The Historical Novel at History's End: Virginia Woolf's *The Years*

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> It seems as if there were no progress in the human race, but only repetition.
>
> ——Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (1938)

The recent surge of interest in late modernism has expanded the purview of modernist studies in at least two directions: on one hand, the study of late modernism addresses lesser known literary and cultural activity that may not adhere to the stylistic or periodizing norms of modernism or postmodernism; on the other hand, it draws the late works of household names such as T. S. Eliot, Rebecca West, and Virginia Woolf from the shadows of their more lauded counterparts from the teens and the twenties.[1] Woolf's late fiction has been a prime focus of this latter direction. In Jed Esty and Marina MacKay's foundational studies, *Between the Acts* exemplifies the formal and historical distinctiveness of late modernism.[2] But where does *The Years* fit within this broadening, vibrant field? How might this often overlooked novel also be historically and aesthetically exemplary? *The Years* has not figured heavily in the history of Woolf criticism. To be sure, this hefty chronicle of the Pargiter family scarcely resembles the svelte, introverted novels that preceded it. It lacks the rapturous prose of *To the Lighthouse* and the hypnotic lines of *The Waves*; it displays little of the daring characterization of *Jacob's Room* or *Mrs. Dalloway*. By comparison, *The Years* falls shy of achieving what Woolf called the merger of "the granite and the rainbow" ("New" 235),

the concrete and the poetic. Indeed, Woolf herself declared it "a failure" and curiously characterized that failure as "deliberate" (*Writer* 277). Years after its publication she would remember the novel only as "that misery *The Years*" (*Diary* 340).[3] *The Years* remained a stray, ugly duckling, an unfortunate blemish on an otherwise handsome career.[4]

More recent critical assessments of *The Years* seem less beholden either to Woolf's judgments or to the near reflexive equation of high modernist style with literary value. Karen Levenback, Judy Suh, Anna Snaith, and Maren Linett have all recast *The Years* as central to Woolf's political thinking on war, fascism, and, perhaps more complexly, anti-semitism.[5] In these readings, *The Years* exemplifies Woolf's imaginative confrontations with the mounting crises of the 1930s. John Whittier-Ferguson ties the social and political turmoil of the decade to the "local details of her style" and what he memorably dubs her "inventively exhausted prose" (231). My reassessment of *The Years* joins this renewed attention to the tangled aesthetic and political problems of Woolf's novel. I treat *The Years* as a late modernist version of the historical novel, one that seems primarily concerned with establishing a correspondence between the minutiae of the everyday lives of the Pargiter family and the world-historical processes that underwrite the novel's near fifty-year timespan. Of course, Woolf's concern with everyday life did not begin with this novel, but *The Years* marks an astonishing departure from the signature interiorized, phenomenological explorations of her earlier fictions.[6] The treatment of everyday life in *The Years* bears stronger resemblances to historical novels and family chronicles like Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace,* Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks,* and John Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga* than anything one might find in her earlier novels or even in her modernist fellow travelers like Joyce, Proust, or Conrad.[7] By attending to Woolf's reworking of the formal features of the historical novel—plot, event, characterization—we can see *The Years* registering the protracted decline of a British centered world-system as a crisis of historical consciousness.[8] In this late novel, Woolf figures the everyday as the scene where the historical crises of the 1930s attain legibility. In what follows, I first examine Woolf's use and reconfiguration of the historical novel, a genre long thought to belong to the great realists. I then turn to two formal features—the emplotment of historical events and characterization—where we see most clearly the novel's portrayal of history as a destructively recursive process.

Late modernism, realism, and the historical novel

How might the shape and mediating powers of the historical novel alter during a decade as troubled as the 1930s? As so many have already pointed out, crisis was the trademark of what W. H. Auden famously referred to as that "low dishonest decade."[9] The avant-garde sociological group Mass-Observation concisely enumerated some of the anxious decade's worries this way in their inaugural pamphlet: "The bringing of civilization to Abyssinia, the coming of civil war to Spain, the atavism of the new Germany and the revival of racial superstition have forced the issue home to many. We are all in danger of extinction from such outbursts of atavism" (Madge 11). Yet, the collective anxieties of the present did little to hamper interest in the historical novel.[10] In fact, the 1930s proved to be a fertile decade both for the writing and the theorization of the historical novel. In addition to novels by Woolf, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Jack Lindsay, Rose Macaulay, and Vera Brittain, György Lukács's *The Historical Novel* appeared in 1937, providing what remains the most thorough and most cited anatomization of the genre.[11]

Lukács casts the historical novel primarily as a realist genre. He declares its foremost task to be "the disclosure of all the contradictions of progress" (29). To accomplish this task, the historical novel must do more than reference historical events and personages. It cannot treat history as a "decorative backdrop" (206) against which characters and plots operate more or less unaffected (this was Flaubert's cardinal sin). Instead, these novels should disclose the migration of historical antagonisms into the most oblique regions of everyday life. In order to accomplish this heady feat, for Lukács, they rely on two crucial generic features. First, and perhaps above all else, the historical novel mediates historical events through the everyday lives of its characters. Sir Walter Scott's novels became the *vade mecum* for historical novelists past and present precisely because they show "important historical changes upon people who react immediately and violently to them, without understanding their causes" (49). Scott and Tolstoy both staged in exemplary fashion "the indirect contact between individual lives and historical events" (285). Second, characters should be typical in the sense that their narrative arcs parallel those of the general population.

This second priority constitutes Lukács's most rigid categorical distinction and, according to his logic, it should prohibit any incorporation

of modernist techniques into the historical novel. Modernism's preference for interiorized characters makes any such incorporation impossible, even if characters like Leopold Bloom and Franz Biberkopf are closer in class to the masses than the aristocrats that populate the storyworlds of Lukács's preferred authors. In Lukács's argument, modernist introversion fetishizes alienation and social detachment whereas Tolstoy's counts and dukes function more properly as examples of "popular character" (86). Combined with the emplotment of historical events, this mode of characterization will show history as a rational process, one that proceeds dialectically through conflict, sublation, and resolution. In Lukács's estimation, the genre of the historical novel functions properly only when literary form is irrevocably bound to this particular philosophy of history.

What could be modernist about a genre Lukács identified with both the great realists and historical progress? Does Woolf's use of the historical novel necessarily entail what Emily Dalgarno calls a "turn to realism" (129)? What exactly does it mean to label *The Years* a late modernist historical novel? We might say that *The Years* participates in the genre of the historical novel without properly belonging to it. That particular form of participation amounts to what Jacques Derrida calls "contamination" (59), a contamination which also spreads to the categorical divide between realism and modernism, a boundary that Woolf's novel, and much of late modernism, scarcely heeds.[12] Christine Froula and Liesl Olson's designation of Woolf's work as "modernist-realism" or "modern realism" brands Woolf's fiction as a contestation between modernism and realism, rather than an emblem of the supposed stylistic and periodizing rupture between them.[13] I would suggest that *The Years* contests that rupture more emphatically than any other work in Woolf's *oeuvre* and, as a result, poses a series of methodological problems that precede any interpretation of the novel.

To take full measure of the problems *The Years* poses for broad aesthetic and periodizing schemes in general, I begin by asking an admittedly naïve question: why are modernism and realism routinely thought of as dialectical opposites? At first blush, it has quite a bit to do with stylistic categories serving as periodizing terms. No matter how much one flexes the boundaries of a "modernist" period, there is still the old problem of accounting for the prolonged existence of styles and techniques after their purported demise.[14] Although modernist studies has admirably challenged the temporal and spatial dimensions of modernism, the terms modern-

ism and realism have lost none of their descriptive and evaluative force; campaigns for an expanded or more inclusive modernism rarely question the power "modernism" or "realism" wield as markers of value.[15] Can we think of the aesthetic techniques identified as "modernist" and "realist" separately from the periods they denote?

This question in part drives Fredric Jameson's arguments in *A Singular Modernity*. While acknowledging the ineluctability of periodization, Jameson also criticizes such gestures and, along the way, undercuts the pat narrative of modernism's supersession of realism: "Modernism is an aesthetic category and realism is an epistemological one; the truth claim of the latter is irreconcilable with the formal dynamic of the former. The attempt to combine the two into a single master narrative must therefore necessarily fail" (124). Splitting the difference between modernism and realism into aesthetics and epistemology certainly renders useless any "single master narrative" of literary history. But, as Jameson knows well, although aesthetics and epistemology may be derived from "two unrelated systems," the fate of art in any given era is tied to the types of relationships it tries to stage between these two.[16] Aesthetic theory since Kant has attempted to refigure the relation of art to both pure reason (epistemology) and practical reason (ethics and politics). One may uncover a different form of relation between art and knowledge across modern aesthetic theory—the Jena Romantics' literary absolute, Hegel's supersession of art by philosophy, and Nietzsche's positioning of art against knowledge are but a small sample. Marxist aesthetics itself is caught in these very dynamics, particularly the key debates on modernism and realism. For everything else that sets them apart, Lukács's broadsides against modernism and Adorno's unflinching defense of it both address the question of art's relationship to knowledge, whether it functions as a way to cast class structures into relief or as a pointed critique of instrumental rationality.

Addressing *The Years* as a late modernist historical novel affords us two things: we can isolate the distinctive form of attention Woolf devotes to everyday life, one that is at a significant remove from her earlier work; and we can see Woolf's contamination of the historical novel as a conceptual act, one that inverts the liberal progressivist philosophy of history into a philosophy of history that is recursive and destructive. My point of departure here is a review of Ivan Turgenev Woolf published in 1933 when she was fast at work on *The Years*. Despite its pithy statements on the Russian writer's technique, the essay is most valuable for what it

discloses about Woolf's efforts to imagine a form of writing that would fuse realist and modernist techniques. In a particularly revealing passage from "The Novels of Turgenev" Woolf meditates on the Russian writer's method and indirectly points to one of the key aesthetic problems of *The Years*:

> For he is asking the novelist not only to do many things but some that seem incompatible. He has to observe facts impartially, yet he must also interpret them. Many novelists do the one; many do the other—we have the photograph and the poem. But few combine the fact and the vision; and the rare quality that we find in Turgenev is the result of this double process. (249)

This "double process" animating Turgenev's novels fuses sharp, almost empirical attention to fact and appearance with the poetic or visionary power to see beyond it—a process that resurfaces also in *The Years*. More specifically, Woolf seeks a way to register the long afterlives of historical violence by attending to the seemingly unremarkable occurrences of everyday life. In this regard, the terminology Woolf deploys is particularly revealing: "photograph," "observe," and, a term that carries several meanings in Woolf's lexicon, "vision." The first two refer to a type of looking, an ideal of impersonal observation that Nancy Armstrong and Peter Brooks ascribe to nineteenth century realism. In *Realist Vision,* Brooks specifically describes realism as "attached to the visual, to looking at things, registering their presence in the world through sight" (3). And what is most often the object of realism's searching eye? The everyday, the unexceptional, and the negligible prose of the world.

"Vision" suggests a more subjective form of experience: this is the cornerstone of Woolf's modernism that readers know well from her previous novels. Yet the conjunctive "and" indicates correspondence with "fact," not opposition to it. Brooks's take on the shared affinities of modernism and realism offers one way to think of their potential coexistence. His conclusion on the relation between these two styles is worth quoting at length:

> That seems to me irreducible in the realist project: to register the importance of the things—objects, inhabitations, accessories—amid which people live, believe they can't live without. The realist believes you must do an elementary phenomenology

> of the world in order to speak of how humans inhabit it, and this phenomenology will necessarily mean description, detailing, an attempt to say what the world is like in a way that makes its constraints recognizable by the reader. Note that Woolf—and also James, and Joyce, and Proust—don't really reject this premise: their work is full of significant things. . . . What is different in the modernists is most of all the selectivity of consciousness applied to the phenomenal world, and the establishment of a perspective resolutely within consciousness as it deals with the objects of the world. (211)

Things, objects, gestures: the clutter of daily life. These are the obsessions of realism, be it in Balzac, Dickens, or Courbet; they are equally the obsessions, so says Brooks, of Woolf and the modernists.

In *The Years,* Woolf freights everyday objects, and the attachments people have to them, with historical meaning. In the "1880" chapter, she diagrams the perspectives of the Pargiters and their servant on the things in Abercorn Terrace, the Pargiter family home. Woolf's free indirect discourse gives us Crosby the servant's eyes as she catalogues the objects of Abercorn Terrace: "The whole room, with its carved chairs, oil paintings, the two daggers on the mantelpiece, and the handsome sideboard—all the solid objects that Crosby dusted and polished every day—looked at its best in the evening" (35). Crosby's labor gives her an intimate knowledge of the "solid objects" of the Pargiter house, objects that tell the family history and identify the Pargiters with a specific class.[17] But if the text positions these objects as decorations for the Pargiter family, it suggests that for Crosby they ground an entire world. Woolf focalizes the final inventory of the house and its objects through Eleanor, diagramming the move for her, the upper class resident, as liberatory, while leaving Abercorn Terrace for Crosby is evidently world-destroying:

> Crosby was crying. The mixture of emotion was positively painful; she [Eleanor] was so glad to be quit of it all, but for Crosby it was the end of everything. She had known every cupboard, flagstone, chair and table in that large rambling house, not from five or six feet of distance as they had known it; but from her knees, as she scrubbed and polished; she had known every groove, stain, fork, knife, napkin and cupboard. They and their

> doings had made her entire world. And now she was going off, alone, to a single room at Richmond. (216)

Eleanor and Crosby's contrasting reactions to the sale of Abercorn Terrace multiply the perspectives on this slice of daily life, but they do so in order to draw attention to the accumulated and continuing privilege of class that stretches from the nineteenth century into the early years of the twentieth. Although Crosby's labor keeps the house together, the Pargiters "and their doings had made her entire world." In other words, Crosby's labor creates nothing of her own world; it is shaped and determined entirely for her by the lives and whims of the Pargiter family. For Eleanor, being rid of Abercorn Terrace unburdens her from obligations of the past; her inheritance affords a future of world travel and the sort of autonomy she never enjoyed at Abercorn Terrace. Expelled from the world the Pargiters created for her, with little economic power and even less choice, Crosby recedes into further entrapment and graver limitations. Through their attachment to things and their juxtaposed perceptions of the meaning of Abercorn Terrace, Woolf represents the contrasting fates of two women as largely dependent on class.

History, event, and everyday life

While scenes like the one above demonstrate how everyday life carries historical meaning, the most significant world-historical events that occur between 1880 and the 1930s are largely displaced from the center of the narrative.[18] *The Years* trains its eye on the traces such events leave on the everyday and, indeed, detects the ways these past histories give form and shape to daily life in the present: the 1857 Indian Mutiny is never discussed in the narrative, but the finger Abel lost during the rebellion attests to its abiding presence in the family's history; Parnell's death, like the speeches of dictators and the rumblings in the Balkans, comes to us by way of a newspaper headline; King Edward VII's death is announced through the drunken shouts from a pub at the corner of Sara and Maggie's slum apartment. Woolf's two war chapters are exemplary in this regard. The "1917" and "1918" chapters gradually chart the transformation of total war from an interruption of everyday life to a permanent condition of it.

The "1917" chapter opens innocently enough with Eleanor Pargiter stumbling through blacked-out London, using the dim light of her hand torch and the air raid searchlight overhead to find Renny and Maggie's house. Air raid sirens interrupt the family's dinner and conversation, setting into motion one of the strangest war scenes in literary modernism. The Pargiters never see the bombing raid. Instead, it is experienced through the impressions it leaves on the domestic, private interiors of the home. As Eleanor and company descend into the cellar, Nicholas, their Polish friend, charts the location of German bombers by timing the bursts of gunfire on his pocket watch. Eleanor tries to witness the event as well; she gazes up at the ceiling and figures "the Germans must be overhead by now" (291). The crackling of anti-aircraft guns shakes a spider-web suspended in the corner of the ceiling and Eleanor monitors its movement, using it as a metronome to measure the rhythms of the air raid. The event only becomes legible through these faint impressions. *The Years* holds the direct, immediate presentation of events to the side, opting to show instead how they press upon daily life.

Most fictional renderings of the First World War turn to the trenches as their preferred topoi. The air raids on the homeland are almost invisible and, thus, their very inclusion is of interest. On a general level, Woolf's recreation of the air raid in *The Years* highlights the impact of the war on the non-combatants, something Woolf had done with relative consistency in all of her novels from *Jacob's Room* forward. Karen Levenback convincingly shows that Woolf drew heavily from her own wartime diaries to reconstruct the air raid section in "1917," this chapter that was "the most difficult and strenuous section of her [Woolf's] novel" (116). Yet, this section also functions as a manifestation of the air war anxiety of the 1930s, of what Paul Saint-Amour characterizes as a "proleptic mass-traumatization, a pre-traumatic stress syndrome whose symptoms arose in response to an anticipated rather than an already realized catastrophe" (131).[19] Woolf's narration of the First World War forecasts the militarization of daily life in a besieged city.[20] The memory of those raids—mandatory citywide blackouts, defenseless populations, the conversion of the Tube into a shelter—provide a glimpse of what shape the coming war will take.[21] Perhaps Eleanor, warm with wine, best characterizes the dramatic changes awaiting daily life in the war metropolis: "It was light after dark; talk after silence; the war, perhaps, removing barriers" (284). The barriers

between war zone and civilian area, combatant and non-combatant, private and public life, would diminish greatly in a war fought through the air.

The "1917" chapter encodes the blurring of those zones by establishing a set of boundaries and detailing their gradual dissolution. Fumbling about in the darkness that "seemed to muffle sound as well as sight" (279), Eleanor enters Renny and Maggie's house and notes with exceptional sensitivity the solidity and distinction of objects: "It looked strange after the streets—the perambulator in the hall; the umbrellas in the stand; the carpet, the pictures: they all seemed intensified" (280). The cataloging and differentiation of these objects draws a firm line between the muffled dark outside and the clear visibility inside. Street and home, public and private, exterior and interior—these are the divisions of everyday life the chapter maps out in its initial pages. They are also the very ones the air raid unsettles. The trembling spider web and the crackling of guns outside draw the war into the warmest, most private interior spaces. After the planes pass and the raid concludes, the motions of daily life seem to continue unabated: "The bugles blew again beneath the window. Then they heard them further down the street; then further away still down the next street. Almost directly the hooting of cars began again, and the rushing of wheels as if the traffic had been released and the usual night life of London had begun again" (295). When Eleanor later that evening waits for the omnibus she has nearly forgotten the air raid. The omnibus arrives as per usual, but the passengers "looked cadaverous and unreal in the blue light" (300). The daily functions of the city resume quickly, but Eleanor's altered perception registers the aftereffects of the war, morbidly casting everyday life as everyday death.

The curiously brief "1918" chapter presents a quick scene of everyday life where war now forms the background. Crosby walks through London on errands for her new employer, Mrs. Burt. The siren sounds to a "dull explosion" and Crosby only mutters "them guns again" (304). Through Woolf's narration, in the metropolis everyday routines and war appear intertwined. Another explosion elicits only a momentary pause in the daily doings in the city:

> A man on a ladder who was painting the windows of one of the houses paused with his brush in his hand and looked around. A woman who was walking along carrying a loaf of bread that stuck half out of its papers wrapping stopped too.

> They both waited as if for something to happen. A topple of smoke drifted over and flopped down from the chimneys. The guns boomed again. The man on the ladder said something to the woman on the pavement. She nodded her head.
>
> Then he dipped his brush in the pot and went on painting. The woman walked on.
>
> Crosby pulled herself together and tottered across the road into the High Street.
>
> The guns went on booming and the sirens wailed. The war was over—so somebody told her as she took her place at the counter of the grocer's shop. The guns went on booming and the sirens wailed. (304-305)

The incessant noises of war form the backdrop for otherwise ordinary actions: a servant running errands, a man painting, and a woman returning from a store. All of this occurs while the war continues long after it is declared over. Woolf threads together a formidable scene where war no longer figures as an interruption of everyday life, but as a constitutive part.

The figuration of the First World War as anything less than a decisive historical and formal break sets *The Years* apart from so many other modernist texts that inscribe the rupture of the First World War into their verbal textures, temporal arrangements, and narrative structures, including, most conspicuously, the "Time Passes" section of *To the Lighthouse*. Viewed from the vantage point of the "present day" of the 1930s, in *The Years* the First World War does not appear as an aberration in the movement of history. Here, Woolf's retrospective view of the First World War figures it as exemplary, not interruptive, of the historical process as such. The philosophy of history that unfolds over the course of Woolf's narrative treats conflicts and antagonisms in a notably non-dialectical manner. On the one hand, they are the generative, mobilizing force of history; on the other, such destruction and violence forecloses any possibility of historical progress. While we might see Woolf's coordination of the historical event with everyday life as perfectly compatible with Lukács's version of the historical novel, this reconfigured philosophy of history thus generates fiction of a very different sort. The extensive catalogue of historical conflicts in *The Years*—imperial, national, economic, sexual—showcases the formative and ultimately deleterious effects they have on those who live through them and, often, those who live after them.

Flowers, stones, and liberty: how Delia and Rose dream

Turning now toward characterization, I want to foreground the way *The Years'* broken historical dialectic manifests itself most explicitly in the lives of the Pargiter women. The "1880" chapter introduces us to the Pargiter household, run primarily by the younger women; an ailing mother withers away upstairs and the erstwhile patriarch Abel Pargiter relies on his daughters to maintain the daily operations of his estate. Preoccupied as it is with introducing these complex family dynamics, the "1880" chapter is also concerned with dreams and fantasies: Delia's Parnell daydreams, Rose's imaginative adventure games, Kitty's erotic fantasies, and Edward's fantasies of Kitty. It is Delia and Rose's daydreams and fantasies that most clearly reconfigure the history they inherit. Daughters of a former imperial soldier, Delia and Rose dream in imperial terms: Delia conjures up visions of Irish Home Rule icon Charles Parnell while Rose fancies herself as a soldier from Pargiter's Horse. As these characters mature, their daydreams become integral parts of their waking lives. Delia eventually marries an Irishman and Rose's childhood war games translate into actual militant activity with the suffragettes. Just as *The Years* turns a skeptical eye towards historical progress, the novel's mode of characterization manifests a skepticism towards agency and individual progress. As with Delia and Rose, Woolf's characters do not progress, but live out and repeat their family histories, with disastrous consequences.

Daydreams, like their unconscious counterparts, transfer latent content into a manifest form.[22] But while Delia and Rose's daydreams express complex desires for greater autonomy, Woolf's novel ironizes these desires. At first blush, Delia's attraction to Charles Stewart Parnell, the antagonist for Irish Home Rule, appears to be a sublimated reaction against her father, but Woolf structures Delia's fantasy in a way that avoids such symmetry. The opening chapter positions Delia's adoration for her father against her hatred of her mother. When Abel Pargiter take his place at the dinner table he transforms from bygone imperialist and adventurer into storyteller and patriarch, further twining the Pargiter family's imperial past with its present. Delia especially falls under the enchantment of Abel's exotic tales: "Delia liked listening to her father's stories about India. They were crisp, and at the same time romantic. They conveyed an atmosphere of officers dining together in mess jackets on a very hot night with a huge silver trophy in the middle of the table" (36). Unmoored from their specific context, these stories of empire take on a

more contemporary form in Delia's fantasies. She imagines herself at the side of Parnell, effectively translating his desire for Irish Home Rule into her own dreams of personal independence:[23] "Somewhere there's beauty, Delia thought, somewhere there's freedom, and somewhere, she thought, he is—wearing his white flower. . . .But a stick grated in the hall. 'It's Papa!' Milly exclaimed warningly" (12). Through repetition, the white flower becomes a metonym for Parnell and his contestation of British rule; it is bound in Delia's daydream sequence with "beauty" and "freedom," all of which exist "somewhere" beyond the confines of Abercorn Terrace.

Delia's yearning for greater autonomy reflects her deep enmity for her mother. At her mother's bedside, Delia lapses into her private dream world and names Parnell for the first time. She "longed for her [mother] to die" (22), but, unable to stave off creeping guilt, she reaches for a simple, affectionate memory of her. When Delia recalls such a memory, it dissolves and gives way to "the other scene": "the man in the frock coat with the white flower in his button-hole. But she had sworn not to think of that till bedtime." She skirts across other memories to keep "the other scene" at bay, but it manifests itself fully anyway and sweeps Delia away with it. Setting the scene just right with the "hall; banks of palms; a floor beneath them crowded with people's heads," Delia envisions Parnell at her side. "'I am speaking in the cause of Liberty,' she began, throwing out her hands, 'in the cause of Justice. . .' They were standing side by side" (23). The "other scene" appears twice more at her mother's funeral and Delia again struggles to suppress it.

Why do these daydreams manifest so powerfully at these specific moments? For Delia, it is not her father, whom she admires and looks upon lovingly, but her mother who represents antiquated and constraining late Victorian feminine roles. When the elder Rose Pargiter's health slides for the final time, Delia presumes it is another false alarm: "But it's all for nothing, Delia said silently, looking at her father. She felt that they must both check their rising excitement. 'Nothing's going to happen—nothing whatever,' she said, looking at him" (45-46). But something does happen and her mother's death provides Delia the opportunity to achieve her dreams of justice and liberty: "She was possessed by a sense of something everlasting; of life mixing with death, of death becoming life . . . life came closer and closer" (87). For Delia, this much anticipated death extends her horizon of possibilities beyond the domestic confines of the late Victorian household. As we learn from later chapters, Delia flees Abercorn Terrace

after her mother's passing, seeking the more egalitarian, open world of her fantasies. Even in those chapters where Delia does not appear, she remains connected to the family's history through Parnell and Ireland; Eleanor and Abel immediately think of her when Parnell's death is announced in "1891" and Rose reports to Maggie in "1910" that Delia "married an Irishman" as Maggie "took a blue flower and placed it beside a white flower" (168), again pairing the metonym for Parnell with Delia.

In the "Present Day" chapter, we see Delia some fifty years older. Her daydreams and political aspirations have merged completely with her daily life, right down to her mannerisms and gestures. She greets Peggy with "her imitation Irish flattery" (362) and assists North while "assuming the manner of a harum-scarum Irish hostess" (365). *The Years* pairs Delia's acquired "Irishness" with a marriage that simultaneously completes Delia's past yearnings and undermines them. Her daydreams of liberty, justice, and "the Cause" find their ironic fulfillment in her husband Patrick, an older Irishman who repeatedly laments Ireland's new freedom and longs instead for the old Empire: "It seems to me," says Patrick of the Irish Free State, "that our new freedom is a good deal worse than our old slavery" (399). Delia's political fervor leads to neither justice nor liberty. Indeed, Lisa Weihman characterizes Delia's marriage as a continuation of the very injustices she fled the Pargiter house to combat, arguing that Delia "inadvertently, comically, champions the forces of English colonial imperialism in spite of her declared politics when she marries a wealthy Anglo-Irish landlord" (40).[24] The novel treats her as something of a caricature, undercutting those lofty ideals that fueled her antagonism towards late Victorian domesticity and Abercorn Terrace: "Thinking to marry a wild rebel, she had married the most King-respecting, Empire-admitting of country gentleman" (398). Delia's artificial Irish mannerisms and her marriage are cast as aberrations; her daydreams have become her waking life and she is none the better for it. These adversarial daydreams find their moment of realization and undoing in a marriage to an Irishman mourning the loss of empire, decrying the gains of suffrage for women, and wishing for the return of the very time and life Delia so longed to escape.

This type of characterization replays in miniature the recursive historicism of *The Years*. Social and political antagonisms drive the movement of history but they only return in other forms. The fate of Woolf's characters, that is, detail inescapable, anti-climactic conflicts suggesting visions that belie Delia's youthful yearnings in two ways: firstly, history unfolds

independently of the will and desires of historical subjects; secondly, the liberal (and Marxist) narrative of history as progress surrenders its place to a vision of history where tensions are amplified, not sublated. While we might anatomize *The Years*'s disquieting philosophy of history as symptomatic of what Valentine Cunningham dubs "the destructive element" (59) in literature of the 1930s, we must also account for the aggressive depoliticization that attends the novel's historical consciousness.[25] The subplots of two other prominent women characters resemble Delia's, but synecdochically stand in for the struggle for women's rights in the Edwardian years (Rose) and the material gains of those struggles for women in postwar England (Peggy). I will briefly take up Rose, who is the most political character in the novel. She joins and leads a militant wing of the suffrage movement in the pre-WWI years. Through the conversations of other family members, we learn that Rose throws a brick through a shop window during a suffrage march, is imprisoned and force-fed, and, like many suffrage activists, eventually works for the British state during the First World War. Froula characterizes Rose's situation in the novel as a heroic plot: "As Rose grows up, unconscious guilt, shame, rage, and fear fuel her distinguished career as a militant suffragette" (238). And yet the novel's treatment of Rose makes it difficult to neatly map Rose's trajectory from childhood guilt and shame to heroic activism. What first appears to be a narrative of political awakening inverts into one of psychopathology.[26]

What we might call Rose's primal scene occurs during one of the evening adventures that take her on missions beyond Abercorn Terrace. Forbidden to leave the house without her brother or any other male escort, Rose nonetheless absconds to visit Mrs. Lamley's shop. Her "mission" is dressed with all the details of military espionage, linking the very structure of her fantasies, like Delia's, to her father's stories: she is on a "desperate mission to a besieged garrison," delivering a "secret message" in "enemy country" (27). She imagines herself as a secret agent, as "Pargiter of Pargiter's Horse." Rose runs past a man leaning against a pillar box and "shoots" him, but here the thick web of fantasy breaks, as the man reaches out for Rose, nearly grabbing her: "The game was over. She was herself again, a little girl who had disobeyed her sister" (28). As she leaves the shop, she tries again to conjure the fantasy "but the story no longer worked" (29). The man by the pillar box returns and exposes himself to Rose. The scene makes a ghastly return in Rose's nightmares, but, having disobeyed Eleanor, Rose cannot explain what happened without admitting her own guilt.

There is more, however, behind Rose's militancy than this single traumatic event. In the "1908" chapter we learn that Rose took the blame for a young boy who broke a microscope in elementary school. Afterwards, she cut her wrist with a butter knife in the bathroom: "'And I dashed into the bathroom and cut this gash'—she held out her wrist. Eleanor looked at it. There was a thin white scar just above the wrist joint" (158). Later, after giving a speech in Northumberland on women's suffrage, a stone is thrown at her: "she put her hand to her chin. But she had enjoyed it" (157). Juxtaposing this scene with Rose's childhood stories, the narrative codes Rose's political life as an unfortunate, even masochistic, repetition of earlier traumas, her political maturation as an indirect effect of psychic damage. Like the cyclical historical plots to which Delia and Rose are held captive, those previous personal experiences are not sublated into collective politics, but, rather, politics is discounted as mere effect. In a telling exchange between Rose and Martin in the "Present Day" chapter, we learn that Rose assisted the British war effort after 1914, recruiting men for the war and performing industrial work, activities Woolf would criticize directly in *Three Guineas*; she is awarded a "decoration" (359), a red ribbon, for her work for the state during wartime. Martin mirthlessly points to the seeming contradiction between Rose's prewar political activism and her reward for trading revolutionary politics for cooperation with the state in its most murderous war of the young twentieth century: "'She smashed his window,' Martin jeered at her, 'and then she helped him to smash other people's windows'" (420). In the narrative logic of *The Years,* historical violence begets more historical violence. Turning the liberal narrative of history inside out, antagonisms only ever return in augmented form.

The last of the Utopians

The Years closes with a conspicuously undated chapter titled "Present Day." In one telling scene, we find two generations of Pargiter women looking at everyday life and speculating on the imprint of the past on their present moment. Eleanor, the elder Pargiter woman, wishes only to be "happy in this world" (388), this immediate present full of young people clad in pretty dresses who say interesting things. For the younger Peggy, though, "this world" is on the verge of apocalypse:

> There was a lull—a silence. Far away she heard the sounds of the London night; a horn hooted; a siren wailed on the river. The far-away sounds, the suggestion they brought in of other worlds, different to this world, of people toiling, grinding, in the heart of darkness, in the depths of night, made her say over Eleanor's happy words, Happy in this world, happy with living people. But how can one be "happy," she asked herself, in a world bursting with misery? On every placard at every street corner was Death; or worse—tyranny; brutality; torture; the fall of civilization; the end of freedom. We here, she thought, are only sheltering under a leaf, which will be destroyed.

Peggy's litany of miseries, naming all the fears attending the nightmare of another global war, diagrams two different versions of "this world." Eleanor's "this world" is the now, a place full of beauty, youth, and possibility, but also one dissevered from the pressures of the past. For Peggy, "this world" verges on a collision with "other worlds" where the horrors of historical violence threaten to tear asunder the comforts and complacencies of everyday life in Britain. With two narrative voices, the omniscient narrator's and Peggy's, this passage aligns the historical processes that precede Peggy's lifetime with her present moment. The narrator's voice imports past colonial atrocities into the present with the unmistakable reference to Joseph Conrad's novel. The very language smuggles the past war into the present: the "siren wailed" (288) is a repetition from the "1917" and "1918" chapters (304); the lulls and silences too are repetitions of the lulls and silences in conversation during the air raids in the "1917" chapters.

The dual voices also manifest another contradiction, as they position Peggy's disenchantment with the present against those past histories that have made her life possible. A successful doctor, Peggy represents the material realization of the struggles and dreams of Rose and the suffrage activists. And yet, her fear of the world's extinction induces nostalgia for the safe, secure world her predecessors worked so ardently to undo. When Peggy does venture to try to speak her fleeting vision of the "state of being" (390), she cannot:

> there was the vision still but she had not grasped it. She had broken off only a little fragment of what she meant to say. . . . Yet there it hung before her, the thing she had seen, the thing she had not said. But as she fell back with a jerk against the wall, she felt relieved of some oppression. . . . Now she could rest. (391)

Peggy's vision and exhaustion recalls Lily Briscoe's final effort in *To the Lighthouse*. Yet Lily completes her painting and her vision takes material form in due time. For Peggy, the vision never finds expression; she is left only with exhaustion, neither words nor art offering redemptive potential, and unable to recover the secure past, her vision for a new world falters. Her yearnings are the novel's own: despite the desire for history as unimpeded progress, moving away from historical forms of oppression and violence toward greater emancipation, the novel can only demonstrate the possibility of that desire.

Reading to the Bloomsbury memoir club on September 9, 1938, J. M. Keynes described his generation's understanding of the world and what it meant to be an historical agent:

> We were among the last of the Utopians, or meliorists as they are sometimes called, who believe in a continuing moral progress by virtue of which the human race already consists of reliable, rational, decent people, influenced by truth and objective standards. . . .It was not only that intellectually we were pre-Freudian, but we had lost something which our predecessors had without replacing it. (qtd. in Zwerdling 295)

By this point, the increasingly metastatic movement of war threatened to engulf much of the globe, and hope and optimism were certainly in short supply. The month would not pass before Chamberlain prophesied that the Munich Agreement signified peace in our time. Of course, Keynes foresaw the direness of this situation from its very origins in Versailles, in *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*. But the sheer gravity of Keynes's statement is striking nonetheless: the liberal project of enlightened modernity, he judged, was incapable of addressing the economic and political problems of the postwar world. Hearing Keynes read from this memoir, Woolf found it "profound & impressive" (*Diary* 168). The "failure" (*Writer* 277) of *The Years* should be read symptomatically; that is, through the deployment and disfiguration of the historical novel, it encodes the waning of a world-system and its concomitant ideologies of history and progress. For Woolf as for Keynes, something has been lost and there is nothing to replace it. Like Keynes's memoir, *The Years* is a pained eulogy for the narrative of historical progress and the promises of human emancipation it could not keep. It is this bleak note that resounds through the novel's recursive, disastrous sense of history.

Bleak though this may be, Woolf's figuration of everyday life as the scene where historical processes attain legibility is not altogether an endorsement of quietism nor is it mere resignation. The novel models a way of investigating and interpreting everyday life. Throughout *The Years* we see the tendency to catalog, describe, detail, or index everything that might appear extraneous to the story. But what this novel tells us is that nothing is extraneous. All signs, regardless of how minor they are to the characters or how quickly they are passed over in the narrative, all have something to tell us. When Martin Pargiter flips through a newspaper story about the political frailty of the Balkans in 1913, what might at first seem like a stray detail in fact foreshadows the First World War. Is this how Woolf hoped her contemporary readers would receive Eleanor's outbursts about dictators she sees in the newspaper in the "Present Day" chapter? What about when North, recently returned from Africa, notes offhand that "somebody had chalked a circle on the wall with a jagged line in it" (310), a clear reference to Oswald Mosley's fascist insignia? A sign of fascism is scrawled onto a wall, but North only mentions the insignia in passing, dramatizing that signs of history written on the surfaces of everyday life require a certain interpretive practice to acquire legibility. In this way, the novel seems to want to train its contemporary readers to look, observe, and read everything with the same intensity before the catastrophe of an historical event, be it the march of fascism or total war, as one would do in retrospect. *The Years* establishes these relationships between historical events and everyday life to help attune readers to the long historical processes that move ahead with or without the knowledge of those who live through them.

Notes

1. Tyrus Miller makes the case for the stylistic distinctiveness of late modernism and argues for more attention to marginal works by Djuna Barnes, the early Samuel Beckett, and Wyndham Lewis. Jed Esty and Marina MacKay point to aesthetic shifts but historicize late modernism in the geopolitical context of imperial contraction and World War II, respectively. Kristen Bluemel's important work on "intermodernism" also participates in this revisionary trend.

2. Esty's *A Shrinking Island* pinpoints Woolf's novel as part of a broader cultural shift towards the rehabilitation of national culture during the protracted loss of Britain's imperial power. MacKay ties the novel directly to aesthetic and cultural shifts precipitated by the war.

3. For meticulously detailed discussions of the evolution of *The Years* from the manuscripts of *The Pargiters,* see Mitchell Leaska, Grace Radin, and Charles G. Hoffmann. More recently Snaith and Froula have investigated the multiple drafts and documents that preceded the final version of *The Years*.

4. Woolf's novel figures scarcely in Valentine Cunningham's encyclopedic *British Writers of the Thirties* and even less in Maria Dibattista's *Virginia Woolf's Major Novels*. Christine Froula's impressive *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde* contains a chapter on *The Years,* but is primarily concerned with the diary entries, speeches, and manuscript versions surrounding the production of the novel. Gloria Fromm offers an entertaining and incisive polemic on Woolf scholars' preference for *The Pargiters* over the finished novel, arguing that the desire to recover Woolf as a paragon of late twentieth/early twenty-first century progressive politics has skewed what we read from her and how we read it: hence the preference for the more openly feminist *The Pargiters* over the less antagonistic and politically uncertain *The Years*. That Fromm's essay appeared twenty years ago and still presents a formidable challenge to even the most recent readings of *The Years* attests both to the veracity and force of her argument and the lingering desire for Woolf's politics to be other than they actually were. Marina MacKay departs from the iconic presentation of Woolf "as a leftwing radical" (23), historicizing her writing to locate a more complex and historically rooted relation of politics and aesthetics in the late works, particularly *Between the Acts*.

5. See Chapter 4, "Remembering the War in the Years Between the Wars" in Karen Levenback's *Virginia Woolf and the Great War*; Maren Linett's "The Jew in the Bath: Imperiled Imagination in Woolf's *The Years*"; Chapter 4, "Negotiating Genre: Re-visioning History in *The Pargiters,"* of Anna Snaith's *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations*; and Chapter 4, "The Comedy of Outsiders in Virginia Woolf's *The Years,"* in Suh's *Fascism and Anti-Fascism in Twentieth-Century British Fiction*.

6. Liesl Olson and Bryony Randall offer the most thorough and sustained readings of Woolf's turn to everyday life.

7. I have found Emily Dalgarno's "A British *War and Peace*? Virginia Woolf Reads Tolstoy" an insightful examination of *The Years* and its proximity to Tolstoy.

8. It is widely acknowledged that Britain's fall from atop the world-system occurred over a lengthy period of time and its geopolitical power waned at different rates in different places. Here I follow John Darwin who writes that "by the inter-war years, in a much harsher environment, there were clear signs of strain, alleviated in part by the weakness of Britain's main rivals until very late in the day. But the real turning point came with the strategic catastrophes of 1940-2" (13-14). For more on imperial life cycles, see Giovanni Arrighi.

9. See Cunningham's *British Writers of the Thirties* for a comprehensive examination of how the writers of the decade understood crisis.

10. Janet Montefiore suggests that the spread of dictatorships across Europe spawned the resurgence of historical novels that "revisited the events of the past in terms of a present need for narratives about surviving defeat" (147).

11. For sustained discussions of gender, the historical novel, and the 1930s, see Montefiore's excellent chapter "Parables of the Past: A Readings of Some Anti-Fascist Historical Novels" and Diana Wallace's "Histories of the Defeated: Writers Taking Sides in the 1930s" in *The Woman's Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900-2000*.

12. One thinks here of the cinematic experiments of the Documentary Film Movement, fictions like Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* or John Dos Passos's *U.S.A,* and Mass-Observation as well as vernacular novels from the 1950s such as Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* and Colin MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners*.

13. Froula takes Woolf and Bloomsbury's aesthetic as one of "modernist-realism," whereby modernist art never discards its interest in everyday life. On her reading, "Bloomsbury contested contemporary *reality* against conventions masquerading as 'realism'" (16). Olson underscores Woolf's attention to facts and material things, and concludes that "her modern realism is not in stark contrast to the realist novels that preceded hers" (85). Esty has recently proposed another type of conjunction between modernism and realism in his take on Lukács. Rather than accept Lukács's division of modernism and realism, Esty suggests we historicize modernism's formal innovations:

> It is not impossible to imagine a critical realism—call it modernism—that registers a heterochronic model of world-historical temporality, one that includes and combines underdevelopment, uneven development, and hyperdevelopment across the global system. With Lukács added back into the equation, perhaps we can think about the experimental temporal forms of high modernist fiction—regressive, cyclical, static, progressive, futurist—as in fact historical, as projections of world-making forces that have pushed beyond the national-industrial phase of modernization and confronted the impossibility of universal progress. ("Global" 371)

14. Gerald L. Bruns's characterization of modernism as nominalism poses a significant challenge to schemes of literary history that collapse period and style. On his reading, modernism is simply the incessant questioning of art or the negation of any set categorization of art. Although aesthetic negativity operates only within a particular historical context, it does suggest that modernism is not defined by a set of traits so much as a conceptual challenge. Fittingly, his book has virtually nothing at all on postmodernism, even though it reaches

into the late twentieth century. While it doesn't quite parallel my arguments here, I find his take refreshing. Also see David James's recent study of modernism's afterlife.

15. While many of the key statements of the New Modernist Studies emphasize its expanding temporal, spatial, and vertical boundaries, very few have targeted the value of the term "modernism" itself. This increasing expansion has the celebratory overtones of an unwitting intellectual imperialism, whereby one colonizes all types of literary, artistic, and cultural phenomena by dubbing them "modernist." One wonders if the goals of such projects in twentieth-century literary criticism might benefit more from provincializing, not globalizing, "modernism." For a summary of the New Modernist Studies' favored sites of expansion, see Mao and Walkowitz's "The New Modernist Studies." The polemic for pushing modernism into all geographies and across all temporal borders is probably best articulated by Melba Cuddy-Keane in "Modernism, Geopolitics, Globalization" and a series of articles by Susan Stanford Friedman, including "Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism," "Periodizing Modernism: Postcolonial Modernities and the Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies," and "Planetarity: Musing Modernist Studies."

16. Of course, Jameson does acknowledge the simultaneous existence of modernisms and realisms, and even the proliferation of new realisms at different historical moments. While I am sympathetic and in agreement with most of Jameson's charges against periodization and the ideology of modernism, my main departure from him here is on the key point of the categorical irreconcilability of aesthetics and epistemology. It strikes me as extraordinarily limiting to argue that either realism or modernism can be compartmentalized as primarily epistemological or primarily aesthetic. One feels that Jameson's polemic gets the best of his analysis on this point. He addresses the question of art and knowledge in truly provocative fashion in both *Marxism and Form* and *The Political Unconscious,* among other places.

17. Crosby's collection and random arrangement of objects she salvages from Abercorn Terrace after it is sold recalls John, the protagonist of Woolf's post-WWI short story "Solid Objects," and the repeated use of "solid objects" in *The Years* also references this earlier story and the world-making power of objects. I can do no more here than gesture towards this connection; a sharp comparative analysis of these two texts still remains to be done.

18. Hayden White distinguishes between modernism and realism according to their treatment of the event. For him, where the distinction between fact and fiction was central to nineteenth-century realism and its mode of treating and

indexing historical events, modernism dissolves the reality of the event. The text gives another layer to the modernist-realism of *The Years*. It certainly does not deny the reality of the event, but it understands the impact of an event as truly excessive of any narrative or historical chronicle that would attempt to bracket it in a mere history of events. The aim of this novel is to interrogate how these events impact our lives and how we go about living history, even if we do so unconsciously. See White's "The Modernist Event" in *Figural Realism*.

19. Levenback cobbles together Woolf's reflections on the war, air raids, and the writing of *The Years* in her informative chapter "Remembering the War in the Years Between the Wars."

20. Sebastian Knowles reads much of the literature of the late 1930s as anticipatory and I rely on his readings here.

21. Arthur Marwick recounts many of the ways the British defended themselves against these early raids. Quoting the official figures from a 1919 edition of *The Observer,* Marwick states that "total civilian casualties were 5,611, including 1,570 fatalities, of whom 1,413 were killed in air attacks" (68).

22. See Sigmund Freud's "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" and Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis's "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality."

23. The figurations of Ireland in Woolf's texts have yet to be analyzed in any comprehensive way. We know Woolf visited Ireland in 1934 and even stayed at Elizabeth Bowen's house. She saw *The Man of Aran* that same year and had quite a bit to say about Irish politics. I have found Lisa Weihman's article "Virginia Woolf's 'Harum-Scarum Irish Wife': Gender and National Identity in *The Years*" to be especially provocative on this issue.

24. Weihman also ties together Woolf's critique of Delia and the situation of Irish nationalism that Delia's storyline indirectly draws into the novel as part of a larger skepticism about nationalism and gender.

25. Cunningham tracks the repeated use of this phrase throughout literature in the 1930s. See chapter three of *British Writers of the Thirties,* especially pages 59-70.

26. Barbara Green maps out the relationship between Woolf's support and use of feminist archives and her late work, especially *Three Guineas*. Yet, as Green importantly reminds us, "Woolf was anything but an activist, and had only a tangential relation to the suffrage struggles of Edwardian England" (144). Woolf's later affinities were with the non-militant sectors of the suffrage movement: "In tracing Woolf's connection to suffrage via the London Society for Women's Service, we should remember that those members of the LSWS who had been active in the suffrage campaign, for example Pippa Strachey,

would have belonged to the constitutionalist NUWSS; thus in working with the Marsham Street Library, Woolf did not affiliate herself with the suffragettes" (144). Green goes on to analyze the way *Three Guineas* draws on the activities, ideas, and histories of both groups, militant and constitutionalist. See Chapter 4 of her *Spectacular Confessions.*

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