating this diversion, Woolf's style of composition rejects what Adorno has called "the dream of an existence without shame."⁴⁷ For Adorno—who is perhaps most known for insisting that poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric and who is perhaps least known for retracting or at least revising this declaration⁴⁸—writers seeking to resist social conformity must develop strategies of critique that exceed homogeneous or merely pious styles of expression; they must accept, if not embrace, the profanity of conflicting sensibilities—beautiful metaphors and ugly events, acts of kindness and scenes of cruelty, suicide in the afternoon and a party in the evening—and they must accept the ethical discomfort that this profanity may evoke. Adorno argues that the writer must acknowledge "the complicity that enfolds all those who, in the face of unspeakable collective events, speak of individual matters at all."⁴⁹ While "collaboration" should be resisted, Adorno asserts, "there is no way out of entanglement" (26–27). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf's shame is marked by her willingness to contemplate both the opportunities and the dangers of evasion.

By cultivating moments of diversion and by rejecting wartime priorities of attention, Woolf makes her readers more aware of social networks and helps them to distinguish between specific perspectives and universal ones. For example, Peter transforms a modest triumph into triumphalism by assuming that the limited success of the ambulance in recovering injured bodies can be simply extended to the entire success of London; that London's success can be extended to the success of the British Empire; that the success of the British Empire is equivalent to the success of civilization. Whereas the generalizing perspective assumes that triumph extends to every action and every actor, the agitated or distracted perspective acknowledges that one person's triumph is often the cause of someone else's loss. This is the point that Walter Benjamin makes in his claim, "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."⁵⁰ Benjamin observes that "cultural treasures," now collected in museums, are the spoils of forgotten wars; that those discoveries

that mark the advance of science and technology, however much they owe to individual inspiration, have been produced in part by anonymous laborers who received no benefit from their efforts. Benjamin's observation emphasizes causality and history, but it also speaks of the present and the future—the "triumphal procession," as he puts it, "that steps over those who are lying prostrate" (256). For Benjamin, forgetting and ignoring are not the unintended or necessary consequences of civilization's triumph, but rather they are the inaugural moments in which destructive self-righteousness are achieved. Writing in a time of too many processions, Benjamin proposes, as Woolf does, that looking backward and looking below are principal tactics of antitriumphalism.

And thus for Woolf even monuments are usable and potentially critical when their marmoreal substance is modified by the incitement to speculation. In *The Years* (1938), one of Woolf's characters refers to the statue of Edith Cavell, a British nurse who was executed by the Germans in 1915 and whose monument was erected near Trafalgar Square in 1920.⁵¹ Initially, the statue was inscribed with the usual patriotic phrases: "fortitude," "devotion," "for King and country." Four years later, however, the Labour government added a statement that Cavell made before her death: "Patriotism is not enough, I must have no hatred or bitterness for anyone."⁵² In Woolf's novel, Eleanor calls these words the "only fine thing that was said in the war" (319). Neither embracing patriotism nor rejecting it outright, Cavell's tentative universalism forces readers to speculate about the statue's message and about its function as a national monument. Woolf seems to appreciate the statue for its articulate evasiveness: the way it acknowledges (and even records) a history of conflict about the appropriate meanings and necessary objects of British devotion.

Woolf suggests that political engagement in an international context requires the willingness to march but also to think; the willingness to have a mind but also to change it; and the willingness to embrace uncommitted styles of attention. Woolf's analytic strategies depend on the persistence of effort rather than the production of efficiency. She uses evasion to reject the consistency and intensity of affect that she identifies with imperial progress and civic hypocrisy. Woolf's project brings together two strains of cosmopolitanism: a decadent, urbane tradition of dissenting individualism and a philosophical tradition of transnational sympathy based on similarities greater or less than the nation. Seeing the mixture of these traditions in Woolf's work has two principal consequences: first, it suggests that Anglo-American modernism includes antiheroic impulses that help to shape alternative modes of political consciousness; second, it suggests that critiques of modernity that focus on Europe, such as Woolf's, share analytic insights with critiques that emphasize the experiences of colonialism. Among these insights is the idea that resisting the politics of imperialism may involve refining or even rejecting some kinds of attentiveness.

When we read Woolf's fiction in the context of theories of cosmopolitanism and social theories of dissent, we can see and question what is valued as literary innovation, political action, and international sympathy in the twentieth century. Her critique of heroism and her emphasis on the political nature of intimacy will be crucial to the work of later cosmopolitan novelists.