Series Editors’ Foreword

It’s one of the irreducible paradoxes of British literary modernism: a time of unprecedented violence on the world-historical stage resulted in a body of literature of unprecedented beauty. Violence issuing in beauty: a terrible beauty, indeed.

In one of Sarah Cole’s early formulations in *At the Violet Hour: Modernism and Violence in England and Ireland*, modernist literary works “created intricate, often exquisite formal solutions to the challenges posed by violence.” But, as she demonstrates powerfully in her reading of the “pandying” scene in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, modernism largely refused to achieve its exquisite formulations by withdrawing to the kind of aesthetic distance that Maud Ellmann memorably dubbed the “poetics of impersonality.” Cole’s sensitive close reading of the intimate violence of that classroom scene is urgent and compelling, and puts the human experience back into a moment that can be written off as a parody of Stephen’s pandy. That is to say, Cole rescues the scene from self-pity and restores to it the genuine pity that lies just beneath Joyce’s vaunted “indifference.” In so doing, Cole demonstrates one of the primary imperatives of *At the Violet Hour*: to find at the very core of the modernist canon propulsive moments of intimate violence, with consequences that ripple throughout a given text and an author’s work, and throughout the period.
Cole’s aim is to redirect our understanding of enchantment and disenchantment as fundamental, opposing principles of violence that oriented writing about violence in the twentieth century. That violence itself is of course unavoidable. In some hands it was promoted to a symbolic plane, the romantic notion of martyrs’ blood nourishing the soil of nationalist revolt; think of the lines in Yeats’s “Easter 1916,” “our part /To murmur name upon name, /As a mother names her child / When (p.x) sleep at last has come....” In other hands, such mythologizing was explicitly rejected—as in the lines of Yeats’s that follow: “No, no, not night but death; /Was it needless death after all?” As Cole writes, “Enchantment loves the metaphor of blood; disenchantment calls upon the hurt body, with its signal fluid, to look as real and frightful as it can.”

As Cole demonstrates, “Easter 1916,” Yeats’s most enduringly popular poem, must then be read as “a dialogue of self and soul”—a debate over the legitimate uses of political violence, and the potential for disenchanted representations of that violence to be reenchanted. “Yeats recognizes,” Cole suggests, “as he is writing the poem, that its language of enchantment is destined to become a convention (as, of course, it has) and hence to function less as a stimulus to thought than as an incantation of what one already believes”—that “murmuring name upon name.” Indeed, as Cole points out, that murmuring of names is itself literally a form of enchant-ment. And yet, Yeats and his contemporaries could never keep the generative cycle intact; its shadowy double, reprisal, stalks their works, providing a rhythm of its own and punctuating their delicate surfaces with disenchanting visions of endless killing.

As these examples from Ireland show, modernism’s fitting attention to violence and the body in pain provokes a crisis in representation: how might literature attest to, without celebrating, the young century’s violent predilections? How short-circuit the deeply entrenched tendency to enchant violence? Given modernism’s commitment to “show, not tell,” how can the engaged writer create a text that reliably produces a response in line with her own ethical commitments? The secret—not to give too much away here—is that, as Cole demonstrates early in her analysis of some representative poems of the First World War, even the project of disenchantment recognizes “the uses of enchantment,” and occasionally stoops to its tactics. And taking a page from the writers she studies, Cole’s writing itself is often enchanted and enchanting (in that other, less technical sense), even as it ruthlessly unmasks the politics of disenchantment.
There’s so much here to admire, with tone-perfect readings of important texts from a wide range of modernist writers: Cole’s work on Portrait, Conrad’s The Secret Agent, Synge’s drama, Yeats’s violent poetics, Eliot’s The Waste Land—all of which are read in the highly material contexts of terrorism, insurrection, and war, and which, she argues convincingly from this historical vantage point, conduct “experiments in miscegenating enchantment with disenchantment.”

One of the great strengths of the book is Cole’s seamless theorizing across genres, as if blind to the “boundaries”: fiction, drama, poetry, “creative nonfiction,” the essay—even painting and photography. Indeed, at the risk of singling out just one (more) body of work that she reinvigorates, we need at least to gesture toward Cole’s tour de force treatment of Three Guineas and the visual rhetoric of violence (as well as the recoil from photographic representations of such violence) that text manifests.

At the Violet Hour concludes with a chapter of great insight and great sympathy that reads much of Woolf’s oeuvre; it sets her intensive, haunting, and far-reaching accounts of violence against a dark and brooding backdrop of 1930s reckoning with catastrophe, as violence comes to stand near the center of life itself, the very principle of incipience. As Cole brings her argument to a close, she manages to articulate one of her last texts back into one of her first, suggesting that “the violet hour” of The Waste Land can be productively remapped by the purple of To the Lighthouse, which “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.”

We’re excited for the experience you’re about to undergo, for the many brilliant insights—we Joyceans are tempted to call them “epiphanies”—that this book will deliver to you. It’s been all we could do to keep most of the “spoilers” out of this foreword; having read At the Violet Hour, like us you will want to share its most exciting discoveries with those who care about this literature as we do.

—KEVIN J. H. DETTMAR & MARK WOLLAEGER  (p.xii)