Patterns of Violence

Virginia Woolf in the 1930s

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter makes the case for reading Woolf's works—from her first novel to her last, with a special emphasis on her three primary works of the 1930s, *The Years*, *Three Guineas*, and *Between the Acts*—as a great theorist of literary violence. It places Woolf in two primary relations to her contemporary culture with respect to violence: deeply, intimately exploring and formalizing its registers of violence; veering away from her peers and constructing an entirely original set of patterns to accommodate the visceral facts of ubiquitous, mass violence. The first half of the chapter elaborates three major topics in the cultural history of violence in the 1930s: the widespread debate about whether violence is or must be a determining feature of humanity, versus the view that civilization might yet prevail (discussion of Freud, Russell, Leonard Woolf, and V. Woolf); the Spanish Civil War, especially as it was reflected and understood in England (discussion of various writers on the war, as well as visual artists such as Picasso and Capa); the logics of action, as expressed by fascists, and the crisis around pacifism in the 1930s (discussion of Mussolini, British journal *Action*, and the history and language of British pacifism). The second half offers a reading of a full range of Woolf's writings (*The Voyage Out*, *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*) culminating in a detailed account of violence in her final three works.
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There, couched in the grass, curled in an olive green ring, was a snake. Dead? No, choked with a toad in its mouth. The snake was unable to swallow; the toad was unable to die. A spasm made the ribs contract; blood oozed. It was birth the wrong way round—a monstrous inversion. So, raising his foot, [Giles] stamped on them. The mass crushed and slithered. The white canvas on his tennis shoes was bloodstained and sticky. But it was action. Action relieved him. He strode to the Barn, with blood on his shoes.

—Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (1941)\(^1\)

By the middle of the 1930s, there was no escaping the fact of overwhelming force. To be an artist was to recognize both the vulnerability and complicity of one’s medium in relation to the vast movements of violence that were threatening to sweep across all protective boundaries. When Simone Weil proclaimed in 1940 that “violence overwhelms those it touches,” and that “each, in contact with force, is subjected to its inexorable action,” she also spoke for works of the creative imagination, whose relation to the brute facts of political subjugation seemed increasingly urgent and direct.\(^2\) In an era when fascism and Stalinism were displaying mass spectacles of aestheticized violence and politics, a great many artists felt called upon to create an alternative aesthetic universe, and even those who attempted to stay out of the fray could not easily distance themselves from the encroaching savagery or the sense of artistic complicity with the history of violence. As Woolf asked uneasily in 1933, already acknowledging the growing pressure to confront the suppression closing in around so many civilians, “how can the artist still remain at peace in his studio?”\(^3\) (p.198) To write or paint or take a photograph was, in some important sense, to answer violence in an observable form.
Aesthetic works in these years became gripped in an agonistic representational dialectic with violence. As such, their measure of value was bound up with their sense of historical responsibility, and a consciousness about how art and violence interact was constantly pushing to the surface. We have, of course, been tracking such frictions throughout this study, with violence insistently demanding some kind of creative reckoning and writers both embracing and resisting that challenge. What make the 1930s unique are the scale, gravity, and sheer predictability of it all. War was coming, and it was likely to mean violence of unimaginable magnitude. The Spanish Civil War provided a vivid example of that which, as everyone understood, would soon spread and intensify across Europe. Even more radically than in the past, as the scenes from Spain demonstrated, the next war would touch not only soldiers but civilians, the term “total war” having emerged in the interwar period as a lexical reminder of war’s reach. Aesthetically, these conditions of the 1930s merged with the lingering (or, perhaps more accurately, revived) memory of the First World War, whose idiom infuses works of this period. And yet, new aesthetic strategies were demanded, developing out from the narratives that had marked the earlier war. That output had prominently included disillusionment, an emphasis on witnessing, the positing of fragmentation as a formal correlative to war-based states of consciousness, and, as we have especially noted, the crisscrossing of enchantment and disenchantment. All of this would be carried forward, but four new elements combined to give particular character to what 1930s works confronted in violence: the immediacy of shattering violence for everyone, not solely for soldiers; a sense of foreknowledge, with world war something already imaginable; a sense, then, of return, as another world war approached, a cataclysm to be repeated and intensified; and an especially strong conviction that art, for better and for worse, was part of the ever-unwinding story of mass violence. As Stephen Spender admiringly wrote in 1938, describing what was already viewed as a signal visual monument of the war in Spain, “Guernica affects one as an explosion, partly no doubt because it is a picture of an explosion.” Guernica figured explosive violence directly, a tableau of its immediate aftermath.
When Giles stamps on a pair of wounded, engorged animals in *Between the Acts*, by contrast, he allegorizes the process of making painting out of bloodshed. The passage is famous among Woolf readers and has been much discussed: an eruption of masculine aggression in the novel, a reminder of the persistent violence of homophobia, an image of paralysis and slow death, a reflection on her darkening state of mind in the period leading up to her suicide, a political allegory (p.199) of national competition and invasion—all of these and more are encoded in this startling episode. The scene, moreover, was drawn from Woolf’s life; in her diary of September 4, 1935, she describes how she and Leonard, walking in Sussex, “saw a snake eating a toad: it had half the toad in, half out; gave a suck now & then. The toad slowly disappearing. L. poked its tail; the snake was sick of the crushed toad, & I dreamt of men committing suicide and cd. see the body shooting through the water.” As Woolf’s biographer Hermione Lee notes, “the sickening, fascinating sight of the half-dead, half-ingested living corpse” haunted Woolf in the ensuing years, appearing here and there in her personal writing, before its stunning reemergence in *Between the Acts*.7
For all the acknowledged power of the sequence, however, one thing has gone relatively unnoticed: relieving his mental strain in a spasm of violence, Giles also enacts the practice of creating art. His sneakers, here named as “white canvases,” refer also to a kind of painterly canvas; the blood that stains them in the moment of killing—a blood painting in effect—remains visible throughout the day, a trace and reminder of the act itself. Woolf’s writings are replete with artists and artworks, texts and textuality, and the bloodstained shoes join a crowded ekphrastic field within *Between the Acts*. Yet, in contrast to her earlier writings, which generally smile on the artistic impulse, the posthumous *Between the Acts* puts extreme pressure on the idea of creativity. The novel envisions a range of imaginative activity, often lingering on expressive origins, but ultimately tilts in the direction of annihilation, silence, and foreclosure. In such a setting, a mere splash of blood on a white surface is easy to overlook, yet its blunt abstraction has a powerful, if quiet, presence in the novel and is, moreover, very much in keeping with the modernist ethos. From Eliot’s “jug jug jug jug jug jug” to Yeats’s red parallelograms as emblems of war-filled national histories, the choice of nontranslatable expression over representation had for decades been a hallmark of the era’s ethos, and Woolf, while working on *Between the Acts*, was painstakingly writing a biography of her friend, the postimpressionist Roger Fry. *Guernica* itself, along with a number of other paintings, posters, and photographs from the Spanish Civil War, helped to engender a new visual vocabulary surrounding war and violence, and did so, in Picasso’s case, in decidedly abstract and allusive terms. Within *Between the Acts*, the possibility of full abstraction is described and praised, as when Lucy Swithin notes that “the Chinese, you know, put a dagger on the table and that’s a battle,” or at the end of the novel, when Miss La Trobe conceives of a new play to display the history of humanity through “the high ground at midnight ... the rock; and two scarcely perceptible figures” (*BTA*, 142, 212). The shoes differ from these in carrying with them the material traces of the violent act. Indeed, as I hope to suggest in my reading of Woolf, there is something iconic about the simple form of blood-artistry suggested by Giles’s shoes. Schematic and exemplary, it stands next to such texts as *The Waste Land* and Yeats’s reprisal poems as a powerful statement of juncture between literary or visual canvases (whose beauty may not be the defining characteristic) and violence in the world (with its attachment to historical narratives and brute human instincts).
More broadly, it will be the work of this chapter to present Woolf as a great theorist of literary violence. The catastrophe of war reverberates throughout her works, and critics have offered powerful assessments of its presence, at the level of form, character, and language, and have analyzed her affective and agonistic relation to its omnipresence in the modern world.9 More, readers have credited Woolf’s writing, particularly robustly antipatriarchal texts such as *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*, for its incisive understanding of the violence underlying and determining Western culture.10 As a feminist who saw the totality of patriarchal violence damaging and compromising many aspects of psychic, social, and artistic life, Woolf was dauntingly insightful. Yet her account of violence goes well beyond the political. Even the framework of psychology, though significantly displayed throughout Woolf’s writing (most personally in her memoir *A Sketch of the Past*), does not fully account for the way violence operates in her work. Instead, many of her starkest and most haunting representations of violence are depicted as strange irruptions, whose importance lies more in the way they become absorbed into the text’s consciousness than as examples of patriarchal aggression or as traces of abuse in Woolf’s own life. As Christine Froula writes, in a superb study that sees Woolf’s full body of writing as engaging with questions of war and civilization, asking what it means to imagine art, literature, and culture in a world of massive violence, Woolf’s work delivers “a call … to become ‘one,’ to enter history, to think in public and with others about the barbarity and no less the potential of ‘this “civilization” in which we find ourselves.’”11 Beginning with her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, continuing throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, and swelling in her three final works—*The Years*, *Three Guineas*, and *Between the Acts*—episodes of stunning violence are framed, bracketed, eclipsed, dispersed, and above all absorbed into Woolf’s textual fabrics. Together, these works demonstrate a completely original strategy for—to return to the snake and toad image—digesting violence into the literary work.
Given the clarity with which Woolf saw the threat of many different kinds of violence, it is especially striking that her overall mode was to imbricate it deeply into her texts and characters, so deeply, in fact, that at times it almost disappears, like the blood on the shoes. For all its intensity, in other words, Woolf’s lifelong engagement with violence is marked, in a certain sense, by muteness. “The human soul,” writes Weil, “seems ever conditioned by its ties with force, swept away, blinded by the force it believes it can control, bowed under the constraint of the force it submits to” (Weil, 45). Woolf’s works persistently display this dynamic. They tell a story of life as the experience of “unseizable force” (as she names it in *Jacob’s Room*) and of creativity as a place of neither submission nor resistance, but rather of endlessly varying forms of accommodation, acknowledgment, and rearrangement (*JR*, 137). Violence in Woolf’s writing becomes shape, color, trace, or, to give it a single name, *pattern*. An element of form, Woolfian pattern in relation to violence is its own distinct category, a way of thinking in spatial and aesthetic terms about the most visceral, bodily, painful aspects of the mortal condition.

For all the universalism of such thinking, Woolf’s treatment of violence, especially in her later works, emerged alongside and in relation to a variety of cultural signifiers that increasingly determined the debates about violence in the 1930s. To unearth and understand these will form the first part of my discussion. As in the short passage when Giles smashes the snake and toad, which is framed around the keyword “action,” Woolf’s representation of violence is fully engaged with a variety of theories and tropes that circulated among intellectuals, politicians, artists, and journalists of the period. Action, for instance, had by the middle of the 1920s become a political fetish, with special resonance for fascist or protofascist rhetoric, hence carrying distinctly troubling affiliations for the pacifist Woolf. And yet, as works like *Three Guineas* attest, Woolf was not content with merely repudiating or reversing concepts like action. Instead, she engages critically with her culture’s central formulations around violence, in a style that pushes, prods, and intervenes rather than erecting its own fixed terms. In addition to the concept of action, several other primary debates and images energized Woolf’s works around the problem of violence. There was, first, a large-scale theorizing of war and violence among 1930s intelligentsia, which circulated around the question of whether war and barbarity are endemic to the human condition. Second, the crisis of the Spanish Civil War offered unique and moving visions to answer the carnage of fascism, and this was correlated with a surge of literary activism among many writers of the period, aiming to bolster a politically engaged poetics. And finally, this period made ubiquitous the tendency, in writing across many genres and styles, to present the facts of mass violence in terms of paradox—where wars are fought to end wars, and only violence can be the route to peace.
Indeed, this last feature of her contemporary culture in some ways exemplifies the challenge for Woolf: how to consider one’s relation to force without collapsing into the circular structure of paradox, where peace must be folded into violence. (p.202) In that model, resistance to violence is futile, and creativity or experiment will always be eclipsed by familiarity. Again, the snake and toad resonate; wrapped in a circle, choking on itself and locked in its cyclical self-death, the pair seems an apt image for what Woolf confronted in the paradoxical logic of violence-for-peace. Like Yeats in relation to generative violence, in engaging this stasis, Woolf saw the dimming of the great power of language itself. It is all the more stunning, then, to find her works straining, paragraph by paragraph, against all the familiar grains, creating an aesthetics of literary violence that continues, as Conrad might have it, to make us see.

Theorizing Violence in the 1930s
“Dear Professor Freud,” wrote Albert Einstein in a 1932 open letter, commissioned by the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation, an arm of the League of Nations, “Is there any way of delivering mankind from the menace of war? It is common knowledge that, with the advance of modern science, this issue has come to mean a matter of life and death for civilisation as we know it.”12 As it happens, Freud’s response to this remarkable solicitation was pessimistic—“The upshot of these observations,” he declares in his rejoinder, “is that there is no likelihood of our being able to suppress humanity’s aggressive tendencies”—yet the exchange itself, symptomatic of its era, points in more open-ended directions (Why War?, 47). This was a period in which large questions about war and peace—or aggression and pacifism, or violence and its curtailment—were thrust into the forefront, as writers of all kinds found venues in which to wonder, indeed to agonize, about the seeming inevitability of monstrous war threatening to destroy what many still believed could be a humane world. So Aldous Huxley, in a pacifist encyclopedia published in 1937, would posit a host of claims clustering under the inherency umbrella: that war is “a Law of Nature,” that the human species is evolutionarily conditioned to war; that other animals are as violent as man; “Man,” he argues, in contradistinction to all of this, “is the only creature to organize mass murder of his own species.”13 In a similar vein, Woolf records in her diary in 1940 an evening conversation with Eliot, Saxon Sidney-Turner, Clive Bell, and others: “our talk?—it was about Civilization. All the gents. against me. Said very likely, more likely than not, this war means that the barbarian will gradually freeze out culture. Nor have we improved … Clive also pessimised—saw the light going out gradually.”14 These metaphors—of darkness, barbarism, eclipse, the dimming of civilization—were ubiquitous in these years, made all the more acute by the fact that the contemporary barbarity was emanating from Germany, still viewed by many English intellectuals as epitomizing the West’s cultural accomplishments. In all of these discussions, the First World War operated as the defining precursor event, a bloodbath which seemed destined to tell a story not only about itself but about Western culture more generally, as Freud’s own writings from the postwar years indicate—the war, after all, having turned Freud into a theorizer of human aggression in the first place, with “Thoughts on War and Peace” written in 1915 and Civilization and Its Discontents in 1929. It was in Civilization and Its Discontents that Freud made such declarations as “man’s natural aggressive instinct, the hostility of each against all and of all against each, opposes the programme of civilization.”15 In Why War? as in the literature of the 1930s more generally, there is a powerful, shared sense that a new war would be even more catastrophic and destructive than the last: “given the high perfection of modern arms,” writes Freud, “war to-day would mean the sheer extermination of one of the combatants, if not of both” (Why War?, 52).
By the 1930s, prominent intellectuals of many sorts were articulating the view that human aggression is one of the driving facts of the world, in its modern incarnation as in the ancient past. A longtime pacifist like Bertrand Russell (jailed for his antiwar activity during the First World War) struggled in this period between believing that people are fundamentally oriented towards peace and giving credence to the idea that the violent drive for dominance has been the underlying motive propelling much of history. In *Power: A New Social Analysis*, published in 1938, Russell argues that “[o]f the infinite desires of man, the chief are the desires for power and glory,” and “the fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics.”¹⁶ I think we can see in Russell’s “power” something akin to Weil’s notion of “force,” though his methodology is systematic and historical, rather than epigrammatic and literary. Perhaps the most salient message to emerge from Russell’s survey, which scans a broad history and sorts through types of power (such as “Priestly,” “Kingly,” “Naked,” “Revolutionary”), is that power often manifests itself paradoxically, so that, for instance, “periods of free thought and vigorous criticism [when traditional forms of power erode] tend to develop into periods of naked power” (Russell, 97). It is a depressing principle that the best elements in liberal, modern culture inaugurate its most vicious tyrannical outcomes. *Power*, like many other works of these years, stands equivocally between two positions, clearly seeing and cataloging the ubiquity of force, even as it proposes an enlightenment view that reason and humane cooperation might still prevail.¹⁷ In this fundamental dilemma, Russell sounds like the character Peggy in Woolf’s *The Years*, a novel published (p.204) nearly concurrently, as she wavers between hope and despair, wondering about the fate of humankind; are we, after all, “only sheltering under a leaf, which will be destroyed” (*TY*, 388)?
The decades that followed the First World War were exceptional in the outpouring of writing they produced on the subject of the inherent and inextinguishable violence that marks human nature and history, though of course, this kind of question had been probed before. Language that would be employed in the 1930s had germinated for two decades. It can be found, to take just one illuminating example, in a 1910 pamphlet entitled “The Moral Equivalent of War,” by the American pragmatist William James. With the threat of war already looming, it seemed that humankind was lurching in the direction of catastrophic violence, and James considers whether there might be some alternative channel into which the warlike tendencies of human beings might be directed. James declares himself a pacifist, and thus it is with regret that he wonders if the goal of ending war will ever be realized, given that “our ancestors have bred pugnacity into our bone and marrow, and thousands of years of peace won’t breed it out of us.”

Writing under a rubric similar to that of the Einstein-Freud exchange—in the form of a pamphlet commissioned by the American Association for International Conciliation—James’s object was to consider the moral possibilities for eradicating war. The question of culture is the crux of it: “History is a bath of blood,” and yet, he argues, over the millennia, entrenched beliefs about the value of honor, strength, bravery, and community have been so bound up with war as to make it virtually synonymous with those qualities (James, 4). For all his pacifism, James himself seems enthralled, in this short polemic, by the spirit of masculine militarism, and his goal is to recruit the qualities he associates with war in the name of peace and civilian improvement. “Martial virtues must be the enduring cement” of civilian life, he argues, “intrepidity, contempt of softness, surrender of private interest, obedience to command,” or again, “the martial virtues, although originally gained by the race through war, are absolute and permanent human goods” (James, 15, 16). James’s language is reminiscent of much in Anglo-American adulation of military masculinity at the turn of the century—with all that implies for sexism, homophobia, and the politics of power—and ties in, too, with later iterations (Mussolini: “War alone brings up to its highest tension all human energy and puts the stamp of nobility upon all the peoples who have the courage to meet it”19). But what is perhaps most revealing in James’s language is the blending of a familiar late-nineteenth-century rhetoric about war’s unsurpassable virtues with a dawning awareness of its terrible consequences, the human brutality that it both represents and encourages, and the real imperative to address and overcome the violent instinct in individuals and (p.205) cultures. In this last sense, “The Moral Equivalent of War” points forward to later decades. Thus Huxley, in his pacifist encyclopedia, includes a heading for “Moral Equivalent of War,” in which he directly refutes the logic of virtue that James had extolled; other writers of the 1930s, too, in attempting to understand or oppose militancy, felt compelled to address the truism that war, for all its catastrophe, engenders unique virtue and exemplarity.20
Perhaps the key feature of this public reckoning about war was its tendency to conjoin—or, of equal importance, to juxtapose—two kinds of inquiry: a pragmatic approach which focused on how the Western nations might prevent wars, primarily through the expansion and development of international organizations devoted to world peace, and the anthropological or psychological account of violence as a central feature of humankind. In a sense, then, the argument revolved around a duality we have been exploring since the discussion of Stephen’s beating in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: violence understood in wide, social terms (in the 1930s, this approach was often geopolitical) versus violence understood in primal, originary terms, magnifying the subjective experience (anthropological and psychological). As we have seen over the course of this study, literary works of the period often took an explicit interest in the connection between such matters as the ritual origins of human culture and the realities of violence in the contemporary world. The anthropological angle in modernism has been well documented and its connection to power noted.\(^{21}\) From Pound’s interest in Chinese artistry to Forster’s engagement with the spiritual force of Islam and Hinduism, this characteristic geographical promiscuity is inseparable from Western imperial domination, the very ability to conjure such mobility being, in some sense, a legacy of imperial confidence and modes of knowing. And yet there was often courage and genuine urgency in these anthropological incitements. As Marianna Torgovnick nicely sums it up: “we need to see the moderns as they were—as needing the primitive and as inventing the primitive that fit their needs. Their truest greatness may lie in their aspiration after ideas and values and alternative modes of being whose time had not yet come.”\(^{22}\) In the case of war, the sense that the inquiry needed to encompass a broad reckoning with human history and varying cultures met with the development of international associations in Europe and America devoted to preventing war, and so tended to oscillate between a generally pessimistic stance on the inevitability of human aggression and a more hopeful view that the Enlightenment might yet prevail. Perhaps, under the aegis of groups like the League of Nations, there could be an end to war’s barbarity. Again, Freud’s response to Einstein is symptomatic of the dire and universalist view: “when a nation is summoned to engage in war, a whole gamut of human motives may respond to this \(\textbf{(p.206)}\) appeal,” he writes; “The lust for aggression and destruction is certainly included; the innumerable cruelties of history and man’s daily life confirm its prevalence and strength ... Musing on the atrocities recorded on history’s page, we feel that the ideal motive has often served as a camouflage for the lust of destruction” (*Why War?*, 43–44).
Equally prevalent were theories that attempted to straddle the two approaches to violence—innate and determining versus aberrant and containable. Leonard Woolf’s work from this period is particularly revealing of how such a dual approach might look. His 1935 tract *Quack Quack!* takes an ironic tone as it makes the universalist case. Woolf ridicules the major European politicians of the day—the more bellicose the more absurd, in his view—even as he suggests that there are powerful human tendencies underlying the violence of fascism. Thus he can compare a portrait of Mussolini or Hitler with a Hawaiian statue of a war god, simultaneously mocking the fascist dictators and suggesting continuities among forms of warmongering throughout history and across the globe. In semi-Freudian terms, Woolf sees in dictators “the instincts and emotions of barbarism,” and fascism as eliciting atavistic, precivilized emotions and social reactions.\(^{23}\) By 1939, Woolf’s *Barbarians Within and Without* faces even more stark conditions (indeed, between its being completed and printed, the war had begun), with the threat of extreme and annihilative violence not only near at hand, but within one’s own ambit of responsibility: “For if civilization is destroyed, it will not be by the Hitlers and Mussolinis and their crude, barbaric violence,” he writes, “but by the muddled betrayal of the civilized. It is not the barbarian at the gate, but in the citadel and in the heart who is the real danger.”\(^{24}\) Yet for all the Manichean logic and anthropological suggestiveness in his thinking, Woolf was entirely committed to the idea that states and organizations could, in fact, remake the political world in such a way that war would be increasingly improbable, ultimately refuting the idea that war’s violence is endemic or ineradicable. He thus titles the epilogue to his 1940 work, *The War for Peace*, “On Reason,” and the primary object of the book is to counter the idea that violence is a necessary and basic feature of human society—in the modern system of nation states as in the ancient world—and hence that war is unavoidable.\(^{25}\) At stake in all of these works, really, is the question of whether violence ultimately expresses humanity—its infliction the essential fact of power, now and always; its suffering the essential fact of vulnerability, now and always—or whether those binding inevitabilities can be loosened, and a better future can therefore be envisioned.

Virginia Woolf, too, spent much of the 1930s reflecting on the precise nature of violence in the contemporary world, considering its psychic, systemic, and structural (p.207) qualities. In three scrapbooks she assembled over the course of the 1930s, whose material forms the basis of *Three Guineas*, Woolf can be seen finding her own position with respect to these debates. Several selections, for instance, offer something like the Freudian view of violence as a destructive instinct, including such pieces as a newspaper clipping, in the first scrapbook, on the subject of women’s attraction to violent male wrestling matches.\(^{26}\) Also concerning the idea of elemental human brutality is this passage from Winston Churchill (no hero in the scrapbooks), an excerpt from his *Thoughts and Adventures* (1932):
The brain of modern man does not differ in essentials from that of the human beings who fought and loved here millions of years ago. The nature of men has remained hitherto practically unchanged. Under sufficient stress,—starvation, error, warlike passion, or even cold intellectual frenzy, the modern man we know so well will do the most terrible deeds, and his modern woman will back him up. (SB, 1:49)

Churchill’s comments on the essential and unchanging savagery of people are left to stand on their own; as is often the case throughout the scrapbooks, Woolf adds no commentary, and a reader can impute irony where or as it seems appropriate. In this case, one might see a cautious agreement between Woolf and Churchill, as both acknowledge an abiding potential for violence that cannot be concealed by modernity’s self-deceptions—unless, of course, the final half line in the selection (“and his modern woman…”) indicates that Woolf is mostly interested in tracing the sexist underpinnings of Churchill’s commentary. If nothing else, what these inclusions show is that Woolf was casting her own withering eye on the broad theorizing of violence that occupied many of her contemporaries, including the way it played out as a consideration of inherency.

Or, to take yet a different kind of example, thinking back to James’s formulation about the need for pacifism to find a use for military values like masculinity, heroism, and self-sacrifice, we hear an almost uncannily close echo in another scrapbook entry, this one from a memoir of his dead son by Victor Bulwer-Lytton, 2nd Earl of Lytton, written in 1935:

We talked of the League of Nations and the prospects of peace and disarmament. On this subject he was not so much militarist as martial. The difficulty to which he could not find answer was that if permanent peace were ever achieved, and armies and navies ceased to exist, there would be no outlet for the manly qualities which fighting developed, and that human physique and human character would deteriorate. (SB, 2:8)

(p.208) There is little ambiguity about Woolf’s attitude toward such a statement. What is most telling is to see the continuity of thinking over a full generation: to espouse pacifism, or even to challenge the value of war, is to set oneself against the old patriarchal ideals of manliness.
The theorizing of war and violence in the later modernist years took many forms; in addition to a debate about instinct versus reason, which transpired most pointedly around the onslaught of fascism and the coming of a new war, there was a widespread reckoning with the nature and condition of civilian life, and in particular with the menace of aerial bombardment.\textsuperscript{27} The idea that technology would one day make destruction by air a terrifying reality had, as we saw in the case of the dynamite novels of the late nineteenth century, been a part of the British imaginary for decades.\textsuperscript{28} After the turn of the century, however, and especially with the experience of the First World War in mind, the concern about what aerial bombardment could do to civilians and their cities intensified; by the middle of the 1930s, the fear of an air war became all but ubiquitous. Airplanes were something of a fetish in the interwar period, with the romanticism that had surrounded the military pilot in the First World War era clinging, often uneasily, to other associations that proliferated in the following decades. Some of these associations were benign, as commercial aviation became a source of public fascination. In fact, the relation of commercial to military flight in this period presented an ongoing dialectic, as suggested in the skywriting-cum-toffee-selling sequence of \textit{Mrs. Dalloway}, in which the attraction of the airplane is composed precisely of its double association with war and with innovative, visually arresting techniques for selling things. Flying was a source of adventure and virtuosity, in the same tradition as mountaineering or polar exploration; like these, adventure aviation in this period was linked to tragedy and failure as much as it was a crucible for human persistence, expertise, and audacity. There is something in this conjunction of epic ambition with catastrophic endings that particularly appealed to the popular British imaginary in this period, as the fascination with polar disasters dramatically shows. Perhaps more than any other single figure, the world-famous Charles Lindbergh provided an aura of popular heroism around the image of flight as adventure. Lindbergh, a romantic figure of the air par excellence, was also a champion of commercial uses for flight, and something of a pacifist in the interwar years. As the victim of a heinous crime, moreover, with the kidnapping and murder of his son, Lindbergh invoked intense public pathos. Similarly, the accomplishments and, more sensationally, the ultimate disappearance of the woman aviator Amelia Earhart in 1937 helped to secure the place of transatlantic flight as one of the signature spheres in which technology, war, adventure, commerce, sensational news, and even gender-bending were yoked and mutually defined.\textsuperscript{29} 

\textbf{(p.209)} Most central to the recalibration of the airplane over these years, however, was its increasingly recognized function as a carrier of weapons, the bombs whose power and reach would define the next world war, as they were already defining smaller wars of the mid-1930s. The RAF in fact produced air shows to display its powers to destroy (enemy) cities from the air. As scholars have pointed out, the European imperialist powers engaged in ruthless attacks on colonial subjects during the 1920s and into the ’30s, though such attacks
were virtually ignored in the European press, with the exception of Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia. As Susan Sontag puts it, “General Franco was using the same tactics of bombardment, massacre, torture, and the killing and mutilation of prisoners he had perfected as a commanding officer in Morocco in the 1920s. Then, more acceptably to ruling powers, his victims had been Spain’s colonial subjects, darker-hued and infidels to boot” (Sontag, 9). But the bombings on European soil presented an entirely different cultural and psychic phenomenon. In fact, as Paul Saint-Amour argues, the muting of colonial violence alongside an enlarging understanding of the threat to European cities in the 1930s was an important element in the interwar consciousness of mass violence, what he calls “the partiality of total war.” The interwar period saw a proliferation of works that imagined spectacular scenes of invasion and destruction—often with whole swaths of the nation wiped out—in a sense updating what had been written in the period before the First World War, this time with the emphasis squarely on aerial assault. It is perfectly symptomatic, for instance, to find Woolf including in her scrapbook a devastating description of a 1937 attack by the German military on the southern Spanish town of Almería, along with Guernica one of the most extreme cases of fascist aerial obliteration of civilians during these years (SB, 3:10). Wells—always with his finger on the popular pulse—wrote The Shape of Things to Come (1933), later adapted into a film (1936) which envisioned the world nearly destroyed by an ongoing, massive air war across the globe. Though the novel ends, improbably, with a gesture towards a utopian future, its most memorable images involve the modern world left in ruin by decades of relentless bombing. In Wells’s work and elsewhere, the image and idea of the airman as a pure destroyer, indifferent to the mere humanity of civilians thousands of feet below him, began to emerge in competition with the earlier icon of flyboys as aristocrats and sex symbols of the sky. If, for Yeats, the sheer distance represented by the airman had offered an image of metaphysical sublimity, well removed from politics, later years would see that distance as enabling a terrifying indifference to human life, the very inverse of Yeats’s idealized view of Robert Gregory. So when Benito Mussolini’s son Bruno, a pilot and bomber who helped to destroy Ethiopian civilians and towns during the Italian invasion, described “set[ting] fire (p.210) to the wooded hills, to the fields and to the little villages” as good sport—“it was all most diverting”—he helped to codify and embody the idea of the bomber as monstrously removed and inhuman. These words are quoted, fittingly, by Russell in Power. The idea of aerial bombardment, in sum, provoked concerns in this period ranging across a sweep of categories—military, strategic, psychic, moral, personal, even aesthetic—and occupied thinkers across the disciplines, from professional war planners to imaginative artists, elite as well as popular.
We might note, moreover, that the fixation on aerial assault, and the transformation in thinking about civilians, cities, and safety it entailed, had begun to spread even before the events of the 1930s. Bernd Hüppauf describes the airplane’s “profound impact on the perception of the environment” as a “constant reminder that this war [WWI] had also conquered the third dimension, turning Daedalus’s dream of escaping from the labyrinth into the nightmare of a complete system of surveillance and threat.”

Though zeppelin raids in the First World War had been limited in scope, they resonated with the public, permanently altering the idea of separation between civilian and combatant spheres and providing a very clear and direct image of how future forms of devastation would be wreaked. As Saint-Amour dazzlingly argues, almost immediately after the war the idea of the city as liable to destruction, and of its citizens as potential targets, began to characterize not only the thinking of military planners and international organizations but also the formal strategies of interwar modernist novelists, who, as Saint-Amour puts it, “incarnate the novel as air-raid siren.” Indeed, “the co-presence in [three major novels of the period, Mrs. Dalloway, Berlin Alexanderplatz, and Ulysses] of an all-encompassing cartographic gaze with a sense of the urban object’s radical vulnerability suggests the emergence of a new sub-genre of the city novel in the wake of the Great War: the novel of the total-war metropolis.”

By the 1930s, then, the significance of aerial bombardment had been well established, the interiorizing and formalizing of an air war having already begun to transform the imaginative range of modernist thinking. Above all, however, it was the Spanish Civil War that brought the idea of aerial destruction into the absolute center of European consciousness, and helped to define the period’s aesthetic responses to mass violence.

The Spanish Civil War
When it came to imagining mass violence, the war in Spain set the terms. The paintings, posters, films, and photographs that emerged from it generated a powerful visual vocabulary for representing as well as resisting violence; the journalism and (p.211) other writing that documented its course (particularly the most notorious atrocities of the insurgent forces) helped to set the tone for testamentary writing about war and genocide well into the twentieth century; and its status as the last front against Hitler and fascism—where democracy must make its stand—transformed it into the cause célèbre of its era for writers, artists, and other concerned citizens from around the world. All of this was intensified by the acute and widely shared understanding that the war in Spain represented a “dress rehearsal,” to use Ernest Hemingway’s term, for what was imminent in Europe and the Far East. Even if the Spanish war itself was actually more complicated than these narratives suggest (a complexity writers like Orwell and Weil attempted to convey), it was, and still is, overwhelmingly understood in stark and polarizing terms, especially by those following the war from outside of Spain. For Woolf in particular, the Spanish war offered, first, a political challenge, as she watched friends and allies join in a concerted effort to help defeat the fascists, a call to arms and politics about which she was deeply ambivalent and in which she was repeatedly entreated to participate. In her scrapbooks, she includes several solicitations from individuals and organizations, as well as pamphlets and manifestos signed by her peers—and in one case by herself (SB: 2:34)—and, of course, she frames Three Guineas according to such an appeal. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the war offered a personal tragedy for Woolf and her family; her nephew Julian Bell volunteered as an ambulance driver in Spain, and was killed there in 1937. For a war taking place in a part of Europe typically portrayed as far removed from the modernized north, and one not posing a direct threat to England, the Spanish Civil War nevertheless had an enormous place in the consciousness of English people, including Woolf and her circle, at personal, social, cultural, political, and visual levels.
The war became the subject of a huge representational project, first notable as a sign and locus of political commitment. Robert Jordan, Hemingway’s alter ego in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) puts it simply: “He fought now in this war because it had started in a country that he loved and he believed in the Republic and that if it were destroyed life would be unbearable for all those people who believed in it.” Hemingway himself covered the war as a journalist, writing over thirty dispatches from Spain, published via the North American Newspaper Alliance in papers across the United States. He also helped to write and produce the propaganda film *Spanish Earth*, released in 1936, which makes an impassioned and eloquent plea for immediate aid to the people of Spain, presented as heroic, dignified, cooperative, and socialist-leaning. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, in contrast to the film (and to some degree the journalism), steers decidedly away from politics, giving us a protagonist who is “anti-fascist” but otherwise politically evasive, and presenting the Republican forces (with the exception of Jordan) in emphatically nonidealized terms. Published in 1940, the novel postdates the war, and in a sense sums up several years’ worth of mourning losses and of celebrating the international outpouring of support that had brought not only Hemingway but writers such as W. H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Stephen Spender, and Simone Weil to Spain. As Thomas Mann asked in 1936, “Whose affair is it, if not the creative artist’s...?”

The participation of artists and intellectuals began early in the war. It took very public shape in the Second Congress of the International Association of Writers, held in three Spanish cities in 1937, and also involved declarations such as the *Left Review*’s 1937 “Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War” forum, which gathered the signatures and written statements from a legion of famous writers. For the Congress, the location in Spain was critical, signifying not only allegiance but also a material, rooted form of participation. The idea of “taking sides” at all is characteristic of the terms employed in the war’s activism; as the *Left Review*’s manifesto put it, “It is clear to many of us throughout the whole world that now, as certainly never before, we are determined or compelled, to take sides. The equivocal attitude, the Ivory Tower, the paradoxical, the ironic detachment, will no longer do.” The point was not only to descend from the Tower to fight against fascism, but also to make one’s writing part of the effort—hence the reference to irony, a stance that crosses over from the personal to the literary. So Auden wrote “Spain” in April 1937 (published initially as a pamphlet), with its famous refrain “but to-day the struggle,” to be borrowed by the “Taking Sides” manifesto two months later, which prominently included the phrase “To-day, the struggle is in Spain” (*Cunningham*, 51).
For all the language of absolutes, this drift among public positioning, writing, and voluntarism was always agonistic. Woolf attacked precisely this kind of connection in her essay “The Leaning Tower” (1940), first delivered as a lecture before a working-class audience, in which she complained, as she had in other contexts, about the politicizing of literature. The “leaning tower” writers, as she dubs the generation of Auden, Spender, and their peers, are fatally marred as artists by the political aspirations of their work. For Woolf, writing in a defensive mood, the activism of her younger peers was damaging—rather than generative—to their literary output. And for their part, some of those who were involved in the Spanish Civil War would attempt, in future years, to distance themselves from the certainties of the era. So Auden drew back from “Spain” after the Second World War: As Spender tells the story, in encountering an original pamphlet copy of the poem being sold on the street, Auden scrawled the words “this is a lie” next to its final lines (“History to the defeated/ May say Alas but cannot help or pardon”). Or a work like Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), whose title and overall concept (p.213) (a memoir of his months serving with a socialist militia n Spain), would seem to promise a nostalgic look at a time of self-sacrifice and motivation, instead takes a decidedly distant, ironic attitude—the forbidden mode? The book’s ambivalent and internally conflicted tone is particularly notable given that it was composed and published while the war was still under way, and hence might have been poised to act primarily as an appeal, along the lines of works like Hemingway’s film *Spanish Earth* or Auden’s “Spain.”
Orwell, Spender, Auden, and Hemingway are just a few; the list is long and varied, and, as these names suggest, prominently includes journalists, whose work in reporting the war was enormously far-reaching and important. We might take, as an emblematic case, the bombing of Guernica in April 1937, which quickly became the most infamous instance of civilian bombing before the Second World War. Guernica (“Gernika” in the Basque spelling), in the north of Spain, was the regional Basque capital, by all accounts a lovely market town. As commentators at the time stressed, it was of no military or strategic value; its almost complete destruction was aimed at its civilian population, and of course at the “morale” of the Spanish people more generally. The town itself was almost entirely razed by the squadron of German airplanes that spent several hours attacking it, thanks to their effective use of incendiary bombs, which set the town ablaze. With its many wooden or partially wooden buildings, it was ready to disintegrate under such a firestorm. The ruthless attack on Guernica caught the world’s attention, in part because of the work of foreign journalists who happened to be stationed nearby (in Bilbao) and who arrived in the town within hours of its bombardment. As Ian Patterson writes in his study *Guernica and Total War* (2007), “Had it not been for the presence in Bilbao of some remarkable foreign correspondents … the real nature of the events of 26 April might not have been known until decades later: Certainly the bombing of Guernica would never have taken on its symbolic significance.”

The overwhelming emphasis in these reports was witnessing and presence; to see the destroyed town itself, and to interview its victims, was paramount. At the same time, journalists gave a feel for the fascist enemy, at his post high in the sky, whose motives and tactics were presented as profoundly inhumane, in proportion to the cold calculation that determined all aspects of this kind of attack. Here, for instance, is the English journalist G. L. Steer, the first to report the attack in the British press, describing events in the *London Mercury* (1937):

It was about five-fifteen. For two hours and a half flights of between three and twelve aeroplanes, types Heinkel 111 and Junker 52, bombed Gernika without mercy and with system. They chose their sectors in the town in (p. 214) orderly fashion … On the shattered houses, whose carpets and curtains, splintered beams and floors and furniture were knocked into angles and ready for the burning, the planes threw silver flakes. Tubes of two pounds, long as your forearm, glistening silver from their aluminium and elektron casing; inside them, as in the beginning of the world in Prometheus’ reed, slept fire. Fire in a silver powder, sixty-five grammes in weight, ready to slip through six holes at the base of the glittering tube. So, as the houses were broken to pieces over the people, sheathed fire descended from heaven to burn them up. 46
Such language was far-reaching. Steer himself was also the unnamed writer of *The Times*’ initial reports on the attack (also printed in *The New York Times*), and he included these initial transcriptions from the *London Mercury* in a book on Basque independence published one year later, while other newspapers, journals, and pamphlets also addressed the bombing of Guernica. Reading these lines and others like them, the public was made witness to several key things. First, of course, was the sense of atrocity and outrage at the attack against civilians, whose plight was detailed throughout these writings. Of equal importance, too, was the sheer technological menace of the bombers’ virtuosity, directed against meager homes and vulnerable bodies. And finally, it was the systematic quality that defined the Nazi air war in these texts—for instance, that wealthy fascist homes outside of the city were spared while the old and beautiful village was burned to the ground.
Guernica became notorious not only because of the exemplary journalism that revealed its atrocities but because of Picasso’s painting, “which soon became an instantly recognizable depiction of the victims of modern war” (Patterson 18). Picasso had been commissioned by the Spanish government earlier in 1937 to contribute a painting to the Spanish exhibit at the Paris International Exposition, in a display that would make a plea to the world for aid in democratic Spain’s increasingly desperate cause. In the bombing of Guernica he found his subject, a place and event that were already the scene of acknowledged slaughter and worldwide outrage. Massive in scale, modernist in style, dramatic in emotion, moving in expression, combining the personal and allegorical, the painting was enormously suggestive and effective, and it immediately garnered a sense of authority, though not, it should be stressed, uniform aesthetic admiration. (The opinion pages of The Spectator in October 1937 provided a lively debate on the aesthetic merits of the painting, as did art journals of the period.48) The Paris display was much visited and reported, and the painting itself, despite its giant size, went on to travel to many cities in Europe and America, including a brief showing in London in 1938.49 Guernica (p.215) offered one kind of powerful artistic intervention into the war, the larger-than-life vision of a famous artist, whose abstract forms captured both the suffering and dignity of the victims of fascism. The painting seems also an accusation—“J’accuse”—an attempt to jar European civilians out of complacency, to insist that they grasp fully the significance of the Spanish war for all of them, by combining specifically Spanish or local iconography (the bull, the rustic and traditional buildings, the suggestion of the “tree of Gernika” in the far corner), with universal images of horror, vulnerability, and resistance. Too, the painting’s palette in layers of gray is highly suggestive of other media. With its coloration and hatching marks, it seems in dialogue with newspapers, even though, unlike many of Picasso’s formative cubist works, there is no actual newspaper here—as if to signal that in this case, where the communicative and political stakes are so high, the aesthetic absorption of these rival forms loses its surprise value; the newspaper has its own distinct role in this historical crisis. Moreover, with its grays and sepias, Guernica is evocative of photography. For all the contrast between the painting’s modernist idiom and mainstream photographic style, that is, its visual language is intertwined with the photography of the period, which, along with journalism, most pervasively mediated the war’s presence in other settings.50

More than the other forms we have thus far noted in this chapter, the rich and diverse photographic archive that emerged from the Spanish war reintroduces the polarities of enchanted and disenchanted violence. It is a visual mode dominated by documentary realism, a genre that tends to take up the dichotomous logic of enchantment and disenchantment with abundant visual clarity. Indeed, it is striking how the photographs of the war tend to fall into those two categories, some stressing the unredeemability and sheer waste of the war’s violence, while others envision a spirit of nobility and beauty as a product
and legacy of the war’s horrors. Woolf’s opening gesture in *Three Guineas*, when she depicts herself gazing at gruesome photographs sent by the Spanish government, is helpful to recall in this context—pictures, we might now note, of landscapes very similar to Guernica’s. In the *Three Guineas* tableau, we recall, Woolf describes (but does not reproduce) photographs of ruined houses and bodies, and from this encounter, begins to imagine the lineaments of a universal sentiment against war. The setting is an interesting one. On one hand, she appears to be comfortably situated in the ease and privacy of her English home (this would be Monk’s House, the Sussex home where the Woolfs spent much of the 1930s), encountering these pictures of someone else’s home in an unnamed Spanish village, blown to bits. I am reminded of Mary Favret’s primal scenario in the expansive condition of “wartime,” with the writer at home, looking into the fire in the hearth, thinking and not thinking about war. Here the continuities across the two realms of war and peace (or rather, peace as oncoming war) are unmistakable: Sussex in 1938, like London, was already preparing for an air war—or worse, possible invasion—and, more generally, the idea of a safe and peaceful civilian existence was, as we have seen, disappearing in the public consciousness. If this sense of local threat is left extraneous to Woolf’s narrative of viewing the pictures, we might nevertheless ask how their presence in this location might alter them, or, conversely, alter the uneasily quiet English space into which they intrude. Woolf argues in the passage that the photographs generate a visceral reaction; seeing the massacred bodies causes one’s own body to experience a “fusion,” somewhat like Spender’s notion of Guernica affecting a viewer in a manner akin to the explosion it depicts. The photos create the necessary horror and shock to incite political engagement—though, as we know from the rest of *Three Guineas*, Woolf was cautious about what kind of political engagement she could support, even toward the goal of abolishing war. To the extent, however, that her own writing might be enlisted in a political cause, it is as part of a chain reaction, a response and answer to these other works of representation and transmission. In the movement through acts of seeing and conveying, the viewer and reader come alive to the destruction being sown in a war happening in a seemingly alternate universe. It is a response conditioned as and calling for affect. Or perhaps, given the aura of preparedness surrounding late 1930s in English culture, it is more accurate to see this “fusion” as premonition, a form of empathy-to-come: in seeing the actualization of extreme violence, those in a state of suspension discover an alchemical connection to its victims. It is a process that depends, vitally, on the visual markers of disenchanted violence.
Indeed, those photographs, icons of meaningless destruction in Woolf’s account, came, in our earlier discussion, almost to define disenchanted violence, with their insistence on an ugly destructiveness that cannot be attached to systems or structures of value. Whether Woolf had in mind actual individual photographs or a general style, such disenchanted images from the Spanish war proliferated in these years, and they held an important place in the visual culture of the 1930s, especially during the war, when extremely troubling images of destroyed civilians and cities were enlisted for Republican support. These uses of photography represent complex trajectories across multiple spheres, not only involving the style and content of the photographs themselves, and the channels of reproduction and dissemination (for instance, in partisan newspapers in Spain and across Europe), but also in the responses they engendered, politically, personally, and aesthetically. It should be noted too, that Franco’s allies worked to cast doubt on their culpability in the Guernica bombing, maintaining that the town had in fact been destroyed by communists hoping to manipulate public perception and sympathy. It is a tactic that continues up to the present day; the worse the attack on civilians, it seems, the more surreal the forms of conspiracy conjured up in defense. Yet documentation presses against such forces. In the decades that followed the Second World War, documentary images came increasingly to the fore, when marshaling and archiving photographic evidence of bombing campaigns and other acts of horrific violence became a critical aspect of the work of journalists, political actors, and historians. Such photographs were reproduced, discussed, and preserved, and they share with film a central position in the visual legacy of the genocidal and atomic atrocities of the mid-twentieth century.

In the Spanish Civil War, photographs of bombed cities and killed or needy civilians carried a powerful narrative urgency. These visual forms had roots in the disenchanted representational history characterized by Friedrich’s photographs from the First World War, a tradition in which the unredeemable, sickening quality of violence is presented in terms of decimated flesh. In the same year that Picasso produced Guernica, to take a striking example, the Hungarian-born British journalist Arthur Koestler compiled and published a chilling series of photographs as an appendix to his book L’Espagne ensanglantée (subtitled “Un livre noir sur l’Espagne”—“Bloody Spain: A Black Book on Spain”). The book is an exposé of fascist atrocities, and though it appears never to have been translated into English (it may have been translated into German), it had enough circulation to get Koestler arrested by the fascists and thrown in prison for six months when he returned to Spain. The photographs assembled in Koestler’s book, rather like Friedrich’s, cover a variety of grisly subjects, including colossally ruined architecture, corpses strewn on deserted streets, and, in several cases, horrendously mutilated bodies, whose very parts have become indistinguishable. Also following Friedrich, Koestler’s pictures move in the direction of increasingly difficult viewing—for Friedrich,
the culmination came with close-ups of veterans with extreme facial wounds, for Koestler with a collection of pictures of dead children who were killed in an air strike on the town of Getafe in November 1936. There are sixteen pictures in this section, thirteen of which are face-on, close-range pictures of individual children, numbered and tagged. Many are bloodied or visibly gashed, all with mouths gaping open. In fact, these pictures had circulated widely in the six months between the bombings of Getafe and Guernica, disseminated by the Republican government. One photograph of a dead girl, included in Koestler’s archive, was used as a Republican poster, and circulated internationally. I do not know if Woolf saw this poster, or this archive of photographs, but they speak a very similar language to the one she invokes at the beginning of *Three Guineas*, all of these photographs (p.218) working not solely to condemn the fascist forces but also to stamp out any idea of symbolic, cultural, or aesthetic value to be found in the violence of war. Typical of this representational mode, the photographs offer a clinical, seemingly neutral and removed look at the body in ruins, even as they invite a political, activist response. As with Friedrich’s archive, these photographs are not, in fact, an objective body of material, standing outside of perspective; on the contrary, their power as disenchanting spurs to action comes from such compositional factors as the relation of intimacy with dead bodies they demand of the viewer, their quality of anonymity, even the indecipherability characterizing many of the bodies they display. As Sontag began declaiming as early as *On Photography*, “Those occasions when the taking of photographs is relatively undiscriminating, promiscuous, or self-effacing do not lessen the didacticism of the whole enterprise. This very passivity—and ubiquity—of the photographic record is photography’s ‘message,’ its aggression.” Or, as Emily Dalgarno writes of the Getafe photographs, as printed in a leftist French newspaper: “Two visual codes are at war: whereas the pictures suggest the aesthetics of the family portrait … the number displayed below reveals the objectivity of the body count” (Dalgarno, 164). The disenchanting photographs that marked the Spanish Civil War in the public were working actively—to turn body into flesh, person into corpse—and they champion a brutal realism where aesthetics would seem entirely beside the point.
An entirely different ideal is embodied by the most famous photographs of the Spanish Civil War, those of Robert Capa, whose aesthetic of noble Spanish humanity has formed an indelible part of the visual culture of Spain (and the rest of the world) since the 1930s. Capa’s photographs are drenched with personal appeal. They are often crisply focused on individual faces, their beauty directly correlated with their often remarkably handsome subjects. Capa’s photos of both militiamen and civilians became instantly famous when they burst onto the scene in 1936. They were published and republished in photojournals in many countries, most notably in a special issue of Life magazine in 1937, and while Capa’s partner Gerda Taro was killed in Spain, her fame muted, Capa went on to a long and distinguished career photographing war and its human consequences. Best known, then as now, is “Falling Soldier,” one of a series of photos Capa took one afternoon on a hill in Cordoba, tracking militiamen in a series of exercises that turned fatal. This one captures a soldier at the very instant when he was hit by a bullet and killed, as he is blown backward, his tensed and wracked body and his clenched face reacting to the force of the bullet. Immediately following “Falling Soldier” in the series came another moving image of a man collapsing, in a somewhat more traditional death contour. No doubt because of its compositional shock, “Falling Soldier” has always garnered (p.219) tremendous attention, as well as controversy. So startling, opportune, and amazing is the shot, indeed, that it has been consistently suspected of having been staged. The debate rages on; though the controversy appeared to have been settled in the 1970s, thanks to the unveiling of the person believed to be the subject of the photograph, recent scholarship attacks the photograph’s legitimacy based on its location.59
Ultimate authentication aside, the photograph was a visual landmark in the mid-1930s and beyond, and is suggestive of Capa’s approach to war’s human significance more broadly. Part of what is so astonishing about “Falling Soldier”—actually, about both shots of falling men—is its status as portrait. Here, in the midst not just of war but in the act of being killed in war, the militiaman remains whole and human, his personhood and individuality in a sense enhanced in this picture, even as his body is jolted back by the force of the bullet. Earlier in the series, Capa had captured the group in celebratory pose, upright, enthusiastic, arms in the air, with rifles held high—men of the people dedicated to their work. This spirit, indeed, marks all of Capa’s photographs from the war, many of which document civilians, as they face the privations and assaults of the war. He took many photographs during the siege of Madrid (as did other photographers, a host of such pictures being included in Koestler’s book), as well as several series tracking refugees. In all of these, the human focus remains both direct and ennobling. Capa captures a sense of elegance and singularity in the features of his subjects, making even the most weathered, lined faces seem vibrantly sensuous. There is, throughout the archive, a sense of presence, even style, in these unbowed civilians. Among Capa’s civilian photographs, one gesture is particularly notable: the individual or group staring up into the sky. With aerial bombardment as the overwhelming threat to civilians during the war, this ubiquitous stance is not surprising. It is described in narrative form repeatedly in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, where the drone of planes almost always precedes their visibility. And so we have an iconographic posture, of civilians craning heads, eyes shaded, staring into the sky, looking at something the viewer herself cannot see, responding to a sound the viewer would never be able to hear.
Capa, of course, taps into a long tradition in European representation of ennobling suffering, which praises and aestheticizes human endurance. His project is essentially Romantic, and his precursors derive significantly from, for instance, French genre painting of the nineteenth century (or English lyrics like Wordsworth’s “Michael” and “The Solitary Reaper”). It is a tradition that stressed the hardship of labor, in the context of industrialization and economic injustice, even as the worker’s unbroken spirit and body was honored. Here those attributes are transferred from the sphere of labor to scenes of war and bombardment. To the extent that Capa’s works can be understood in terms of enchanting violence, then, the terms shift away from the most pervasive formulations we have encountered up to now, in which, for instance, the community of war is imagined as sacred, or in which a regenerative ideal demands that symbolic and aesthetic value emerge from violent events. Instead, it is in the human pathos of endurance and resistance to violence that Capa locates the core of his enchanting visual project. And yet, in his many photographs of people staring into the sky, the dominant emotional register is one of imminence—of destruction to come, perhaps within minutes, or even seconds. For all that they imply of endurance, beauty, and nobility, then, qualities that resonate with the idea of permanence, there is a profound sense of transience and uncertainty in these photographs. To enchant violence, in this part of the Capa oeuvre, is thus, in a strange way, to conjure the shattering of that very ideal, to shadow a moment of continuing human strength with the promise of a horrendous destruction that would look, in the end, more like Koestler’s archive of mutilated flesh than Capa’s own works of resilient beauty.

These diverse visual creators—Picasso, Capa, those who took, compiled, and disseminated photographs of bombarded cities—believed that by making visible and visceral the barbarity of war and fascism, they could be part of a counteracting force against the most violent regimes and ideologies. Along with poets, journalists, and other writers, they epitomized the activist spirit of the era, constructing a narrative of suffering, resistance, determination, and need that called out for responsiveness from around the world. Yet this kind of activism needs to be distinguished, at least in part, from the idea of “action,” which, in the same period, was taking on dramatic connotations of its own. To be involved in the antiwar and antifascist movement was—in the name of peace and justice—to act. But action had also been colonized as an ideal for the right, which fetishized its metaphorics and held it up as the opposite of a weak and despised pacifism. In other words, a complex net of issues around war and action was entangled together in the 1930s, with ideas of activism (or acting) against war and violence coming into contact with very differently weighted beliefs about action, passivity, and pacifism.

Action and Pacifism
“But it was action. Action relieved him.” So Woolf describes the particular relief Giles experiences and expresses through stamping on the snake and toad. At its most straightforward, it is a moment of psychic release, depicting, in characterological form, a version of what Eric Leed has called the “drive discharge” model of war and violence. In general terms, the “drive discharge” theory holds:

(p.221) ... that organized spheres of conflict—war, revolution, and warlike sports—function to discharge drives which are blocked from expression in normal social life. War, in an image which seems native to the Age of Steam, provides a “safety valve” for aggressions, drives, and needs that cannot be used in working the social mechanism. Implicitly, the distinction between peace and war is a distinction between necessity and freedom, repression and release, the blockage of vital force inherent in men and groups, and the “expression” of that force in acts which are normally taboo....

War, here, becomes a world of instinctual liberty that contrasts starkly with the social world of instinctual renunciation and the deferment of gratification.60

This view, which Leed argues “was a deeply rooted cultural assumption intrinsic to the sense of liberation that many experienced in August of 1914” and which similarly “describes the assumptions of those who, at the end of the [First World] war, feared that the returning veteran had been criminalized, revolutionized, or barbarized by his experience,” maps closely onto what we have seen to be a widespread belief in the following decades as well, that human beings are prone to aggression and that there is no way to avoid the slaughter that was beginning to define the modern world, any more than people through the millennia could have prevented their own histories of endless bloodshed (Leed, 6, 7). Giles’s frustrations, moreover, are given real credence in Between the Acts; the only member of the Oliver circle to be paying close, conscious attention to the dire political and humanitarian situation on the continent, or to be envisioning the destruction that threatens the village and its residents, Giles is perhaps understandably enraged. Discredited though he may be as a violent homophobe—and as a representative of patriarchal capitalism more generally—Giles does embody a twisted and knotted desire to transfer his aggression from the small and local to, one imagines, the fascist and international, a desire that Woolf might expect her readers to share, or at least to understand.
Yet the phrase “it was action” calls up another set of associations, which—unlike the pseudo-Freudian theory of bottled aggression, which both pre- and postdates this era—was more particular to the interwar period, and more specific in its political affiliations. By the 1930s, the cult of action had become a byword for fascism, not only abroad, but in England as well. When “action” comes up in Woolf’s novels, it has this tone about it; in the case of Giles, certainly, or in one of Louis’s monologues in The Waves, when he thinks, “the voice of action speaks,” and likens it to aggressive sexual desire, possessed by “an imperious brute.”

Earlier in the (p.222) century, the worship of action had helped to characterize avant-garde literary creeds, including futurism and vorticism. Best articulated and epitomized by Marinetti’s first futurist manifesto of 1909, this was a language that took its reigning metaphors from motion and activity, declaring that “[u]p to now literature has exalted a pensive immobility, ecstasy and sleep. We intend to exalt aggressive action, a feverish insomnia, the racer’s stride, the mortal leap, the punch and the slap,” and lauding, among other things, “the beauty of speed.”

BLAST, too, for all its declared differentiation from futurism—its snubbing of automobiles in favor of ships, as an example—notably retains Marinetti’s exaltation of action, opting throughout its short run for metaphors of movement and mobility.
As Martin Puchner has shown, these avant-garde manifestos emerged in dialogue with radical political movements, and in the case of “action,” it is Italian fascism that is the closest interlocutor. Mussolini always trumpeted action as a fascist value and attribute, and in the early 1930s, he canonized such notions in various texts that helped to codify and rationalize the doctrines of Italian fascism. “Fascism,” he writes in one such declaration, “wants man to be active and to engage in action with all his energies.” His pamphlet “The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism,” published in English by the Woolfs at the Hogarth Press in 1933 (a text ridiculed by Leonard in *Quack! Quack!*), elevates action explicitly and implicitly, allying it with militarism and opposing it to what Mussolini most reviles, pacifism. “Born of the need for action,” in a time marked by “the necessity for action,” fascism, he writes, “believes neither in the possibility nor the utility of perpetual peace. It ... repudiates the doctrine of Pacifism ... War alone brings up to its highest tension all human energy and puts the stamp of nobility upon the peoples who have the courage to meet it”—and so on, the tract ending with a paean to empire. All of this is highly familiar in the European context—the metaphoric and symbolic associations that underpin such logic, the extreme political usages to which this violent language could be put, the specific consequences in the 1930s and ‘40s—and these ideas were also disseminated in England in the same period, albeit less consequentially. Oswald Mosely and his British Union of Fascists were the most direct followers of Mussolinian ideology in England, with Mosely’s tack to the extreme right escalating through the 1930s. At the beginning of the decade, in 1931, Mosely founded the “New Party,” a political movement that was framed more as antiestablishment than fascist.

The party’s journal was called *Action*, and in its short run between October 1931 and early 1932, it gave vent to Mosely’s increasingly strident voice, but also to a host of other writers who would seem strange company for him. The journal was edited by Harold Nicolson, who also wrote its book reviews, and these included, for instance, a rave report of Woolf’s *The Waves* (in its first issue, published on the very day that Woolf’s novel came out), reviews of other modernist writers like William Faulkner, and a sustained interest in First World War–related books. Other contributions in every issue included a column by Vita Sackville-West on gardening, film reviews (but not theater, signaling the journal’s consciously modern pose), humor, a focus on outdoor pursuits, and, of course, the expected emphasis on politics. The journal’s political voice was alarmist, and it resonated with much of the political language of fascism, despite an insistence that it deplored violence. “The Nation Calls for Action at Once,” ran its opening issue’s leader, and Mosely went on to describe his party in these terms:
We must create a movement which aims not merely at the capture of political power; a movement which grips and transforms every phase and aspect of national life to post-war purposes, a movement of order, of discipline, of loyalty, but also of dynamic progress; a movement of iron decision, resolution and reality; a movement which cuts like a sword through the knot of the past to the winning of the modern State.\textsuperscript{67}

All of this was short-lived and marginal to the overall political life of 1930s England, with the New Party faring execrably in the November elections of 1931, and the journal continuing a course of increasingly conservative ideology, only surviving for a few more months (it was restarted in 1936 under the auspices of the British Union of Fascists, until it was shut down, along with the party, in 1940). Mosely, of course, can claim no ownership of the idea of action, yet the journal I think represents a concise and not immediately discredited example of how the term could work in England in this period, politically and ideologically. Connected to a violent, contemporary worldview, derived from European fascism and feeding directly into movement’s like the B.U.F., it marked a pivot where humanist values of thoughtfulness, tolerance, and justice gave way to brutality, racism, and oppression. This whole sensibility, moreover, took shape in a relation of extreme antagonism to pacifism.

The story of pacifism in England in the 1930s is rife with contradictions, as the philosophy found its greatest expression and faced its harshest challenges, all within a few years. Nonviolence and antiwar movements had existed for centuries in England and throughout Europe (the peace historian Peter Brock begins his survey of European pacifism with the early Christians).\textsuperscript{68} These were overwhelmingly sectarian, but in the nineteenth century, radical groups opposed to international war and imperialism began to make their own, secular case against violence and aggression. Marx, of course, opposed the wars of nations, and anarchism, too, \textbf{(p.224)} had always stood against the national world organization that so endemically perpetuates war. Among the different pacifist groups that emerged in England after the First World War, the most prominent was the Peace Pledge Union (P.P.U.), which began in 1934 when a clergyman named Dick Sheppard published a note in the \textit{Manchester Guardian} soliciting postcards from those who would declare themselves opposed to war (\textit{The Times} having turned down his request). Receiving many thousands of these pledges, he organized a movement that grew to several hundred thousand members.\textsuperscript{69} All of these groups published their views and membership included many prominent political and intellectual figures (the P.P.U. counted such names as Huxley, Russell, Sassoon, Vera Brittain, and Storm Jameson).\textsuperscript{70}
For all this fervency, pacifism stood on very shaky ground in England in the 1930s. Facing the savagery of fascism and the increasingly widespread sense, on the left as well as the right, that war was necessary (or at least inevitable), those who were devoted to nonviolence in general, or to opposing war in particular, were liable to extreme marginalization, indeed to hostility or outright ridicule. By the end of the decade, a number of prominent pacifists had either recanted or recalibrated their positions. Of the strategies employed to avert charges of escapism and worse, the most notable was a recourse to the logic of paradox. When Leonard Woolf in 1940 titled his tract about international politics and democratic survivability under the stresses of fascism *The War for Peace*, he intimated a basic structure of thought that had been a central tenet since Wells’s famous coinage of the “war that will end wars” (title of a 1914 polemic, a moniker made famous by President Woodrow Wilson not long after): that the only way to find an avenue to peace—in 1938 as in 1914—was by waging war. To sustain nonviolence, violence. So basic was (and is) this notion, so deeply internalized its logic, that its paradox could pass almost unnoticed throughout the period. Leonard Woolf was not a pacifist, and pacifism itself could not in any coherent way advocate war and violence to attain its end, but it nevertheless became entangled in similar formulations, and, more generally, the period was one in which resisting war and violence seemed more and more elusive and impossible—or more and more attached, in some kind of terrible dialectic, to the achievement of war and violence.

Given how important the Spanish Civil War had become in filtering these questions, we might look to one of its many leftist international volunteers for an interesting rendering of the view that pacifism is always and inevitably bound to violence. Killed in Spain at age twenty-nine, the English communist Christopher Caudwell had just begun a career as an essayist and political theorist. In his essay “Pacifism and Violence,” first published posthumously in 1938 in the collection *Studies in a Dying Culture*, Caudwell makes the case against pacifism as a matter of root economic and social conditions. Within bourgeois capitalism, Caudwell argues, pacifism is nothing more than a form of violence in its own right, just as inaction is only a disguised (and even self-deluded) form of action. “Man cannot live without acting,” he writes, “And since man is always acting, he is always exerting force, always altering or maintaining the position of things, always revolutionary or conservative ... The web of physical and social relations that binds men into one universe ensures that nothing we do is without its effect on others.” All action, in this account, is force, and since inaction is embedded in action, to participate in capitalist culture at all, even in ways that might seem benign or passive, is nevertheless to promote force. In the case of pacifism, this inherent complementing of opposites means the cloaking of a silent and invisible violence:
Bourgeois social relations are revealing, more and more insistently, the violence of exploitation and dispossession on which they are founded; more and more they harrow man with brutality and oppression. By abstaining from action the pacifist enrolls himself under this banner, the banner of things as they are and getting worse, the banner of the increasing violence and coercion exerted by the haves on the have-nots. He calls increasingly into being the violences of poverty, deprivation, artificial slumps, artistic and scientific decay, fascism, and war. (Caudwell, 126, italics in original)

What is particularly notable in Caudwell’s Marxist formulation is his attack on those principles of resistance—inaction, pacifism, nonviolence—espoused by thoughtful, engaged liberals like Virginia Woolf. Too, his comments about the connected nature of the social fabric might remind us of Woolf’s own formulations, laced throughout her writings, of the intimately imbricated web of social, personal, and psychic connections that knits together the modern world. In Caudwell’s rendering, these connections are first and foremost political. There simply is no pacifism under conditions of capitalist inequality; there is only violence.

Even for those working to develop a viable antiwar theory in the 1930s, pacifism was pressed into a defensive posture, and was open not only to the kind of attack Caudwell made but also to the war-for-peace formulation rendered inevitable by the spread of fascism. A particularly eloquent and fervent work, which takes the route of evading these critiques, is Huxley’s *Encyclopedia*, which I have mentioned in reference to some of the dominant militarist arguments of the period. The *Encyclopedia* sets out the principles of pacifism in a historically extensive, philosophically cohesive way, dropping back from the particularities of the moment. Adopting the encyclopedic structure and style—its headings range from “Armaments, Private” to “Women in Modern War, Position of”—Huxley makes his case against war and violence through a clinical, topic-by-topic analysis, which is cumulatively powerful, while in a sense dodging the dilemmas facing pacifists in the 1930s. He has no subject heading for fascism, for example, instead bundling it with communism, and effectively brushing off both as the “product” of a long history of violence, Western culture’s own logical outcome (Huxley, 23). No apologist for the mass violence on the continent, Huxley nevertheless refuses to allow it to alter his own convictions, which look far afield from the present and from Europe for examples of nonviolent political and religious successes. As for the war in Spain, it is mentioned only under the general rubric of civil war, though the atrocities and horrors of aerial bombardment are generously articulated in the *Encyclopedia*, as part of its disenchanting agenda.
Indeed, disenchantment is the dominant mode in pacifist accounts of violence, as one would expect. In the case of the *Encyclopedia*, whose stylistic mandate would seem to disallow too much focus on the flesh, Huxley nevertheless creates headings that invite such emphasis (such as “Chemical Warfare,” which includes a detailed and grisly description of how mustard gas attacks the body), and methodically attacks all the conventional terms by which violence is ordinarily enchanted—religious, revolutionary, nationalistic, or even aesthetic. Or, to take a particularly wry example (one which recalls Lytton Strachey’s famous rejoinder from two decades earlier), Huxley writes:

Another favourite question asked by militarists is the following: “What would you do if you saw a stranger break into your house and try to violate your wife?” This question may be answered as follows: “Whatever else I might do—and it is quite likely that I should become very angry and try to knock the intruder down or even kill him—I should certainly not send my brother to go and poison the man’s grandfather and disembowel his infant son.” And that precisely is what war consists of—murdering, either personally or (more often) through the instrumentality of others, all kinds of people who have never done one any sort of injury. (Huxley, 48)

It is symptomatic of Huxley’s approach that he reaches back to the jingoistic formulations of the First World War for his most biting ironies, since the possibility of disenchantment was especially strong, as we have seen, in that period, whereas the contemporary moment invites, by contrast, a potently enchanting idiom.
Other pacifist works of the 1930s took a more direct approach to the violence of the times. In *Why War?*, a pacifist appeal written in 1939, C. E. M. Joad uses vivid, visceral language to drive home the horrors of war, highlighting, as is typical of the *disenchanted mode*, the vulnerable tissue of the human body. "War, as we now know it," he writes, "is a process whereby mechanisms mangle human flesh. To indulge in it is ... to enter a shambles in which all the resources of chemical science are concentrated on blinding, burning, poisoning and mutilating living human bodies"; or again, "To-day there is only the naked human flesh that feeds the machine." Though Joad shares with Huxley the desire to offer a bracing account of war’s material effects, his work takes an entirely contemporaneous approach to the claims of war and peace, beginning with the international situation at the moment of his writing, and including a late section entitled "The Policy of ‘Standing Firm’ to Fascism and What It Means.” In this penultimate chapter, Joad describes the disheartening experience of attending a pacifist gathering at a Quaker meeting hall, which disintegrated when, in an adjoining room, “a packed audience of excited persons was welcoming with terrific enthusiasm the British members of the International Brigade, just home from Spain” (Joad, 214). Though Joad is careful to speak respectfully of the volunteers, the experience of observing their welcome remains troubling:

The point for me lay in the contrast between the mild and decorous meeting attended by the few who had come to consider ways of peace, and the uproarious multitude who had come to do honour to the acts of war. The contrast made me pensive. The facts that the multitude belonged to the Socialist Left, and that their meeting place was the headquarters of the Society of Friends, gave point of paradox to my meditations. (Joad, 215)

For Joad, the paradox of pacifists embracing war is one he feels called upon to confront. Socialism is not, of course, synonymous with pacifism, but for Joad there is something definitive about his idea of the left and war: the one must, in order to stay true to its basic tenets and values, oppose the other. It is perhaps symptomatic of the period that Joad’s treatise, confident and brimming with moral purpose, ultimately finds itself in an uncomfortable, even alienated position. The pacifist watches, amidst a dwindling circle of friends, as war engulfs not only the continent but his own political movement.
Joad invokes the idea of paradox directly, but there are other measures of paradox in which he more unwittingly engages. Readers of *Three Guineas* will recall Joad’s name; he appears there (and in the scrapbooks) as a representative of contemporary misogyny. It is Joad who states, in a memorable footnote, that “Women, I think, ought not to sit down to table with men; their presence ruins conversation, tending to make it trivial and genteel, or at best merely clever” (*3G*, 159). More centrally, Joad is a spokesman in *Three Guineas* for the hypocritical idea (p.228) that the very highest standards must apply to women’s civic participation. Having fought so hard for the vote, Joad declares, women should use their newfound power to advance serious causes, rather than spend their time eating peanuts and ice cream. These are not incidental examples of misogyny and illogic—are men to lose their votes if they do not engage in meaningful political activity?; how absurd to suggest that women have real power; and so on. The fact that Joad, one of the villains of *Three Guineas*, is also an eloquent and committed pacifist indicates an especially problematic situation for Woolf and for her project in *Three Guineas*. In fact, the specific passage Woolf chooses from Joad involves him imploring women to work for peace, and to fight fascism. Along similar lines, when Dick Sheppard made his first appeal for support from fellow nonviolence advocates in the *Manchester Guardian*, inaugurating the P.U., he called explicitly for the votes of men, the reasoning being that a peace movement made up primarily of women would have little political force. One could very easily envision a place for this appeal in *Three Guineas*.

The problem of Joad (or Sheppard) represents more than just another ironic study in the logic of patriarchy; its offense and its challenge are structural. If male pacifism comes in the form of subjugation of women, of what use can it be? To answer this question is, of course, part of the imperative of *Three Guineas*. More broadly, though, it belongs to the large dilemma of how people imagined and promoted peace in the 1930s. On all sides, violence crowds out nonviolence: Marxists like Caudwell see pacifism as simply the quiet (or cynical) side of violence; Leonard Woolf and others call for war to bring peace; and feminists might see in pacifism a laudable goal that nevertheless fatally relies on yet more viciousness toward women. And so we reach an impasse, with the idea of action tarnished by its relation to fascism and to other ideals of force and power, but with no obvious pacific alternative. Woolf responded to these dilemmas throughout her late work. Indeed, the whole panoply of public discourse we have examined in this chapter, from debates about the status of violence in the human condition, to the aesthetic response to aerial bombardment, to the limitations of pacifism, find a literary home in her intensely empathetic body of writing.

Virginia Woolf
What, then, does a theory of writing violence look like in Woolf’s works? Are there strategies that either develop or persist in her fiction from early novels like *The Voyage Out*, which was largely written before the First World War, to late writings (p.229) such as *Between the Acts*, produced in the midst of a new war and reflecting the darkening outlook that took its ultimate form in Woolf’s suicide? How does the cultural history we have been tracing in this chapter—and more extensively throughout this study—play out across her career? The answer to these overlapping questions is that Woolf accomplished an extremely full and rich assessment of violence over the course of her writing life—the parallels between her first and last novels on this score are remarkable, her career framed around large questions of literary violence—with a result that is essentially twofold. On one hand, she engages many of the strategies and themes that occupied her contemporaries, from an emphasis on disenchantment, to the allegorizing of human violence via animals, to the rendering of the airplane as a singular new threat, to the many debates around the inherence of violence we have seen to concern writers in the 1930s. But there is a second and partially countervailing tendency, a way in which Woolf retreats from the forms for understanding violence that we have been tracking, and these might be categorized under the formal rubrics of dispersal and absorption. Though it is neither feasible nor helpful entirely to separate these two modes—the way she approached her culture’s shared tendencies and discourses around violence, the way she created her own unique formal solutions—nevertheless, her works can fruitfully be read both for their relation to a broader culture around violence and for their idiosyncratic turn away from the conventions developing in the public conversation of her day. Ultimately, the violence that Woolf always understood to threaten and encroach on human life comes to be emblematized and activated by several key verbs: bracket, disperse, absorb. From her first novel to her last, and in many nonfictional writings as well, Woolf considers violence in terms of pattern, the shapes and formations it can inhabit within the literary work, almost as if she is creating her own blood painting. Indeed, in all of this, the muting and erasing activity evoked by Giles’s shoes is significantly present, as violence is often marked by a mere stain. The central challenge faced by all the writers we have studied—how to find a formal register adequate to the excess and sheer monstrosity of violence—is met in Woolf’s writing with extraordinary patience, as each work develops new patterns, shapes, lines, and depths where violence can reside, or be contained, or find sharp new visibility. Woolf is, in this sense, a little like her creation Mrs. Ramsay, confronting “this thing that she called life,” a force that is “terrible, hostile, and quick to pounce on you,” and yet, “she said to herself, brandishing her sword at life, Nonsense.”77 Brandishing her sword at her own lifelong nemesis—violence—Woolf created a countermovement; if violence in her writing is often like a wave, the texts she shapes are like the obscure patterns left, however temporarily, on the battered sand.
“July 19th, 1939. I was forced to break off again, and rather suspect that these breaks will be the end of this memoir”: as critics have noted, the Second World War impinged on Woolf’s attempt, in *A Sketch of the Past*, to write her personal history. The war was the motivating force behind this sketch—she began each entry with a description of bombers and invasion threats—but it also profoundly interrupted and disrupted the effort:

June 8, 1940.... Shall I ever finish these notes—let alone make a book from them? The battle is at its crisis; every night the Germans fly over England; it comes closer to this house daily. If we are beaten then—however we solve that problem, and one solution is apparently suicide (so it was decided three nights ago in London among us)—book writing becomes doubtful. But I wish to go on, not to settle down in that dismal puddle. (*MB*, 100)

The disruptions converge here in 1940, when not only her writing but her life is at stake. These are extreme, terrifying, and moving statements, signifying debilitation—interruptions that herald only endings. Yet they also crystallize a theme that, in less abortive form, had always permeated Woolf’s work, the idea that violence presents a profound dislocation, around which literary works take their shape. In the memoir, the interrupting presence of the ongoing war gave form to the very past Woolf was writing. It created a heightened sense of magic and refuge in memory, for instance, and it also imposed its own structure of irruptive violence onto the past, the never-quite-safe haven of personal history. In this retrospective moment, in other words, the pattern of interrupting violence became one of the defining forms around which the individual life would be understood and narrated. And so Woolf offers in *A Sketch of the Past* a handful of crux events from her earliest memories, which, in this late and anxious writing, she describes as both formative and representative of her aesthetic consciousness. There is rapture and ecstasy, ignited by a blowing curtain in the Cornwall nursery, or focalized by the sight of a flower, complete and perfect. There is terror and self-hatred, generated by her half-brother’s sexual assault, or by the sight of a boy in the park whose face is marked and disfigured. There is early reckoning with death, and also with suicide. There is the stunning awareness of a latent pacifism, when the young Virginia finds that she is incapable of fighting with her brother, and allows him to pummel her (*MB*, 66, 71, 78, 71). In *A Sketch of the Past*, undertaken when Woolf had finally read Freud (or at least when she had acknowledged having read him), she writes back through her life and career, suggesting a personal dimension to the perception and endurance of violence. Even when lifted out of this explicitly psychologized frame, moreover, Woolf insisted on seeing violent events, to which a person is randomly, bewilderingly subjected, as pivotal elements in the aesthetic imagination.
Late in her life, Woolf’s writing tilts steeply towards this violence, as readers often note. Diary entries register bleakness, foreclosure, and real sadness: on March 24, 1940, she writes, “I remember the sudden profuse shower one night just before war wh. made me think of all men & women weeping”; January 9, 1941 opens, startlingly, “A blank”; on January 26, she writes, simply, “we live without a future”; and the list goes on. (At the same time, it should be noted that Woolf’s diary in these years is not merely a record of depressed sentiments, filled as it is with her habitual wit and brio, and rebounding often into notable expressions of pleasure.) Short prose works of the late 1930s, too, became a forum for considering the viability of liberal or pacifist strategies for confronting violence, and more largely, for weighing the possibility, in some basic sense, of survival. Thus one of Woolf’s last pieces, “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid,” takes the Blitz as an opportunity to imagine, in the future, a gentle demilitarizing of Western masculinity, as Woolf muses on how, through the creative and educative capacity, women might work to mitigate the “subconscious Hitlerism” of their culture. Or in Woolf’s final, unfinished essay “Anon” (initially envisioned as a full-length work), she erases the author altogether, in a gesture that is simultaneously self-annihilating and breathtakingly lovely and elevating:

The voice that broke the silence of the forest was the voice of Anon. Some one heard the song and remembered it for it was later written down, beautifully, on parchment. Thus the singer had his audience, but the audience was so little interested in his name that he never thought to give it. The audience was itself the singer...

Above all, the last three extended works of her career, The Years, Three Guineas, and Between the Acts, iterate and reiterate an increasing consciousness of overwhelming force. In form as well as theme, these texts present a world where waves of violence wash over us—in the crush of wars, in the organizing facts of patriarchy, in the history of a family.
The metaphor of the wave, indeed, is exemplary, providing a neat illustration of the way Woolf sets violence in tension and also dialogue with literary form, noting its power, engulfing it in her texts, erasing it even as she thrusts it into view. Woolf employed the wave metaphor abundantly over the course of her career, often to represent the terror of an indifferent, harsh world. In *To the Lighthouse*, water and wave are mesmerizing, beautiful, and evocative; but they are also the trigger of an almost ontological threat to the human condition. Thus in the famous dinner scene, the small party finds its shelter together in an island-like oasis, battered and encroached upon by the watery world around it. Or, earlier in the novel, in a moment of quiet reflection, Mrs. Ramsay is suddenly frozen in fear, for she finds that the “monotonous fall of the waves on the beach ... remorselessly beat the measure of life, made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea” (*TTL*, 15–16, ellipses added). *Jacob’s Room* has Betty Flanders, her son off at the front, wonder if the booming sound in the night might be the guns: “‘Not at this distance,’ she thought. ‘It is the sea’” (*JR*, 154). And in *The Years*, written a decade and a half later, a scene set in a First World War air raid evokes the familiar metaphor: “The guns were still firing, but far away in the distance. There was a sound like the breaking of waves on a shore far away” (*TY*, 293). Waves in Woolf’s work signal destruction and engender terror, at the same time that they are an emblem of extreme aesthetic patterning, as in the novel of that name. The metaphor of the wave, in other words, explicitly and closely ties violence to form (Betty Flanders, for her part, shifts quickly from guns to a more artful and imaginative image: “Again, far away, she heard the dull sound, as if nocturnal women were beating great carpets” [*JR*, 154]). The ubiquity of waves in Woolf’s writing underscores how important the intertwining of violence with aesthetic creation is for her; but also how elusive; the waves denote, but also, true to their structure, wash away the stain of violence.

*Early Patterns: The Voyage Out*
As early as her first novel, Woolf had developed her sense that there can be no separating aesthetic projects from intense, brutal episodes of violence and suffering. Indeed, in *The Voyage Out* (1915), Woolf makes her protagonist Rachel Vinrace into something of a repository for the experience and expression of violence, a collecting point for the many otherwise disparate and inchoate passages about violence that abound in the novel. These range from incidental suggestions and unidentified statements to more extended sequences, as when the English company aboard the *Euphrosyne* spots a fleet of warships from the deck. What unifies these disconnected passages in *The Voyage Out* is a consistent circling back from the suggestion of violence to Rachel, who exemplifies a quality of deep susceptibility and malleability. Allied especially with animals, Rachel is the pivot point for the text’s reflections on that which is physical, vulnerable, precarious. There are two especially resonant such passages, one strange and oblique, the other piercing and vivid. In the first, which appears just several pages into the novel, the group aboard the ship alludes to a herd of goats, drowned at sea:

(\textit{p.233}) [Mr. Pepper] professed himself surprised to learn that although Mr. Vinrace possessed ten ships, regularly plying between London and Buenos Aires, not one of them was bidden to investigate the great white monsters of the lower waters.

‘No, no,’ laughed Willoughby, ‘the monsters of the earth are too many for me!’

Rachel was heard to sigh, ‘Poor little goats!’

‘If it weren’t for the goats there’d be no music, my dear; music depends upon goats,’ said her father rather sharply, and Mr. Pepper went on to describe the white, hairless, blind monsters lying curled on the ridges of sand at the bottom of the sea, which would explode if you brought them to the surface, their sides bursting asunder and scattering entrails to the winds when released from pressure, with considerable detail and with such show of knowledge, that Ridley was disgusted, and begged him to stop.\textsuperscript{83}
Among other oddities of this passage is the fact that in the final draft of the novel, Woolf gives no explanation of what it might mean. Rachel’s dreaminess about goats is complemented by Pepper’s explicitness about flesh, but in neither case do we learn the provenance of these dead beasts who seem to amalgamate actual dead goats with the larger horrors and mysteries of what might rest at the bottom of the sea. In an earlier draft, the narrator had noted, several pages after this conversation, that Rachel’s father “was a sentimental man who imported goats for the sake of empire.”\(^84\) When the final draft eliminates clarifying fact that Vinrace is a goat importer, it leaves the passage to stand alone as a strange aside, where mangled animals or monsters at the bottom of the sea are simply depicted, for no obvious reason, at the same time that they are vaguely associated with Rachel, who empathizes with the goats and who is closely linked, throughout the novel, with images of drowning.

All of this culminates, horrifically and tragically, when Rachel experiences fever as a form of suffocation under water, returning her almost to a prenatal state of fluid existence, and also to the poor little goats:

> At last the faces went further away; she fell into a deep pool of sticky water, which eventually closed over her head. She saw nothing and heard nothing but a faint booming sound, which was the sound of the sea rolling over her head. While all her tormentors thought that she was dead, she was not dead, but curled up at the bottom of the sea. There she lay, sometimes seeing darkness, sometimes light, while every now and then some one turned her over at the bottom of the sea. (VO, 322)

In the typical allegorical usage, violent imaginings of animals stand in for their human counterparts. Here, however, Woolf closes the circuit, giving us a picture of Rachel’s fevered and suffering interior life every bit as vivid as the depiction of the goats’ bodies that had so disgusted Ridley. As in Yeats’s poems, allegory drops to symbol, metaphor to identity. The vitality and heat of violence seems simply to burn through the structural boundaries separating signified from signifier, person from animal. Lurking in the background of all of this, and tying together its divergent imagery, is not only Rachel, but also the disenchantment of the body more generally, revealing itself as flesh. So Helen, in a visit upriver, becomes “acutely conscious of the little limbs, the thin veins, the delicate flesh of men and women, which breaks so easily and lets the life escape compared with these great trees and deep waters. A falling branch, a foot that slips, and the earth has crushed them or the water drowned them” (VO, 270). The novel is always circling around such frail flesh.
The scenario of the goats/monsters—a moment of excessive animal mutilation, interiorized by Rachel and later played out as her own private drama, connected with drowning—has trenchancy in the novel, a kind of recurrence effect. It comes back in a tableau of behind-the-scenes hotel activity, a sequence reminiscent of such other modernist accounts of the underbelly of bourgeois life as Dorian Gray’s nights in the opium dens, Stephen Dedalus’s wanderings in the squalid Dublin streets, or Franz Biberkopf’s life in seedy Berlin. Rachel, ambling through the halls of the hotel, happens upon a scene of employees at their work:

Two large women in cotton dresses were sitting on a bench with blood-smeared tin trays in front of them and yellow bodies across their knees. They were plucking the birds, and talking as they plucked. Suddenly a chicken came floundering, half flying, half running into the space, pursued by a third woman whose age could hardly be under eighty ... the bird ran this way and that in sharp angles, and finally fluttered straight at the old woman, who opened her scanty grey skirts to enclose it, dropped upon it in a bundle, and then holding it out cut its head off with an expression of vindictive energy and triumph combined. The blood and the ugly wriggling fascinated Rachel, so that although she knew that some one had come up behind and was standing beside her, she did not turn round until the old woman had settled down on the bench beside the others. (VO, 238–39)

Even more directly than with the goats, Rachel stands in the position of spellbound spectator. In this episode of identity and radical difference, Woolf has her protagonist watch women who seem her exact other: in age, class, work, language, and attitude. It is a scene of female community, as the women talk and work together, and also, of course, of dramatic violence. For her part, Rachel would seem to identify primarily with the chickens, since it is their “blood and ugly wriggling” that transfixes her, and since she is generally associated in the novel with suffering beasts who have in store for them a grisly fate.
Yet when the tableau is resurrected in Rachel’s illness, it is the beheading women, rather than the animals, who appear. “She opened [her eyes] completely when [Terence] kissed her,” in a moment of relative consciousness, “But she only saw an old woman slicing a man’s head off with a knife. ‘There it falls!’ she murmured” (VO 320). It seems that the paradigm that substitutes animal violence for a human counterpart is going askew in The Voyage Out: far from allaying the textual pressure of presenting human vulnerability, the sequence with the chickens has lodged in Rachel’s consciousness, with powerful and ongoing consequences. The images of beheading that torment her throughout her illness doubtless represent her own castrating urges, but mostly are experienced as reiterated horror, with the phrase “there it falls” announcing the returned vision. Indeed, Rachel continuously occupies all three positions: she is the woman with the knife, she is the writhing hen, and she is also the bystander, who happens in on the bloody scene and can never quite dispel it from her mind or body.

Over time, Woolf will make the presence and absorption of violence more and more oblique; the characterological emphasis, which places Rachel at the center of the novel’s violent imaginings, recedes, and violence will come in less direct and reiterated spectacles. In the novel’s closing pages, Woolf adumbrates what will become her central system for engaging violence, to refigure it as pattern. Here is St. John, numb after the misery and tragedy that has so fully consumed him, allowing the welcome indifference of the hotel to lull him into tranquility:

As he sat there, motionless, this feeling of relief became a feeling of profound happiness. Without any sense of disloyalty to Terence and Rachel he ceased to think about either of them. The movements and the voices seemed to draw together from different parts of the room, and to combine themselves into a pattern before his eyes; he was content to sit silently watching the pattern build itself up, looking at what he hardly saw. (VO, 352)
In these closing paragraphs of her first novel, Woolf makes a complex gesture, on one hand suggesting that form (here called pattern) provides an escape and release from the pressures of suffering and death, but on the other hand, depicting this tendency in troubling terms, as St. John disengages himself, shuns intimacy, and takes pleasure in envisioning people’s relations as entirely aesthetic. It is as if, in (p.236) this closing movement, as St. John gazes abstractly into the hotel, Woolf gazes out onto a different horizon, of modernism’s future, and also of her own career, during which she will register violence as pattern. Or rather, in a strange, hall-of-mirrors way, Woolf seems not so much to be looking forward as backward—at herself now, finishing her first novel, which in retrospect anticipates a career of striving to find the appropriate balance between expressing the great human events defined by violence (including suffering, death, loss, and physical trauma) and refiguring these in purely formal terms.

*The 1920s: Jacob’s Room, Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse*
Woolf makes a dramatic gesture in this direction—of formalizing death and violence, of questioning the prominence of character, and of holding her own moves open to radical critique—in the first of her 1920s novels, *Jacob’s Room*, the work that marks her major break with conventional form, soon to be followed by two novels whose distinguishing formal experiments also emerge around the dark shape of violence, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse.*

*Jacob’s Room* makes the question of annihilating violence its central dilemma: how to write (or read, or know, or desire) a man who is, in some essential way, always on his way to death. Predetermined to die in the war, Jacob will never be given a completely full or knowable character, as if he is, from his very boyhood, on the verge of disappearing. At every level, Woolf posits her protagonist as elusive, with both major and minor characters responding to him in terms of this central, personal enigma. People “endow [him] with all sorts of qualities he had not at all,” he “looked quiet, not indifferent, but like some one on a beach, watching” he is “distinguished looking,” “the silent young man.” With all this vagueness about him, it is not surprising that characters turn to simile, noting his resemblance to different types—admirals and generals, frequently, and works of stone, relentlessly. He is “like one of those statues … in the British Museum” (*JR*, 67), classical, monumental marbles that are both lifelike and lifeless, and associated above all with war. Women are especially tormented by Jacob’s indeterminacy, which seems to match his noncommittal habits and general inscrutability. Jacob’s self-sufficiency is part of his defining quality of distance and drift; it is also, in this novel that takes the university circle as a site of remarkable intimacy and community, an aspect of that hermetic masculine culture which erects its own barriers against women. Thus they cope: Fanny Elmer, desperate during Jacob’s long absence in Greece and Turkey, visits the British Museum, squeezing out a residue of recognition and satisfaction from “the battered Ulysses … enough to last her half (p.237) a day” (*JR*, 150), while Clara Durrant gets by on excruciating patience, reminiscent of the kind of agonized waiting suffered by Jane Austen’s young women. But this is no Austen novel; as in *The Voyage Out*, which promises us a young woman’s bildungsroman knitted into the domestic novel and then shockingly kills off both protagonist and genre, so, here, the generic preparations are in place to bring recompense after all that waiting, yet no such consolation is forthcoming. In *The Voyage Out*, the generic end-jam comes as a cruel jolt; here, it is foreclosed in advance and comes as no surprise at all.
For all the unknowability about Jacob, there is one thing we know from the beginning: he will die in the war. As readers cannot fail to note, his name Flanders alerts us from the start to the place where his life will end, and even his first name comes freighted with loss and a sense of erasure. When “Ja-cob, Ja-cob” is called to the young boy on the beach at the novel’s opening, it does not produce the boy, any more than it will when Bonamy repeats the gesture at the end of the novel—“Ja-cob, Ja-cob” is a cry of loss and mourning, a communal wail in advance of and after the calamity, akin, in some ways, to the Irish keen that simultaneously mourns the losses of the past and prepares for the violence to come. The blankness at the center of that broken name is like many other images of emptiness in the novel—“listless is the air in an empty room” goes the refrain—culminating in the novel’s final and eponymous room, so full of objects, missing their subject (JR, 31, 155). The objects in Jacob’s empty room, moreover, are themselves constructed of emptiness and of loss, not only his old shoes, whose literal shape is one of molding to a missing body, but also numbers of letters that litter his table. Well before the novel’s ending in Jacob’s room, we have already been reminded that letters embody a kind of death, that “to see one’s own envelope on another’s table is to realize how soon deeds sever and become alien” (JR, 79). Bookended by death, the novel is relentless in insisting on the determinism of this whole twisted narrative of the young life headed for slaughter. We begin with Betty weeping, and we end with the shock of death, almost as if the cycle is working in reverse. Betty’s tears in the opening sequence make a blot on her writing paper, suggesting from the start that grief fundamentally thwarts and distorts writing, and yet, in one and the same passage, Woolf suggests an aesthetic reparation, for the tears “made all the dahlia in her garden undulate in red waves and flashed the glass house in her eyes, and spangled the kitchen with bright knives” (JR, 3). If this altered form of seeing represents some kind of compensation, it is not therefore pacific; every element that passes before Betty’s tearful eyes suggests death and violence, from the bright knives, to the glass assaulting her eyes, to the bloodlike red waves. In this compacted gesture at the beginning of the novel, Woolf promises a text that will enmesh its aesthetics (p.238) with violence, even as it will seek to keep alive the human aspects of loss, the widow whose husband is under the ground, the mother whose son will die in war.
The novel is indeed thoroughly engrossed by death, presenting a catalogue of mortality. People die; we know that, but here it happens unexpectedly—“Accidents,” Betty rues as early as the novel’s second paragraph, “were awful things”—and, at the same time, with devastating predictability (JR, 3). And it is not only people who die in Jacob’s Room. When “a tree has fallen,” it is “a sort of death in the forest,” the land “seemed to lie dead,” young children kill their butterflies, and so on (JR, 25, 85). Death is rigorously physical in this novel, from the sheep’s jaw that mesmerizes Jacob on the beach in the novel’s impressionistic opening sequence to the full inventory of burial and memorial apparatuses—tombstones, graveyards, bones, bodies that are never properly mourned (like Betty’s brother, who may or may not have drowned long ago), monuments, statues, names of the dead engraved on all manner of stones. Tombstones are especially ubiquitous, appearing even in such seemingly random locations as the bizarre cargo in a passing truck. Or perhaps it is not random; Sassoon, for one, noted in his memoir that there was something especially conspiratorial and invidious about the coffins prepared in advance of the Somme. As Froula notes, it is as if the full history of Western civilization had made the novel’s outcome—Jacob’s never-narrated death in the war—not only inevitable, but necessary: “Jacob’s Room,” she writes, “traces an inexorable yet reasonless reduction of masculine subjects to dead bodies,” as Jacob comes to take his expected place in the line of patriarchs. All of the men are caught in the cycle, the narrative being set by Jacob’s surrogate father Captain Barfoot, who “represents the long history of collective violence into which Jacob will be conscripted” (Froula, 70, 71).
For the novel is as consumed with war as it is with the broader category of death. The imagery of war comes in many forms—starting with Barfoot (“he was lame and wanted two fingers on the left hand, having served his country” [JR, 18]), moving through references to admirals and other war leaders, including the various statues and monuments, inevitably oriented around war and warriors, that constitute the public landscape of the novel, increasingly involving the visible or aural presence of massing soldiers, and culminating in the political discourse that brings a declaration of war. War is present by suggestion from the earliest moments in the novel, and its urgency becomes greater and greater as the novel progresses, moving from an undercurrent to a torrent, as soldiers and military music come to predominate the scene, whether in Greece or in London. The aura is of a gathering storm, as if the cultural history of the West had, all along, been building to its ultimate import, fulfilling itself. The circularity of the novel’s beginning and (p.239) ending suggests a narrative of violent realization (now we know what it really means to call for a boy who will never answer), and also offers a pattern for reading cultural history: at the end, we come back to the beginning. We have seen how origins were understood in the 1930s as a story of the ineluctable return to barbaric violence, and here, too, there is an unwelcome suggestion that even literary beginnings are fields of death. It was after all the Trojan War that began the Western literary tradition, providing the language, as we have repeatedly noted in this study, for fully integrating war with beauty, horror with value.

Homer’s Trojan War is also the event that Simone Weil would name as founding the idea of “force,” and this is pertinent to Woolf’s meditation on the long and recurrent history of war in Jacob’s Room. Metaphors of wind and darkness are especially potent as signifiers of an uncontrollable power that will destroy indiscriminately and extensively: “Violent was the wind now rushing down the Sea of Marmara between Greece and the plains of Troy … Now it was dark. Now one after another lights were extinguished. Now great towns—Paris—Constantinople—London were black as strewn rocks,” or again, “But the wind was rolling the darkness through the streets of Athens, rolling it, one might suppose, with a sort of trampling energy of mood which forbids too close an analysis of the feelings of any single person, or inspection of features” (JR, 140, 142). Like Yeats in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” Woolf employs wind to signify force itself, the very limit of human value, individuation, and meaning. The darkness here is obliterating, with all that is valuable in civilization flickering out and becoming extinguished (a motif we will find again in To the Lighthouse, The Years, and Between the Acts). Here, as in Weil’s formulation, the humanity of people (“the feelings of any single person,” one’s “features”) is leached away, as the individual is fated to become no more than a thing, a strewn rock. Woolf circles around this terrible possibility, first giving Bonamy “a very queer feeling … of force rushing round geometrical patterns in the most senseless way in the world” (JR 133). This notion of a senseless force, akin to the
destroying wind, is expanded by the narrator into a communal sense of the world’s workings: “It is thus that we live, they say, driven by an unseizable force. They say that the novelists never catch it; that it goes hurtling through their nets and leaves them torn to ribbons. This, they say, is what we live by—this unseizable force” (JR, 137). The logic of force is of inexorability, the structure is of interconnection, and the content of this iteration of force is highly suggestive, comprising battleships and submarines, “banks, laboratories, chancellories, and houses of business,” buses and policemen, even the human body itself: “When [the policeman’s] right arm rises, all the force in his veins flows straight from shoulder to finger-tips; not an ounce is diverted into sudden impulses, sentimental regrets, wire-drawn distinctions” (JR, 136–37). If Budge the policeman will be a figure of satire in Miss La Trobe’s pageant, here he embodies the trajectory of Western culture, which ends, in this particular segment, with the Durrants and their guests “talking about Germany” (JR, 137). Even if force may be said (ironically) to elude novelists, this passage offers something of an allegory for Jacob’s Room itself: this text too is composed of “geometrical patterns,” its own construction could be legible as a writing of “unseizable force,” and the passage gestures ahead to what will become a signature of Woolf’s fiction in subsequent novels, her metaphors of connection providing a diffuse unity within her novelistic worlds. And yet, for all this emphasis, Woolf’s stance on the value of the insight about force is equivocal, the speaking voice (“they say”) reflecting a questionable communal sentiment, of the sort that crops up often in her fiction (notably, in the brackets of To the Lighthouse and the villagers’ idiom in Between the Acts), always with some combination of pointedness and banality, poetry alongside conventionality.
It cannot be accidental that Woolf takes her novel to task at the moment when it seems to express itself most directly. As the visual shifts ushered in by Betty’s tears had suggested at the outset, Woolf is exceptionally conscious of the way her novel takes violence as its aesthetic engine. There is a kind of inhumanity about this novel, a cruelty even, as Woolf refuses to give Jacob any real fullness of character; the episodic and fragmentary structure of the narrative correlating with a distinctly partial, unfinished protagonist. In setting him up for violent death, it seems, Woolf has built obliteration into his very being. At its most extreme, we might even say that the novel’s formal proclivities, its construction of patterns and shapes (on the page, in the way we are able to know characters, in the structure of parallelism at beginning and end), is pitted against its humanity. To keep true to its vision of people as little bits of historical flotsam, the novel leaves its own creations empty, hollow. Even Jacob’s mother and best friend fall short, their closing thoughts in his empty room hardly commensurate with the loss at hand. Bonamy’s cry of “Jacob! Jacob!” is poignant and powerful, but his more intellectual reaction to the room bespeaks a shocking distance from it all—“What did he expect? Did he think he would come back?”—and especially the verb, “he mused” (JR, 155). The novel exacts a trade, in some basic sense, between its formalism and its humanity, as suggested by the destructive wind—to recognize its power is to lose sight of (and interest in?) the individual. Such a configuration also arose at the end of The Voyage Out, when the ability to see people as shapes, life as pattern, offered solace from the actual facts of humanity, sickness, loss, and death, but at a cost.\textsuperscript{90} It is especially interesting—and ironic—that this economic logic should so define a novel that takes as its starting and ending point the utterly incalculable pain and waste of a young man’s death in war.
At this novel’s heart is a terrible pain, a wound. It comes in part, no doubt, from the layering of the war story onto Woolf’s own past, with Jacob a figure for her brother Thoby, who had died when he was only twenty-six (after a trip to Greece). It is a wound that does not show overtly, unlike the manifestly injured Captain Barfoot. Nor is it in the form, exactly, of a blot, akin to the spreading ink that mars Betty’s letter and causes her visual world to ripple. It is a stain, the deep mark of violence on the world that never really disappears, as seen during a sailing and swimming expedition: “when Jacob had got his shirt over his head the whole floor of the waves was blue and white, rippling and crisp, though now and again a broad purple mark appeared, like a bruise” (JR, 39). These purple marks in the water will return in Woolf’s writing; there is something in their shape that is fundamentally evocative of violence and threat, of the way a whole, gigantic narrative of world violence is always just beneath the surface, just out of view. In this scene of male bathing—ground zero, as Fussell has shown, for signifying the vulnerable flesh of the war’s soldiers—there is much that is peaceful and beautiful, yet the benign qualities always follow a qualifier (“as if wisdom and piety had descended….,” “as of a man calling pilchards….,” “as if old men smoked by the door….” [JR, 39]), bespeaking an extreme tentativeness about what kind of peace can coexist in relation to the world’s bruise. More, in this novel published in the same year as *The Waste Land*, Woolf gives us her own violet hour (it will not be the last in her writings): “Strangely enough,” the narrator remarks after Jacob reemerges from the water, “you could smell violets, or if violets were impossible in July, they must grow something very pungent on the mainland then” (JR, 39). Notwithstanding the tour-guide tone (a notable instance of what Froula has nicely dubbed the “essayist-narrator” voice), there is something enormously strange and haunting in the presence of violets here, their aural proximity to violence and also the soft beauty they connote, making similar gestures to Eliot’s etherealizing violet in *The Waste Land*. At one and the same time, Woolf gives us the wound and its antidote, an image of ugliness that nevertheless conjures its own sweet intensity. If the purple mark in the water allows for the enchanting powers of violet to contain and mute its meaning, however, such constructs become impossible when it is Jacob himself who is the direct and immediate victim of violence. There, it seems, the artfulness, or perhaps artificiality, of the novel’s heightened form, cued to death and loss, ensures not enchantment but erasure.
To the Lighthouse inherits both of these violence protocols from Jacob’s Room, the creation of visual patterns that obliquely express terrible episodes of violence (the bruise) as well as the development of artful formal mechanisms constructed to manage death. This latter takes its most crystallized and famous form in the actual bracketing of death and violence in the “Time Passes” section of the novel. The brackets are startling, callous, and indifferent; they divert and diminish. Death, they seem to say, is not the decisive, world-changing event we have always imagined; when people die, they simply become asides. And so, after lavishing attention on Mrs. Ramsay’s every turn of consciousness over the many pages of “The Window,” and after evincing a spirit of deep and rich empathy for her (despite her flaws, which it also emphasizes), the novel can kill her off not only within a parenthetical, but within a dependent clause. The first reading of Mrs. Ramsay’s death in brackets always provokes a gasp, calling for a necessary rereading. At the same time, the brackets have nearly the reverse effect: they create little frames around their content, setting off, memorializing, protecting. The brackets shock—as death itself always shocks—but they also temporize. They remind us that it is ultimately the survivors who require attention, death and loss mattering primarily insofar as they become part of the consciousness of the living. Moreover, the brackets are effusively literary; they align the brutal facts of life with the way such facts are known and understood, in language, in this case the formal trope of parentheses. Mrs. Ramsay is the most notable casualty of the brackets, but Prue and Andrew are also lost in such spaces, and, indeed, the “Time Passes” sequence itself is a kind of bracket, as the novel skates the thin line between its two more robust segments, “The Window” and “The Lighthouse.” Windows, too, have bracket-like shapes, and the novel is replete with images and scenarios—the dinner scene, Lily’s painting of the purple triangle, the “shape” that, in Lily’s view, Mrs. Ramsay creates as a confrontation to chaos—that replicate and enlarge the idea of encirclement as a principle and formal concept which both wards off and contains death. The bracket as encirclement signals the terrible arbitrariness of violent or sudden death, but also emphasizes basic, human strategies for living, in the face of the many ruthless reminders of mortality that structure the novel.
Mrs. Ramsay dying unexpectedly one night, Prue in childbirth, Andrew blown up in the war—these are sensational and grievous matters for the parentheses, punctuating “Time Passes” and determining its sorrowful character, as well as setting the stage for the rest of the novel, which works toward reparation, but there are other brackets with stranger content, and these offer somewhat different suggestions about the relation of literature to violent loss. In the case of the bracket that relays that Augustus Carmichael has become a famous poet, the description of his success is followed by this comment: “The war, people said, had revived their interest in poetry” (TTL, 134). Here the content within the parenthetical is connected to Woolf’s intention in using brackets, since both are concerned with how literature makes formal sense of violence. In reference to the war and Augustus, Woolf is of course being ironic about the vogue for war poetry. Though herself supportive of a number of the famous soldier poets (in her writing, through the Hogarth Press, and in the larger Bloomsbury context), there is always the possibility, with Augustus, of his being something of a lightweight—we never know—the tone of the bracketed language intimating that the surge in taste for war poetry might have been as much about easy solutions and sentimental emotionality as it was about genuinely confronting war (or reading serious poetry). If Woolf’s own experiments, as in the brackets, are both challenging and surprising, the culture of war-poetry consumption, by contrast, was in many ways nostalgic and undemanding.

The brackets represent a highly self-aware aspect of the text’s consciousness; artful and formal, requiring that we see them on the page as much as read them, they offer commentary on the novel’s other formal moves. As windows, for instance, they comment on “The Window,” enhancing its thematics, but also suggesting a certain artifice in the novel’s use of such figures. Tonally, too, they are equivocal, playing a choral role, catching the contemporary idiom (“people said”), raising a question of authorial cat and mouse: can the narrator really disappear at these crucial moments, muting herself behind a general social voice? In this sense, they recall Jacob’s Room, but in a more contained fashion, as one would expect of bracketed passages. The brackets in fact comment on themselves. Of particular significance as a metabracket, defiantly reconstituting the brackets’ most notable functions, is this one, which stands as its own tiny chapter (VI) in “The Lighthouse”:

[Macalister’s boy took one of the fish and cut a square out of its side to bait his hook with. The mutilated body (it was alive still) was thrown back into the sea.] (TTL, 180)
On one hand, this ministory, in comparison to the deaths of Mrs. Ramsay, Andrew, and Prue, is inconsequential. This is a fishing expedition, after all, and the use of fish as bait would hardly be shocking to Woolf’s readership, much less to the characters of To the Lighthouse. Graphic and unflinching, it represents an instance of the hard-bitten, Scottish, working-class ethos that Mr. Ramsay so admires and that, as critics have noted, casts a somewhat conventional, even essentialist, eye over the local inhabitants of the island.  

And yet, here is the wounded body; more than any other passage in the novel, including the devastating parenthetical sequences conveying death, this one delivers the quivering flesh. With the brackets working in their distinctively doubled way, they wind a secure cordon around their content, pinioning the flesh into this one spot; at the same time, they draw special attention to that flesh, hence opening (p.244) the door to its presence in the novel. What floods in is the disenchanted reality of the mortal body—the body as victim, cut and discarded by an entirely unsympathetic young man, not only mutilated but desecrated. By contrast, when Andrew and his peers are killed in the war, the novel’s language remains distant and conventional, reminiscent of journalistic or official renderings of such events during the war years:

[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous.]  
(TTL, 133)

Among the great fictions of the war was that of the instantaneous (hence presumably painless) death, one of those lies that underlay the dialogue between the military and the civilian population. “Twenty or thirty,” meanwhile, reminds us of the callousness and insincerity of contemporary reports, even those disseminating comforting fictions. Commenting, then, on the habitual language used to depict and also to evade the reality of war deaths, the passage simultaneously participates in and stands aside from such protocols. But one thing is clearly avoided, and that is the flesh.
Woolf, then, is pulling no punches; she is vividly clear in attributing to the fish’s body the disenchanted ugliness that she will not give to the dead soldiers (or to Mrs. Ramsay, or Prue). She turns to the animal body—and one with distinctly nonhuman attributes—for the disenchancing presence. In the typical use of animal allegory, as we have seen, an animal stands in for a person (or for some segment of the population), the depiction of violence in a sense relieving the pressure on the human body to bear the representational weight of its own potential suffering. In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf partially revised that mode. Rachel’s identification with the goats and chickens (her own conscious identification as well as the reader’s identification of her with these animals) seemed to determine and demand her tragic end, as, dying of fever, she lay drowning in visions of violence reminiscent of what she had seen or imagined with the animals. In *To the Lighthouse*, the allegory would seem to operate more conventionally: we see the fish mutilated; we consider the human body subjected to violence. And yet, the effects are complex, disorienting, subversive. Coming as it does in the midst of the novel’s final section, which is devoted to unification and resolution, its abrupt appearance acts as a fresh disruption, a return (formally as well as atmospherically) to “Time Passes,” with its ethos of destruction, undoing, and loss. In resurrecting the earlier brackets, in turn, the fish passage raises a question as to whether those earlier scenarios were quite accurate, with regard to the wounded and suffering body. It relays that ground-zero (p.245) quality that Spillers associated with the most victimized of all people (the slave woman), and thus forces the earlier, more conventional recordings into a dubious light. Too, the passage creates its own cycle of infinite regress, drawing a parallel between the fish and the text; a square or window inside the novel, like all the bracketed passages, this one announces another square, inside the fish itself. The square of fish is the bracket; it is a statement and metaphor for the text’s stylistics. Thus the novel’s signature formal mechanism for relaying death, loss, tragedy, suffering, and violence—the brackets—becomes the very essence (the destroyed body) it has been deployed, at least in part, to evade. When fish becomes flesh becomes text, it sends disenchantment hurtling back to those earlier moments when violence was relayed more evasively, through euphemistic, idiomatic language. In a strange way, in fact, the fish passage is the least contained within its bracket, perhaps because it has no real relation to the plot; purely an image—of violence, of the violated body, of the text—it effectively disperses its meaning throughout the novel.
To the Lighthouse is, after all, full of fish and fishing references (as are nearly all of Woolf’s works), with Woolf evoking a Christian association of Jesus with fish, littering the novel with lines of poetry that allude to the sea and its tragedies, organizing the last section around a sea voyage (Cam looking dreamily into the water recalls Rachel Vinrace, among others), and on from there. Critics have fruitfully analyzed these rich associations, suggesting, among other things, that the fish becomes a metaphor for a subversive femininity. What the square of fish flesh does is to layer something disturbing into all of this, so that the text seems infused with the threat of disenchanted violence. The body as flesh, the irruptive power of violence—these form a substratum in the novel, always partially effaced. Early in “The Window,” Minta chattily conveys her fear of bulls, thinking, in vaguely Freudian terms, that “she must have been tossed in her perambulator when she was a baby” (TTL, 74). It is an innocuous enough reference—though one could certainly unpack the image of the bull, with its suggestions of masculine violence. When the perambulator as incubator of traumatic memory reappears, however, the sense of consequence intensifies. Now it is in James’s rendering, as he tries to measure the justice of his (violent) hatred of his father:

Suppose then that as a child sitting helpless in a perambulator, or on some one’s knee, he had seen a waggon crush ignorantly and innocently, some one’s foot? Suppose he had seen the foot first, in the grass, smooth, and whole; then the wheel; and the same foot, purple, crushed. But the wheel was innocent. (TTL, 185)

(p.246) Anticipating the passage where Giles stamps on the snake and toad, this one, too, presents a searing visual image (appropriately, since it is a description of a visual image scored into the child’s consciousness, recalling Joyce’s language surrounding the beating of Stephen’s hands). In To the Lighthouse, the crushed foot stands beside the fish as the only other reference to mutilated flesh, and although it comes as part of a thought experiment (hence aligned with the philosophical exercises of Mr. Ramsay and his followers), it nevertheless has real visual resonance. The word “crush” is used twice in the passage, and the structure of thought indicates a particularly intensive imaginative experience, almost as if we could see pain—start with the foot in its whole and unblemished state, see the wheel (turned weapon, as in Elaine Scarry’s account of torture), then return to the foot, now smashed. Moreover, the mashed purple foot casts a shadow back on Lily’s purple triangle, and on Mrs. Ramsay more generally, while the reference to infantile terror recalls Minta’s less concentrated reflections about her preconscious past. Again, a seemingly contained image of the flesh forcefully impinges into other parts of the novel, staining them, we might say, the way Giles’s shoes remain colored by the residue of blood.
The purple stain, in fact, becomes emblematic of Woolf’s simultaneous inclusion and muting of ghastly violence in *To the Lighthouse*. Here, for instance, is a passage characteristic of the more harrowing sequences in “Time Passes,” depicting a view out to sea during the war:

[There was] something out of harmony with this jocundity and this serenity. There was the silent apparition of an ashen-coloured ship for instance, come, gone; there was a purplish stain upon the bland surface of the sea as if something had boiled and bled, invisibly, beneath. (*TTL*, 133–34)

Expanding on the suggestion made in *Jacob’s Room*, “Time Passes” is full of such imagery. This passage, for instance, culminates in the novel’s most wildly despairing language, where the war years are imagined as a time of brutality and idiocy, the light of reason having gone extinct, when “gigantic chaos streaked with lightning could have been heard tumbling and tossing,” and “it seemed as if the universe were battling and tumbling, in brute confusion and wanton lust aimlessly by itself” (*TTL*, 134, 135). Indeed, these sequences in “Time Passes” press up against the terseness and conventionality of the bracketed passages, offering an alternative language for the violent reality both styles convey. For its part, the metaphor of the purplish stain on the water is visceral and indelible, and it also offers—along with the mutilated fish—an image for how violence operates in the novel: just out of view, only available as an “as if,” yet terrible, threatening, sad, disenchanting. Connecting (p.247) across the text to Mrs. Ramsay as a purple triangle and to the crushed purple of the foot, it helps to weave violence into the textual fabric.

One is reminded again, with this sequence of purple and violence, of Eliot’s use of violet in *The Waste Land*. *To the Lighthouse*, it seems, has its own violet hour, its own set of associations by which purple stands for the most disenchanted, visceral effects against the body, and also for the aesthetic work marshaled on the other side: the work of submerging and muting, but also of telling and making visible, ultimately of absorbing violence into a textual world where beauty and ugliness jostle for supremacy, along the lines, perhaps, of the novel’s most overt image of artistry, Lily’s painting:

Beautiful and bright it should be on the surface, feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into another like the colours on a butterfly’s wing; but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron. (*TTL*, 171)
Patterns of Violence

Those bolts of iron have always seemed an image of strength, solidity, and longevity, to counter the sweetness and light of the painting’s (feminine) beauty; but in the shadow cast by the irruptive violence we have been tracking, they also sound like instruments of torture and imprisonment. Even Lily’s painting, the definitive ekphrastic object among Woolf’s works, and one seemingly removed and abstracted from the flesh, in its own way partakes of the violent suggestiveness made manifest in the fish and shaded in purple.

_Mrs. Dalloway_, similarly canonical and sharing many formal features with the later novel, offers its own bracketing structure in the person of Septimus Warren Smith. It seems straightforward enough that Septimus embodies the war. He is, of course, one of its former soldiers, representative of millions of men who returned home to England (and to all of the warring nations), bearing with them many wounds, repositories of a history of violence that noncombatants might never fully understand. Shell-shocked and entirely unable to resume normal civilian life, Septimus is exemplary, too, in acting as a fundamental disruption of his home culture—hence the psycho-medical forces arrayed around him. Surrounded, moreover, by violent imagery (flames, most notably), keeping company with the dead, and sending his wife Lucrezia into a state of her own near-traumatic anxiety, Septimus is a repository for the war’s violent residue, far from dissipated five years after the armistice. David Bradshaw has movingly argued that _Mrs. Dalloway_ is “a commemorative text which memorializes the dead of the First World War in a variety of ways, even as it dissents from the necrolatry of the state,” and, more, that “there are moments of observance in the text which are almost ceremonial in their reverence and dignity.” And it is not only the war: “Death is defiance,” thinks Clarissa about Septimus’s suicide, and as he sits on the window sill, drinking in life’s pleasure for one last instant before his plunge, he stands for all the sensitive, vulnerable people for whom “human nature” is experienced as an assault, and whose difference and unhappiness cannot, it seems, be tolerated in the world.
The novel is intensely empathetic to Septimus, Clarissa’s deep and spontaneous understanding of him in its last pages suggesting a form of identification that the reader herself has been asked to extend to this troubled and yet fundamentally appealing protagonist. (We might note, nevertheless, that Clarissa’s response is, in its own way, limited, with a narcissistic, callous quality about it, just as Clarissa’s great strength as a facilitator of human contact can also be derided, as it is by Peter Walsh, as merely the accomplishment of a “hostess.”) Septimus’s violent life, both representative of a generation and intensely individual, is indeed one of the most heartbreaking in modernism. The novel began as a short story, “Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street,” yet as a novel, it shaped itself equally around Septimus’s madness, and the connection between his mental struggle and Woolf’s own has always been noted (“I adumbrate ... a study of insanity and suicide; the world seen by the sane and insane side by side,” Woolf wrote in her diary in 1922.). Still, for all his poignant imbrication in Woolf’s own story, Septimus is not really an alter ego (or double, foil, or scapegoat) for her or for Clarissa, though the two are formally and imagistically linked throughout the novel; he is formed fundamentally by the war’s violence, and his life tells its story. This type of historical ventriloquism, as Leed has shown, represents the general pattern for First World War soldiers suffering from shell shock; to decipher their symptoms was to learn how modern mass warfare writes itself into the soldier’s bruised consciousness. Even beyond this, with his load of trauma, his broken and cryptic attempts at language, and his profound separation from the ordinary goings-on of the postwar world, Septimus also becomes a figure for modernism—for its states of consciousness and its formal commitments. It is a disheartening analogy, in a way; threatened by coercion on all sides and experiencing the world as assault, Septimus is thoroughly consigned, even before his suicide, to a futureless stasis.
If Septimus most distinctly embodies the threat and reality of mass violence, other traces abound in the novel. Most notable, as critics have stressed, is the entire patriarchal establishment represented by Drs. Bradshaw and Holmes. Formidable and threatening, the politico-medical structure in the novel is even more coercive in its modern form (Bradshaw) than in its conventional, Victorian style (Holmes). Either way, the insistence on “conversion” reaches beyond Septimus, indicating a form of subjection that cuts across different categories of experience and can be practiced by different kinds of would-be convertors. So we have, for instance, Miss Kilman—lonely, hungry, and herself sympathetic as a victim of wartime hysteria—bent on conversion, and in that sense exerting (or hoping to exert) a measure of force in the world. Or there is Richard, not the patriarchal boor of his namesake in The Voyage Out, but nevertheless carrying patronizing political overtones. Or the Bradshaws: Lady Bradshaw is not an attractive character, to be sure, but Woolf presents her, nonetheless, as another victim of her husband (“there had been no scene, no snap; only the slow sinking, water-logged, of her will into his” [MD, 109]). One could continue in this vein; the novel’s characters, from its most central to its entirely peripheral, belong to a kind of force field, where exertions and violent tendencies from one direction can be felt, in lesser and greater degrees, in another. Given how pronounced is the imagery of connectedness in the novel—in the form of a great fabric or mist, as Clarissa variously thinks, or in the spectacles of shared watching represented by the car and airplane—such a vision of violence aptly extends the text’s overall thematics.
Yet this image of violence as part of the great push and pull of the novel’s (or London’s) shared consciousness raises questions—as we have found so many times in this study—about its aesthetic status. In texts like “Easter 1916” and The Waste Land, at the moment when violence is most thoroughly and gorgeously imbricated in the literary text, it is, in a sense, lifted back out, to be seen as jagged and discomfiting, demanding that we ask what the effect is or should be when the blast of destruction stands as the bedrock of a text’s—or a culture’s—artistic achievement. Such questions are also implied in one of Mrs. Dalloway’s most memorable sequences, that of the airplane sweeping through the London sky, an object of war (from the recent past and surely again in the future) marshaled in the name of a new mission, advertising toffee. It is an overdetermined sequence, a favorite of critics, this skywriting exploit that lifts the eyes of the citizens of London, in awe, confusion, and pleasure, uniting them in concentration, and momentarily diverting them from the patriotic emotions engendered by the great personage in the grey car. Remarkable in many ways—a grand theater of textuality, a comment on the artifice of all forms of signification, a wonderful evocation of how the new spaces of modern life create incredible distances and simultaneously breach them, a scene that mimics in the populace a child learning to read—the sequence also showcases just how intricately the life of violence has been absorbed into the civilian sphere. As we have seen, the airplane had already, by the 1920s, established itself as a major technological legacy of war. Even if the gesture of looking up at the sky, which dominates the sequence, had not yet assumed the full import it would have by the time of the Spanish Civil War, when it came to epitomize the perilous civilian condition, still, as Saint-Amour has stressed, the tense and involuntary (p.250) move of upward looking reflects the period’s dawning awareness of the air as the site of warfare, an active and fundamentally threatening sphere, whereby the city and its populace become targets for the lofty and dehumanized gaze of aerial bombers. The skywriting episode coheres the novel’s mood of recent trauma, a kind of group shell shock that always registers the airplane as potential weapon, in what Saint-Amour calls a “sense of suspended, future-conditional violence” (Saint-Amour, 142).
For all its violent suggestiveness, however, the airplane in the toffee sequence is acting under the rubric of commerce; it is, as Jennifer Wicke notes, “emblematic of all writing under the sign of mass culture.” Indeed, as Michael North has shown, Woolf based the skywriting sequence on an actual happening in June 1922—the first ever commercial skywriting in London, and hence a dramatic public spectacle, in which the airplane spelled out the name of the newspaper that also conspicuously covered the event in its pages, the Daily Mail. In shifting from newspapers to toffee, Woolf’s airplane flaunts its commercial inconsequence all the more conspicuously. Flamboyantly it displays its wares, its birdlike drops and rises undertaken in the name of a type of creation—an elemental writing, which of course spells out a familiar commodity, or, more accurately, an item of small decadence—akin, in that sense, to the chocolate éclair Miss Kilman buys at the Army and Navy store, another instance of military surplus feeding, as it were, the demands of the civilian populace. All of this belongs to a commercial London that has emerged from its wartime privations; as the novel testifies from its first page to its last, the city is flourishing, with its populace on a sustained shopping spree. The airplane, along with the Army and Navy stores, makes it literal: the war is over, the whole enormous infrastructure of war can now be reconstituted in and for commerce. Buying and selling exuberantly function as antidotes to war, affirming and creating where war devastates and destroys. So Lady Bexborough “opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed” (MD, 3). And yet, as Lady Bexborough herself demonstrates, the war is not really over, the destruction and tragedy it spawned not so much ended as dispersed and ingrained—those habitual Woolfian forms of admitting violence into the textual consciousness. Moreover, the British economy in 1923 was not entirely booming, with industrial action and unrest having carried over from the immediate postwar period, culminating in the 1926 General Strike, an event that was much more powerful in defining the mid-1920s than is sometimes remembered. Too, as Woolf and her peers had acknowledged for years, war and commerce were never oppositional categories in the first place. The image of the war profiteer (often represented, in Britain as in Germany, as Jewish) was a staple villain in the period, with Pound, Eliot, and others imbuing their poetry, prose, and private writings with this kind of anti-Semitism. Even those wary of too-easy caricatures, much less of anti-Semitism, strongly suspected a profit motive among many powerful men endorsing and directing the war. Sassoon, in his famous Soldier’s Declaration, referred both to military and capitalist aggressors when he declared: “I believe that the War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it.”
Perhaps all of the novel’s war-related commercial activity, then, is just another sign of the war’s ultimate profitability. In a series of essays Woolf wrote for *Good Housekeeping* in the early 1930s (later collected as *The London Scene*), which represent her most sustained reflection on the city and its commerce, she shows herself highly attuned to the double nature of urban commercial exuberance. On one hand, she revels in the sheer energy of the city, and in the seeming infiniteness of its capitalist creativity, where demand and supply spin an endless spiral of production and more production, engendering not only objects but aesthetic effects. In the great London warehouses, for instance, she finds compelling patterns:

Indefatigable cranes are now at work, dipping and swinging, swinging and dipping. Barrels, sacks, crates are being picked up out of the hold and swung regularly on shore. Rhythmically, dexterously, with an order that has some aesthetic delight in it, barrel is laid by barrel, case by case, cask by cask, one behind another, one on top of another, one beside another in endless array down the aisles and arcades of the immense, low-ceiled, entirely plain and unornamented warehouses.  

The pleasure of form is very clear in this passage, which mirrors in its cadences the rhythmic symmetries it describes. On the other hand, Woolf intimates that there are real costs and hidden pains standing behind the commodities at which she marvels, a whole world of work and transportation and, in some cases, exploitation demanded for every ivory umbrella handle.

*Mrs. Dalloway* shares this tone and spirit to an important degree. For all its tremendous pleasure in the June day—“what a lark, what a plunge”—the novel, like its protagonists (Clarissa, Septimus, Rezia), has something of the anorexic or ascetic about it, and plunging, as we know, turns out to be the sign of suicide. The skywriting, in its way, is an excessive frivolity, marking a disequilibrium between the magnificence and power of the airplane, on the one hand, and the lightness and inconsequentiality of this one’s particular aim, on the other. As Yeats and Wilfred Owen have each phrased it, in reference to the great violent events of the times, “was it for this...?” Once again, it is this crux relation (p.252) excess that motivates the modernist text’s most spellbinding formal maneuvers around violence; the airplane becomes an emblem of that desire, and also of its always falling short. For all its significatory power, the flight leaves in its wake a vague aura of disappointment and uncertainty (Clarissa’s query “What are they looking at?” is the last thing we hear about the plane [*MD*, 29]). The airplane straddles the line between the view that culture can absorb and redirect the technologies of violence (somewhat akin to Leonard Woof’s political stance a decade later that war and violence need not be the drivers of human history) and a bleaker notion that there always lurks, in these objects, the reality of killing and death, just as Septimus reads in every tree fiber or car window the signs and signals of his dead war friends.
By the mid-1920s, Woolf had come to see the airplane as a primary player in the whole dialectic of war, violence, commerce, and aesthetics. *Orlando*, too, her last novel of the decade, features an airplane at a critical moment, at the very end of the novel. Delivering Shel to the modernized Orlando, the plane shoots in, melodramatically and self-consciously playing the deus ex machina. In the twentieth century, Woolf seems to say, we turn to the airplane as our ultimate metaphor; our combined image of savior and destroyer, our overdetermined technological fetish. For all the undertones of war that *Mrs. Dalloway*, especially, resuscitates, the evocations surrounding the airplane in these 1920s novels are also of gusto and confidence; though intimated as a looming threat in the world, the airplane nevertheless operates largely as an expression of literary exuberance (in that sense, it is akin to Conrad’s treatment of dynamite, where, we recall, the extravagance of Stevie’s death became an occasion for literature, after considering the limits posed by an exploded body, to show its dazzle). Yet in Woolf’s three major works of the 1930s, this tone of aviational pleasure evaporates; in each, the airplane, true to the period’s zeitgeist, becomes an image of the complete vulnerability of the civilian population. In fact, if the skywriting in *Mrs. Dalloway* was an instance of Woolf’s textual dance around violence, in these later works the airplane operates, conversely, as that which creates the urgent need for literary strategies around violence, so direct, severe, and disenchanting is its threat. Each novel features the violent realities of the airplane: *The Years* in an air raid sequence set in London during the First World War, *Three Guineas* in the Spanish photographs, and *Between the Acts* in the fleet of planes that burst across the sky near the end of the novel, bifurcating the Reverend Streatfield’s sentence as he entreats the village audience to donate money to his church. Woolf’s airplanes now fully express the 1930s imaginary, their artistry or literary flair deeply compromised by what they have come to do.

(p.253) *Overwhelming Force*: *The Years, Three Guineas, Between the Acts*
In *The Years*, a novel inflected by the Spanish Civil War and the contemporary mood of impending catastrophe, the air raid sequence expresses two decades of gestating discomfort about what it means to be targeted by bombers. The scene is set in 1917, as the characters—Eleanor, Sara, Maggie, Renny, Nicholas—gather for dinner; disrupted by the sirens, they migrate to the cellar, then reascend after the all clear, resuming their evening. On one hand, the characters are nonchalant about the air raid, proclaiming themselves unbothered, slipping easily back into wonted activities once the raid has ended, concerned primarily about whether the sleeping children were roused by the noise. On the other hand, the raid cuts apart and disrupts the life of the group: “there had been a complete break,” the narrator declares, “none of them could remember what they had been saying.”

As in *A Sketch of the Past*, where the war continually intervenes and thwarts the possibility of writing (even as it acts as an inducement to write the memoir), here, too, the presence of the Germans overhead severs the stream of conversation and thought, an idea that will be made literal by the squadron of planes in *Between the Acts*. In keeping with this notion of disruption, moreover, there is the serious question of whether these raids are, in fact, lodging themselves in people’s consciousness. As Sara notes of the sleeping children: “But they may have dreamt” (*TY*, 294). These experiences of generalized violence might find a home deep in the psyche, they might live there unrecognized, they might be obliquely felt and expressed. The life of dreams perhaps betrays what the stiff upper lips of civilians, responding to a culture of wartime resolve, aim to disavow, the power of violence to traumatize, infiltrate, shape.
Ultimately, the raid poses itself as a question: Does it change, disrupt, and distort? Or does it leave everyone, finally, exactly the same? Sara notes, and the text confirms, that the old conversations do in fact return (endlessly), hence perhaps overriding the immediate sense of “complete break.” And no one can answer the question of dreaming. The sequence might also be understood in the context of the contemporary debate about whether war is or is not endemic to human nature, whether it fundamentally defines us or is, instead, an aberration that can be eliminated by a supreme effort at international cooperation. Much in the novel certainly tends in the direction of annihilation and chaos, as in the preamble to the year 1908, which again portrays a cold wind as a metaphor for intense violence: “Uncreative, unproductive, yelling its joy in destruction … Triumphing in its wantonness it emptied the streets; swept flesh before it; and coming smack against a dust cart standing outside the Army and Navy Stores, scattered along the pavement a (p.254) litter of old envelopes; twists of hair; papers already blood smeared…” (TY, 146). Its destruction imagined almost as intent, the brutal wind, like its counterpart in Jacob’s Room, recalls Yeats’s leveling wind as nightmare in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” suggesting an aura of frightening force, human in power yet without agency. In terms of the air raid, Renny, a Frenchman and the most politically engaged person in the room, betrays a sentiment of savage anger during the raid itself (he is a bit like Giles from Between the Acts in that regard). Nevertheless, Renny summarizes the experience in unemotional terms: “I have spent the evening sitting in a coal cellar while other people try to kill each other above my head” (TY, 295). His summation is resigned, equivocal, noncommittal. There is irony in his statement, yet also a tone of unreality. It suggests, in its resignation and impersonality, that these insane violent happenings cannot be addressed in any meaningful way by the civilians in their cellars, much less eradicated by people working above ground for peace.
Notably, Renny characterizes the killing in detached terms, with “other people” aiming to kill “each other” rather than targeting him and his family, and, more generally, the novel seems intent on placing violence at a slight remove from its characters, or, better, on seeing it in a constant interchange with more sustaining forces, such as beauty and calm. So Sara and Maggie, at home in their flat in a rough London neighborhood, hear harsh sounds from their window, but these are suffused with loveliness: “The night was full of roaring and cursing; of violence and unrest, also of beauty and joy” (TY, 189). On the evening of the air raid, too, Eleanor experiences the dark London night, counterintuitively, in especially friendly terms: “She had a sense of immensity and peace— as if something had been consumed” (TY, 298). And the novel itself, which, like Orlando, ends at the “present day,” closes in stunningly optimistic terms: “The sun had risen, and the sky above the houses wore an air of extraordinary beauty, simplicity and peace” (TY, 435). It is a breathtaking closure (for a novel whose actual year of completion was 1936105), with its allusion to Wordsworth’s sublime 1802 poem about the beauty of the London morning, “Lines Composed upon Westminster Bridge,” a canonically romantic image of the city at peace.106 As Favret has shown, however, Romanticism’s idiom of domestic calm is often writ as only one half of the complex interplay with distant war; Woolf’s channeling of Wordsworth is perhaps closer in spirit to that earlier peace than might at first be suspected—a one-year lull in the Napoleonic wars, to be followed, in 1803, by the threat of invasion. Such expressions of peace might always carry war in them, incipiently and tragically. Or we might read these last lines in The Years, whose tone is virtually the opposite of the closing lines of Woolf’s subsequent novel, Between the Acts, as a wish or plea, as when the group in the air (p.255) raid lift their glasses to “a New World,” or when, in the culminating pages of the novel, narrator and characters welcome the literal dawn and herald the new day.
For all their poignancy, such performatives have about them a certain strained willfulness, a consciousness of their fictionality. In the case of the air raid toast, Woolf alludes to the spirit of utopianism that, in both the First World War years and the 1930s, relied on the paradox that war could—indeed was needed to—make peace: war to end wars, as we have seen. It was a structure of thinking that her novels might relay, given how widespread was its logic, but could never entirely endorse. In the novel’s last lines, moreover, it is difficult not to read the still and peaceful city as all the more vulnerable and open to attack, that moment of suspension captured in Capa’s photographs of civilians looking up at the sky. The novel itself looks up at the sky, as the characters literally look out the window at the dawn. Woolf’s Wordsworthian echoes seem, if not ironic, then deeply sad, a reaching out and back towards the kind of calm splendor and tranquility strength that in 1936 could never replicate what one might have claimed for London in 1802, when Wordsworth could describe the city’s openness to the sky—however this might invite a quiet and oblique engagement with a distant war—as a central feature of its majesty, and could do so, moreover, from the vantage of a location of special interest to those who might want to bomb the city, a bridge.

Woolf’s treatment of air warfare in The Years is consistent with the novel’s larger approach to violence, which it both admits and radically denies. With its chronicling of the Pargiter family over a half century, the novel invites a focus on major historical events, such as wars and the deaths of world leaders; death, especially, functions as the selection principle and organizing motif of the historical span. The Irish national drama plays an ongoing role in the novel’s imaginary, with Parnell’s death echoing in ways that evoke Joyce and other Irish modernists. And the Pargiter women, in their different styles, stand up against the brutality of their times. Rose, an obscure member of the Woolfian feminist pantheon, is a defiant suffragist; as a young woman, she goes to jail for breaking windows. Delia champions the Irish cause (and mourns Parnell). And as the novel moves into the 1930s, Kitty, always an enemy of raw power, makes her case against force, which is becoming more and more ubiquitous and endemic. These women offer voices of small resistance, tinny echoes in the large public sphere. As Peggy, one of the younger generation, thinks:

But how can one be “happy,” she asked herself, in a world bursting with misery? On every placard at every street corner was Death; or worse—tyranny; brutality; torture; the fall of civilisation; the end of freedom. We here, she thought, (p.256) are only sheltering under a leaf, which will be destroyed. And then Eleanor says the world is better, because two people out of all those millions are “happy.” (TY, 388)
Though the novel quickly moves from these late reflections towards its tenuous affirmation of peace, Peggy’s question might stand for the text’s own: what is the value or truth of focusing on one person, one family even, given the greater panorama of suffering and brutality engulfing the world? It is a question of and for the novel in general, the genre that has done the most to lift the fates of “two people” out of the “millions,” insisting, at its very core, that the happiness of one pair does matter. Governed by this spirit of self-annihilation, *The Years* anticipates *Between the Acts* in suggesting that, with tyranny, brutality, and torture announcing themselves on every corner, the novel is resigning, unable any more to assert its fundamental, defining principles. The threat of real futility is near, literature itself looking “like a serpent that swallowed its own tail” (*TY*, 129).

At the same time, the Woolf who wrote *A Room of One’s Own*, with its famous denunciation of novels that preach political creeds (or “Modern Fiction,” or “The Leaning Tower”), even in late 1936 cannot bend her novel under the sweep of force. Though she gestures towards the massive movements of violence defining “the years,” for the most part, her strategy is gamely to carry on with the novelistic function she has undertaken, to tell the family story. She is a bit like Eleanor herself, in that sense—Eleanor, who despite a cramped and virginal life, too much of which is spent caring for her father, has a real energy and spirit which carry her through the decades almost triumphantly. Moreover, the cry for peace at the end of the novel might be taken as a plea for the novel itself, premised as all are (and most literally this one) on the idea of new days, on the particular aspect of willing suspension of disbelief that presses us to imagine continuity past the moment of the book’s closure. Yet the novel’s treatment of violence is not solely a matter of the oscillation or competition between acknowledging mass violence and defiantly refusing to succumb to it; instead, Woolf creates small, almost invisible pockets where violence can reside and tell its story. If *To the Lighthouse* perfected the strategy of bracketing—that is, of giving a view to violence that is framed or surrounded, even as that view sheds light intermittently on swaths of the novel, in a manner akin to the lighthouse beam—here Woolf takes that motif a step further, condensing the place of violence into extremely packed spaces, where its history can be read only by scrutinizing.
The strategy begins, not surprisingly, with the body, and especially with the hand. After its ritual description of the weather, the novel opens with “Colonel Abel Pargiter,” patriarch of the family, “sitting after luncheon in his club talking.” The setting is a hermetic world of Victorian masculinity, where “his companions in the leather armchairs were men of his own type, men who had been soldiers, civil servants, men who had now retired,” and who “were reviving with old jokes and stories now their past in India, Africa, Egypt…” (TY, 4). As one might expect from this description, loaded with those Victorian habits, obsessions, and blind spots that so infuriated Woolf and her peers, Abel belongs fully to Woolf’s parents’ generation—yet without her particular family’s intellectual proclivities—in which women provide domestic comforts for men at the expense of their own fulfillment, and where a patriarchal atmosphere reigns in the home, stifling and partially silencing the children. An unattractive figure, with his mistress (Mira) and his military, colonial past, Abel would seem to offer a starting point from which future characters can only improve and bloom, as indeed they do.
And yet, Colonel Pargiter is most memorable for an injury that marks the violent tendencies of his era onto his own body, a mutilated hand. The hand seems to invade the early portions of the novel, mentioned no fewer than three times in its first few pages. And invasion seems the right metaphor, as the hand’s initial appearance comes in the context of Abel’s sexual advances on Mira: “The Colonel began to stroke her neck. He began fumbling, with the hand that had lost two fingers, rather lower down, where the neck joins the shoulders,” in a phrase that will be repeated verbatim on the next page (TY, 8, 9). The injured hand functions in a variety of simultaneous registers: it marks Abel as both a representative and a victim of his aggressive past; it brings home the colonial violence of “India, Africa, Egypt”; it links that colonial mode of force with Abel’s unsettling relationship with Mira; it acts as a visual reminder of the violability of the body, hence the potential for disenchanted violence; and it recalls, in its truncated way, the “withered stumps of time”—and of limbs—that had marked so many injured men from the First World War. Abel, let us be clear, was no First World War conscript or deluded volunteer, no victim in the sense that Woolf’s generation understood the soldiers of their era to be, having received his injury instead in the quintessential war of colonial force: “He had lost his two fingers of the right hand in the Mutiny, and the muscles had shrunk, so that the right hand resembled the claw of some aged bird” (TY, 13). The Mutiny (or first Indian war of independence, in 1857, when the British responded to a rebellion initiated by sepoys with a policy of extreme repression) exemplifies the mid-Victorian violence spree around the world, Abel’s two lost fingers a pittance in comparison with the harsh tactics employed by the British in stamping out the insurgency. Nevertheless, Abel’s injury remains an almost unique (p.258) physical symbol in Woolf’s works, which strenuously avoid almost any inclusion of physical scarring and deformation of its primary characters (Captain Barfoot presents one other such character, and incidental figures with mutilated or otherwise deformed bodies make brief appearances here and there). Abel’s own children, following their father’s (and Woolf’s) lead, keep quiet about the injury, though “the shiny knobs of the mutilated fingers fascinated Rose” (TY, 13).
The shrunken hand, the shiny knobs, the missing fingers: when they appear, they seem to bring a violent past flooding back into the novel, akin to the square of fish in *To the Lighthouse*, and the injury, moreover, reproduces and disperses itself across the text, with scarred hands cropping up repeatedly. Mrs. Porter, the elderly woman whom Eleanor visits as part of her charity work, has hands that are “knotted and grooved like the gnarled roots of a tree,” and those hands, symbolic of her physical pain, seem to burn into Eleanor’s shoulder, where she grips the younger woman (*TY*, 99). Within the Pargiter family, there is, first, a scar on Morris’s hand (“the white scar where he had cut himself bathing”), especially visible at his most public moments, such as when Eleanor views him admiringly at the law courts (*TY*, 110, 202). More troubling are the white marks on Rose’s wrist, testament to an early attempt at suicide. It is a kind of family inheritance, the wounded hand, a signal of a whole violent landscape—colonial force, sexual power relations, the tremendous stifling of women—yet one that is left undernarrated, just as the Pargiter children remain mute on the subject of their father’s deformity. In focusing on the hand, of course, Woolf taps into a rich field for the symbolism of violence. In the rector’s beating of Stephen Dedalus’s hands, as we saw, hands signaled both fracture and healing, as Joyce posited the origin of language and creativity at the moment when Stephen was beaten on his hands, unjustly and painfully. In *The Years*, the injured hand is also the injuring hand (Stephen and the rector conflated), closing the circle. The Colonel’s mutilated hand is first seen in the scenario with Mira, where its groping action and the odd decapitating imagery (“where the neck joins the shoulders”) hold undertones of an unspecified violence; Mrs. Parker is very much a victim of social and economic inequality, and she also transmits her pain to Eleanor; Rose’s self-inflicted wound layers infliction into victimization; even Morris, though nothing like his father as a symbol of patriarchal power, shows his scar most notably at the courts, where he forms part of the same judicial establishment whose submerged violence Woolf does so much to expose in *Three Guineas*, a companion text to *The Years*. Even Kitty, who spends her life deploring force, always makes the same gesture when she thinks about it: she lifts her hand and slams it down. All touch, the novel seems to indicate, is violent touch.
Yet perhaps the most significant inheritor of the colonel’s wound is an unlikely figure, Sara. One of Abel’s nieces—cousin to Eleanor and the other Pargiter children—Sara is in some ways akin to Isa in *Between the Acts*. Like Isa, she lives in her own lyrical world, creating a running, private poem out of everything she observes and experiences. Like Isa, too, she has a deep sensitivity to violence in the world, even as she is, in a sense, protected by her thick wall of private consciousness. Markedly unlike Isa, Sara is not integrated into the normative life of wife and mother (there is no stockbroker husband, no family home); as a young woman, she lives with her sister, and, after Maggie’s marriage, seems to float alone through London, singing her private melodies. Significantly, the first thing we hear of Sara, before we enter her rich interior world or watch her pirouetting, is that she has a “slight deformity ... She had been dropped when she was a baby; one shoulder was slightly higher than the other” (*TY*, 122). The deformity upsets Abel, makes him “squeamish”—an interesting bit of narcissistic failure to self-identify, since, of course, it reflects back on his own injured body. Like Minta in *To the Lighthouse*, who traces her fear of bulls to a fantastical event in infancy, here the crippling moment also happened in babyhood, though this one is more real, and more unsettling. Sara’s mother may have a special attachment to her because of her injury, yet the event and its ramifications remain shrouded. “But they might have dreamt,” Sara will say of her sister’s children in the air raid, and she, too, might trace her psychic life to whatever kinds of childhood trauma both led to and followed from her injury. Perhaps; yet none of this is really allowed into the novel, which almost entirely circumvents Sara’s deformity, as she herself is said to skip happily along as a child, unbothered by it.

Instead, the novel registers the shocks of violence, such as the one suggested by Sara’s body, in strange ripples. The wounded hands are passed along, injured and injuring, but only seen in glances—Morris, for instance, shows his scar when he moves his hand across his brow, or in some other similar gesture, so that one glimpses it only fleetingly. And for Sara, her injury is best adumbrated in a startling and oblique passage:

She curled herself up with her back to the window. She had raised a hump of pillow against her head as if to shut out the dance music that was still going on. She pressed her face into a cleft of the pillows. She looked like a chrysalis wrapped round in the sharp white folds of the sheet. Only the tip of her nose was visible. Her hip and her feet jutted out at the end of the bed covered by a single sheet. (*TY*, 144–45)
Patterns of Violence

It is a strange description, difficult to envision. I find in this odd moment—which follows upon an evening spent reading Antigone, a quintessential text of violence (p.260) for Woolf throughout her career—an extrapolating or dispersing of Sara’s injury onto her surroundings. Consider, for instance, this list of words: “hump,” “cleft,” “sharp,” “jutted.” The first of these alerts us to the connection with Sara, her own hump, while the others each suggest wounds and wounding. It is a deeply uncomfortable sequence (even if it describes an act of comfort, going to sleep), registering the facts of violence as a series of jagged points and clefts. It evokes death, with the white sheet suggesting a shroud—and it points back to Sara’s reading of Antigone, since she had focused in her reading on the dead body, whose consecration is Antigone’s mission and the source of her defiance of the state. At the same time, the simile in the passage is of incipient life, in the image of the chrysalis. Indeed, the intertwining of death or wounding imagery with the promise of new life mimics what the novel as a whole also confronts, whether in the air raid sequence or in the novel’s closing pages, when it simultaneously presents the brute facts of violence and tyranny, and raises its voice in a hymn to peace. Violence in The Years, in these ways, is much like one of its other spectral manifestations, an owl with a mouse in its talons that swoops in and out of vision during one of the Pargiter family reunions. Simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, it impinges and retreats, it is absorbed and enfolded, it resides on the body and then hides itself, it juts out and is re-covered.

In The Years, Woolf creates an expansive panorama of violence, even as she disperses and mutes it, lifting her voice to a tenuous peace; in Three Guineas, written just after and growing out of a similar set of preoccupations, Woolf offers her most direct account of force, in a vision of Western culture as a product of deep and unending violence. Violence is right on the surface in Three Guineas, as attested by the narrator’s opening encounter with the Spanish photographs. As we have seen, the photographs signal disenchanted violence; they belong to the same representational family as Friedrich’s visual archive of wounded veterans, asking to be taken as nothing more nor less than records of war’s brutal attack on the flesh. In a very real sense, the photographs set the task of Three Guineas. To answer their visual challenge (“a crude statement of fact addressed to the eye”), to create a complementary idiom that will work alongside their gruesome visuality in making the case against war, to turn the eyes away from the maimed bodies and landscapes without in any way reenchanting war and violence—these are the imperatives of Woolf’s polemic. The text will meet them in terms decidedly its own. Taking on the great questions about violence of its day, Three Guineas answers both directly and stylistically, through its patterns.
As Woolf’s scrapbooks attest, *Three Guineas* is the product of years of reckoning with her culture’s often skewed and self-denying attitude towards war and other violent events and tendencies. The foundational catastrophe for Woolf is the First World War, whose legacy is everywhere in *Three Guineas*. Wilfred Owen provides the book’s primary terms for critiquing war (“war is inhuman … war is … insupportable, horrible and beastly”), and it is the First World War that gives the text its overall understanding that war is an unmitigated catastrophe, not only for its participants but for the whole of civilization (*TG*, 12). Very much in keeping with its era, moreover, *Three Guineas* imagines the world situation of the late 1930s as promising a repetition and intensification of that earlier slaughter. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf engages directly with the theorizing of violence that we have seen to preoccupy her contemporaries, rising to the demand of creating new formal mechanisms to match the violent conditions of the times. She takes on such contemporary questions as whether war is endemic to humankind (shifting the terms to argue that if war is inherent, it is only so in men) and whether there is anything valuable about war (we know Woolf’s answer to that one); she sets the scene around the violent events in Spain, specifically the ruin left by aerial bombardment; and she tackles, in especially creative terms, the problems of action and passiveness.

Among the organizing antinomies of *Three Guineas*, there is no opposition more ringing than the central one dividing violence from peace—or, put differently, dividing the purveyors of convention (which, in this text, is a form of violence) from those who experiment. On one side are the fathers. The tyrant or dictator is the prototype:

> He is a man certainly. His eyes are glazed; his eyes glare. His body, which is braced in an unnatural position, is tightly cased in a uniform. Upon the breast of that uniform are sewn several medals and other mystic symbols. His hand is upon a sword. He is called in German and Italian Führer or Duce; in our own language Tyrant or Dictator. And behind him lie ruined houses and dead bodies—men, women, and children. (*TG*, 142)
The portrait is exact, another mimed photograph in the text, along with the description of the Spanish photos and the inclusion of a raft of actual pictures of public figures in their fancy getups. This one, like the description of the Spanish photographs, would be highly familiar in 1938, a composite image of the tyrant from across Europe (and the globe, in our time). And yet the primary argument of Three Guineas is that the dictator represents an extreme case only; his avatar is everywhere in Western culture, not only there (Germany, Italy, Russia), but here, in Britain, the father in nearly every home, the judge, the university don, even the pacifist (as we have seen, with Joad, one of the period’s most prominent pacifists, (p.262) showing his stripes in Three Guineas as a hypocritical sexist).

All patriarchs share with the dictator a deep-seated love of power. Behind the dictator lie dead bodies and destroyed landscapes; behind these less obviously threatening men lie subjugated women and girls, a whole history of silencing and thwarting. Crucially for this text, that is, when it comes to violence, “the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected … the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other” (TG, 142).

On the other side are the experimenters, those who challenge and forego the dominant desires of power and prestige, who act through unique and creative channels, who eschew acclaim and self-promotion, who punch through the wall of conventional thinking to make real changes, even if only on a tiny scale.

Though Three Guineas is a generally downbeat text, the word “depressing” figuring regularly (as in “these are the facts and they are depressing”), when it comes to the idea of experimenting Woolf is full of optimism, even joy. Here, for instance, is her utopia of an experimental university, a place of learning that would jettison all of those habits and proclivities that she believes contribute to war:

Obviously then, it must be an experimental college, an adventurous college. Let it be built on lines of its own. It must be built not of carved stone and stained glass, but of some cheap, easily combustible material which does not hoard dust and perpetrate traditions. Do not have chapels. Do not have museums and libraries with chained books and first editions under glass cases. Let the pictures and the books be new and always changing. Let it be decorated afresh by each generation with their own hands cheaply…. It should teach the arts of human intercourse … The aim of the new college, the cheap college, should be not to segregate and specialize, but to combine. It should explore the ways in which mind and body can be made to co-operate; discover what new combinations make good wholes in human life. (TG, 33–34)
The passage radiates with utopian promise, with pleasure and hope, energized by verbs like “combine,” “explore,” “co-operate” and “discover,” and conveying the exhilaration of adventure. Even in this partial excerpt, the word “new” is used three times. One almost feels the relief in throwing off the old, dusty cover of tradition. At the same time, Woolf has her dogma, her “do not” and “do not”; this is no anarchic celebration of individual creativity. In both the emphasis on newness and in her polemical rejection of convention, the passage recalls one of her most famous manifestos, “Modern Fiction,” which exhorted writers to do away with all the literary conventions (“no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style”) to find their way to “life” by following new rules. In the fifteen years that separate these two visions of experimentation, however, much has changed; there it was writers—working in their own names, with posterity in mind—who were called upon to make it new, while here it is an anonymous group of women, who reject fame and influence; there it was writing, that singularly individuated profession, that offered a route to intellectual revolution, while here we have an institution, with bricks and mortar.

Above all, what has changed, I think, is that by the 1930s Woolf had been betrayed by her male modernist peers, many of whom had come to embrace fascism and other authoritarian ideals. Unquestionably, the literary clarion call of “Modern Fiction” was answered (and also anticipated) by a host of writers, many of them men, many connected to Woolf’s circle; and yet, in their masculinism and adulation of force, these same artists—by the logic of Three Guineas—have contributed to the brutal, violent condition of the world. Woolf never names Eliot, Pound, Lawrence, Yeats, or any comparable writers in Three Guineas (though she does offer her habitual dismissal of Wells). And yet it is abundantly clear, in passages such as the utopian university description, that she has transferred her hopes for radical protest and creative transformation from her (male) modernist peers—those brave anticonventionalists of the early 1920s out to change the world with their pens—to an imaginary cast of anonymous people, mostly women, whose work will be prosaic rather than dazzling, collaborative rather than individual, indeed almost invisible. Her decision in the text, moreover, to embrace a number of Victorian women (Gertrude Bell, Mary Kingsley, Josephine Butler, even Florence Nightingale is named)—women who opposed the vote in their day and, in the case of Bell, played a role, through her work in Iraq, in cementing British imperial power, who for most of Woolf’s career stood for all that needed to be overcome and superseded in her parents’ generation—this choice suggests, again, that Woolf is looking for new alignments, backing away from her signature celebration of her artist peers in favor of a more equivocal tradition of women, most of whom could not reasonably be termed “modern.”
In this revaluing of experiment, Woolf tackles the question of action, developing her own model of activism that, she hopes, will succumb neither to the noxious quality of “action” as it was imagined in this period nor to the paradoxes of pacifism. As is often discussed, the final turn in Three Guineas is toward what Woolf dubs a society of “outsiders,” those whose disaffiliation from nation and other conventional sites of loyalty positions them to oppose and critique patriarchal and patriotic values, to make small cracks in the wall of masculinism and subjugation. Woolf cites several such efforts—a mayor who refuses to knit socks for soldiers, a sports team for women whose leader refuses to award trophies—actors on small (p.264) stages, working in modest ways to confront entrenched and powerful forces in their culture. In this call to outsiders, Woolf works out a complex logic around action. It would seem that Three Guineas is all for activation—as we have seen with the Spanish photographs, or, for instance, in passages like this one: “We who have looked so long at the pageant in books, or from a curtained window watched educated men leaving the house at about nine-thirty to go to an office, returning to the house at about six-thirty from an office, need look passively no longer” (TG, 61). Tied to the servile and confined life of the private home, female passivity is a thing of the past, to be joyfully discarded as women become active members of the public world.

But, of course, Woolf quickly complicates the story, questioning the value of joining men in their professional work (following the procession, as she terms it), and with that revaluation comes a recalibration of passivity. The text is full of calls for renunciation—of honors, money, privilege, power; fame—and, perhaps surprisingly, points repeatedly to the life of Jesus as a salutary example of such willing sacrifice. And yet, despite a leaning in this direction, hers cannot be entirely the logic of paradox: that in passivity there is the greatest action, in renunciation the greatest power. Woolf does call for a kind of active passivity or passive activism, but the intention is to confront in these formulations the logic of violence itself, by slipping out of its dominant formal arrangements. The text thus describes a variety of measures one might take in the quest to answer the Spanish photographs. Some are direct in relation to war (for women not to adulate war, never to shame men who refuse to fight), others oblique. There are exhortations to writers, to educators, to those working in the name of peace or women’s equality, and to ordinary citizens, who in Three Guineas are credited with having perhaps the greatest potential for pressing change, albeit in latent form: to opt out, abstain, and refuse, and hence, in their own way, to pressure, demonstrate, and perform. Above all, she invites all of her readers to experiment; perhaps by creating a form of passive activism her experimenters will “break the ring, the vicious circle, the dance round and round the mulberry tree, the poison tree of intellectual harlotry” (TG, 99).

Indeed, as this passage reminds us, the dominant characteristic of violence in Three Guineas is that it comes as repetition, an endless, regressive experience of return. As Woolf asks, in her first iteration of the cyclical motif:
If we encourage the daughters to enter the professions without making any conditions as to the way in which the professions are to be practiced shall we not be doing our best to stereotype the old tune which human nature, like a gramophone whose needle has stuck, is now grinding out with such disastrous unanimity? “Here we go round the mulberry tree, the mulberry tree, the mulberry tree. Give it all to me, give it all to me, all to me. Three hundred millions spent upon war.” (TG, 59)

This rhythm, harkening back not only to a children’s nursery rhyme but also to Eliot (who borrowed it for “The Hollow Men”), returns over and over in the text, with emendations and alterations, always stressing the same thing: the incessant quality of violence, its similarity across time and space, so that one sees the continuities among all forms of tyrannical behavior, all forms of suppression. Violence is always raw and unique, but when looked at through the prism of history, it is also fundamentally numbing, almost hypnotically repetitive. And so, as the text reaches its close and the brutality of the contemporary moment again rises to the forefront, now audible where it had been visible in the case of the Spanish photographs,

... we seem to hear an infant crying in the night, the black night that now covers Europe, and with no language but a cry, Ay, ay, ay, ay ... But it is not a new cry, it is a very old cry. We are in Greece now ... That is the voice of Creon, the dictator.... And he shut [Antigone] not in Holloway or in a concentration camp, but in a tomb ... It seems, Sir, as we listen to the voices of the past, as if we were looking at the photograph again, at the picture of dead bodies and ruined houses that the Spanish Government sends us almost weekly. Things repeat themselves it seems. Pictures and voices are the same today as they were 2,000 years ago. (TG, 141)

This is really the crux of *Three Guineas*: to expose the deep affinities among forms of violence (Creon and Hitler, the dictator abroad and the father at home, old wars and new ones). And like Sophocles, for whom the cyclicity of human life is the basis for tragedy, Woolf presents these commonalities and cycles across history as totally crushing, something like *The Waste Land*’s invocation of these repeated narratives of brutal violence that have always made a waste of human experience.
It is thus especially significant that, in constructing her own experiment in opposing war, Woolf adopts a similar set of patterns. The text is, firstly, very repetitive. It employs certain phrases and expressions over and over (Owen’s “beastliness, insupportability, and folly of war,” the mulberry tree rhyme), it circles back to particular narratives or tableaus (the Spanish photographs, Antigone), and its overall structure is itself a form of modified repetition (the three appeals, one guinea for each). Readers who are not fond of Three Guineas might indeed describe Woolf’s text as itself sounding a bit like that broken gramophone. If Three Guineas (p.266) goes in circles, however, it does so—like each iteration of the mulberry tree rhyme, or like the answer to each solicitation—in a spirit of modification. Hence the odd disjunction at the end of each iteration of the rhyme. If the ouroboros from The Years or the snake/toad mass in Between the Acts makes vivid the idea of circle-as-futility, Three Guineas wants to find some kind of revisionary energy in these patterns of circling and cycling violence. “Ignorant as we are of human motives and ill supplied with words,” Woolf writes of historical change and progress, “let us then admit that no one word expresses the force which in the nineteenth century opposed itself to the force of the fathers. All we can safely say about that force was that it was a force of tremendous power” (TG, 138). Force against force: this is the only possibility, and yet, of course, the positive force in question must be entirely unlike its homonym; it must be nonviolent and noncoercive. (We might note how much repetition there is even within a single sentence, as here, with the word “force” used four times.)

What Woolf imagines, finally, as the counterpoint to the endless circle of subjugation is a counter-circling, which involves its own form of destruction (“a force of tremendous power”) but in a spirit that is liberatory and inclusive. There are several such visions in the text, responses-in-kind to the dominant pattern of recurring violence. They answer and complicate the mulberry tree, repeating its structure but undoing its meaning. So, for instance, the experimental college passage ends with a vision of deconstruction, as both actual and ideal models of the university are sent to the pyre:

“Take this guinea and with it burn the college to the ground. Set fire to the old hypocrisies. Let the light of the burning building scare the nightingales and incarnadine the willows. And let the daughters of educated men dance round the fire and heap armful upon armful of dead leaves upon the flames. And let their mothers lean from the upper windows and cry, ‘Let it blaze! Let it blaze! For we have done with this “education”!’” (TG, 36)
I say “deconstruction” because, for all its flames and burning, the vision is not exactly one of destruction (the creative destruction of anarchism, for instance, has a different theory behind it, in part because anarchists aimed to burn actual buildings). If the old colleges are secure in the real world, the imaginary ones also cannot be destroyed, because they are constructed precisely to be rebuilt by each generation, to be combustible and temporary. The utopian college, in other words, incorporates the fiery dance into its conception; it is meant to be burnt. Significant, too, is the central place of the mothers in this vision of counter-circling. They lean from the windows and cheer on their daughters; in a later iteration, they “laugh (p.267) from their graves,” again encouraging the younger women: “‘It was for this that we suffered obloquy and contempt! Light up the windows of the new house, daughters! Let them blaze!’” (TG, 83). It was for this! Woolf takes a leap of faith in answering Owen, Yeats and others who had wondered whether the Enlightenment had gone dark, imagining continuity and mutuality from mother to daughter, in a striking departure from her more renowned attitude of generational conflict. A cycle demands another cycle; if violence comes in the form of return, so too must its antidote. Woolf thus renews the agonizing question of reprisal, yet resisting its nightmarish, bloody logic. For their part, the daughters here circle around “the new house, the poor house, the house that stands in the narrow street” and chant “‘We have done with war! We have done with tyranny!’” (TG, 83). With their bacchic energy and unleashed feminine strength, these women anti-warriors invite an Irigarian or Cixousian reading, pointing, indeed, to a protest spirit that recalls the 1960s more than the 1930s. It is instructive, too, to think back to the burnt buildings that comprised the landscape (allegorical and real) in the later Irish works we have discussed. The freight and sorrow of those lost structures came in relation to their historical significance, their carrying of tradition; in knocking religion off its stand, Woolf can delight in these incinerations—fanciful even if they are not, in Yeats’s terms, “mere dreams.”
Most centrally, what the chanting, burning passages show is how thoroughly the confrontation with violence in *Three Guineas* matches and absorbs the structure of violence itself. Antiviolence has to consume violence, to swallow it. The image of swallowing has figured before in this study, in *The Waste Land*, where it represented the stunted and muted music that even horrific histories of violence construct (“O swallow, swallow…”), and it will return in *Between the Acts*, as Bart Oliver hums the same line from Swinburne’s (and Eliot’s) poem, as well as in the snake-toad dyad. Here, the idea of consumption has a double cadence: first in the image of burning and bonfires, a material and literal consuming, and second in the text’s formal move of counter-circling, where one kind of violent process (the world history of violence) is absorbed or ingested into another one. As with Woolf’s treatment of passivity and action in the text, the structure here is dialectical, with the polarities of violence and antiviolence mutually engendering and transforming. It is also formal, in a literal sense. The actual form that violence takes, the destructive circle, is met and overtaken by another version of itself.

There is, moreover, yet another kind of circling in *Three Guineas*, which emerges only at the text’s close, and this one is meant, perhaps, to swallow both of its predecessors: “But that would be to dream—to dream the recurring dream that has haunted the human mind since the beginning of time; the dream of peace, the (p.268) dream of freedom” (*TG*, 143). That Woolf closes *Three Guineas* with the idea of peace recalls *The Years*, whose final lines were almost defiant in their desire to envision peace in the midst of the violence that was so thoroughly dispersed through world and text. Peace and violence in *The Years* always move in tandem, whether in the loveliness of evenings that are stalked by terror or in the lifting of eyes toward the sky, in a gesture that evokes both bombardment and the utopian belief in a better future. In *Three Guineas*, the similarity and yoking of violence with peace is formal, with the structure of return and circularity defining all at once the numbing horror of the mulberry tree, the energy and enthusiasm of women’s resistance, and the undercurrent of hope that makes its quiet countersong.

And it is figured as song, for the voices credited with pushing forward the dream of peace are “the voices of the poets, answering each other” (*TG*, 143), an echoing conversation that itself echoes one of Woolf’s most compelling accounts of the great urge to write, Orlando’s summation of her centuries-long desire for voice:
Was not writing poetry a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice? ... What could have been more secret, she thought, more slow, and like the intercourse of lovers, than the stammering answer she had made all these years to the old crooning song of the woods, and the farms and the brown horses standing at the gate, neck to neck, and the smithy and the kitchen and the fields, so laboriously bearing wheat, turnips, grass, and the gardens blowing irises and fritillaries?¹¹³

Writing is always romantic in Orlando, a basic human response to the natural world. It is an urge figured organically, an answer to woods and cows and gardens, even if such organicism is best experienced from the luxury of 365 rooms of one’s own, and even if it takes a few centuries to write a finished poem. Something of that romantic model is retained even in Three Guineas, where the echo chamber of voices is audible over the “bark of the guns and the bray of the gramophones” (TG, 143). Or is it? For all the relief and pleasure of Woolf’s nod to the poets and their dream of peace at the end of her text, the serpent is always swallowing its tail in Three Guineas. Woolf is pinned down in and by her own patterns, where the circularity of violence and its counterforms seems, finally, engulfing.

It is not surprising that the most visible literary antecedent in both The Years and Three Guineas is Antigone; though all of the Greek dramatists steeped their plays in violence, Sophocles is remarkable for having by far the bleakest vision, his characters locked in a losing battle with fate, their mortality figured as a prison. In Antigone, it is not only the relation of male dictator to female resister that is so relevant to Woolf’s critique, but also Antigone’s punishment, to be buried alive, walled in a circular chamber, a metaphor for the cramped, stunted human condition for Sophocles, and of the mulberry tree of ever-returning subjugation for Woolf. In fact, the very form of drama in Woolf’s last works becomes associated with the stark mortal reckoning epitomized by Sophocles. Between the Acts, above all, embraces dramatic form as a way to present life on the verge of—and indeed defined by—catastrophic violence. In fact, every formal strategy for engaging violence we have tracked in Woolf’s writing appears in Between the Acts, a novel whose belief in the power and efficacy of literature—a voice calling to a voice—is dimmed and compromised. Violence now can be found in all of the Woolfian forms: as spectacle, irruption, shape; in the body; scored into the landscape; absorbed and dispersed. In Between the Acts, as in Antigone, life itself is modeled on the patterns that violence takes.
We see it in the name; in the shift from *Pointz Hall* to *Between the Acts*, Woolf indicates the depth of the novel’s engagement with violence as pattern. Acts, acting, action—all are implicated in Woolf’s exploration of the formal, rhythmic structures of violence in the world. What are “the acts”? Most obviously, the acts in Miss La Trobe’s pageant, which, for its part, is a spur for the novel’s characters to recognize themselves as actors, as part of the play’s—and the world’s—large cast. “You’ve stirred in me my unacted part,” Lucy feels of Miss La Trobe’s production, while Bart reports that “our part ... is to be the audience. And a very important part too” (*BTA*, 153, 58). Though introduced amusingly, the role of audience is a serious proposition in the novel, suggesting the Greek idea of chorus (Greece itself being repeatedly invoked, as with the barn, which reminds people of a Greek temple [*BTA*, 26]). Mrs. Manresa performs her part energetically, and for Giles, the pleasure of basking in her light comes because she makes him “feel less of an audience, more of an actor” (*BTA*, 108). Others among the assembled group feel violated and uncomfortable in the spotlight, fidgeting and complaining about their treatment. La Trobe will pressure these impulses as hard as she can, forcing her audience to confront itself with uncomfortable silence—“She wanted to expose them, as it were, to douche them, with present-time reality” (*BTA*, 179)—or with jarring mirrors—“So that was her little game! To show us up, as we are, here and how” (*BTA*, 186)—and even with a lecturing voice on the megaphone accusing the audience of hypocrisy. The whole question, indeed, of the relation between acting on a stage and acting in the world remains strained in the novel (with *King Lear*, the play that most famously articulated this relation, hovering allusively in the background), in part because La Trobe’s play intends to vex that very line, in part because the pressure of the historical moment is so intense—“reality too strong”—as constantly to (*p.270*) be felt in the midst of what is supposed to be a simple “village entertainment.” The airplanes are the most potent example of such painful confusion of these categories, forcefully intruding onto the village scene; they very literally split apart language (slicing between “opp” and “portunity” in Streatfield’s appeal), an extremely mild anticipation of what their German counterparts, in Giles’s frustrated understanding, will soon do: “rake that land into furrows; planes splinter Bolney Minster into smithereens and blast the Folly” (*BTA*, 53). As Gillian Beer has noted in “The Island and the Aeroplane,” the planes at the end of *Between the Acts*, with their exact V formation, are unambiguously warplanes, and in that sense they contrast with the looping, diving airplane of *Mrs. Dalloway*, whose status on the threshold between military threat and commercial exuberance was the essence of its significatory overdrive. Preceded by their sound, as we have seen always to be the case (here initially mistaken for music), the airplanes signal war as directly as is possible in 1939; and though these British planes are meant to defend rather than menace the community below, their message is of destruction more than protection.
Indeed, from the vantage of the sky, the land in *Between the Acts* is already scarred by violence, as each wave of inhabitants (or invaders) has left its marks in the very texture of the landscape: “From an aeroplane, [Bart Oliver] said, you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house; and by the plough, when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic wars” (*BTA*, 4). If a novel like *Orlando* figured historiography in terms of succeeding social and literary styles, and if La Trobe’s pageant elaborates literary history as a procession (a favorite metaphor for Woolf in these years), here, in the opening pages of *Between the Acts*, the ages again come in clear sequence, this time very literally marked by violence. The history of the locale is figured in this short passage as something of an ongoing battle between the land and the invaders who have followed one another—even the great narrative of agriculture is filtered through war—a notion that contrasts with the sentiment of changelessness experienced by those looking comfortably at the view from the protected terrace. Will the scars of the current generation, the novel seems to ask, be the blasted landscape left by bombs? One thinks of the dynamite tradition, where the gash in the landscape marked a nihilistic vision yet was also the site of productivity, something of a literary point of origin. In a text consumed by history—where even in short sequences, an enormous variety of operations for both memory and history can be elaborated—this iteration stands out for the harshness of its vision. It also encodes with particular power the idea of muted, silent histories of violence, of the sort Rhys would later impute to the broad movements of British culture. Such a blunt accounting for life and history as scarring and recurrent warfare anticipates (p. 271) the novel’s conclusion, where Isa and Giles become an inverted Adam and Eve, whose enmity, at the end of the June day, might be said to stand in for the whole race’s history of violence: “But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night” (*BTA*, 219).
For its part, the audience of villagers, playing out its choral function, weaves the contemporary situation into its communal voice. On one hand, this would seem an exceptionally insulated and inwardly focused community. Giles, for one, feels “rage with old fogies who sat and looked at views over coffee and cream when the whole of Europe—over there—was ... bristling with guns, poised with planes” (*BTA*, 53). Here, on the brink of war, in time of extreme international tension and sweeping violence, the locals gather to watch their pageant, seemingly oblivious, comparing barns and past village plays, enacting their own habitual performances. And the sense of localness is everywhere stressed. Figgis’s guide, we are told, is as accurate in 1939 as it was in 1830, suggesting an impermeability about the community. Page the reporter is another quintessentially local figure, as central to the village cast as is Albert the idiot, a gossip columnist in a novel that weighs the newspapers heavily as the source of information from the world beyond the village. On the other hand, Giles is not really accurate in his condemnation of his family and the other local people; it may be reluctant and partial, but the community does in fact invite all kinds of externals, including the troubling events on the continent, into its consciousness. Lucy might think herself far from the sea, but we are told emphatically that it is actually only thirty-five miles away, and this proximity analogizes to the deceptive nature of the village’s insularity. The protective hollow where the villagers gather is not, as the narrator indicates and the villagers at some level seem to understand, particularly protective. Examples of its porousness abound. The library, a room to which characters return now and again over the course of the day, and whose contents are described with both irony and affection, certainly seems a haven from the now, representing a repository for family history, its accrued volumes expressing different eras, tastes, and personalities, akin to the literary history on view in the pageant. At the same time, the library is full of contemporary cheap novels bought at the London train station for the three-hour ride, or, in Woolf’s wonderfully alliterative terms, “the shuffle of shilling shockers that week-enders had dropped.” (Interestingly, “dropped” is a verb associated more with bombs than with books.) The library, in fact, is as much given over to the present as it is to the past. As for the house—synecdoche for family, community, and nation, and the ultimate site of shelter—it is repeatedly characterized as a “shell,” the merest of protective coverings, itself to be opened up in the final moment, when “the curtain rises.” An evocative image, as in Yeats’s (p.272) “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” the shell can be, all at once, an image of lustrous beauty, wrought by the sea; a delicate ornament; a mere relic and ruin left of a once-living creature; the thinnest of shelters; or, disrupting the metaphoric chain entirely, the agent that destroys all of this, the artillery shell.114
More generally, the village is actually not nearly as static and contained as it seems to project, or perhaps to desire. Streatfield laments, about movies and motorbuses, that they lure away his congregants, but they are also technologies that very effectively usher the outside world into the village. Movie houses in particular, which were affiliated in this period with newsreels as much as with entertainment, held a prominent role in helping to create a national narrative about news events, and eventually about the war. And it was emphatically a national dialogue, since newsreels in British cinemas in the 1930s, unlike the films shown there, were entirely British-produced and oriented; interestingly, moreover, the moviegoing population in this period was largely working-class, making the cinema, as the historian Nicholas Pronay argues, “exceptional among all the products of twentieth-century technology in that it reached the poorer elements in the community first before spreading upwards...” \(^{115}\) It may be, in other words, that the newsreel in this period had begun to offer a narrative about world events alternative to that found either in newspapers or in the library’s volumes; still, in *Between the Acts*, these are incidental suggestions. The newspaper, by contrast, is omnipresent.\(^ {116}\) “For her generation,” Isa thinks, “the newspaper was a book” (*BTA*, 20).\(^ {117}\) The paper indeed crosses all the generations; it is also read by the oldest member of the family, Bart (who uses it, too, to scare little George), and, akin to the cards, letters, shilling shockers, and even the filleted sole, its regular arrival signals an ongoing relationship between home and away, country and city, as the pageant itself also indicates. Modernization in general is a major topic in the villagers’ idiom, from a running commentary on refrigeration and aerodromes to the fact that the play’s proceeds have been slated to electrify the church (an irony, needless to say, since by the time of the novel’s writing such illumination would have been rendered moot by air raid conditions).
Further countering Giles’s critique, the villagers’ commentary is laced with a latent understanding of the severity of the political situation abroad, and of the vulnerability of their world at home. The combination of localness (even triviality) with acknowledgement of terrible violence renders the village dialogue at once anxious, grimly comic, and, in its own way, powerfully evocative: of a moment of dawning awareness, where the reality of what is to come, of what is, for millions of people, already at hand, is only half internalized or articulated. Characters think directly about invasion (“what’s the channel, come to think of it, if they mean to (p.273) invade us?”) or about what the airplanes signify (“the aeroplanes, I didn’t like to say it, made one think…,”) or about the victims of persecution (“And what about the Jews? The refugees … the Jews”), seeming to recognize the profound temporality and fragility of the present (BTA, 199, 121, ellipses in original). Lucy, certainly the most detached of the family members from contemporary events, imagines a prehistory in which England was not separated from the continent (a view that comes courtesy of Woolf’s old straw man, Wells), making literal and geographical the connectedness that underlies her spiritual habit of “one-making.” And it is Lucy, too, who sees a leaf on the pond and thinks it the shape of Europe, with other leaves representing different continents or nations, “Islands of security, glossy and thick,” emphasizing the lull and lure of the great fiction that England is a protected (or sceptered) isle (BTA, 205). Highly expressive of these contradictory emotions and proclivities, the choral voice of the novel veers and verges, at times conveying a quality of (modernist) pastiche that intermingles high with low, serious with silly, political with personal, among other dichotomies. So we have, for instance:

“What we need is a centre. Something to bring us all together … The Brookes have gone to Italy, in spite of everything. Rather rash? … If the worst should come—let’s hope it won’t—they’d hire an aeroplane, so they said … What amused me was old Streatfield, feeling for his pouch. I like a man to be natural, not always on his perch … [extra ellipsis mine] … But I was saying: can the Christian faith adapt itself? In times like these … At Larting no one goes to church … There’s the dogs, there’s the pictures … It’s odd that science, so they tell me, is making things (so to speak) more spiritual … The very latest notion, so I’m told, is nothing’s solid … There, you can get a glimpse of the church through the trees…” (BTA, 198–99, ellipses in original).
As in the overdetermined sequence with the mirrors—to be read, I think, with at least a degree of tongue in cheek—here Woolf seems in part to be parodying modernism itself, which, like all other linguistic forms in Between the Acts, falls precariously on the verge of obsolescence. At the minimum, Woolf shows a willingness to be playful with her own serious concerns—the idea of nonchurchgoing, we recall, was presented as vital political engagement in Three Guineas, while the “latest notion ... is nothing’s solid” comes straight out of Woolf herself (via Bergson, or Pater, or Montaigne). There is a kind of poetry, moreover, in the shared narrative voice in these segments of the novel (as in the pseudo-rhyming of “pouch” with “perch,” say), interwoven with the gramophone’s music and the language of the play, at the same time that Woolf’s almost Popian use of figures like litotes or juxtaposition (p.274) gives voice to her own frustration with the smallness of country life. These passages, moreover, might be read as the community’s collective unconscious, and they reveal a tense competition between the desire for insularity—for the comfort of what is known and understood—and the reality of worldwide interconnection, a tension in sync with the novel’s most abundantly stated opposition, between unity and dispersal, or, in its own shorthand, “un-dis.”

For the acts—to return to the title—are, of course, the wars. Woolf wrote Between the Acts in the midst of the Blitz, and the sense of profound precariousness—the possibility that all Woolf loved and valued could be wiped out—is everywhere in the novel. Famously antipatriotic, Woolf in these last years of her life articulated a sense of love and emotion about England proportionate to the extreme threat to its buildings, its landscape, its very life, and especially to London. As Lee movingly writes:

Like many other writers witnessing the city in these weeks ... Virginia described the destruction of “her” London eloquently and with strong personal feeling. She wrote about it a little in letters, never in essays or fiction, but mainly to herself in the diary, in a shocked, rapid, jagged, intensely observant language. It was some of her most powerful writing, about some of the most painful things she had ever witnessed. (Lee, 728)
In *Between the Acts*, set in 1939, the potential for civilian catastrophe is writ as incipience, in keeping with the dominant mode of the 1930s; it anticipates the Blitz instead of recording it. And yet Woolf’s emotion about the destruction all around her determines the novel’s tone, which is as much in the key of sorrow as of ominousness. The world of *Between the Acts*, that is, simultaneously crouches in fear and lifts its voice in sorrow. If Giles imagines the whole area smashed and destroyed, other voices seem to weep for such violence as if it has already happened. And so, in the midst of the pageant, a herd of cows, mourning a lost calf, “took up the burden ... All the great moon-eyed heads laid themselves back. From cow after cow came the same yearning bellow. The whole world was filled with dumb yearning. It was the primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment” (*BTA*, 140). The primeval voice speaks repeatedly in *Between the Acts*, always in some way reflecting the oncoming violence of the present. With the wailing cows, moreover, Woolf returns to animal allegory, the cows very directly expressing a sorrow that belongs, more properly, to the human audience. Not long after this nonhuman expression, a rain shower douses the audience, and it too is presented as an image of collective mourning: “Down it poured like all the people in the world weeping. Tears. Tears. Tears” (*BTA*, 180). These are, of course, instances of the “pathetic fallacy,” yet they escape the charges of artificiality or sentimentality that modernism might be expected to level, in part because they accurately reflect something very real in the contemporary consciousness, as Woolf felt and filtered it. In March of 1940, as we have seen, she recorded a moment like this in her diary: “Not a sound this evening to bring in the human tears. I remember the sudden profuse shower one night just before the war wh. made me think of all men & women weeping” (*Diary*, V, 274). Pointz Hall, too, expresses in its spaces the shared sentiment of loss and mourning, and, as in *Jacob’s Room*, of foreshadowing as well as felt pain: “Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell, singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence” (*BTA*, 36–37). There is beauty in this emptiness, as there is in the song of the cows or the rain, a strange loveliness even at moments of heartbreaking pressure. And the characters, too, express a sense of sadness—Isa, Miss La Trobe, William Dodge—which is often aesthetically rich and productive (as with Isa’s poetic rendering of the world, or Miss La Trobe’s artistry), and which Giles tersely names for all of them: “I’m damnably unhappy” (*BTA*, 176).
The flood of sadness in the novel is profoundly humanizing, but in a strange way, the grim ubiquity of violence also presses the novel in a different direction, towards an anti-characterology and near nihilism that threatens to undermine the novel itself, a generic self-destruction more severe than what we saw in *The Years*, though similar in spirit. In that novel, we recall, it was the ubiquity of tyranny and violence that pressed the text into a mode of declamation that, in Woolf’s own view, is fatal to art (“On every placard, at every street corner was Death...”). Here, the question of novelistic limitation takes a different form—of a drama that has already been written. Drama of course is ubiquitous in *Between the Acts*. First we have the pageant itself, which, though distinct from the novel, at times merges into its stream, as when the description of the gramophone or megaphone becomes indistinguishable from the novel’s narration. And the audience picks up the pageant’s tune and intonations; as Isa puts it, “It’s the play ... the play keeps running in my head” (*BTA*, 105). Permeating its audience, the pageant invites an uneven reaction. At times, it has transformative power, as in the last moments before the community disperses, when the play continues to cast a spell on the scene (“Each still acted the unacted part conferred on them by their clothes. Beauty was on them. Beauty revealed them” [*BTA*, 195–96]); at other times, as we have seen, La Trobe aims to unsettle and antagonize her viewers, a village version of Artaudian discomfort. What I want to stress about the pageant’s dramatic effects, however, is the way it sets the stage, literally and figuratively, for the novel to act out a different kind of drama. The novel marks the moment of oncoming tragedy; it stands just on the threshold of the main act of massive violence, which it both presages and mourns. It leads up to the act; at the end of the novel, the curtain rises.
In other words, for all the emphasis on the acts and acting, the novel actually assigns itself the place of the interim, of “betweenness.” The place in the hollow, of quiet and calm before the storm, of incipience and fear, betweenness is an expression of that which both expands in the intervals and shrinks in the face of the acts. It concerns the actors just before and after they play their parts—as they dress and undress in the bushes, so to speak—a time of preparation and anticipation. The novel depicts a state of tension in the before and between, which is also felt as lethargy, or perhaps rest: “They stared at the view,” goes one of many such depictions, “as if something might happen in one of those fields to relieve them of the intolerable burden of sitting silent, doing nothing, in company” (BTA, 65). The state of betweenness has its pleasures, too, its beauty and poignancy. Here, for instance, is little George, as a child able to dig deeply into his immediate time and place, to inhabit the in-between with intensity and keen sensitivity: “The flower blazed between the angles and the roots. Membrane after membrane was torn. It blazed a soft yellow, a lambent light under a film of velvet; it filled the caverns behind the eyes with light. All that inner darkness became a hall, leaf smelling, earth smelling, of yellow light” (BTA, 11). For their part, the villagers also acknowledge the appeal of resting in the moment before and after, when, for instance, they hesitate before leaving the grounds, enjoying their time of unity before the inevitable dispersal. This state of betweenness is both capacious and ready to be obliterated, like the view, which Giles thinks of as eminently destructible even as he also acknowledges its permanence and serenity. To be between is not to have to act, to be Hamlet rather than Lear. It is to remain in the present.
And yet, as Woolf has always implied, the present is never really possible to inhabit (“it had become,” Mrs. Ramsay thinks of the dinner scene as she steps out the door, “already the past” [TTL, 111]). In *Between the Acts* this instability is not only ontological or existential; it is also historical. The present, now inescapably understood as “between” two wars, is eclipsed by what is coming. Woolf figures this annihilating force as a shadow, like the giant silhouettes that pervade the final paragraphs of the novel (“The great hooded chairs became enormous ... The window was all sky without colour” [BTA, 219]), or in Isa’s evocative terms: “The future shadowed their present” (BTA, 114). Harking back to Eliot’s early poetry, as she so often does, Woolf, too, gives us a shadow that marks betweenness, yet for her, there is no flourishing on the cusp of restrictive categories, like Eliot’s shadow in “The Hollow Men” (“Between the idea/And the reality/Between the motion/And the act ... Between the conception/And the creation/Between the emotion/And the response...”); in *Between the Acts*, the future that shadows the present is all menace. One might note, here, Woolf’s heavy and affective reaction to a solar eclipse (1928), which she described in the essay “The Sun and the Fish”: the sun is darkened, and “This was the end. The flesh and blood of the world was dead; only the skeleton was left. It hung beneath us, a frail shell; brown; dead; withered.” Even after the sun remerges and brings an enormous optimism with it, “still the memory endured that the earth we stand on is made of colour; colour can be blown out; and then we stand on a dead leaf...” Anticipating her 1930s imagery—the precarious leaf that will not shelter in *The Years*, the shell of a home in *Between the Acts*—the projection of annihilation takes the form, as always, of shape, color, visual pattern.
The present is fraught, too, by a different kind of temporal logic, that of the long
title: the long
title: history (and prehistory) of humankind, which Woolf figures in Between the Acts
as an essential violence; it is her most sustained contribution, along with Three
Guineas, to the 1930s conversation about whether war and violence are endemic
to human life. The suggestion of some kind of elemental barbarism is intimated
early in the novel, with Lucy reading and musing about prehistory, “when the
entire continent, not then, she understood, divided by a channel, was all one;
populated, she understood, by elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging,
slowly writhing, and, she supposed, barking monsters” (BTA, 8). For all the
fantasy and imaginative appeal of these musings (“she supposed” reminding us
that Lucy’s inventiveness is filtering and transforming her reading), the
adjectives and verbs here (elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging,
writhing, barking) recall those terrifying passages in both To the Lighthouse and
The Years where the whole universe seemed embroiled in a violent semiotic,
where “gigantic chaos” ruled and the “light of reason” had flickered out. And
Between the Acts has its own version of such overarching chaos, which it figures
primarily in terms of an attenuated and broken communicability. The novel
dramatizes the failure of communication and intimacy at nearly every level, from
the image of Isa tapping uselessly on the glass at her unheeding children, to the
actors’ words being lost in the air, to the many sequences that show the village
and family communities as fragmented and at odds: “dispersed are [they].”
Moreover, to return to Wells’s textbook, what Woolf does not mention in Between
the Acts is where it ends: with the First World War, which Wells treats as a major
cataclysm in human history, and to which he devotes far more pages than to any
other event in his broad catalogue. The Outline of History, in other words, moves
from one kind of barbarism (albeit an imaginatively evocative and fantastical
one) to another. Miss La Trobe, too, looking to the future, finds the distant past.
Already beginning to construct her next play, she sees this (p.278) new one
arising from “the mud,” where “the intolerably laden dumb oxen plod...”; it is
elemental in shape, another outline of history (as is the pageant, as is the novel
itself). “There was the high ground at midnight; there the rock; and two scarcely
perceptible figures” (BTA, 212). It is a setting that for La Trobe is “fertile,”
productive of “words without meaning—wonderful words,” a breath of hope and
promise in a world become increasingly shadowy.

And yet, for all the richness and relief accompanying La Trobe’s vision of
prehistory, it also heralds the novel’s conclusion, a far more sobering sequence:

Left alone together for the first time that day, they were silent. Alone,
enmity was bared; also love. Before they slept, they must fight; after they
had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be
born. But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the
heart of darkness, in the fields of night.
Isa let her sewing drop. The great hooded chairs had become enormous. 
And Giles too. And Isa too against the window. The window was all sky 
without colour. The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads 
were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched 
from some high place among rocks.

Then the curtain rose. They spoke. (BTA, 219)

Woolf imbricates many literary and cultural references into her concluding lines, 
both external and internal to the novel—most directly Conrad, but also Matthew 
Arnold, the novel’s own Miss La Trobe, and those many writers of the 1930s who 
had worried about the essential violence always ready to erupt in destructive 
chaos and slaughter. Moreover, Woolf’s sentences here are uncharacteristically 
short and blunt. They are also repetitive (“And Giles too. And Isa too...”), her 
language mimicking in form what it describes, a radical reduction in the creative 
power. The passage is similar, in that sense, to what we saw in “Easter 1916,” 
where the language of generative violence became lulling and circular, forcing 
out alternative modes of thought, checking the imaginative capacity. Where 
Yeats makes this linguistic lethargy equivocal and seductive, Woolf sees the 
lights going out; it is the only really dark and terrifying ending to any of her 
novels. Even The Voyage Out, in some ways the closest in spirit to Between the 
Acts, pushes past Rachel’s death, to conclude instead in the indifferent space of 
the hotel, impervious to the losses it witnesses. And so St. John relaxes, after the 
intense grief of Rachel’s illness:

All these voices sounded gratefully in St. John’s ear as he lay half-asleep, 
and yet vividly conscious of everything around him. Across his eyes passed 
a (p.279) procession of objects, black and indistinct, the figures of people 
picking up their books, their cards, their balls of wool, their work-baskets, 
and passing him one after another on their way to bed. (VO, 353)
At the conclusion of *Between the Acts*, there is no quiet forgetting of calamity; on the contrary, many of the novel’s defining forms of creativity are squeezed out and diminished, in a trajectory that takes its final direction when the novel relinquishes itself to drama. Such a move transpires at several levels, not only in thematic terms, but also in its generic borrowing, as it partakes of many features it attributes to drama: characters figured as cast; the audience playing a choral role; the contained setting; the twenty-four-hour time span; the refrains and repetitions that give a sense of formal cohesion to the play/novel; and, of course, the final curtain. Given the depth and diversity of the theatrical referencing, and given the imaginative appeal of the pageant for late modernism, as Jed Esty has described it, such an overlap seems fruitful. The problem is that, in *Between the Acts*, the essence of the novel’s (or play’s) humanity is drained, so that characters become stock characters, relationships fall into clichéd categories, people act out their roles with a wearisome predictability, even the most intimate relations are anchored on formulated phrases. “Surely,” as Isa sums it up, “it was time someone invented a new plot, or that the author came out from the bushes” (*BTA*, 215).
In *Between the Acts*, the rubric of wearying repetition is expansive. The acts, first, signal the repeating sequence, as do the annual production of the pageant itself and its allied rituals. “Every summer, for seven summers now, Isa had heard the same words; about the hammer and the nails; the pageant and the weather. Every year they said, would it be wet or fine; every year it was—one or the other” (*BTA*, 22). The swallows are in on the repetitive mode, returning every summer (and provoking the interesting philosophical question of whether, if they are not the same actual birds, their annual migration actually counts as a return). Lucy, whose “one-making” takes the form of giant circling excursions, continually seems to read the same passage from Wells, just as she asks herself every year whether to move to Kew. If these forms of repetition are perfectly benign, the novel is nevertheless clouded by the idea of war as an ever-repeating cycle, and by the structure of return as annihilative. And so we have an exceptionally startling passage, as the family and guests are looking at the view: “The flat fields glared green yellow, blue yellow, red yellow, then blue again. The repetition was senseless, hideous, stupefying” (*BTA*, 67). There are a number of curious features in this brief and brutal passage. First, it is one of those narratorial moments that unfixes the subject whose feeling is being recorded; it seems to belong to the text as a whole. Mrs. Manresa is (p.280) being described in the immediately preceding lines, but if it is her thought, it is not hers alone. Second, the lines jarringly contrast with everything that has been said up to now about the view, whose signal characteristic is that it invites universal affection (even Giles, who imagines it blasted apart, “loved” it). And finally, it is very strange and disorienting to find such a painterly, aesthetic moment—the undulating colors, the interesting mixing—and one tuned to the familiar and revered, depicted in such aggressive and repellant terms. In its very surprise, it is a profoundly clarifying moment. Repetition in some basic way means violence; its presence shocks and sickens.

What counteracts the monstrousness of repeated violence is pattern—an alternate style of pattern that mitigates the forcefulness of repetition. If the view passage startled with its unexpected revulsion, its counter-passage, just several pages earlier, had offered a wonderfully exuberant image of the surroundings:

> The other trees were magnificently straight. They were not too regular; but regular enough to suggest columns in a church; in a church without a roof, in an open-air cathedral, a place where swallows darting seemed, by the regularity of the trees, to make a pattern, dancing, like the Russians, only not to music, but to the unheard rhythm of their own wild hearts. (*BTA*, 64–65)
It is a marvelous moment, a surge of lightness and joy in a novel that tends toward the sorrowful. The dancing swallows call up many evocations, from Yeats’s “Among School Children” to the sensation of the Ballets Russes in the 1920s, while the roofless church, a modernist Tintern Abbey, manages to skirt all that Woolf loathed about religion, while inviting in what she could still afford to love—its architecture, for instance, and its sheer, unanchored uplift. Moreover, the reference to Greece in this passage, unlike the Sophoclean mode that stresses the imprisonment of the human condition (“They were all caught and caged; prisoners” [BTA, 176]) evokes what British culture had always idealized about the ancient landscape—a fantasy that, in their own time, the classical temples had been open to the sky, their columns supporting no roof. But what is most strange about the passage is how precisely Woolf delineates the nature of the trees’ regularity, the specificity of their pattern. They are ordered, but not too much so, architectural but open; the whole tableau establishes a perfect balance between form and formlessness, repetition (or regularity) and freedom. Indeed, it is tempting to see in this glorious moment the achievement of a goal we have followed throughout these pages: to find a language that will precisely delineate violence’s excess, without lapsing into an economic style of balance and counter-balance, or, conversely, succumbing to the lure of waste and self-sacrifice.
This contrast between repetition and pattern is the crux of it for Woolf, as it is for modernism more broadly, the difference between violence as overwhelming force and violence as something that must be acknowledged, but can also be managed and accommodated, by formalizing it in some way— weaving it into the text, or bracketing it, or embodying it, to name several styles we have encountered. In the pre-1930s novels we have considered (The Voyage Out, Jacob’s Room, Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse), violence was formalized, in the most explicit sense; it was imbricated in the primary formal mechanisms of the text. As we move into the three late works, that possibility is threatened—but here is the key point: it is threatened, particularly in Three Guineas and Between the Acts, by form itself. In The Years, Woolf created an especially muted and oblique pattern for violence; and yet The Years suggests that when some threshold of world violence has been crossed, this formal solution no longer suffices, and the novel as genre ceases to suffice. With Three Guineas, the repetitiveness of violence becomes the text’s own stylistic driver; its strategy is to take up the circular rhythm, in effect swallowing up the terrible problem of repetition (violence) by a desired form of circularity (the bacchic dance or the recurrent dream of peace). Of course, one only dreams of peace because one is confronted by war, and so the pattern is regressive, mutually engendering (like the snake and toad). In Three Guineas, in other words, repetition and pattern are closely linked; Woolf’s vision of breaking the violent cycle involves more circling, absorbing and refiguring the pattern that had been deadly and depressing with new energy and intention. Between the Acts pushes the furthest, asking: is history no more, finally, than repeated acts of violence? We can do nothing to intervene in the acts; and it is not even clear that can we imagine forms and patterns that, as in her previous novels, might incorporate violence without entirely succumbing to its force.

“Surely,” as Isa says, “it was time someone invented a new plot.” It may be an impossible task for this novel, a rhetorical rather than genuine appeal. If there were to be a new plot, it would have to be Isa’s to create, Miss La Trobe’s plays being too fully invested in what has already been written. Isa is always at work on her own narrative: she writes poetry concealed in an accounting book; she very consciously scripts herself (as lover to the man in gray, for instance) and others (“the father of my children”), and she constructs an ongoing poem over the course of her day, a rhythmic reflection on the rich sensory and intelligible world around her. Like many other artist figures throughout Woolf’s fiction, Isa is a stand-in for Woolf, not so much because her output resembles the novel (much less for reasons of character similarity) but because the deep psychic attitude she betrays—to approach her world, an often bracingly difficult one, punctuated by loneliness and frustration, in a spirit of aesthetic creativity and exuberance—resembles Woolf’s own lifelong accomplishment.
The challenge for Isa comes with the intrusion of violence. It enters with the newspaper. Where Giles reads about international finance, and the villagers are drawn to stories about the royal family—and where, for everyone, the lead-up to war provides the subtext—Isa reads a story of a rape:

“The troopers told her the horse had a green tail; but she found it was just an ordinary horse. And they dragged her up to the barrack room where she was thrown upon a bed. Then one of the troopers removed part of her clothing, and she screamed and hit him about the face...”

That was real; so real that on the mahogany door panels she saw the Arch in Whitehall; through the Arch the barrack room; in the barrack room the bed, and on the bed the girl was screaming and hitting him about the face, when the door (for in fact it was a door) opened and in came Mrs. Swithin carrying a hammer. (BTA, 20, ellipsis in original)

Strange as it sounds, it is a true story; coverage appeared in The Times on successive days in June 1938.123 “That was real”: Isa’s response, reverberating with the realness of disenchanted violence, anticipates and conditions the reader’s. Crucially, though, there follows a mutation from this very realness, as the rape language refuses to stay static, joining the thought stream, and Isa embraces that “imaginative reconstruction of the past,” so often constitutive of the novel’s female characters (BTA, 9). More than any other single event depicted in the novel, the story of the raped girl, lured in by the fantastical idea of a horse with a green tail, permeates Isa’s imagination, transforming her interior monologue. It returns over the course of the day, always with Isa’s own emendations; she will soon have the girl hitting the soldier with a hammer, having incorporated Lucy’s unthreatening hammer (used to nail up the placard about the pageant) into the violent narrative. In the actual trial and news coverage, a recurring question involved the girl’s complicity; here, there is no doubt that this is a rape, and Isa, in her vision, gives the rape victim the opportunity to hit back in a meaningful way, with a weapon. It may be, indeed, that Isa’s arming of the girl represents her own unfulfillable wish to smash back at men, a repressed and reversed narrative of female rage that recalls Rachel Vinrace’s identification with the women beheading the chickens. We might also note, again, the recurrence of the primitive weapon to join our bayonets, here the hammer.
Mostly, however, the intrusion of this blunt moment of visceral violence, sexual and disenchanted, disrupts Isa’s internal equilibrium, her poetic form of self-regulation; but it also adds something, a realness that is, in a strange way, anchoring for Isa. When, for instance, Isa listens to Lucy and Bart having their annual conversation about the weather on pageant day, her interior monologue concludes: “The same chime followed the same chime, only this year beneath the chime she heard: ‘The girl screamed and hit him about the face with a hammer’” (BTA, 22). The effect of this shocking intrusion into the lulling sequence is mixed. In part, it depersonalizes and generalizes: this year’s sequence of wet-and-fine—1939’s—is different from all previous ones, underpinned by brute violence. The description comes from Isa’s personal iconography, but it speaks to the world situation. It is also jolting: if the conversation about the weather acts as a soporific (like the effect of a large lunch on a warm day, such as the one that puts Bart to sleep on the terrace), the presence of the rape shocks Isa’s language, and the novel’s, into alertness. It acts internally the way Giles wishes to act on the villagers around him, to force the pressing reality of violence into view, disrupting the rituals that order and shape their day. As the Giles comparison suggests, this jolting function is twofold. On one hand, it pains Isa’s own interior life, which is constantly pressured by the memory of her reading about the rape. On the other hand, it counters the repetitive ritual, which, as we have seen, mirrors and anticipates the massive violence of the wars. In other words, her internalization and absorption of one narrative of violence (the rape) in part counteracts another, broader one (the history of world violence, emblematized by the two wars, and by repetition). In that sense, the rape is almost a comfort, a form of violence that can still be assimilated. It thus recalls The Secret Agent, which, in shifting to Winnie’s melodramatic story of domestic violence from Stevie’s ambiguous one of dynamite explosion, found available literary conventions. Woolf drives the point home a little later in the novel, when Isa, in the midst of a particularly troubled thought sequence, turns to the raped girl as part of her retreat from public violence and apathy: “On, little donkey, patiently stumble,” she encourages herself, “Hear not the frantic cries of the leaders who in that they seek to lead desert us. Nor the chatter of china faces glazed and hard. Hear rather the shepherd, coughing by the farmyard wall; the withered tree that sighs when the Rider gallops; the brawl in the barrack room when they stripped her naked…” (BTA, 156). It is a difficult sequence to understand; why would she “hear rather” the sounds in the background of the rape? Perhaps because “the brawl in the barrack room when they stripped her naked” belongs to the tradition of formalizing violence with which Woolf has always worked. It scans, for one thing. And it represents Isa’s imaginative absorption and redirection of violence as part of her personal poem, a synecdoche, in the end, for Woolfian textuality.
The passage, moreover, comes as close as Isa’s narrative ever will to modernism, and particularly to Eliot, whom she echoes stylistically (one hears the timbre, especially, of such lyrics as “The Journey of the Magi” and “Sweeney among the Nightingales”); in fact, the rape functions in Isa’s consciousness, and in the novel more generally, in a manner akin to Eliot’s amalgamation of the rape of Philomela in *The Waste Land*. In both cases, the rape allusions return repeatedly; are interwoven very thoroughly into the textual fabric and consciousness; work in relation to larger narratives of world violence (primarily war); and put particular stress on the division between enchanted and disenchanted violence. In Eliot’s poem, we recall, the rape of Philomela provoked an especially dense and layered reflection on the way violence becomes the foundation on which many aesthetic forms are based, often leaving behind only trace reminders of its original catastrophe. Here, things are much rawer; the rape is “real,” a contemporary event given in material detail, a violent attack figured as palpable (and the bizarre inclusion of the green-tailed horse only heightens this sense of its viscerality). This raw quality fits with the temporality of violence in *Between the Acts*—oncoming, shadowing, squeezing out the present moment—in contrast to *The Waste Land*, which stands instead as a postwar monument, dedicated, in part, to mourning and healing. And yet, the commonalities are striking; perhaps, indeed, it is this intertextual connection that calls up the Swinburne poem “Itylus” in *Between the Acts*, from which Bart—an unlikely reader of Swinburne—hums several lines, including, “Swallow, my sister, O sister swallow” (BTA, 109). It is, of course, the same one Eliot borrows in *The Waste Land* to suggest how deeply violence is embedded in literary culture and history, and reminds us, as in Eliot’s poem, that tales of brutal violence can be transformed, though long historical and literary passages, into lyrical refrains, almost nonreferential bits of music. More generally, what the parallel between *The Waste Land* and Woolf’s novel helps to show is that these narratives of violent rape fundamentally display and challenge the relation between art and violence. Woolf reveals that for Isa, the rape, though shocking and terrible, is also invigorating; it shakes up her language, just as it breaks the somnambulatory quality of the day. It does not enchant—Woolf will never allow that—but it does revive; it demands recognition.
The rape sequence, then, becomes a critical, transformative element in Isa’s and the novel’s poetic consciousness, insisting on its presence; as such, it stands as a complement and counterforce to the other moment when violence and creativity are interlocked, Giles’s stamping on the snake and toad. The passage, as we have seen, reflects the contemporary conversation about violence in several ways (the questions of inherent human violence, the status of action), and also resurrects many of Woolf’s own preoccupations, as reflected in her earlier works (the circularity of violent happenings, animal allegory). I have suggested, moreover, that the blood on the shoes represents an instance and refraction of artistic creation, or, we might say, of form itself. In other words, it allegorizes Woolf’s own writing, which repeatedly offers the equivalent of a splash of blood as a distillation of its own processes for accommodating violence—the purple stains or bruises in Jacob’s Room and To the Lighthouse, the wisps of cloud left by the airplane in Mrs. Dalloway, the wounded hand in The Years, to name a few cases. The blood on the shoes, then, becomes emblematic: it stands for Woolf’s observations about how violence and art mutually inseminate, in her own work as in that of many other artists (including Eliot). As the novel moves more and more in the direction of gestural violence, the patterns that Woolf has created in the past show their artificiality, they anatomize themselves. Are they no more than a stain of blood of the shoes? Moreover, with the artist visible—violent, aggressive, homophobic, frustrated, as well as impotent, helpless, passive—his artistry seems all the more compromised. Indeed, the elemental quality of the entire configuration aligns it with the other primal moments in the novel, a trajectory that ends in the novel’s final paragraphs, with their grimacing, frightening cadences.

The rape and the shoes suggest a reckoning with violence that not only looks out at the world, but also back at Woolf’s career, and these are not the only such self-referential moments in Between the Acts. Lucy, too, articulates an aesthetic model that recalls Woolf’s earlier works, particularly at the end of the novel, when she spies the ancient fish in the pond. It is a favorite Woolfian image, one that has resonance as early as The Voyage Out, and comes in a passage that also evokes such canonical figures as Lily Briscoe:

Then something moved in the water; her favorite fantail. The golden orfe followed. Then she had a glimpse of silver—the great carp himself, who came to the surface so very seldom. They slid on, in and out between the stalks, silver; pink; gold; splashed; streaked; pied.

“Ourselves,” she murmured. And retrieving some glint of faith from the grey waters, hopefully, without much help from reason, she followed the fish; the speckled, streaked, and blotched; seeing in that vision beauty, power, and glory in ourselves.

Fish had faith, she reasoned. (BTA 205)
Is this, then, the vision that counters what Isa and Giles, in their separate iterations, show about the complicity of art with violence? Woolf poses the possibility that Lucy’s vision, like Lily’s in *To the Lighthouse*, might offer a real alternative to the shadowy mood epitomized by both the rape and the bloody shoes (and in *To the Lighthouse* by the sound of waves or the purple stain). It is an especially welcome passage, moreover, (p.286) because fish in *Between the Acts* have generally not fared well: they come filleted, or with gills full of blood, or at the end of two crisscrossed fishing lines (*BTA*, 21, 48). And yet, the freedom and beauty of the fish in the pond are circumscribed by Lucy’s own limitations—“Fish had faith, she reasoned”—as Woolf puts the brakes on her as a viable visionary for this novel (as, in an earlier passage, when her admirable proclivity for “one-making” is undermined by her childlike image of God as a giant head). The novel seems disinclined to give Lucy any real or sustained imaginative reach, instead, as we have seen, tending to stereotype and circumscribe all of its characters, Lucy included; she is all faith, Bart all skepticism, neither sufficient. Just as *Three Guineas* indicated that Woolf had moved away from her male modernist peers as sources of experimental inspiration, here it is Woolf’s own former modernist expressions of hope and beauty that she presents as tired and self-deceived. Instead, the rape language and the shoes have a resonance and honesty in the present that distinguishes them from insufficient visions such as Lucy’s. They are distinct, too from the novel’s many images of violence in the past, wonderfully compact and layered as those are, such as the passage about the scarred landscape, or another in which is framed—literally, in a glass case—“a watch that had stopped a bullet on the field of Waterloo” (*BTA*, 7).
Isa and Giles, in their disparate ways, initiate images of violence and creation that have a depth of metatextual layering one expects of a final novel. “In the history of art,” Edward Said notes, quoting Adorno, “late works are the catastrophes.” If we return to *The Voyage Out*, we can see that Woolf has moved almost one hundred and eighty degrees in her understanding of character and violence: there, it was Rachel who became the recipient and focal point, constellating the episodic, detached spectacles of violence that peppered the novel; here, the protagonists themselves act out the dialectic between art and violence, making their own canvases in blood. There is nothing enchanted about such complicity, but nor are we in *Three Guineas*, with its positing, in the Spanish photographs, of a thoroughly disenchanted view. Indeed, the division between enchanted and disenchanted violence, which we have seen to energize the literature of modernism to no small degree, itself seems beside the point. Miss La Trobe had ended her pageant with self-reflection, “Ourselves,” and Woolf’s version of that imperative, at least in part, involves a searing look at how and where and in what form violence has inhabited her literary oeuvre. And though Woolf may not be one for self-dramatizing gestures, when she ends her novel with a rising curtain, she indicates something that all three of her final works have intimated: a new story is ready to be told. Woolf cannot, of course, know the extent and contours of the worldwide violence that will follow her death. What she does know is that it will not be she, or modernism, that will find the language for writing those painful truths.

Notes:


(2) Simone Weil, *The Iliad or the Poem of Force*, trans. James P. Holoka (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 57, 61

(3) Virginia Woolf, *The Moment and Other Essays* (San Diego: Harvest, 1976), 228


(8) Woolf casts the net wide in depicting art and its production in the novel—with Miss La Trobe’s pageant occupying nearly a third of the novel’s pages, a marked emphasis on the artistry of and within Pointz Hall, various characters inhabiting artist-like roles, and a running comparison of life to theater.


(20) Huxley, *An Encyclopedia of Pacifism*, 56


(22) Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, 174


(26) *SB*, 1: 21. The scrapbooks are available in full online, at *Virginia Woolf: Reading Notes for Three Guineas: An Edition and Archive*, http://www.csub.edu/woolf/tgs_home.html. Citation will be by volume and page, abbreviated in text as “SB.”

(27) The idea of a civilian/combatant distinction has perhaps never been firm. Mary Favret makes the case that as far back as the end of the eighteenth century, any seeming safety wall between war and peace was beginning to erode. See Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). Also germane is Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2003).
Patterns of Violence


(30) “On the Partiality of Total War” was delivered as a lecture at the City University of New York, March 2012, to be in the first chapter of a forthcoming book, tentatively titled Archive, Bomb, Civilian: Modernism in the Shadow of Total War.

(31) For detailed discussion of a whole variety of works that represented the phenomenon of air-war panic, with a particular attention to fiction, see I. F. Clarke, Voices Prophesying War 1763–1984 (London: Oxford University Press, 1966) and Ian Patterson, Guernica and Total War (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). For the Blitz, see Marina MacKay, Modernism and World War II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Mark Rawlinson, British Writing of the Second World War (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

(32) This was a theme Wells had pursued for years, including in his 1908 novel, The War in the Air, which features the destruction of world capitals by airship.

(33) Russell, Power, 30


(37) Ernest Hemingway, For Whom the Bell Tolls (New York: Scribner, 2003), 163
(38) The text of these dispatches is now available, thanks to the Hemingway Review, which has reproduced them in full. The Spanish Civil War issue also reproduces a propaganda article written for Pravda in 1938. See The Hemingway Review 7.2 (Spring 1988).


(40) From a pamphlet published by the Socialist Alliance of Swiss Women, in Zurich. Quoted in Voices Against Tyranny, 63.

(41) Cunningham, ed., Spanish Front: Writers on the Civil War, 51

(42) Virginia Woolf, The Moment and Other Essays, 128–54

(43) Spain Edward Mendelson, Early Auden (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 323


(45) Patterson, Guernica and Total War, 19–20


(48) The show was given a mixed review in The Times, on October 5, 1938. For more extensive conversation, see The Spectator (October 8, 15, 22, 29, 1937); Apollo, 28 (November 1938), 266; and London Studio, 116 (December 1938), 310–12. I have not been able to ascertain for certain whether Woolf saw the show, but it seems unlikely.
The painting had its home in New York as of 1939, but continued to travel for nearly two decades after that, but not to Spain, Picasso having stipulated that the painting be barred from his native country until it was again a republic, and it accordingly was only moved to Madrid in 1981. Today it is seen in a beautiful dedicated gallery in the Museo Reina Sofia.


According to Patterson, initial reports from the scene, and the iconography that soon emerged in both visual and written representations, tended to stress a number of repeated features, including the town’s historic tree and the presence of dead goats; one wonders whether Woolf’s pig carcass obliquely gestures towards these goats?

I am grateful to Victoria Rosner for drawing my attention to these features of Sussex in the 1930s.


Koestler documented his time in Spain in a 1937 memoir, *Spanish Testament*, the second half of which was reprinted, and widely translated, as the highly readable prison memoir *Dialogue with Death* (1942).


The book, *Sombras de la Fotografía* (Shadows of Photography), by Jose Manuel Susperregui, is not currently available in English, but was widely discussed in newspapers and online in 2009, when it was published.


(64) Benito Mussolini, *Fascism: Doctrine and Institutions* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1968), 10

(65) Mussolini, “The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism,” 8, 10, 11


(69) The P.P.U. eventually came to enfold another large pacifist group, the War Resisters’ International, a socialist organization.


(71) In addition to essays on such literary/cultural figures as Shaw, Wells, Freud, and D. H. Lawrence, Caudwell (pseudonym of Christopher St. John Sprigg) also wrote fiction and poetry.


(74) Two other noteworthy titles from the 1930s pacifist canon are A. A. Milne, *Peace with Honour* (New York: Dutton, 1934) and Beverley Nichols, *Cry Havoc!* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1933). Milne revised his views over the course of the decade, publishing *War with Honour* in 1940.

(75) C. E. M. Joad, *Why War?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1939), 99, 102
(76) Indeed, Joad is a favorite target of both Woolfs; Leonard takes him to task in Quack! Quack!.


(78) Virginia Woolf, Moments of Being (San Diego: Harcourt, 1985), 98MB

(79) The literary legacies impacted in these moments and memories are rich, evoking not only contemporaries like Proust, but also nineteenth-century figures like Wordsworth and even Tennyson (“flower in the crannied nook…”).


(81) Virginia Woolf, The Death of the Moth and Other Essays (San Diego: Harcourt, 1970), 243-48Death


(84) MelymbrosiaVirginia Woolf, Melymbrosia, ed. Louise De Salvo (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2002), 19

(85) The attempt to look behind the scenes in modernism tends to operate as a psychic device; following the flaneur, the modernist voyeur finds his own repressed desires and fantasies—erotic, masochistic, sadistic, infantile—displayed in such working-class scenarios. Later in the twentieth century, by contrast, these become overtly politicized. Hence the commodity history or film, or works such as Jamaica Kincaid’s A Small Place, emphasize that what hides behind the luxury hotel or the well-prepared chicken dinner or the imported wool coat is a whole history of exploitation, environmental degradation, and violence. See Jamaica Kincaid, A Small Place (New York: FSG, 1988). For a discussion of the phenomenon of the commodity history, see Bruce Robbins, “Commodity Histories,” PMLA 120:2 (March 2005): 454-63.

(87) Virginia Woolf, Jacob’s Room (London: Penguin, 1992), 61, 96, 59, 49JR

(89) Woolf stocks her novel with a medieval allegory’s worth of descriptive names: Flanders; Captain Barfoot, with his lame walk; Jacob’s closest friend Bonamy; and as for Florinda, the conceit becomes literalized (and also ironized): “her name had been bestowed upon her by a painter who had wished it to signify that the flower of her maidenhood was still unplucked” (JR, 65).

(90) It is notable that in both of these scenarios, the character who most directly embodies such a trade-off (St. John Hirst, Bonamy) is modeled on Woolf’s friend Lytton Strachey.

(91) Roger Poole, “‘We All Put Up with You, Virginia’: Irreceivable Wisdom about War,” in Virginia Woolf and War, 79–100


(93) A suspicion about the value of this newfound interest in poetry was widespread among writers in the period.


(96) Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway (San Diego: Harcourt, 1997)

(97) David Bradshaw, “‘Vanished, Like Leaves’: The Military, Elegy and Italy in Mrs. Dalloway,” Woolf Studies Annual Vol. 8 (2002): 107


(101) Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 81-84

(102) Siegfried Sassoon, *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston* (London: Faber, 1952), 496


(105) Unlike *Orlando*, *The Years* does not name its "present," leaving the reader to calculate the year, based on the characters' ages, at around 1932. Perhaps Woolf simply could not bear to leave her characters in the actual present of 1936, when she finished the novel.

(106) The full text of Wordsworth's sonnet "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802" is as follows:

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Earth has not any thing to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did the sun more beautifully steep
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In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne’er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!


(110). Two important discussions of Woolf, in the context of many of these topics, are Jessica Berman, *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community* and Merry M. Pawlowski, ed., *Virginia Woolf and Fascism.*


(112). These tableaus recall the bonfire at the young Maggie’s birthday party in *The Years,* which invites Eugénie’s delighted and distinctly *Three Guineas*–like cry, “‘Make it blaze! Make it blaze!’” (*TY*, 124).

(114) Terry Castle, “Rococophilia: War, Beauty, and the Eighteenth Century in British Culture 1919–1933” delivered at Columbia University, November 11, 2010


(116) See Mary Favret, War at a Distance, for a wonderful rendering of time, “wartime,” and the arrival of the news (via post boy) in the early nineteenth century—or perhaps in any time period.


(119) One might also consider The Waves in this regard, though in that novel Woolf’s experiments with shared consciousness are generally less annihilative of the novel than experimentally expansive of its boundaries.

(120) T. S. Eliot, Selected Poems (San Diego: Harcourt, 1964), 80

(121) Virginia Woolf, The Captain’s Death Bed and Other Essays (London: Hogarth, 1950), 197


Later, Miss La Trobe, in one of her agonized moments, will feel as if there were blood pouring from her shoes, a hyperbolic version of Giles’s canvases (BTA, 180).

Edward Said, On Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain (New York: Pantheon, 2006), 160