Introduction

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Abstract and Keywords

Taking as its touchstone the passage from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when young Stephen Dedalus is beaten on the hands, the introduction establishes key principles for reading violence in modernist literature: violence is imagined as the site of multiple origins and primary subjectivity; it is located in the body and at the crux of culture; it often begins as allegory (for instance by suggesting violence against humans through representations of violence against animals) yet it also collapses allegory into incarnation; most generally, the effort to find literary forms for violence stands at the very crux of literary self-definition. The introduction amplifies key terms in the book such as force and political violence, and develops two poles of historical thinking about violence in the period, the spectacular (where violence is hyperbolic and intensely visual, as in WWI) and the hidden (where violence remains mute and effaced). It also clarifies the book’s relation to several important critical conventions about WWI and modernism, and provides brief chapter summaries.

*Keywords:* violence and history, James Joyce, William Butler Yeats, modernism, animals and violence, political violence, force, Simone Weil, Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*
Nothing is older than the story of violence. As anthropologists tell us, ancient cultures and religions drew their fuel from violence: acquiring its power, protecting against its ravages, rendering it divine or anthropomorphic, creating rituals and ceremonies to slake or reorient it, finding for it a language and an art. Violence is a beginning, not only because the first cultures saw it so, but because the pattern repeats, with modern nations often seeing in war or in other large-scale violent events their points of origin. The outcome need not be victorious; Easter 1916 is a glorious beginning, as is Masada, and in the ruins of Troy, Virgil conjures the seeds of Rome. In the Aeneid, it is a band of ragged survivors who eventually will found the empire, but first, they look like modern stateless people, huddling and afraid, traumatized refugees who have seen their families killed before their eyes, their glorious city burned to the ground. The outcome need not, moreover, be triumphant; the killing and uprooting of Native Americans, which can be named the founding violence of America, represents a blot on the nation’s ideals, a form of engendering bloodshed that, shorn of its manifest destiny, compromises the culture’s self-image. And the outcome is never complete: where there is a flood, there is also an ark. If violence is contemplated as an origin, it cannot entirely be so, the operations of transformation, carryover, and trace being as important as those of genesis and creation. Violence leaves its stains, and the long march of years, despite efforts at redemption or revisionism, will often fail to obscure them.

Literature, with its unique ability to embed long pasts into vibrant narratives of the present, and with its restless urge to rewrite inherited stories, has always offered an exemplary forum for making violence knowable, showing how it can be simultaneously the crucible for a culture’s highest values (in war, especially) and a force radically to undermine those ideals. At the same time, the urgent, physical, primordial quality of violence can disturb the self-concept of literature, insofar as, in Matthew Arnold’s once-commanding words, it seeks to yield “the best which has been thought and said in the world.”¹ To linger on destruction and disgrace is a capitulation to barbarism, perhaps, a self-abnegation, when literature instead might be called upon to replace the raw and gruesome with the rare and comprehensible. Modernism, in particular, falls far along the historical spectrum from all those violent origins. Out to make it new, modernism aligned itself with innovation, snubbing the monuments and certainties of the past. Calling themselves “the moderns,” writers of the period embraced their new century specifically as an era defined by novelty and found the reigning self-expression of their times, for better and for worse, in technology.² Yet modernism took a great interest in beginnings, and not only as part of an atavistic or conservative embrace of the past’s coherence; it did so, rather, in the shadow of its own belatedness, espousing the role of reviver.³ Modernist literature took up beginnings by resuscitating classical categories like myth and reimagining heroic wanderers on epic journeys, and also by thinking back through mothers or fathers into the tunnel of human history and
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consciousness. At times, too, it turned the historical lens on itself, creating an archive out of the local, domestic, and personal. What better moment, then, to look squarely and unflinchingly at violence, to consider both the productive and the shameful nature of its narrative? How could modernism, in fact, not be essentially and deeply concerned with violence, given its commitment to deconstructing great cultural institutions that are fundamentally sustained by violence, such as gender, social hierarchy, and empire, and to exploring the human psyche? It is astonishing, indeed, how thoroughly the problematic of violence as an organizing cultural and aesthetic fact underwrote the literature of the years between 1890 and 1940. The period fostered a literary culture that at times saw itself as terribly useless (Auden: “poetry makes nothing happen”), at other times reckoned its own power (Stephen Dedalus: “forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race”), but always placed the literary work in gripping relationship with defining, destructive events in the world. The span and variety is enormous, with works as satiric about violence as Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* seeming to construct an alternate moral and aesthetic universe from the eccentric symbolic absorptions of, say, Yeats’s drama. Nevertheless, in detailing an intimate and intricate interleaving of violence into modernist works, this book will suggest some important consistencies. One of those is a restlessness determining the entire endeavor, as if the fact of arriving at a representational strategy adequate to the violence of life is itself a step toward (p.5) accepting it. In engaging violence, modernist works often seem to say, success is failure; and, at the same time, the urgency surrounding literature’s role in making sense of a violent world never wanes. W. G. Sebald puts it bracingly: “The ideal of truth ... proves itself the only legitimate reason for continuing to produce literature in the face of total destruction. Conversely, the construction of aesthetic or pseudo-aesthetic effects from the ruins of an annihilated world is a process depriving literature of its right to exist” (ellipses added).4
In form as in theme, works of the modernist period were profoundly shaped by the call of violence: to answer its challenges, to seek out new representational strategies, to find a conceptual register cued to its brutalities. Scholars have, of course, noted the complex relationship between violence and language, and in particular the contradictory ways that violence can act both to diminish and to incubate literary language, either rendering people mute (“why speak not they...?” Wilfred Owen asks of those who “from existence’ brink/Ventured but drave too swift to sink”) or loquacious, compelled, like the Ancient Mariner, to share their torment. In the wake of Elaine Scarry’s work, critics have noted a great deal of silence around the body in pain (“grown silent,” as Walter Benjamin had put it, “not richer, but poorer in communicable experience”), but have also uncovered a range of distinctive linguistic qualities that derive from pain, or emanate from war, or characterize trauma. For all its sublimity, then, which at times seems to render it beyond comprehension or articulation, violence, like everything else, is subject to words and to the imagination. It has its language. The project of this book is to discover and elaborate one such language, with reference to English and Irish modernism. It is to reveal how literary works created intricate, often exquisite formal solutions to the challenges posed by violence, and to trace how violent events enhanced as well as deformed their structures and surfaces.
The formalization of violence stands as one of modernism’s central endeavors, in a symbiosis that resists easy categorization. Form and violence are tightly bound, reverberating together, a yin and yang, often gorgeously so. Some of the period’s most memorable expressions—“A terrible beauty is born,” “April is the cruelest month,” the brackets in “Time Passes”—are products of this intimacy. At other times, violence and form become too closely mapped, as the violent content collapses boundaries and shatters distinctions; allegory will then drop to symbol, or metaphor become incarnation. In all cases, one of the organizing motifs is excess; given the stark and hyperbolic conditions of violence, including physical pain and suffering, and the enormity of the twentieth century’s orgies of violence, there will always be a quality of inexhaustibility about the subject. Robert Buch calls this “the pathos of the real,” and sees in the most gruesome, literary (p.6) embodiments of violence a number of reversing events: “the response to the real, violence and suffering brought up close,” he writes, “is not limited to the sentiments of horror and awe,” and instead includes such states as transcendence and revelation. If enormity and excess are the condition, then the inevitable rectifying model, in the West, is of balance, this for that, economics as the last resort in meaning-making. “Was it for this...?” is the repeated question in the period—why have we bothered to create this civilization if its culmination is the senseless killing of whole generations in war? —reaching the endpoint of Enlightenment conviction. It is a formulation of agony, in part because it sees clearly how literature is a part of (not apart from) that which it is considering, the structures we use to understand and accommodate violence, in this case the model of exchange and balance. One thing that we will not find in this study, however, is the traditional view that modernism retreats from the fray; in all of the densely material settings I will be discussing, literary works are saturated, content and form, with the ample blood of their times.
Several large-scale events comprise the historical component of this study—terrorist violence in the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, the aftermath of the First World War, the Irish insurrection of 1916 and the wars that followed, the Spanish Civil War and the 1930s aura of incipient conflict—to be considered in dynamic, dialectical relationship with individual writers and texts. I am especially drawn, in considering textual and visual materials initiated by these events, to the intellectual climate that arises before and after major eruptions of violence. These are the moments when literary strategies begin to congeal, as aesthetic order emerges in anticipation of and after violent chaos. In engaging major historical events like these, each of which produced its own full literature, one confronts a potentially limitless array of works and contexts, and I hope that my discussion will provide useful models for readers studying very different collections of texts. For this book, I am interested, first and foremost, in works or episodes that consider infliction, those moments when the body is attacked, violated, or killed—when, that is, we follow texts and characters as they witness a profound intimacy with violence. This is not to say, however, that the intense expression of violence stays isolated or private, nor that such implosive topics remain the sole focus; on the contrary, modernist works share a distinctive leaning, with regard to their violent content, to create meaningful distances from the scene of infliction, to display wider figurations alongside the initial stress, telling stories about such large subjects as power and vulnerability. In fact, the scenario of represented violence, as I am unearthing it in this book, might be said to perform in itself one of the basic achievements of literature: to see in a single moment, episode, or narrative the intensity of subjective life, and also the inseparable interchange of that experience with the large forces of culture and history. Ultimately, the argument I want to make is as big—and as small—as the subject of violence itself: that the essential operations of literature are inexorably bound to the representation of bodily violation, so that if we excavate, pursue, and seek to understand literary violence, we will find ourselves looking at literature’s very nerve center; the place where its most proud accomplishments and greatest limitations are engendered and defined. More, it is precisely this conflation of mastery with shame, in relation to violence, that modernist writing ultimately exhibits as one of its defining features, the site of astonishing and forceful presentations, but also the locus—and this we will find in each chapter—for recognizing where the literary text or writer is surpassed, as the present hurtles out of view.
In its strongest form, then, my argument aims to provide a new rubric for thinking about the self-concept of literature in the early twentieth century. But is this modernism per se? Given the historical orientation and cultural-studies approach of this book, the label “modernist” might seem inexact, calling instead for purely chronological descriptors, which might, in turn, help to deflect the label ennui that tends to grip this period’s scholarship. The models I am establishing, moreover, ideally will prove resonant for literature from different historical periods, as well as for thinking about works from the twentieth century that do not fall under the modernism umbrella, hence loosening the power of the modernist designation. And yet, formal considerations ultimately stand at the heart of my argument, which consolidates around writers, especially Eliot, Conrad, Yeats, and Woolf, who have helped to define English-language modernism. The formal achievements of these and other writers, set in motion around violation and destruction, and coming often in emblematic scenes, lines, or textual maneuvers, in the end will be exported from their early twentieth-century contexts and carried forward, powerful aesthetic markers of one period’s experiments in understanding violence. *At the Violet Hour* delineates a set of paradigms common to the modernist period, expressing some of its most powerful convictions and installing violence at the very center of its stylistic endeavors. Nevertheless, in each chapter, modernist writing engages reciprocally and productively with a variety of other texts and voices, and in some cases (especially in my consideration of Irish works in chapter 2) I am arguing for a discourse that cuts decisively through literary and cultural fields, so that to isolate one writer or formal sensibility (Yeats and modernism) would be to miss the large point about how the period’s violence spread across and determined a host of imaginative efforts.

The three sections below introduce some of the central paradigms that will inform my discussion of violence throughout the book. In the first section, I discuss several of the most significant and moving formal approaches to violence that the period elaborated. Some of these have roots in the nineteenth century (and earlier); others are more specific to the modernist era. Following this discussion of literary rubrics, I turn to a number of key terms, including the concepts of political violence and force, to which I will return in different contexts throughout this study. The final section elongates the temporal scheme, establishing the most significant models for thinking about history and violence that tended to underwrite modernist literature. These last imaginative structures divide into two primary clusters, one of which emphasizes the extravagance and unavoidability of violence, while the other works to reveal its presence despite layers of burial and invisibility.

Violence and Form
Violence experienced subjectively—bruising, terrible, vibrant, productive—is, for modernist writers, where it all begins. As a template, then, for the dynamics of violence to unfold in the chapters that follow, I offer an intensely personal expression of victimization. An early sequence in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), it is a scene of searing and scalding consequentiality, and one that follows the novel’s opening paragraphs in establishing the short textual block as repository for almost endless meaning-making:  

Stephen closed his eyes and held out in the air his trembling hand with the palm upwards. He felt the prefect of studies touch it for a moment at the fingers to straighten it and then the swish of the sleeve of the soutane as the pandybat was lifted to strike. A hot burning stinging tingling blow like the loud crack of a broken stick made his trembling hand crumple together like a leaf in the fire: and at the sound and the pain scalding tears were driven into his eyes. His whole body was shaking with fright, his arm was shaking and his crumpled burning livid hand shook like a loose leaf in the air. A cry sprang to his lips, a prayer to be let off. But though the tears scalded his eyes and his limbs quivered with pain and fright he held back the hot tears and the cry that scalded his throat.

—Other hand! shouted the prefect of studies.

Stephen drew back his maimed and quivering right arm and held out his left hand. The soutane sleeve swished again as the pandybat was lifted and a loud crashing sound and a fierce maddening tingling burning pain made his hand shrink together with the palms and fingers in a livid quivering mass. The scalding water burst forth from his eyes and, burning with shame and agony and fear, he drew back his shaking arm in terror and burst out into a whine of pain. His body shook with a palsy of fright and in shame and rage he felt the scalding cry come from his throat and the scalding tears falling out of his eyes and down his flaming cheeks.

—Kneel down! cried the prefect of studies.

Stephen knelt down quickly pressing his beaten hands to his sides. To think of them beaten and swollen with pain all in a moment made him feel so sorry for them as if they were not his own but someone else’s that he felt sorry for. And as he knelt, calming the last sobs in his throat and feeling the burning tingling pain pressed in to his sides, he thought of the hands which he had held out in the air with the palms up and of the firm touch of the prefect of studies when he had steadied the shaking fingers and of the beaten swollen reddened mass of palm and fingers that shook helplessly in the air.
The passage is conscious of its force in portraying injuring as elemental, intimate, and transformative, and it functions, in several respects, as an origin story. Language, first, finds a beginning here, with the agony of the beating registering initially as the most fundamental human noise, a cry, to be followed quickly by more social forms of language and behavior, such as prayer and repression. Stephen is fully in his body, a child experiencing the world largely through the physical intensity of the moment, before more intercultural possibilities are engendered. The word “burning” repeats this reflexive structure. First used to describe the initial attack (“a hot burning stinging tingling blow”), it is quickly transferred to the arm itself (“his crumpled burning livid hand”) and then to the slightly more abstract entity, his pain (“fierce maddening tingling burning pain”); from attack to body to pain, we then reach the social construct of shame (“burning with shame and agony and fear”), in a development that pushes outside of the passage, pointing toward a later culmination in the lengthy and fervid imagining of hell that takes up a great deal of the novel’s middle chapter. Empathy, too, seems born in the beating sequence. Stephen’s tendency to distance himself from his own body, even at the moment of most intense bodily presence (suggested by his sorrow for his maimed hands, “as if they were not his own but someone else’s that he felt sorry for”), may prefigure his later development of an aesthetic theory of detachment, but here provides something like an originating myth for the idea of pity. More, the process of figuration itself leaps forth in the passage, as suggested (p.10) by Joyce’s sudden and rather wild employment of lists of adjectives, many in gerund form (“maddening tingling burning”), and his usage, in the first descriptive paragraph, of back-to-back similes that suggest the most basic natural forces (“like the loud crack of a broken stick,” “like a leaf in the fire”). The representation of injuring thus calls up the initiatory contortions that language makes, its generative propulsion. If irony edges into this scene, with pity tilting toward self-pity or bodily suffering perhaps a hyperbole for nothing more than a slap on the wrist, it nevertheless stays near the margins, as the force of the beating in transforming both language and consciousness is credited with real efficacy. What the passage shows, in fact, is just how far the scene of explicit violence goes in redirecting narrative habits (such as the ironizing of childhood self-importance).
Crucial to the sense of elementary processing in the compressed passage is its handling of time. It is something of a truism that “pain stops time,” that in the experience of pain, the body both crowds out and distorts the sense of time’s passage. Indeed, time, space, and experience all become enfolded and massively intensified in the injuring scenario. In film, we get slow motion; in poetry, the vivid image; in narrative, subjective intensification (and all of these in the passage from Portrait). This sense that chronology is altered by violence is not solely a matter of pain, moreover, for the experiencing of violence can occur in time-stopping brilliance even when physical sensation has been numbed or delayed. Time stands still; the present enlarges; these basic features of violence and representation are supplemented, in many instances, by the compulsion to think back to the moment of infliction. The violent encounter in this sense conjures narrative, demanding that one return, at least imaginatively, to the event at the time of its inception and to the interior life of the person in contact with a destructive agent. In trauma, one of the psyche’s mechanisms for accommodating violence at the breaking point, temporality is massively skewed, with the past disrupting the present—the past indeed manifesting as presence—or disappearing altogether, and hence therapeutically inviting a return to the violent incident itself. Whether from inside or outside of the violent situation, to be confronted with the body’s radical suffering is to force the imagination back to the moment of injury, to read time empathetically. For Joyce, in the pandying passage, this imperative is resolutely met, for the beating is presented moment by moment, in a tightly packed narrative sequencing. We as readers are there, we register the sensations as they come, we are asked to feel alongside the young boy. Indeed, this reading of time as precise and affectively construed contrasts with other passages in the early portions of Portrait, which present themselves via disjointed impressions or in dreamlike ambiguity. As if to remind us that the sequence has a special temporal status, the beating is bracketed, (p. 11) near the beginning and end, by the phrases “for a moment” and “all in a moment.” The beating sequence thus marks itself out specifically as a scene, something excerptable in time and space. And that, too, is representative of a broader pattern: the portrayal of violence lends itself to the model of tableau, the moment that stands apart, jolted out from the literary frame.
In addition to reflecting on violence as a site of origins, and as an experience in and of time, the passage offers a strong statement about the intertwining of intimacy and injuring. The disembodied prefect of studies stands as an image of almost pure power—a voice, a sleeve—and yet this disembodiment is not complete, for the single feature that most compels and confuses Stephen is the steady touch of the man’s hand before each hit. That touch would seem to represent his humanity, a breaching of the distance between the two people, yet it also suggests the reverse, his ability to distance himself enough from Stephen to carry out the punishment without so much as a flinch. As with the emphasis on origins, the sensation here is one of discovery, as Stephen puzzles out in physical terms what might ultimately be generalized as a universal structure of power. If the tactile exchange of hands has historically and mythologically been figured as a source of healing and creation, as in Genesis or the Christian Gospels, it is inevitable that within the religious frame, the proximation of touch with violence shocks and resonates in part because of its harsh contrast with these traditions of (re)generation via divine touch. In the pandying sequence, that history is certainly suggested, for the priest’s touch, metonymically tied to Jesus’s own, is distorted from healing to injuring. The feel of the prefect’s hand is significant as a matter of political or theological ambiguity, and it also registers in its own right, part of the sensorium activated by the attack. People might touch one another across a spectrum from violence to caress, and if these forms of touch at times are clearly separated by motive and effect, at other times they overlap and intertwine.

Equally salient to the personalized quality of the pandying episode is the way it reads as a parable of power. On one hand, Joyce gives us a description of subjective, individual pain, in the form of Stephen’s experience of victimization and physical hurt; on the other hand, it is all but impossible to read the sequence outside of a structure like allegory. The hierarchical configuration is decisive: priest and student, adult and child, punisher and victim, oppressor and oppressed, even colonizer and colonized, given Joyce’s figuring, in Portrait, of the church as a colonizing power in Ireland, a predecessor and (perhaps counterintuitively) a companion to the domination by the British. If the prefect makes himself known by shouts and blows, Stephen presents a picture of subjection, with his stammering, ineffectual whine, his physical acts of kneeling or raising hands, and his self-understanding in terms of almost pure feeling. The stress, moreover, on uniformity, in the form of the twice-appearing soutane sleeve, reinforces the idea that this performance can seem to move horizontally beyond the walls of Clongowes to Ireland more generally, and vertically back in time to the endless list of historical settings when power has been abused.
Here, then, is a critical point about literary representations of violence during the modernist period: they have a tendency to move in two opposing directions—toward the private, subjective, and personal, rooted in the body, with an emphasis on elemental experience and originary cultural constructions; and toward the representative, where larger, often political readings are invited. For all their divergence, these expressions are often engendered together, and, in fact, constitute in their mutuality one of modernism’s primary insights about violence. Violence is, almost axiomatically, a site of excess; to experience violence in any register is to reckon with overflow—of pain, of bodily suffering, of helplessness, of sadism, of silence. In the literature of modernism, this quality of excess can be seen as a provocation, that which invites literary innovation, even if, in the end, there remains a strong sense that something—or everything?—has eluded capture. It is telling, in fact, how close these paradigms around violence are to modernism’s generalized statements about its mission, whether Woolf denominating her cohort as those who chase down the elusive quantity she calls “life” (“Modern Fiction”) or Eliot, in scripting the spatio-sensory dimensions of modernity, enjoining the contemporary writer to “force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning” (“The Metaphysical Poets”). Such manifestos never mention violence—in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” Woolf hammers the point home by setting the date when human character changed well before the war—yet they envision a literary endeavor that could be redescribed in terms of the encounter with violence: that most essential and urgent of all quantities, there in the world in an intensely affective and real sense, a subject calling forth experiment, something that will never be mastered.
Modernism was not unique in suturing the interior experience of violence to its larger social meanings, but it did so with a special vigor and urgency; and such constructions make sense within its output, for the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries mark a signal moment in the ascendance of formal representations of subjective vision, at the same time that this was an historical epoch marred by events of spectacular violence. In other words, what made these years particularly ripe for a rich and significant exploration of violence was the conjunction of two phenomena. There was, first, the hallmark modernist imperative to take subjective experience seriously, comprised, for instance, of a developing vocabulary of unconscious processes and an expansion of interest in the individual’s private vision. Alongside and contributing to these intellectual and aesthetic developments were the highly visible explosions of violence that virtually define the period, including the First World War and the lead-up to the next, as well as a spate of less expansive but no less savage conflicts across Europe and the colonized world. It is not that there was more violence in the early twentieth century than there had been before—the British nineteenth century is a time of “peace and prosperity” only if we overlook empire, industrialism, and sexual inequality—but that its heightened visibility conjoined with the direction intellectual currents were moving, in such a way as to produce especially layered and dynamic renderings of violence throughout its literary culture.
Introduction

In nineteenth-century British writing, representations of violence tended toward an extensive mode, concerned with wide social forces and meanings. If Romanticism had created and elevated the subjective, interior focus that modernism would inherit (and at times link with bodily suffering), fiction writers later in the nineteenth-century looked to the violence spawned by industrialism as a necessary and appropriate topic for their works. The Victorian novel, with its recurrent ties to an agenda of industrial and urban reform, concerned itself with an array of violent configurations and situations, often making use of conventions of sentiment in concert with its visceral realism. The Dickensian novel was brilliant at displaying the worker’s hurt body—very selectively, to be sure—but especially at deploying that body into a wider story about the structures and spheres of modern social relations. For a host of important English industrial novelists, not only Charles Dickens, but also such varied figures as Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Kingsley, Mrs. Humphrey Ward, and Elizabeth Gaskell, the actual moment of violent infliction—registered in the mind and body—was less important than the wide, rippling ramifications of injuring as a part of the social and industrial context. It is, in other words, the representative qualities of bodily attack that were most avidly embraced as the nineteenth-century novel’s particular arena, and readerly techniques, including the cultivation of such forces as “sympathy,” became crucial features of the novel’s project. To linger on violence was to linger above all on the social problems that created those ills and the appropriate responses that would help to alleviate them.
In the early twentieth century, literature took up violence more directly, as one of its central aesthetic problems, formalizing it in both new and old ways, employing radical innovations alongside ready conventions. One of the most resilient and recurrent figures to which modernist writers turned when considering violence was allegory. Along with less elaborate, related forms such as analogy or parable, allegory would seem an intuitive approach for writing about violence, since its principal utility is to tell a given story without having to engage it directly. The term, as commentators stress, incorporates the premise of breaks and disjunctions (allo- for “other,” agor- for “speaking”); it is a pliant structure for jumping across gaps, for implying large narratives while telling more contained ones, or for constructing rich and surprising connections. This may be why Walter Benjamin came to see allegory almost as constitutive of imaginative writing itself in the modern era. “In it,” as Bainard Cowan writes of Benjamin’s approach, “the world ceases to be purely physical and becomes an aggregation of signs.” My own usage is more narrow and normative than Benjamin’s, and yet it is worth acknowledging from the outset that allegory has a real trenchancy in the modernist period, at least insofar as it is deployed around violence. In this study, allegory emerges with special resonance in several guises, such as in the figure of the house or tree as representative of the nation, or of the woman’s body as site of generativity. Nevertheless, allegory’s premise of distinctiveness among its parallel modes, and of tending to extend these parallels beyond the momentary, are challenged by the very qualities of violence that make allegory attractive in the first place (its excess, its bodily severity, the way it forces private vision into wider narratives and back again). Though allegory has the capacity to suspend several strands of thought and imagination in elegant balance, we will also find that it is liable to collapse, in a burst or shudder or explosion.

Yeats’s “Leda and the Swan” (1923), is especially illuminating in this context, providing a concentrated reflection on the overlapping of the intensive, physical experience of violence and the larger narratives or conclusions this might usher in. Like the pandying passage from Portrait, the poem crystallizes in its fourteen lines many recurrent dynamics common to modernist expressions of violence:

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.
Being so caught up,
(p.15) So mastered by the brute blood of the air;
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?\textsuperscript{22}

The poem takes as its subject the precise moment when literary history and the history of violence become one. There is a specificity of temporality here: in that “sudden blow,” the reverberating instant is isolated, asked to stand “still,” in contrast to the unfurling of slow time out of its consequences (“And Agamemnon dead”). Yeats emphasizes fixity of place, too, with the middle of the poem focused on immobility (the “where” and “there” of lines 8 and 9 concentrating the rape forcefully in the woman’s body). The fact that this reckoning takes shape in terms of relentless questioning—over 50 percent of the poem is bundled into question form, an exceptional situation even for Yeats, whose poems are filled with memorable questions—suggests that there is something inconclusive and open-ended about this collapsing of categories. And yet, one thing is clear from the start: in the sudden blow of the opening, an iconographic narrative of divine metamorphosis, detached from the world by its mythological setting, is envisioned as a real rape, the victim a helpless, staggering girl. At the same time, Yeats rejects a pure distinction between the masterful “brute blood of the air” and the disempowered rape victim. With grammatical uncertainties such as the identity of the “strange heart,” an ambiguity about what the “shudder in the loins” implies about Leda’s own sexual pleasure, and in the final question of whether and how she becomes empowered before being dropped, the poem suggests that power can be distributed in surprising, counterintuitive ways. The greater the import, perhaps, the less likely it will be that power will be meted out in strict dichotomizations.\textsuperscript{23}
There is no “I” in “Leda and the Swan.” Leda’s subjectivity remains dispersed, her story drawn away from itself. To the extent that the poem is ambivalent about Leda’s interiority, it invites allegorical interpretation. Indeed, in this poem, it is only insofar as the subjective vision disappears that there can be allegory. If we follow Edward Said and view Yeats not simply as an Irish national(ist) poet but as a voice of and for decolonization, the last lines in “Leda and the Swan” suggest an allegory of colonized and colonizer in which the nascent power of bloody revenge is embedded in the situation of colonization. The poem envisions a structure of sedimented violence, in which abused power may be shifted, shared, and reapportioned, but never nullified. As time is condensed into the instant of rape, the poem suggests, so might history be viewed as a series of bursts of violence, which, in turn, produce a continuing narrative of brutality, grief, and vengeance, and also, importantly, a continuing sequence of literary and visual art. “Leda and the Swan” (p.16) dramatizes the intertwining of an intensive imagining of a scene of violation—an initiatory moment of vibrant, clarifying violence—with an exceptionally extensive sequencing of future consequence.

“Leda and the Swan” differs in an important respect from the *Portrait* passage, in the sense that its reflection on violence is distanced from the events. It neither is nor wants to be a subjective, personalized account; its interest in the instant of erupting violence is seen through a telescope rather than a microscope. Yet in its positing of an almost ontological connection between violence (rape, war) and the generative literary act (the creation of poetry, the development of iconography and canons), it speaks a related language. In “Leda and the Swan,” Yeats erects a shaky balance between an allegorical style, which submerges Leda’s interiority, and an account of the “sudden blow,” which promises to flood the poem with violent excess. Insofar as that blow inaugurates an idea that the vessels of culture and art are real violated bodies, the poem abandons its allegory and intimates instead a radical form of aesthetic incarnation. Such a mode has been adumbrated by Terrence Des Pres in his influential study on the structure of the Nazi death camps, *The Survivor*. Des Pres notes that at times of the most overwhelming horror, experience itself has the surprising tendency to lean toward the literary. Des Pres’s claim about the overlap between symbolic language and the imperative to catalogue extreme violence is a powerful one:
We might say, then, that in extremity symbolism as symbolism loses its autonomy. Or, what amounts to the same thing, that in this special case everything is felt to be inherently symbolic, intrinsically significant. Either way, meaning no longer exists above and beyond the world; it re-enters concrete experience, becomes immanent and invests each act and moment with urgent depth…. It is as if amid the smoke of burning bodies the great metaphors of world literature were being “acted out” in terrible fact—death and resurrection, damnation and salvation, the whole of spiritual pain and exultation in passage through the soul’s dark night.  

Even if we scale back from the sublimity of horror that is Des Pres’s subject, his argument is resonant: when the body is under tremendous assault or when the task of literature is, in part, to exfoliate an intimate experience of felt violence, representation moves inexorably toward such structures as archetype, which most closely seem to incarnate their content, and away from allegory, where categories must remain intact. It is what Paul Fussell, thinking about landscape and times of day in the battle zones, describes as “a metaphor caught in the act of turning literal.” The stakes for literature spike in this configuration, as if its very definition and sustaining concepts were at issue (as, in some of the writing we will consider, they are). Either literature is going to fall away, seeming trivial and insufficient, or, conversely, it is vigorously going to show its special uses. It is in this scenario of dire severity, faced with the worst, that texts remind us of why we read.

In part to evade such pressures, writers have often adopted indirect representational strategies. One of the most prominent and persistent, from the nineteenth century into the twentieth, substitutes a direct portrayal of violence against people with an analogy, violence against animals. A passage from an influential late-Victorian novel, Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), provides an especially crisp example of how such a strategy works. *The Story of an African Farm* is set in present-day South Africa, and announces itself as centrally about that space and its multiform colonial configurations. The imperial conflicts among European planters are worked out in the novel in the muted language of domestic rivalries and ambitions, and the presence of black Africans is almost entirely erased. Yet there is one salient sequence, which bursts into the novel as if from nowhere, in which an ox is worked to the point of torture by a Dutch overseer, and which asks to be read as a parable of colonial violence:
“He took out his clasp-knife, and ran it into the leg of the trembling ox three times, up to the hilt. Then he put the knife in his pocket, and they took their whips. The oxen’s flanks quivered, and they foamed at the mouth. Straining, they moved the wagon a few feet forward, then stood with bent backs to keep it from sliding back. From the black ox’s nostril foam and blood were streaming on to the ground. It turned its head in its anguish and looked at me with its great starting eyes. It was praying for help in its agony and weakness, and they took their whips again. The creature bellowed out aloud. If there is a God, it was calling to its Maker for help. Then a stream of clear blood burst from both nostrils; it fell on to the ground, and the waggon slipped back.” (narrated in dialogue)27

In this sequence, black Africans are represented by the black ox, and the most brutal and unwarranted violence against them is exposed for the first and last time in the novel. The violently abused colonial body does need to figure into the story of Africa, Schreiner seems to be saying, but it can do so only through the figure of representative suffering. Here is one more use that animals provide: representationally, their bodies take the place of their human counterparts. It may have seemed untenable to ask her middle-class English audience to read about the routine violence to black human bodies that sustained the empire, but Schreiner is counting on a reader who has the facility to segue into an allegorical mode, and who is, in effect, ready to “see” black Africans by suggestion, if not directly. The strategy is to project an extended and gruesome descriptiveness onto a being recognized as having no human subjectivity (hence both pain and responsibility are, in a sense, located in the reader). The awkwardness of having the ox call on God for help, however, indicates a problem for this stylistic, since it simultaneously requires that the animal seem human and, at the same time, remain obviously and significantly nonhuman. In the twentieth century, this symbolic or substitutive model became increasingly tenuous, especially in the colonial context, largely because the subjected people in question refused to stay silent and invisible, even in the most westernized accounts. We might think of Heart of Darkness (1902)—hardly a paragon of humanist empathy, yet in it black African slaves stare pointedly at Marlow; they are not given a voice, but neither can they be easily allegorized.
The decision, however, to consider human violence by way of animal suffering remains a potent literary strategy. It is employed regularly in the modernist period, and the tensions that surround it are emblematic of the equivocal place of animals in the ethical imagination of these years, but also, more centrally for this inquiry, of the uncertainty about the meaning, value, and consequences of displaying any kind of violence in literary works. The early twentieth century, like our own era, evinced an interest in animal suffering that at times (but only at times) was portrayed as urgent in its own right. Examples of such ambivalence abound, including in the ubiquitous images of horses screaming and writhing in the First World War, or in overdetermined hunting scenes writ as sexualized power spectacles, or in vivid images of food preparation. In many of these, it remains unclear whether the text is ready to pose the kind of searching ethical questions that such contemporary writers as J. M. Coetzee explore, including a self-reflexivity about whether representing animals as stand-ins for humans is itself an ideologically problematic move, questions currently being pressed in the burgeoning movement of animal studies. At the same time, modernist writers were intensely interested in the limits and edges of human subjectivity, in trying to derive and isolate what makes up our personhood, and in the way the body confronts the forces of modernity, all of which invite comparison to animals. The recurrent and always-mutating theme of cattle in *Ulysses* (1922) is suggestive of such questions, as the prospect of meat eating presses, at times uncomfortably, in multiple textual directions. Even more unsettling is the lengthy and ghastly depiction of a slaughterhouse that punches into the center of Alfred Döblin’s novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929). Döblin’s slaughterhouse—enormous, modern in method, and located uncomfortably adjacent to the novel’s central action—seems itself to define the threshold between industrialization and deep subjectivity, and is notably analogous to the prison that stands in the background of the novel. It seems, in fact, to point simultaneously in two chronological directions—toward an ever more modernized future, which presages awful technologies of killing, and way back to ancient cultures, where killing animals represented a sacred act, central to culture. The animals in the slaughterhouse are systematically managed as if they were in an ordinary factory (or prison), yet their living-ness everywhere intervenes, not only with their streaming blood and insides, but also with their eyes, their trust, their complex behavior. To kill one of them should, the text almost wants to say, be sacramental, whereas instead their vitality sheers against an inhumane killing apparatus, a crossing that is symptomatic of the period, which continually came back to the deadly moment of contact between the mortal, vulnerable body and the forces of modernization.
It is not only the industrial qualities of the slaughterhouse, moreover, that make it an exemplary locus for considering violence; to see the animals killed there is to be forced to think about all forms of physical violation, in a novel that catalogues terrible physical calamities of violence and abuse. Clearly, Döblin wants us to reflect upon the connection between humans and animals. Thus the chapter subject headings say things like “For it happens alike with Man and Beast; as the Beast dies, so Man dies, too” (borrowing from Ecclesiastes), and the novel analogizes the slaughter of a calf with the murder of a young woman. Just as clearly, the slaughterhouse sequence seems to evade that rubric, as comparison shrinks away and the sheer horror of the treatment of the animals becomes its own study. The spectacle, moreover, has an uncomfortable resilience throughout the novel, felt, for instance, in the presence of cattle dealers, in descriptions of meat eating, in continual tabulations of slaughterhouse inventory, and even in direct revisions of the novel’s own statements of animal-human continuity, so that human loss is presented, finally, as more significant than the suffering of an animal. At the center of Döblin’s novel, indeed, is the question: to what extent can the depiction of awful violence against animals be representative of anything other than itself, and, if we do press it to function allegorically, what kind of story can it tell? Such a basic question—which touches on the issue of how, exactly, one can represent violence of any sort without compromising the literary work—emphasizes the ethical discomfort lurking beneath all of these formal choices for figuring violence. If literature cannot avoid representing violence, if, in fact, it gains power and momentum from its intimacy with the violated body, it is also, in some essential way, haunted, stained, and defaced by that very reliance.

(p.20) Power, Force, Political Violence
Violence is a broad and encompassing term, necessarily and importantly so. It involves two basic features, an agent of attack, precipitating the injury or violation; and a person or object on the receiving end of that attack, whose bodily surface is in some way overcome, hurt, trespassed, ruptured. Both parts of this equation warrant appreciation, as in the *OED*'s definition, which has, as its first sense, “the exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on, or cause damage to, persons or property; action or conduct characterized by this; treatment or usage tending to cause bodily injury or forcibly interfering with personal freedom.” The word carries with it suggestions of will and intention (“so as to inflict,” “forcibly interfering”), as if to demand that one never lose sight of there being a driver, one person’s will and body actively impinging on another’s. In my readings, I will consider the agent’s “exercise of physical force,” but especially will emphasize the experience or imagining of finding the body (one’s own or someone else’s) in the force field of aggression. If the body is absolutely central in this arena of compulsion and contact, there is, nevertheless, a primary slide in the *OED* definition from bodily injury to the possible loss of “personal freedom,” also subject to offense and disruption in the most basic sense, and this extension of the body to person is a constant presence in the imagination of violence. The concept of “violation” is thus fully allied with the primary term “violence,” the two obviously linked at the etymological level. What “violation” adds is a reminder that to have the body penetrated is to have the personal integrity also breached and defiled, so that the healing of an external wound in no way entails the healing of an internal one. Instead, these connections between external wounds and internal consequences call attention to the endlessly recursive nature of dualism; in the violent scenario, when the separation of body and mind seems most essential, it also becomes exceptionally fragile. The premise of the violence/violation interaction, that is, also suggests the underpinnings of psychological trauma. One of the effects of violence that most resonated for modernism, trauma, by definition, assumes a fluidity across seemingly divergent and exclusive spheres.
Because the range, sweep, and import of violence vary enormously, one large question will always be to what extent violent incidents can or should be understood in political terms. The intensive focus often seems a private affair, isolating the sufferer in her body and resonating as a moment of origins. And yet, since at least the nineteenth century, violence has been understood and registered as an ineluctable aspect of industrial modernity. To seek the social and economic underpinnings of capitalist culture is to find endemic violence, and vice versa. Indeed, for (p.21) contemporary theorists, violence is almost always political, and demands to be analyzed in terms of the unequal differentials of power it manifests. Thus a recent work by Judith Butler, to take just one very compelling meditation on violence, in a post-9/11 mood, begins with the evocative idea that the body’s vulnerability to violence makes for a mimetic empathy among people, and an ethics of mutuality: “To be injured means that one has the chance to reflect upon injury ... to find out who else suffers from permeable borders, unexpected violence, dispossession, and fear.”

Butler is searching and sensitive to the interior aspects of violence, which she names “precarious life,” and which she sees, in terms akin to those of Scarry, as revealing something irreducible about humanity. Nevertheless, for her, as for most political theorists, the overarching issue is always power. Whether considered by nation, class, race, wealth, gender, governing regime, or otherwise, the big question is how power is apportioned and wielded, what kinds of inequities it metes out, how violence is used or spared, by and against whom, in the name of what agent, ideology, or system of dominance. Beneath and in dialogue with these expansive questions of power are two slightly narrower rubrics, which will be important in the chapters that follow: political violence (named as such) and the concept of “force.”
If all violence is political, then the hybrid “political violence” cannot be very meaningful, but there are, of course, forms of violence that are perpetrated explicitly and directly for political purposes, and these carry especially severe and polarizing connotations. The deploying of violence as an expressly political act transforms its character and valuation, pointing toward such contradictory possibilities as sanctification, atrocity, neutralization, and sensationalism. To attach violence to political philosophy is to heighten its status, prestige, and danger, at times to mitigate its illegality, or conversely to enhance its outrageousness and invite legal excess. For their part, radical political movements across the spectrum have always relied on the appeal of their ideological claims to transform the reception of violence from the criminal to the exalted, from the exclusionary act that ostracizes a person to gloriable sacrifice that heroizes its protagonist. And normative culture reacts in tandem, fearing and demonizing terrorism with special fervor. Political violence is notable, too, for its implications about language, since its defining feature is the idea that violence is a potent form of political expression. Violence, in that sense, becomes its own kind of language, and a host of terminology is called upon to describe this relationship: acts of terrorism can be seen as statements of belief or creed, threats of future violence as messages written in bodies and blood. Such metaphors were undoubtedly at the back of the composer Karlheinz Stockhausen’s notorious comment, several weeks after 9/11, when he described the attack on the World Trade Center as representing “the greatest work of art that is possible in the whole cosmos.” As the response to Stockhausen’s comments reminds us, the idea that there could be any relation between horrendous violence and aesthetics, or any kind of willed and serious meaning-making in such atrocities, is, for most people, entirely heinous and unthinkable. The issue is not solely about ethics; rather, as modernists repeatedly suggest, to set violence next to political meaning, in the hope of a clear alliance, is to invite a focus specifically on that impossible conjunction, on what, for most onlookers, will be a gap rather than a continuity. In other words, the expressive quality of political violence makes it compelling to literature largely for its failure to work coherently. Political violence becomes literary just when its meanings and uses cannot be aligned with its concrete, material effects. For Conrad and Yeats, in particular, when politics inflicts itself on the physical being, a reactive force is generated, as political meaning is thrust outward and rendered unreal. In considering political violence, then, modernists find an exemplification or hyperbolization of a more general phenomenon that drives their inquiry, the sense that literature has as one of its defining features the encounter with forces of extremity and incommensurability. Whatever approach a literary work might take in exploring, countering, or replicating the disproportions inherent in political violence, some disjunction will emerge between the principle of making meaning and the recognition of senselessness.
One term I will use in this study, to delineate an approach to violence and power that takes account of these contradictions and enables a flexible relation to political meaning, is “force.” I am borrowing my idea of force primarily from the pacifist philosopher Simone Weil, who defines force as a kind of superviolence, a sweeping and swirling phenomenon that belongs to no one group or person, and that touches those who wield power as well as those who are its victims. In a celebrated essay on the *Iliad*, Weil thinks about how the violence of war consumes and transforms its universe. When considered through the prism of Homer’s epic, Weil argues, war is force and force is war:

The true hero, the true subject matter, the center of the *Iliad* is force. The force that men wield, the force that subdues men, in the face of which human flesh shrinks back. The human soul 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.

The notion of force is itself sweeping, in a sense matching its content: it wraps together such differing experiences as the lust for combat, the sense of total helplessness in the hands of a merciless enemy, the awe-filled respect that soldiers feel for war’s sheer magnitude, and the close ties that knit together such seeming antagonists as enemy and friend, past and present, combatant and civilian, sword and body. Weil’s essay, written in the summer and fall of 1940, at the outset of the Nazi occupation of France, offers a double perspective on the subject of war, as both a focus of literature—indeed, the very point of origin of the Western canon—and a dark and dominating reality for an ever-increasing swath of the world. For Weil, this doubled point of view amounts to a single insight, for “those wise enough to discern the force at the center of all human history, today as in the past, find in the *Iliad* the most beautiful and flawless of mirrors” (Weil, 45).

What that mirror shows, perhaps more than anything else, is that war turns all its participants, helpless victims as well as ruthless perpetrators, into “things.” “Each, in contact with force, is subjected to its inexorable action, which is to render those it touches either mute or deaf,” she writes, and further: “Such is the character of force. Its power to transform human beings into things is twofold and operates on two fronts; in equal but different ways, it petrifies the souls of those who undergo it and those who ply it” (Weil, 61). Weil’s account of how perpetrator and victim are swept up together into a single phenomenon is deeply problematic as an ethical idea. She can, moreover, be an imperfect reader of Homer, sometimes schematizing or overlooking elements in the *Iliad*’s vision of the intersections among war, humanity, and culture. Nevertheless, she is persuasive in rendering a cycle of terror that promises to make death the ruler over life and in seeing in the vulnerability of humanity a basic feature of existence, connecting the contemporary world with the ancient, and the glamour of the hunt for glory with the drudgery of being a victim:
The force that kills is summary and crude. How much more varied in operation, how much more stunning in effect is that other sort of force, that which does not kill, or rather does not kill just yet. It will kill for a certainty, or it will kill perhaps, or it may merely hang over the being it can kill at any instant; in all cases, it changes the human being into stone. From the power to change a human being into a thing by making him die there comes another power, in its way more momentous, that of making a still living human being into a thing. (Weil, 46)

It is the “other form of force” that most succinctly characterizes the savagery of the fascist regime: the potential for violence defines the state of terror, where the imminent threat of an always ready violence is seared into the consciousness of the populace (privy to previous scenes of terrible violence and understanding the logic of the regime).

Weil’s notion of force approaches an edge, a place which the early-twentieth-century literary imagination loathed to reach, though often enough it touched that (p.24) limit. Such possibilities as a person being reduced to a thing or the recognition of strange intimacies between oppressors and victims (like Stephen and the prefect) are invoked in the period, even before the 1930s, when they became much more widespread, as we will see more fully in the final chapter. It may indeed be that what the reckoning with violence does, and especially the consideration of such dispersed and devastating violence as that of world war, is to showcase and expose the moment when humanness and thing-ness come terribly close, in a proximity that has consequences for any literary work that hopes to encompass it. Force is an entity that corresponds less to any given act or individual than to a broad compulsion with the capacity to constrain, strike, or even annihilate. More generally, force, as I am imagining it, is almost a condition of existence, a way of considering the swell of power that surrounds and can demolish the individual, even as, in some cases, it provides a sense of that individual’s purpose (to resist, to rebel)—or, as Holocaust survivors tell it, to resist or rebel by the bare fact of remaining human. It is, finally, a central insight of this period that, for all the contortions the literary text might make to adapt itself to the violent conditions of the world, raw force will always have the power to squelch and to silence. As 1984’s villain O’Brien puts it, in one of English literature’s grimmest statements, “If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever.”

Confronting War, Imagining History
Weil’s notion of force (like Orwell’s dystopia) is a product of 1930s totalitarianism, but the mass violence that has always defined the era’s literature emerged from the trenches of 1914–18. The First World War was endlessly written and rewritten, even from its outset, and scholars of the period have shown how profoundly the aesthetic culture of modernism was permeated and shaped by its violence. I will discuss some aspects of this relation in the next chapter, where I lay out the model of enchanted and disenchanted violence that I regard as an overarching principle throughout the period, especially keyed to conceptualizing war. Here, in order to clarify and distinguish my approach, I want briefly to mention—and also to qualify—several commonplaces about the period’s aesthetics in relation to the First World War (and war in general). First, readers will readily note that many influential modernists on both sides of the Atlantic glamorized violence and aestheticized its effects. It is a truism that major writers of the period became infatuated with fascism and other forms of authoritarian politics in the 1920s and ’30s (Pound, Eliot, Lewis, Yeats, and Lawrence come immediately to mind, to name (p.25) only a few). Though debates persist over the precise importance of such politics for reading the literary canon, there is little question that an enthrallment with hierarchy, class stratification, and militarism had, already by the first decade of the twentieth century, come to pervade literary circles in England and elsewhere. In avant-garde milieus, from the pages of Wyndham Lewis’s BLAST to the various Futurist manifestoes, bellicose in substance and style, writers eagerly celebrated a virile, often violent masculinism. These were short-lived trends—BLAST with only two numbers and Futurism giving way to and amalgamating with other movements—but they remain useful barometers of the period, illuminating at least one scheme for connecting violence to art: the one imitates and glorifies the other.42 So Marinetti, in the first Futurist Manifesto, proclaimed war to be “the world’s only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman.”43 And BLAST, Lewis’s English answer to the “futurist moment,” to use Marjorie Perloff’s phrase, imagines an aesthetic movement geared to cheer on the artist troops.44 The manifesto, which ran from 1914 to 1915 and comprised polemical pieces, fiction, poetry, and visual images, issued its own clarion call for a violent new aesthetics that would shake up and revitalize the arts. As Lewis wrote in his opening statement, “Blast sets out to be an avenue for all those vivid and violent ideas that could reach the Public in no other way.”45 Even BLAST 2, the so-called War Number, uncomfortably produced in 1915, continued to embrace violence, despite the elegy that tinges its pages (in part owing to the death at war of one of its primary contributors, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska). These statements, moreover, might be projected forward to the fascistic tide that partially engulfed high modernism in the later twenties and thirties, and backward to late-nineteenth-century figures like Nietzsche who had articulated an ethics and aesthetics of violence to be taken up in later years.46
There is nothing in this narrative per se that I want to challenge or correct, but in the chapters that follow, I hope that my consideration of violence will complicate the story. To give just one example, in the years after the war, and especially in the 1930s, the airplane helped to focalize the culture’s contradictory self-understanding with respect to war, violence, and glamorization. If airplanes had seemed in the context of the First World War to line up with the adulatory scheme, its fliers inevitably rendered as the aristocrats of the military, later years would figure both technology and crew as menace. Meanwhile, the idea of flight can be seen as an example of how war ultimately yields to peace, destruction to commerce, the precision of killing to the triumph of human virtuosity. Flight is linked to the imagination, that which, in dark times, might seem to offer an alternative to the morass of competition and war. Ultimately, the airplane is best read as an emblem of the full enmeshment of violence (p.26) and aesthetics, where all its signifiers of beauty, adventure, and dazzling elevation came equally to express violence, fear, and loss. In that sense, it exemplifies what I will be arguing more generally in this book, that violence in modernism is so deeply embedded as to function almost as the literary itself—like the wave in Woolf’s writing or the swallow in The Waste Land, images of the accrual of meaning, inseparable from the violence they both represent and beautify.

In addition to the general dictum that modernists had a regrettable tendency to worship violence is another (contrasting) critical truism, also instructive as a point of departure: that the catastrophe of the First World War, with its shattering and disillusioning qualities, helped to create a modernism that stands, in part, as an aesthetic refutation of war. As with fascistic modernism, the varied elements that fall under this rubric are well known. They include questions of literary form—disjunctiveness, fragmentation, lapses, and breaks—and also of individual and cultural experience, reactions to violence like alienation and trauma, embitterment, loss of belief in the governing narratives of Western culture. As Paul Fussell summed it up in The Great War and Modern Memory, still the canonical statement of the war’s role in shaping the modern imagination: “I am saying that there seems to be one dominating form of modern understanding; that it is essentially ironic; and that it originates largely in the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War.”47 Fussell of course left off the “ist” in his title, and part of the power of his analysis comes from its eliding of distinctions between specifically literary responses to the war and a larger, more encompassing shift in sensibility that invites the term “modern.” And certainly there is nothing automatic or truistic about the mutuality of artistic engagements with historical events and the shifts in consciousness that come to constitute an episteme. Thus Margot Norris opens a study of war and twentieth-century literature with an initial skepticism about such conjunctions: “Looking back at the twentieth century, we might at first be struck by the incommensurability of two of its hallmarks: modern mass warfare
and innovative art. Still, as Norris and many others have found, the intimate relationship of the war to the modernists who wrote in its wake remains an extremely compelling combination. It is, however, not a determining one, with the richest violence stories of this period only partially comprehended by the most familiar narratives linking the war and modernism. In this study, we will find overlaps and congruencies between the violence of war and other historical events of the period, and these relations might stimulate a critique of some general assumptions about whether and how the war set the terms for both modernism and modernity. Irish works of these years, for instance, fit only uneasily into the scheme, given that the war functioned for many Irish people not only as a spectacle of unimaginable (p. 27) violence but also as a wedge issue in the independence struggle. Irish writers were hard at work constructing a specific thematic of blood and power; the war intersected, intervened, contradicted, intruded. Or, to look in a different direction, if we assume that the devastating violence of explosion is primarily a matter of the First World War, how do we approach the many novels about radical bombers that pervaded the popular literary scene in the thirty years that preceded the war? It is undeniable that the literary output of these years was influenced by the war’s cataclysm of violence, with its terrible legacy on bodies, landscapes, and the intellectual and spiritual life of the West, and yet it may also be that the war worked too well as an event from which myriad art forms could draw their defining strategies; its very extravagance of violence and destruction lent itself to schemes of aesthetic assimilation in such a manner as to virtually ensure canonization in such terms. The war provided a common language of literary violence, yet it need not be taken as a totalizing one.
The subject of shell shock illuminates how accepted narratives about war and modernity can be fruitful, but also incomplete. A term first coined in 1915 and quickly enshrined in both medical and lay vocabulary, shell shock represents the prototypical injury from the First World War and one of the most persistent symbols of psychic modernity. The image of contemporary consciousness suggested by shell shock is characterized by a severe rupturing in time, space, and personal memory, and the shell-shocked former soldier becomes a kind of tortured hero for modernism’s particular theater. A threshold figure, he suggests many antinomies, such as protest and capitulation, silence and reconstituted language, destruction and tenuous rehabilitation. To name just a few of the many prominent literary examples, Woolf’s Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway* exemplifies the shell-shock victim, a “last relic straying on the edge of the world, this outcast, who gazed back at the inhabited regions, who lay, like a drowned sailor, on the shore of the world,” as does Captain Herbertson in Lawrence’s *Aaron’s Rod*, a former officer whose obsessive, panicked urge to relive the war dominates and drives him, unleashing “a hot, blind, mesmerized voice, going on and on, mesmerized by a vision that the soul cannot bear.” Or, there is Chris Baldry, the protagonist of Rebecca West’s 1918 novella *The Return of the Soldier*, whose war injury is an extreme amnesia. The war, whose slaughter appears in the brief imagined glimpses of its female narrator, comes home instead as a matter of psychic creativity and resistance, and Chris, in refusing his wife and with her the entire class structure, embodies a type of romantic hero. In addition to such canonical embodiments, shell shock entered countless other works, fictional, poetic, scientific, political, and journalistic. In all of these cases where the shell-shocked man becomes an embodiment and focal point of war, the structure is one of displacement—from the violence itself to its psychic residue or internalization. If one of the key aspects of violence in literary modernism will be its insistence that we be there, at the moment, shell shock represents an entirely different temporal schema, where the past constantly invades the present, distorting both, and where any access to the moment of violence is made tenuous.
The traumatic structure of shell shock lends itself to a particular temporal prism, and there are other leanings and occlusions that follow its dominance in the critical imagination. One involves physical injury, a whole landscape of wounded bodies that were every bit as problematic for the culture of postwar England, every bit as unhinging of expectations and comfortable commonplaces, as the troubled minds that are so often invoked and fetishized. In the years following the war, physical injury was an utterly ubiquitous phenomenon, as men with a huge array of often horrifying physical ailments, from blindness to amputation to tuberculosis, pervaded the civilian scene, often straying from such seemingly contained locations as hospitals and asylums, and unsettling basic categories such as old/young, masculine/feminine, and broken/whole. And yet, one might read many works of modernism, as well as the critical record since midcentury, without understanding the extent of postwar injury—how striking it is that Woolf, who rendered the war so richly throughout her work, includes no physically injured First World War combatants in her novels. In fact, it may be that the injured survivors of all modern wars create uniquely disturbing problems for their cultures, provoking issues from memorialization, to reparation, to civilian responsibility, to the nature of warfare itself. One could press further, to argue that the emphasis on mental breakdown can be seen as part of a contest over who will, in effect, be in control of the enormous fund of cultural affect generated by the war’s pain. The transformation of the war’s physical destructiveness to an event primarily of the mind shifts those imaginative artists whose special purview is the interior life to the forefront as the appropriate figures to narrate, conceptualize, and reconfigure the war for an ongoing civilian readership. The issue here is not that one form of representation (that which stresses the body’s harm) is better or more truthful than another (that which refigures it), but rather to notice the dominance of any overarching story, in this case the shell-shock canonization. In this study, I would have us see shell shock in a kind of shadow game with other strategies for understanding, internalizing, and formalizing violence; its codification of one mode—personification—offers a special insight and visibility, abutting and at times concealing other representational principles.
Another example of how critical assumptions about the war both enable and inhibit an understanding of violence in the period’s literary history relates to the war’s technological innovations. The technologies that developed around the war for many years held a special place in the cultural imaginary. The Victorians had thoroughly exposed the industrialism of their era as a killing and injuring machine, but these were not willful forms of attack (an obvious point, perhaps: one might create or operate a machine with callous indifference to human life, but one designs a bomb in order to kill people). It was the deliberate, scientific nature of war violence that most engaged the public imagination in the early decades of the twentieth century, when wars smashed back into the sphere of British consciousness after the relative quiet of half a century. If the ideal of scientific detachment could, by 1914, rest on very stable ground, the war brought to the fore an image of science gone catastrophically wrong. Foremost, of course, were the technologies of attack, whether in the form of mustard gas, machine guns, artillery, or the impressive hardware of tanks and airplanes, some of which would soon make their way into civilian life. The procedures of propaganda and organization for such a massive effort as the First World War were equally impressive, involving not only conscription but the creation of a busy arm of government dedicated to sending out clear messages and stimulating enthusiasm, as well as the legal means to repress dissent. If technology could seem to have turned monstrous, however, the technologies marshaled in the name of curing promised a return to humaneness, especially with the much-publicized development of prosthetics and other medical devices for the badly wounded. Finally, efforts to record war, especially photography and film, added to the range of innovations that surrounded the war from its beginnings to well past its end. Literary and cultural critics of the war have approached many of these topics, showing, to give a few heterogeneous examples, how an innovation like the tank was imagined, during the war years, as a symbol of both combatant and civilian participation, how the reach of the state via its various legal and propagandistic arms entered and shaped public life, in some cases continuing on after the war had ended, and how the resonance of photography came to influence the very grammar of many writers in the period, including those (like Eliot) who would not seem its most likely champions.
At the same time, I would call attention to one feature I have discovered over the course of my readings: that in the face of violence, modern technology has a tendency to bind itself to the most primitive forms for hurting people. So in the war, it was as much the bayonet as chlorine gas that captured the public imagination as a symbol of the war’s ferocity and barbarism. In fact, given how fundamentally disorienting and disillusioning the shift to modern, mass warfare was, for both combatants and civilians, it is especially notable and surprising that the atavistic image of one man bayoneting another became a gripping and defining image (p.30) of brutality throughout the period. Similarly, in the case of anarchist explosion, if the technology of the dynamite bomb seized the interest of radicals and conservatives alike, its effects tended to be juxtaposed, in many kinds of texts and reports, against the least advanced forms of technology, like the ditch or shovel. As Jean Rhys has it in Wide Sargasso Sea, catching the modernist moment with precision, the ultimate weapon can be nothing more sophisticated than thick walls and a heavy lock. In short, I am attempting, in thinking about violence and literature over the course of this study, to show that alongside the biggest stories that evolved from the war—an event that was unique for the extreme and blinding visibility of its destruction—there are other important patterns flourishing in darker cultural recesses. The violence of war was spectacular and unavoidable, and postwar culture in many ways came to define itself in and around its slaughter, taking itself to task. One key point I will be arguing about modernism, however, is that this spectacular quality is not so much a given in the period as the subject of literary effort. The extremity of visible violence is in many cases the generating fact behind modernism’s portrayals of indeterminacy, and the reverse is also true: such violence embodies and makes spectacular a set of formal principles and modes of consciousness that were gaining steam in other contexts as well.
An equally important model of understanding violence in historical terms might be found under a rubric nearly oppositional to that of modernism and war: silence and dispersal. Rather than be confronted with the trenches that, in some grim way, culminated nineteenth-century culture in the West, this alternate paradigm reminds us of the many, many cases, in the present as in the past, where violence stays hidden. If we want to see it, we will have to know where to look. “The village was called Nyaunglebin,” the narrator of George Orwell’s *Burmese Days* (1934) says, “‘the four peepul trees’; there were no peepul trees there now, probably they had been cut down and forgotten a century ago.” A passing reference, this language is significant for the way it strikes off into a different historical imagining from the narrative of visible violence that war and empire display, including the contemporary imperial situation Orwell’s novel depicts—one thinks here of Rob Nixon’s ecological concept of “slow violence”.

The town’s defining linguistic feature, the pipal trees have been removed, victims, perhaps, of the developing timber industry, that which drew the British to Burma in the first place and their engine of profit there at the time of the novel’s publication. Or perhaps they were cut down in order to build the village, the founding strike against the environment that defines human culture. Whatever the story—whether it is part of the universal narrative of human relations to their surroundings or an early passage in the depredation of the East by a greedy, violent West, which Orwell’s novel ruthlessly exposes (p.31) for the unvarnished hatred that drives it—all of that is long gone, and instead we have only an echo, a name that both holds and lets go of its history. And we might add: the word “pipal” (or the earlier “peepul”) reads phonetically as “people,” again raising the question of allegory—are these trees supposed to be telling a story about violence against people, here the Burmese? (And Orwell’s resonance goes further, though he may not have intended it, in that “pipal” is another name for the bo tree, under which the Buddha is said to have found enlightenment.) It is, of course, inherent in Western accounts of empire that it credits no history—or only distorted history—to the rest of the world, and, conversely, that it imagines the imperial domains as having access to a primordial past that the civilized West has long superseded. Orwell debunks all such logic in his novel, suggesting, rather, that the violence of empire corresponds and cooperates with other, indigenous forces. The British, too, leave names behind; perhaps we are to see these, from the perspective of some vague future (a century or so forward in time), as equivalent to the pipal trees as markers of a violent incursion that one day will be forgotten, to require translation and reimagining.
In *Burmese Days*, history is not really the focus, but other works of the modernist period dwell insistently and movingly on history and violence, and the model of an erased violent past, which nevertheless leaves its markers, held a central place in the imagination of these years.\(^6^2\) We might generalize the motif, since it is a structure of understanding and naming with persistent application: in the past, a grove of trees grew here; I or my ancestors cut down those trees in order to build our house, create roads, or cultivate the land for agriculture; we named the street for those vanished trees, “Elm.” The process is one that has been noted, particularly in the American context, where the culture constructs its present and future through acts of obliteration and forgetting, but also by preserving myths of the previous (comparatively pristine) condition.\(^6^3\) Such preservation can be as minute as the embalmed trace of the street name, a small kernel or stunted narrative primed to resurrect a large history. Destruction, clearly, is at the core of the process. As Dominick LaCapra puts it, “The foundation of a polity as well as of a personality is often traced to some violent, traumatic, transgressive, often sacralized or ‘sublimated,’ event that is presumed to mark a turning point or rupture in history and the instauration of a new era.”\(^6^4\) With the clearing of land, this need not be understood as violent—through much of history, on the contrary, the transformation of the land for human use has been seen as a definitively humane act, often a sacred one.\(^6^5\) Nevertheless, as the early twentieth century had begun to see, the first strike against the land often sets in motion an exploitative and expropriative process underpinned by violence and inequality. Most grotesquely, what can be at stake in all (p.32) of this is the elimination of people, even populations. Philip Fisher calls these “hard facts,” and sees in them a dynamic of visibility and invisibility at the heart of American literary culture.\(^6^6\) In British works, where the configurations differ markedly, in part because national origins are not at issue in the same way, the pattern nevertheless has significant life, often (though not exclusively) in the colonial context. One paradigm that frequently emerges in British literature involves this emphasis on trace over narrative, with broken signals and symbols of a never quite vanished tale of violence taking the place of fuller narratives or visual representations. One thinks of Ian Baucom’s spellbinding depiction of the horrendous violence of the late-eighteenth-century massacre of slaves on the slave ship *Zong* as inaugurating and emblematizing what Baucom argues is the political unconscious of the “long twentieth century.”\(^6^7\) Such partiality accords, too, with what Mary Favret has described as the attenuated, dispersed condition of “wartime,” a quality of life and feeling in nineteenth-century Britain, where war is experienced as distance, something sensed but not known, a shadowy film never brought into distinct focus.\(^6^8\)
Shedding light on and epitomizing the pattern in the twentieth century is a work written several decades after the modernist period yet very much in dialogue with it, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Rhys’s great novel has a complicated relationship of belatedness, critique, and overlap with the modernism that defined much of her career. There can be no circumventing of historical responsibility in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which, like its characters, is obsessed with the erasures and distortions of history, where slave-owners who have raped untold black women can become church-sanctioned gentlemen, where individual and family pasts are continually invoked as secrets to be decoded (and hotly disputed), where ancestry is figured as determinism—some truth always lurking in the blood—and, above all, where slavery is the one institution the English do not want to acknowledge as a part of their own ugly past. In four short passages, Rhys gives the motif concrete form, creating a model for reading not only *Wide Sargasso Sea* but the literature of its recent past—modernism—which is one of the novel’s primary alter egos and intertexts and about which Rhys is particularly astute:

I looked at the sad leaning cocoanut palms, the fishing boats drawn up on the shingly beach, the uneven row of whitewashed huts, and asked the name of the village.

“Massacre.”

“And who was massacred here? Slaves?”

“Oh no.” She sounded shocked. “Not slaves. Something must have happened a long time ago. Nobody remembers now.” (Rhys, 65–66)

(p.33) “If this is a sad story, don’t tell it to me tonight.”

“It is not sad,” she said. “Only some things happen and are there for always even though you forget why or when. It was in that little bedroom.” (Rhys, 82)

Next morning there would be very little sign of these showers. If some of the flowers were battered, the others smelt sweeter, the air was bluer and sparkling fresh. Only the clay path outside my window was muddy. Little shallow pools of water glinted in the hot sun, red earth does not dry quickly. (Rhys, 94–95)

I said, “There was a road here once, where did it lead to?”

“No road,” he said.

“But I saw it. A pavé road like the French made in the islands.”

“No road.”
“Who lived in that house?”

“They say a priest. Père Lilièvre. He lived here a long time ago.”

“A child passed,” I said. “She seemed very frightened when she saw me. Is there something wrong about the place?” He shrugged his shoulders.

“Is there a ghost, a zombi there?” I persisted.

“Don’t know nothing about all that foolishness.”

“There was a road here sometime.”

“No road,” he repeated obstinately. (Rhys, 105–6)
Taken together, the passages offer a complete picture of the paradigm, where violent pasts are figured as severed, ambiguous narratives, and unseen forces invisibly direct and determine the traumas of the present. The violent deeds that define this novel’s past (of which there are an almost infinite number) are erased and unavailable, even as they are compulsively reconjured. They exist somewhere between remembering and forgetting, like the zombie itself, which epitomizes many thresholds—living and dead, past and present, real and imagined, Africa and the Caribbean. What we know, what we remember, what we can imagine, what we deduce, what we infer: all these operations of mind confront and circle the gaps that violence creates and upholds. In the case of the Massacre sequence, Rhys offers a darker and more insidious version of what is found in Orwell: the foundational actions of the past have been obscured, but they have enough presence to unsettle the present, creating an aura of threat and incipience. To name a town “Massacre” is to make explicit what “Elm” (or “Nyaunglebin”) evades, yet there is no shared, communal memory—much less official historical accounting—to give these landmarks the power to shame, or to revive, or to enforce. Such remnants (p.34) might seem ready to tell buried stories, but they also call attention to the blunt reality that, in the 1840s when the novel is set, no one was accounting for the murder of slaves. The issue of raw colonial power is even more at stake in the road/no-road dialogue, a typically modernist sequence of echoing and redundancy, which also aligns with the novel’s larger portrayal of miscommunication between people. The road and shrine signify control of the island, whether by French priests, local people (a heterogeneous group), or the English patriarchs who make it their business, first and foremost, to know what happened where. These are social facts, but the passages equally characterize the individual experience (“it was in that little bedroom”), and, moreover, seem agnostic as to speaker or narrative perspective; from the most noxious to the most sympathetic character, the historical pattern persists. And yet, if these broken narratives signal the continuity and reinvigoration of violence in the present, beauty also clings to them, at least in places. The pools and flowers are refreshed, sweet smelling, and all the passages have something lyrical about them, a refrain-like quality that reads almost as poetry.
What makes Wide Sargasso Sea (a novel that was finally published in 1966) so resonant for the study of violence in the modernist period is that in the end, Rhys reveals modernism’s own violence protocols as much as she does the Victorian era’s, which, via her rewriting of Brontë, has always seemed the most prominent subject of literary critique. Modernism, in fact, might be said to function like those other severed narratives, its presence implicit as the trace of some brutal history. Unlike Jane Eyre, which becomes known through plot and character cues, modernism is there as form. Its signature technique—stream of consciousness—acts in the novel as another mode of imprisonment, aligned with all the other forces that Rhys has shown to lock women up: slavery, patriarchy, silencing. Or rather, modernist form functions paradoxically in Wide Sargasso Sea, as the only recourse left to the utterly exploited and isolated Antoinette, even as it lays the final nail in her psychic coffin. Rhys had been incubating this perception about modernism for decades, with her 1920s novels portraying their numbed and brutalized heroines as victims of a cosmopolitan aesthetic whose humanity has been fully leached. But it took another four decades, during which the nature of colonial violence became increasingly potent in her understanding, for the critique to become historicized.

In the wake of anti- and postcolonial consciousness, the paths of history come to seem rutted with shell holes; to think historically requires that a partially covered road, a single word, or even a sparkling flower petal be reinvested with its violent past. In the first decades of the twentieth century, writers were beginning to imagine the world in these terms, though the episodes are more partial, the indictment more ambivalent, and the element of beauty more pronounced. When (p.35) set next to the dramatic aesthetic culture of the war, this structure of excavation and partial rediscovery looks especially lean and ambiguous, well cued to the modernist temperament. Or perhaps it is most useful to see the war’s hyperbolic slaughter and the erased violence of the longer past as establishing two poles of historical imagining in this period, both of which provoked new and sophisticated systems for formalizing violence. Whether spectacular and undeniable or silent and resilient, violence demanded that a new language be forged to acknowledge, express, and embody it.

Chapters
At the Violet Hour is premised on the notion that very specific material conditions will always shape the literary work, and that such conditions are not only historical but generic; hence the chapters look at violent situations in the context of a panoply of written and visual materials, many with popular appeal, all of which, in turn, comprise the world of the modernist text. Despite heterogeneous historical contexts, these interactions produce some repeated patterns. In each chapter, I trace the generic surround (including popular novels, political polemics, and journalism); in each, there are moments when modernist works seem to hit their stride in the formalizing of violence; and each ends with the suggestion of an indefinite futurity, as the story of violence rampages onward into a future that is almost inevitably rendered in precarious terms. The four chapters are not entirely parallel in structure, however. The first develops a theoretical paradigm for the rest of the book, to be followed by three historical chapters, each of which presents a case study in the material history of violence, structured according to the particular logics of violence at hand. Thus with anarchism, the historical readings center on a set of preoccupations that emerged in late-Victorian culture, attentive to such phenomena as sensationalism and the appeal of melodrama, while the chapter on Ireland weaves through four distinctive modes for considering violence, following the events on the ground in the period around the Rising, and the final chapter builds an expansive political and cultural history into a reading of Woolf’s novels. I conclude with a short coda pointing toward developments later in the century.

The first chapter sets up the dichotomizing paradigm of enchanted and disenchanted violence and represents the book’s primary engagement with the First World War. I argue, here, that a major imaginative structure about violence—one way in which Western culture has understood violence in relation to itself, its values, and its aesthetic artifacts—can be schematized according to a model of (p.36) generative violence, which I call enchantment, in tension with an insistence that all violence is unredeemable. In addition to elaborating this model, the chapter will make two further interventions. One is to consider war primarily through the enchantment/disenchantment structure, thus connecting its dominant imaginative configuration to other forms of violence in the period and to a structure of thought that has significant literary application. And secondly, I offer a reading of Eliot’s The Waste Land (1922), a work that exemplifies the way enchanted and disenchanted violence can be developed and deconstructed, separated and interfused, and does so in especially complex, lyrical fashion. Given the poem’s elevated status in modernism, to read it under the rubric of enchanted and disenchanted violence helps to demonstrate how thoroughly the paradigm underwrote the aesthetic achievements of the period.
The second chapter inaugurates the book's structure of historical inquiry. It is about dynamite violence, and also about anarchism, which stood behind an absorbing set of political events in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and galvanized the public imagination. The gash or rent or, ultimately, the exploded body became the sign of a radically destabilizing politics, with provocative consequences for the literature that addressed it. That literature extends from popular dynamite novels, journalism, and anarchist writings into more canonical works of the turn of the century, most powerfully Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*, all of which I consider in the chapter. Amidst a rich terrain of revolutionary personae, historical acts of sensational violence, perceived new threats, and fervent fantasies of destruction, I tease out two phenomena of special interest to modernism: the idea that dynamite violence epitomized meaningfulness, as it conjoined exceptional damage with a gaping absence of justification, and the gradual emergence, out of the late-Victorian and Edwardian frame, of the transhistorical figure of the terrorist. The chapter concludes with a reading of the suicide bomber as a resonant new type, an image of the future in which the key characteristic of violence becomes its potentiality: indefinite rather than spectacular, it casts a long shadow up to the present day.

In shifting to Ireland and the events surrounding the 1916 insurrection for the third chapter, I track a wholly different relation between violent actors and their publics. Anarchism’s marginality is its abiding characteristic, while the rebels who ultimately forged the new Irish state could understand their violence as representing and embodying a national ideal. Yet the question of containment, as with dynamite violence, remains urgent in the Irish independence struggle as well. In the language that developed around the events of 1916, and especially during the years of war, we find a basic uncertainty about its exceptionalism, which would link it back to the kind of episodic violence embodied by dynamite, versus its permanence, where the (p.37) notion of revenge points forward into infinity. Such cyclical has a name, reprisal, and this becomes an absolutely pivotal idea in the period, its reciprocal formal structure offering a correlative in literary texts to its devastating effects in the material world. For Yeats, to work out the issue of reprisal was a poetic challenge linked with the broader cultural thematics of generative and cyclical violence that pervaded the nationalist scene, as articulated by such figures as Pádraig Pearse, Joseph Mary Plunkett, J. M. Synge, and Sean O’Casey, all of whom I consider in the chapter. More generally, I look at a span of imaginative constructs around violence in the period—“keening” (the language of ritual mourning in Ireland), generative violence, reprisal, and architectural allegory—and reveal a dialectical structure among these modes. Jostled between the promise of generative violence and the nightmare of reprisal, literary works looked to generate stability and beauty out of the archaic formalism of mourning or the capaciousness of the representative building.
In its culminating chapter, *At the Violet Hour* turns to one of the great formalists of violence in the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf, whose late works, especially, offer remarkably deep, moving, and idiosyncratic reflections on the darkening of the world around her, and on her contemporaries’ dominant ideas about violence, war, and human nature. The chapter has its defining nexus in the 1930s, with special attention to the Spanish Civil War, which activated Woolf’s social circle and took the life of her nephew Julian Bell, as well as more broadly consolidating the culture’s understanding of what the next world war would mean. Fascism in the 1930s brought the specter of endemic violence perilously close and pressured the viability of pacifism in new terms, and it was in this political and intellectual climate that Woolf created her stunning and tortured late works, which fixate on the permeation of violence into culture and consciousness. These writings, composed in the key of incipient war—*The Years* (1937), *Three Guineas* (1938), and *Between the Acts* (1941)—blend a deep empathy for women’s suffering and imaginative lives with a scorching critique of violent male power. They also build upon what Woolf’s earlier novels, in particular *The Voyage Out* (1915), *Jacob’s Room* (1922), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), had begun to achieve, a distinct stylistics of violence, often revolving around the creation of abstract patterns. In keeping with the war photography that emerged from the Spanish war and Picasso’s *Guernica*, its most famous artistic manifestation, Woolf and other antifascists were extremely conscious of the paradox in their endeavor: only as expressions of the deepest vulnerability might their works be able to claim historical significance. Uniquely, Woolf took the measure of that paradox as a guiding challenge, to be met by a language that would be bracingly honest, unflinching, and increasingly despairing, and which was ever working out the relation of its aesthetic principles to its humanity.
The precariousness of humanity, in the face of a bewildering array of powers—mass violence, totalitarianism, bureaucracy, technology, the onslaught of visuality—is one of the primary morals of the twentieth century. Modernity thus takes as one of its organizing conditions an imbalance between the individual (deconstructed and relativized as she may be) and enormously threatening forces, both visible and invisible; and this uneven configuration has motivated writers and artists since the industrial revolution, in new and enduring ways in the early twentieth century, where this study focuses, and on into the twenty-first century. The literary and cultural works of the modernist period were especially adept at creating aesthetic forms to contain and display both the excesses and the mundane realities of violence, according to the logics I will be pursuing in these pages: enchanted and disenchanted, intensively imagined and projected outward, asked to speak a political language and wrenched free of politics, governed by the terrible realities of force. Enfolded in these doubled, structurally ambivalent, contradictory forms, violence finds a voice. That such a voice is exceptionally conscious of its mutability and partiality, that it recognizes the power of giving narrative life to violence even as it often shrinks away to a mere whisper, that it forges some of the period’s greatest expressions of humanity yet also despairs of that effort: all of this is to be expected, given the enormity of the subject and the tenuousness of any single literary expression. These efforts carry with them both the modesty and the accomplishment due their subject; they are, if nothing else, what Yeats delicately named “befitting emblems of adversity” (Var, 420).

Notes:
(1) Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 6


Introduction


(8) In attending to the moment of violent encounter, one inevitably faces several possible methodological and ideological objections. There is, first, the problem of contributing to a thematics of voyeurism. In her study of spectatorship and slavery, Saidiya Hartman explicitly disavows the focus on the “routine display of the slave’s ravaged body” in favor of more dispersed and concealed realms of violence, a choice that for Hartman is both laudable and fruitful: Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3. Broader critiques have been inaugurated, for instance, by Rob Nixon, whose concept of “slow violence” demands a very different temporal scheme from one generated by the moment of infliction, by Ian Baucom, who locates the almost silent, almost invisible murder of slaves as a new nexus for configuring the imaginative scene of what he calls “the long twentieth century,” and by Slavoj Žižek, who has argued that to focus on the violent event (what he calls “subjective violence”) is itself a political (and perhaps he would even say violent) move, since it obscures deeper, systemic forms of violence in the culture at large (“objective violence”). All of these points are well taken, Žižek’s stance being the most generally construed—that there is never a pure and free ground against which violence manifests as entirely unique and aberrant. See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), and Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile, 2008).

Despite the utility of these critiques, there are good reasons to track carefully the focus on the violated body, in part because to do so helps us to understand, as distinct from overlook, these less visible forms of violence as well.

(9) As is always the case with “modernism,” my usage carries field qualifications: I am using the term primarily as it derives from literary history, though I also discuss visual culture, and my focus is on the British Isles, which of course is nonidentical with other modernisms. I hope that the models I am tracing in this book will resonate beyond (and in some cases specifically challenge) national traditions or borders.

(10) The pandying episode represents one of the most overtly autobiographical sequences in the Clongowes segment of *Portrait*. For discussion of the episode with respect to Joyce’s young schooling experiences, see Bruce Bradley, *James Joyce’s Schooldays* (New York: St. Martin’s 1982), especially 69–78. See also Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 28.


(13) We might, for instance, consider Tolstoy’s reflection in *War and Peace* about the inverse relation between power and bodily vulnerability in war, or Scarry’s analysis in *The Body in Pain* of the defining feature of power in the Hebrew Bible being a disembodied God in relation to a radically embodied people.

(14) Critical accounts of “the body” have been a major topic over the last several decades. One dominant strain, for which Judith Butler’s works from the 1990s can be seen as leading articulations, takes the body as a construct, inseparable from, and fundamentally determined by, a host of factors that, in a sense, create the person from the inside out. See especially Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993). For a deconstructive approach to violence (also representative of its critical era), in which the body is dematerialized and language is the focus, see Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, eds., *The Violence of Representation: Literature and the History of Violence* (New York: Routledge, 1989). Moving in a different direction, a smaller and less cohesive cohort of scholars has challenged the constructionist thesis. Coming from such diverse perspectives as human rights, Holocaust studies, postcolonial studies, and a variety of New Historicism and materialist positions, critics have recommitted to a sense of priority about the body’s material presence. I will refer to a number of these theorists over the course of my study.


(17) In depicting this interlocking of subjective with extensive violence, one precursor from a different national tradition comes especially to mind: Fyodor Dostoevsky, who has a shadowy presence throughout modernist accounts of violence. In some cases (such as Raskolnikov’s dream of the mare in *Crime and Punishment*), later writers will make direct reference to Dostoevsky. More generally, a number of the themes, historical topics, and formal mechanisms I will be discussing figure in Dostoevsky’s works as well (especially *The Devils*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*). Still, for all the overlaps, there are important formal and contextual differences separating Dostoevsky from the early-twentieth-century British writers who followed him. To take just one example: if the double murder at the outset of *Crime and Punishment* (with its widely dispersed ramifications throughout the novel) might stand at the cornerstone of many later considerations of brute violence, Dostoevsky’s verbose style of realism in the novel, the novel’s gender constructions, and its ultimate Christian framework mark important differences from the later English tradition. It is tempting to read Raskolnikov in protomodernist terms; but what do we do about Sonya?


(21) Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 167-68


(23) Elizabeth Cullingford, *Gender and History in Yeats’s Love Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 140-64


(31) . Violation derives from the Latin verb violare, “to treat with violence, to outrage, dishonor, injure, etc.” (*OED*).


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(36) . Interestingly, the German word “gewalt” is translated as both “force” and “violence.”

(37) . Weil’s politics are not easy to summarize: a sometime socialist, anarchist, and Bolshevik (all self-described), she is known for her pacifism, but also, in partial contradiction, she participated in the General Strike of 1933 and volunteered in the Spanish Civil War. And despite her being Jewish, several essays in the late 1930s indicate an insensitivity and anti-Semitism that is hard to understand. For discussion of Weil and politics, see Mary G. Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine: The Political Thought of Simone Weil* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1988) and Christopher J. Frost, *Simone Weil: On Politics, Religion, and Society* (London: Sage, 1998).


(39) Simone Weil, *The Iliad or the Poem of Force*, trans. James P. Holoka (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 45

(40) . The essay was first published in two issues of the journal *Cahiers du Sud* in December 1940 and January 1941, though there remains confusion about exactly when it was written. The editors of a pamphlet edition (translated by Mary McCarthy) date the essay’s composition to the summer of 1940 (hence after the fall of France), while others leave unspecified its precise composition date. See Simone Weil, *The Iliad or the Poem of Force*, trans., Mary McCarthy (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1976), 2; Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon, 1976); and, following her, Dorothy Tuck McFarland, *Simone Weil* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983).


(43) Filippo Marinetti, *Selected Writings* (New York: FSG, 1972), 42


(46) For English writers of the modernist years, Nietzsche was an anxiety-of-influence figure. Nearly everyone had a strong opinion, for or against, acknowledged or unacknowledged. In celebrating violence and disdaining Christian values of subjection, pacifism, and self-sacrifice, works such as *The Genealogy of Morals* and *Thus Spake Zarathustra* offered to subsequent generations a philosophy of violence (and of history as violence) that remained influential for decades.

(47) Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 35

(48) Margot Norris, *Writing War in the Twentieth Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 1

(49) Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1997), 100

(50) D. H. Lawrence, *Aaron’s Rod* (New York: Penguin, 1976), 139

(51) In the Iraq and Afghanistan wars (2001–present), journalists have focused a good deal on injured soldiers. Even before a scandal involving inadequate care and resources at Walter Reed Hospital brought added attention to the subject (spring 2007), this journalistic focus, which cuts across medical, technological, psychological, and broadly social categories, suggests real potential for breaking the wall of silence that generally surrounds injured war veterans.


The bayonet, in other words, puts a slight check on one of the twentieth century’s recurring fantasies, a product of the First World War which has not since lost its hold—the retrospective nostalgia for one-to-one combat over modern mass warfare. One might think here of General Patton, especially as imagined in the 1970 film *Patton*.

George Orwell, *Burmese Days* (San Diego: Harvest, 1962), 59

Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*


For all its withering critique of empire, there is almost no history in *Burmese Days*. As its name suggests, the novel sits, marking time, in a slow present. There are, however, coded references. I read, for instance, a listing of earthquake dates by an otherwise silent Burmese servant as a version of a covert nationalist history (*BD*, 182–83). At the time of the novel’s publication (1934), anti-British activity was on the rise in Burma.

“History” means many things. In this portion of the introduction, and again in the first chapter, I am laying out imaginative models for comprehending and articulating violence in the past. In chapters 2, 3, and 4, I develop cultural histories of violent events, a different methodology.


Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*


The actual massacre for which the town is named was a convoluted affair, involving fratricide and treachery, and some celebrity. It did not involve the killing of (or by) slaves.
It could be objected that the unnamed male narrator (aka Rochester) cannot be trusted, especially on the subject of sensory input, and in a more developed reading of the novel, these sensory observations would need to be registered in their full, political terms (such that, for instance, the islands’ beauty, which is often figured by still pools, is feminized, hence ready for attack by Rochester). Even so, one can never discount the value of beauty in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. 

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