THE MIRROR EFFECT:

VIRGINIA WOOLF'S WAR WRITINGS

A Senior Honors Thesis

By

MARCIA WILKENS MURCHISON

Submitted to the Office of Honors Programs
& Academic Scholarships
Texas A&M University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATE
RESEARCH FELLOWS

April 2000

Group: Humanities

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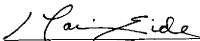
Approved as to style and content by:



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April 2000

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ABSTRACT

The Mirror Effect:

Virginia Woolf's War Writings. (April 2000)

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Born in England in 1882, in the course of her lifetime Virginia Woolf witnessed the end of the Victorian Age and the rise of the Modern Period. She observed firsthand the horrors of World War I and the birth and expansion of Fascism. Her last days were spent in fear of a Nazi invasion of her native England. Woolf experienced the cruelty and inhumanity of war in her personal life, losing friends and family members in service, and devoted much of her work to the examination of the causes and consequences of warring sentiment. This research project approaches the means by which Woolf links the personal and political to suggest that violent and tyrannical attitudes, easily recognizable in the authoritarian states and leaders that dominated the first half of the twentieth century, bear an uncanny resemblance to the patriarchal gendered relations of her own society. Woolf expresses this argument clearly in her revolutionary text *Three Guineas*. This project locates the foundations of her argument in other prose texts by Woolf: the experimental novels *Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse,* and *Between the Acts,* and the book-length lecture/essay *A Room of One's Own.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks to Dr. Marian Eide for direction and much-needed advice, and to the ideas and support of my friends and "Research Group," Heather Holcombe and Lori Lee.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> Three years is a long time to leave a letter unanswered, and your letter has been lying without an answer longer than that. I had hoped it would answer itself, or that other people would answer it for me. But there it is, with its question – How in your opinion are we to prevent war? – still unanswered . . . one does not like to leave so remarkable a letter as yours – a letter perhaps unique in the history of human correspondence, since when before has an educated man asked a woman how in her opinion war can be prevented – unanswered. Therefore let us make the attempt, even if it is doomed to failure. (3)

So begins Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas,* a book-length essay written in the late 1930s shortly before the author's death. Terrified by the certainty of impending war, in *Three Guineas* Woolf explores the implications of patriarchal oppression in her native England.

Her arguments are couched in the form of a letter, addressed to a mythical British gentleman attorney. Woolf has received three requests for the donation of a guinea--one for a women's college building fund, one for a society aiding women in professional employment, and one to help "protect cultural and intellectual liberty" and prevent war. She uses these letters as a premise for her own argument. Attaching "conditions" to the donation of her money, Woolf fashions a lengthy response, revealing the contradictions inherent in patriarchy and calling for a new order in intergender relations.

Her essay, a virtual manifesto, is a disturbingly accurate commentary on the implications of the patriarchal system for even present times. Woolf's revolutionary and overt indictment of that system is a carefully crafted and shockingly valid argument. Her central contention in *Three Guineas* is to argue that there is a strong similarity, a link, between the threatening fascist powers abroad in 1930s continental Europe, so feared and hated in her own country,

and the tyrannical nature of British patriarchy itself.

Woolf, born in 1882 during the Victorian period, witnessed the atrocities of the first World War, lived in fear during the rise of Hitler and Fascism, and remained terrified at the prospect of a Nazi invasion of England until she took her own life in 1941. She was touched personally by the horrors of war as she lost family members and friends. Poised at the very forefront of a generation that witnessed radical military, social, and artistic change, Woolf's work – a substantial body of both fiction and non-fiction–is colored by the reality of war.

In *Three Guineas,* Woolf comments on the uniqueness of the gentleman's request, asking "when before has an educated man asked a woman how in her opinion war can be prevented?". The singularity of the gentleman's request lies not in his interest in preventing war, but in his breech of conventional gender relations. Woolf 's approach to the subject of war is equally unique. In her fiction and non-fiction prose works, she notes a correspondence between issues of gender and warring sentiment. Woolf argues that societally constructed gender roles reflect and contribute to the persistence of violent, warring sentiment, and that the atrocities of war, in turn, act as a mirror, magnifying the destructiveness of rigid gender roles.

CHAPTER II

COMBAT, COURTSHIP, AND MARRIAGE IN *MRS. DALLOWAY*

In her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf reminds the reader that while the machinery of war and its aftermath dramatically transformed the map of Europe and the individual combatants, those who stayed at home were fighting their own battles. *Mrs. Dalloway* recounts the events of a summer's day in 1923. It is the story of Clarissa Dalloway, a London aristocrat. Busy recuperating from an illness, preparing for a party, and supervising domestic life in her London home, Clarissa is surprised by the visit of an old friend and former suitor, Peter Walsh. A day-long series of reminiscences and reflections ensue. For a single day, the promise of Clarissa's past and the constraints of her present situation are juxtaposed. The reader is privy to Clarissa's inner life–her fears, her triumphs, and her self-conception. *Mrs. Dalloway* is also the story of Septimus Warren Smith, a young veteran who, five years after the end of the European War, suffers from delayed shell-shock. The war experience precipitates for Septimus Warren Smith an inner conflict; he is unable to reconcile the horrors of war with English public life. Although large-scale combat is long over, Septimus continues to experience daily the conflict between the realities of war and the idealized notions of military service that persist in his own society. Clarissa Dalloway suffers as well—not from the remembered atrocities of combat, but from an "emptiness about the heart of life" (31).

A combat structure particular to the fighting technologies of World War I characterize the experiences of both Septimus and Clarissa. In his book *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*, author and historian Eric Leed develops the idea that trench warfare was a

profoundly disillusioning experience that destroyed the ideological conception of soldiers as "national personas, armed defenders of a unified community"(112). Beyond this disillusionment, an even more fundamental destruction took place: the soldier's very definition of identity was in jeopardy, as he was "distanced from all military sources and concepts of selfhood" (112). According to Leed, the realities of a defensive war stripped combatants of a means of identification with "the military character and community," and precipitated a "destructive tension between official conceptions of the soldierly self and the front soldier's conception of what he was and what it was possible for him to do and be within the defensive system" (112). The myths of honor and valor, and of the bravery of the front soldier, proved incompatible with the nature of trench warfare. Volunteers and recruits, heading to the front lines, envisioned themselves defending their nation against ideological enemies, and confronting them in traditional military battlefield maneuvers. But the realities of trench warfare rendered this vision naive and illusory. Hidden in the trenches, Englishmen were literally unable to see their enemies; moreover, they were unable to engage in defined battles with them. "Combat" consisted alternatively of long periods of waiting immobile underground and intermittent shelling of a virtually invisible enemy. Soldiers in the defensive positions, then, isolated deep in the trenches, were distanced not only from their families and homes but from an idealized vision of combat that they shared with those at home. Leed attributes the prevalence of "war neurosis" to this tension between a societally constructed conception of military service and the soldier's own experiences: "against the background of this tension we must come to understand war neurosis as an attempt, through the neurotic symptom, to repudiate a role that, objectively, was self-destructive" (112). Soldiers unable to reconcile popular myths of combat and constructions of honor and valor with their own

painful experiences suffered as a result.

Both Septimus and Mrs. Dalloway are engaged in attempts to "repudiate self-destructive roles." Septimus struggles, in the fashion described by Leed, to "play the role" of the brave and stoic soldier. When he succeeds, he finds that, along the way, he has emotionally disengaged himself. His war neurosis as described in *Mrs. Dalloway* is an all-consuming guilt. Clarissa struggles, too, as she finds that, in the middle of her life, she has been absorbed by the role of wife and mother, a reality that is as potentially threatening for her identity as an individual as Septimus's neurosis.

The war forever changes Septimus Warren Smith. His suffering stems from his inability to resolve the disparity between his combat experiences and civilian life. Leed explains the sense of personal discontinuity that many veterans felt following the war and comments on its consequences. He suggests that the soldiers' combat experiences unequivocally altered their individual personalities. When they returned home to civilian society, they were expected to resume their former lives, in spite of their traumatic war experiences. The resulting sense of discontinuity often had psychic consequences. In *Mrs. Dalloway,* Virginia Woolf highlights the extent to which that transition — from combat to peacetime existence – is further problematized by the nationalistic sentiment that attends public perception of combat.

Septimus's sense of patriotism and duty largely determines his decision to go to war. As a young English gentleman, Septimus he is accustomed to fulfilling all the obligations entailed by that role. His enlistment, therefore, is a predictable response to his nation's call to arms. He begins his adulthood in London. Upon arrival in the city, he promptly falls in love with Miss Isabel Pole, a young Shakespeare teacher, and gains employment as a clerk. His

manager, Mr. Brewer, sees promise in his work and abilities, and prophesies "that he would, in ten or fifteen years, succeed to the leather arm-chair in the inner room under the skylight with the deed boxes round him, 'if he keeps his health'" (85). Mr. Brewer sees Septimus, a young man of humble origins, as ready for the fast track to "success," which he defines as a life of leisure and privilege. But Mr. Brewer's plans for Septimus are interrupted when the War intervenes:

> Septimus was one of the first to volunteer. He went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square. (86)

Septimus embodies the patriotic ideal—as a young man he sacrifices, leaving a promising career and a developing relationship to fight for his country. But he does not sacrifice for his country's ideals alone: Woolf reveals Septimus to be a person with romantic notions of his own. He goes to war chasing the promise of a nation that consists of "Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole." Woolf illuminates the pervasiveness of idealistic myths of valor and combat and their effect on Septimus, who goes to the defense of his nation in the tradition of Shakespeare's *Henry the Fifth.* As addresses his vastly outnumbered troops before the Battle of Agincourt on the holiday of "St. Crispin's Day," King Henry V delivers a rallying speech:

> And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by
> From this day to the ending of the world
> But we in it shall be remembered
> We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.
> For he today that sheds his blood with me
> Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
> This day shall gentle his condition.
> And gentlemen in England now abed
> Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
> And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
> That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.
> (*Henry V*. 4.3. lines 57-67)

The sense of brotherhood, of nobility earned through valor, and the promise of unabashed virility are clearly central to Shakespeare's characterization of combat, and to Septimus's as well. But soldiers expecting to gain glory and an enhanced sense of their own masculinity in combat were shocked by the trench experience. For the fledgling idealist Septimus, combat becomes an experience that shatters not only societal values of bravery and valor, but also a sense of personal idealism.

Septimus returns from the war profoundly disillusioned. Life in the trenches of World War I proved a far cry from the leather chair in Mr. Brewer's inner office. Upon his return to England, he is clearly incapable of resuming his former life and his former job. Alienated not only from home, but also from the idealistic myths of bravery and valor that motivated him to go to war; his utter inability to unite combat and civilian life transcends mere cynicism, however. Septimus threatens to kill himself, and his frightened wife Lucrezia seeks professional help. As Septimus responds to the questions of Sir William Bradshaw, the second doctor the couple has visited, the shocking extent of his alienation becomes apparent:

> "You served with great distinction in the War?" [asked Sir William]
>
> The patient [Septimus] repeated the word "war" interrogatively. . . .
>
> "The War?" the patient asked. The European War—that little shindy of schoolboys with gunpowder? Had he served with distinction? He really forgot. In the War itself he had failed.
>
> "Yes, he served with the greatest distinction," Rezia assured the doctor; "he was promoted." (96)

Septimus's language suggests that his experiences in combat are incongruent with his own conception of "war." The European War seems for Septimus to be barely recognizable as anything more than a "shindy of schoolboys with gunpowder." Not only is Septimus unable

to reconcile combat and civilian life – he is fundamentally unable to reject idealistic notions about war and recognize his own experiences as reality. It is here that Woolf intercedes for him, leading the reader to an awareness of the senselessness of war and an understanding of Septimus's condition.

In much the same way, Woolf provides the reader with insight into the experience of Clarissa Dalloway. Clarissa, too, is struggling–not in the trenches of the Western Front, but within the confines of her marriage. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, courtship becomes an initiation not unlike the rite of passage in combat. Leed points out that trench warfare was "fixed in character"–that because soldiers, without a visible, recognizable enemy, could not see themselves as "authors of their acts," the war took on the status of a ritual event, dictating the necessary behavior to participants (38). By juxtaposing the stories of Septimus and Clarissa, Woolf suggests a similarity between their experiences. Through the experiences of courtship and marriage, Mrs. Dalloway, like the front soldier, is stripped of the power to act of her own agency – she is unable to act beyond the ritual behavior dictated by her role as wife and mother. For Clarissa Dalloway, these experiences are an initiation not into the daily atrocities of combat but into the daily atrocities of life in a culture where women are defined in terms of their relation to men.

The reader comes to know Clarissa through a series of flashbacks–remembrances of her youth and maidenhood at Bourton, her family's country home. We are introduced to Peter Walsh, an old friend who occupies her thoughts on this June day: "For they might be parted hundreds of years, she and Peter . . . but suddenly it would come over her, If he were here with me now what would he say?–some days, some sights bringing him back to her calmly, without the old bitterness; which was perhaps the reward of having cared for people" (7).

Mrs. Dalloway's reflection here provides the reader with a first hint that she is experiencing self-doubt. She wonders what Peter would say if he were with her. On the same page the reader learns that Peter and Clarissa were once romantically involved. Indeed, Peter wanted to marry her. Woolf provides insight into Clarissa's reason for rejecting him: "So she would still find herself arguing in St. James park, still making out that she had been right – and she had, too – not to marry him. For in marriage a little licence, a little independence there must be between people living together day in and day out in the same house . . . But with Peter everything had to be shared; everything gone into" (7-8). Many years after her marriage to Richard Dalloway, a conservative Member of Parliament, Clarissa finds herself still doubting her decision. She rejected Peter and with him an intimacy that made her uncomfortable – that frightened and challenged her. She chose Dalloway, with whom she felt little emotional intimacy, instead, and hoped to preserve her independence within marriage.

When Peter pays her an unanticipated visit, Clarissa returns to the throes of self-doubt. During their youth and courtship, Peter consistently mocked Clarissa's naivete and her preoccupation with matters of the domestic realm, predicting that she would someday become "the perfect hostess". Clarissa is hurt by his derision. Her intimacy with Peter more than challenged Clarissa – it threatened her very identity. And years after her marriage to Richard Dalloway, Clarissa has become in fact an ideal hostess". Peter's presence, on this, the day she is to give a party, to "perform" as hostess, seems to Clarissa a very real reproach, one that causes her to doubt herself and to revisit her decision to marry Dalloway. As Clarissa watches Peter play with his knife, a symbol of aggression and violence, she reflects on his effect on her. Woolf describes her experience using the language of battle:

> What an extraordinary habit that was, Clarissa thought; always playing with a knife. Always making one feel, too, frivolous, empty-minded; a mere silly chatterbox, as he used. But I, too, she thought, and, taking up her needle, summoned, like a Queen whose guards have fallen sleep and left her unprotected (she had been quite taken aback
> by this visit–it had upset her) so that anyone can stroll in and have a look at her where she lies with the brambles curving over her, summoned to her help the things she did; the things she liked; her husband; Elizabeth; her self, in short, which Peter hardly knew now, all to come about her and beat off the enemy. (44)

Peter's visit makes Clarissa feel vulnerable, as if she is engaged in a battle she is unprepared to fight. To protect herself, she raises her "needle," summons her "guards," and attempts to justify her life choices in terms of the things that make her life enjoyable–her family, and the things she does and likes. Clarissa defines her "self" in terms of these things, and prepares for combat with the "enemy," Peter Walsh.

But this definition of "self" proves to be a poor defense. In the middle of life, Clarissa discovers the value she has placed on "licence," and on a respectful distance in marriage has turned into a profound sense of isolation. Like the soldier deep in the trench and alienated both from the action of combat and from his own expectations about the combat experience, Clarissa's isolation represents the failure of her expectations for the marriage experience. Mrs. Dalloway is in the process of recuperating from an illness–a weak heart after a bout of influenza prompted doctors to prescribe undisturbed rest. Richard, following doctor's orders, provides Clarissa with a room of her own:

> Like a nun withdrawing, or a child, exploring a tower, she went upstairs, paused at the window, came to the bathroom. . . . There was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room. Women must put off their rich

> apparel. At midday they must disrobe. . . . The sheets were clean, stretched tight in a broad white band from side to side. Narrower and narrower would her bed be. The candle was half burnt down and she had read deep in Baron Marbot's *Memoirs*. She had read late at night of the retreat from Moscow. For the House sat so long that Richard insisted, after her illness, that she must sleep undisturbed. (31)

Clarissa's attic room is a physical space that makes concrete her emotional isolation. The independence she sought as a young bride has become a narrow bed, with tight white sheets–the language recalls the sterility of a hospital environment. Her only companion, the Baron Marbot, is an imaginary one. It is in this space that Clarissa must "disrobe:" when the trappings of life are stripped away, Clarissa finds herself alone in an empty attic room.

When Clarissa marries, she has defined expectations for her role as a wife, just as soldiers like Septimus going off to war had expectations for their roles in combat. Her expectation of independence is eclipsed by the disillusioning reality of isolation in marriage. Similarly, the introduction of other perspectives on her role-governed existence also have a disillusioning effect. The models of other women who push the limits of gender roles lead Mrs. Dalloway to a discrepant awareness of her own situation and her true nature.

Miss Kilman, who tutors Clarissa's daughter Elizabeth, defines an unusual role for her gender and suffers as a result. Poor, unattractive, and thwarted in her attempts to educated herself, Miss Kilman pities herself and demands pity of others. She and Clarissa dislike each other intensely. Miss Kilman resents Clarissa's privilege and apparent superficiality, while Clarissa senses in Miss Kilman's choices a threat to her existence. Miss Kilman is a competitor for her daughter Elizabeth's affections. A devout Christian, Miss Kilman is preoccupied with "converting" Elizabeth to her point of view. She sees Mrs. Dalloway's

entertaining and preoccupation with beauty as shallow and attempts to convince Elizabeth to share her perspective. Miss Kilman's own values – the importance she places on education, asceticism, poverty, and Christianity – are opposed to those of Mrs. Dalloway, a wealthy aesthete and agnostic. The presence of this alternate perspective in her home makes Clarissa feel insecure, and as she projects the anger generated by this insecurity onto Miss Kilman, she is also frustrated by it:

> "It rasped her, though, to have stirring about in her this brutal monster! . . . never to be content quite, or quite secure, for at any moment the brute would be stirring, this hatred, which, especially since her illness, had power to make her feel scraped, hurt in her spine, gave her physical pain, and made all pleasure in beauty, in friendship, in being well, in being loved and making the home a delightful rock, quiver, and bend as if indeed there were a monster grubbing at the roots, as if the whole panoply of content were nothing but self love! this hatred!" (12)

The anger she feels is a response to the challenge to her own life implicit in Miss Kilman's values. Miss Kilman's very existence, as a woman who lives outside the bounds of Clarissa's world of marriage, domestic labor, and material wealth, makes Clarissa doubt the validity of her life. Her anger causes her to begin to lose interest in her role – in home-making, in being loved, in the superficiality of beauty and social interaction. This anger is not a consciously rational response to the challenge of Miss Kilman, but rather a symptom of her frustration with her role as wife and mother.

But Clarissa does realize the limitations of her role. And this realization is prompted by her acquaintance with Lady Bexborough, a powerful aristocrat involved in philanthropic and political work. As she walks through the streets of London, Clarissa thinks of the "woman she admires most, Lady Bexborough," and wishes she could revise her role as a woman: "Oh

if she could have had her life over again! she thought, stepping on to the pavement, could have looked even differently . . . She would have been, like Lady Bexborough, slow and stately, rather large; interested in politics like a man; with a country house; very dignified, very sincere. Instead of which she had a narrow pea-stick figure; a ridiculous little face, beaked like a bird's . . . often now this body she wore, . . . this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing–nothing at all" (10-11) Mrs. Dalloway, provided with the Lady Bexborough as an example of a woman interested in politics and capable of dignity and sincerity, begins to question her decisions. But although Clarissa is romantic about her "idol," Lady Bexborough, Woolf is careful to point out that for women in Britain in the first part of the century, even women interested in the politics of the public realm, there is no easy route to self-actualization. Lady Bexborough's politics are a bit ridiculous and the men who share her interest in politics do not take her seriously. Woolf does not present her as an ideal model for Clarissa, but Clarissa's admiration of her does serve an important function in the text–it reveals Clarissa's dissatisfaction with herself. She wishes she could begin again, re-fashion herself, even her appearance. Woolf highlights in this passage the difference between Clarissa's outward appearance and her inner life. The outer appearance, the face (and body) which Clarissa shows to the world, is for Clarissa "nothing at all"–wholly distinct from her self-conception.

This distinction is echoed in a moment in which Clarissa gazes in the mirror,

> seeing the very delicate pink face of the woman who was that night to have a party; of Clarissa Dalloway, of herself.
>
> How many million times had she seen her face, and always with the same imperceptible contraction! She pursed her lips when she looked in the glass. It was to give her face point. That was her self--pointed; dart-like; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone

> knew how different, how incompatible, and composed so for the world only into one center, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting point. (37)

Woolf provides the reader with insight into Clarissa's condition of self-awareness. We watch Clarissa watching herself. She expends effort in fashioning an appearance that is cohesive and definite. She takes on her role and becomes "the woman who was that night to have a party"– an individual that is truly only in some complex and indirect sense "herself." But the "real" Clarissa is composed of disparate, conflicting parts. It is this woman who "sits in her drawing room" and makes a conscious choice to resolve the conflicting parts of her identity by "making a meeting point."

In *Mrs. Dalloway,* Clarissa does more than assume the role of wife; she is consumed by it. Woolf describes her situation: "She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible, unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying now, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway." (11). It is here that the reader is made aware of the gravity of Clarissa's situation – she has utterly lost herself. When others look at her, they see "Mrs. Richard Dalloway," wife of a Member of Parliament, acclaimed hostess, and aging mother. But Clarissa herself is unknown, unseen – like a soldier in trench warfare, she has been fundamentally stripped of the power to be the author and originator of her own identity. There are no active means by which Clarissa is capable of defining herself. She is a wife, but the act of marriage is over. She is a mother, but will never bear more children. There is a stasis in her role, and a confinement. And as

her idealistic notions for her role as wife and mother are defeated, Clarissa herself is defeated by her role.

Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus have both been convinced to volunteer in roles that are part of an effort to uphold a certain kind of Englishness, an Englishness that benefits only a very few – wealthy men and non-combatants – those who hold power in the patriarchal society described in *Mrs. Dalloway*. As he writes about the sense in which the war was an initiation, Eric Leed notes: "The effects of war upon participants could no more be reversed than the character given by the rites of passage could be resolved back into its constituent elements" (38). Both Mrs. Dalloway and the combatant in trench warfare have been initiated into role play. For Clarissa, marriage fundamentally affects her self-conception, her very identity. For the soldier, the effects of war alter permanently his character. Both are changed by the paralysis inherent in their positions – in roles that strip them of the power to act of their own agency.

The problem that plagues post-War society and haunts Septimus is the persistence of an idealized notion of combat. But no less problematic is the reality that this idealized notion has been adopted and internalized by Septimus. The ideal enables him to "succeed" in battle, to stay himself against fear and injury. When his friend and commanding officer Evans dies, Septimus plays the role of the brave and stoic soldier:

> when Evans was killed, just before the Armistice, in Italy, Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognizing that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him. It was sublime. He had gone through the whole show, friendship, European War, death, had won promotion, was still under thirty and was bound to survive. He was right there. The last shells missed him. He watched them explode with indifference. (86)

In Woolf's terms, in the European War Septimus becomes an "actor." He learns the part that the War has "taught him." His performance in the war is a "show." Like Mrs. Dalloway, who "makes a meeting point" in the mirror, Septimus, too, fashions his own identity with some effort. And like Clarissa Dalloway, Septimus does more than "play the role"– he becomes it. Everything – friendship, even death – the realities that define the human condition, become part of the "show" as well. It is in the days after the war that the idealized role and the stoicism and bravery that characterized Septimus during combat begin to fail him. His careful indifference becomes an awful inability to feel:

> When peace came he was in Milan, billeted in the house of an innkeeper with a courtyard, flowers in tubs, little tables in the open, daughters making hats, and to Lucrezia, the younger daughter, he became engaged one evening when the panic was on him—that he could not feel.
>
> For now that it was all over, truce signed, and the dead buried, he had, especially in the evening, these sudden thunder-claps of fear. He could not feel . . . something failed him; he could not feel. (87)

The terror that accompanies the realization of his indifference is further amplified by Septimus's return to English society, in which war is still valued as an expression of masculinity and nationalistic loyalty. As Leed notes, "Particularly in the mouths of civilians words like 'honor,' 'sacrifice,' 'duty' became intolerable assertions of the lie that nothing had changed. Those words illuminated too starkly the victimization of those at the front" (209). The very qualities that made Septimus adapted to the horror of the front make him ill-adapted to civilian and domestic roles – his inability to feel renders him an unsympathetic husband, and his overpowering sense of guilt prevents him from resuming the structure of his former life.

Dr. Holmes, Sir William Bradshaw, and even Septimus's wife, Lucrezia, each preserve an idealized notion of war. Each fails to accept Septimus's illness as a predictable reaction to the horrors of combat. Dr. Holmes, in fact, refuses to acknowledge Septimus's illness at all, assuring Lucrezia that "nothing whatever is the matter" (91) and encouraging Septimus: "health is largely a matter of our own control. Throw yourself into some outside interests; take up some hobby" (91). Bradshaw diagnoses Septimus as merely "not having a sense of proportion" (96), and glibly replies to Septimus's distress with the statement: "We all have our moments of depression" (97). Lucrezia insists that Septimus "served with the greatest distinction," in spite of his pleas to the contrary (96). Lucrezia and Septimus have arrived at contradictory definitions of distinction. For Lucrezia, the military "distinction" society confers on Septimus for his service combat is a straightforward expression of his accomplishments as a soldier. But for Septimus the notion of "distinction" is problematized by the realities of combat, in which he insists "he had failed"– Septimus's failure to save his friend Evans, and to grieve for Evans' death, supersede what for him is an artificial notion of distinction (96).

Septimus Warren Smith is a product of the War—a human type created by inhuman conditions. Beneath his "lack of proportion" lies the reality of everything awful that accompanies combat and undergirds nationalistic sentiment. And yet, it is his very real pain that the doctors ignore. Septimus is a mirror, reflecting the atrocities and the realities of combat. But his contemporaries, English non-combatants, symbolized by the figures of Dr. Holmes, Sir William Bradshaw, and even his wife, Lucrezia, turn away from the figure in the glass. English society is unwilling, or unable, to see itself in his pain, to realize that Septimus's "sense of proportion" is valid – a necessary, a human, response to war.

Septimus's ultimate suicide is a recognition of *this truth*, a reflection of his unwillingness to live in a world that denies his experience as reality. This recognition of the disparity between Septimus's experience and society's perceptions of his experience mimics Mrs. Dalloway's honest look in the mirror. As she gazes at her reflection in the mirror – the "meeting point" she makes for the benefit of others – Mrs. Dalloway, much like Septimus, acknowledges that the reflection society is willing to look at is not a true reflection of herself and her experience.

CHAPTER III

REFLECTIONS ON THE ENGLISH DINNER TABLE:

Fascism and Patriarchy in *A Room of One's Own and To the Lighthouse*

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf illuminates the devastating effects of trench warfare and the expectations that surround the soldier. She goes further to locate these effects on a continuum within the English home. Woolf argues throughout her work that the personal and the political are inextricably connected. The experiences of the soldier and the wife are analogous. In much the same way, what happens at home often bears an uncanny resemblance to what is happening in the public sphere. In her novel *To the Lighthouse,* and her book-length essay *A Room of One's Own,* Woolf locates the foundations of Fascist, warring sentiment in an unlikely place – the English dinner table.

To the Lighthouse is Woolf's poetic exploration of the dynamics of English family life. The novel centers around the Ramsay family. Mr. Ramsay is an esteemed but aging scholar and a domineering father and husband. His wife, Mrs. Ramsay, is the "ideal" mother, wife, and hostess, preoccupied with ameliorating Mr. Ramsay, caring for her children, entertaining, and making romantic matches among young men and women. In *To the Lighthouse,* Woolf explores the nature of relationships – between husband and wife, parent and child, and man and woman.

Criticizing the lack of personal space for creativity within the home an Englishwoman must manage, in *A Room of One's Own,* Woolf advances her opinion that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (4). She substantiates her argument by foregrounding the social and historical position of women in modern Britain. Along the

way, she explores the nature of the established patriarchy in Britain and the conditions that have prevented women from creating their own literary and intellectual traditions.

Asked to give a lecture on the topic of "women and fiction," Woolf heads to the British Museum to begin her research. Once there, she discovers a preponderance of books written by men about women, but curiously few by women about men. Wondering at this disparity, Woolf begins to read the books written by male professors, and she begins to notice a common tone – one of anger. Her reading leads Woolf to ask questions: "How explain the anger of the professors? Why were they angry?". She notices that the professors are angry, and that their anger has manifested itself in their works. It finds expression stylistically – in the form of satire, for example – and rhetorically, in sentiment, curiosity, and reprobation (32). But the expression of this anger is not overt: "Anger, I called it. But it was anger that had gone underground and mixed itself with all kinds of other emotions. To judge from its odd effects, it was anger disguised and complex, not anger simple and open" (32). The professors' anger is disguised because the battle towards which it addresses itself takes place in the domestic sphere, a place where harmony is necessarily a part of the illusory atmosphere.

Woolf is able to identify one man's anger, however, because when she reads what he has written about women, "I thought, not of what he was saying, but of himself" (34). Woolf points out that the angry professor's very words are colored by his anger: "When an arguer argues dispassionately he thinks only of the argument; and the reader cannot help thinking of the argument, too" (34). Woolf establishes that the professor's anger is not merely addressed towards its target – it is also a reflection on the author himself. His own insecurities are exposed alongside his argument.

Positing possible explanations for the professor's anger, Woolf speculates that perhaps "when the professor insisted a little too emphatically on the inferiority of women, he was concerned not with their inferiority, but with his own superiority" (34). And she attempts to explain why this preoccupation with superiority may be necessary:

> Life for both sexes–as I looked at them, shouldering their way along the pavement–is arduous, difficult, a perpetual struggle. It calls for gigantic courage and strength. More than anything, perhaps, creatures of illusion that we are, it calls for confidence in oneself. Without self-confidence we are as babes in the cradle. And how do we generate this imponderable quality, which is yet so invaluable, most quickly? By thinking other people inferior to oneself. (34-35)

According to Woolf, in order to face daily frustrations, humans must have confidence in themselves. And possibly the surest and quickest way to gain such confidence is to make others seem smaller than oneself.

Woolf goes on to extend the rationale: "Hence the enormous importance to a patriarch who has to conquer, who has to rule, of feeling that great numbers of people, half the human race indeed are by nature inferior to himself. It must indeed be one of the chief sources of his power" (35). She points out that this false sense of confidence, created by viewing others as inferior, may actually be one of the "chief sources of power" for the patriarch. The "half the human race" she refers to is clearly the "female half." It is the perceived inferiority of females that enables the patriarch to "conquer" and "rule," which are among his chief functions.

Woolf's insight has implications for both the public theater, in which world war takes place, and the domestic front. In *Mrs. Dalloway,* the role that defines Clarissa and prevents her from asserting herself also serves to enable those who do possess the power to act. Her activity in the domestic sphere – home-making, raising her daughter, and hosting parties –

enables her husband to pursue his political career as a Member of Parliament. He is vested not only with power to "conquer" and "rule" in his position in the Commons, but also with power in his own home.

Woolf comments on the domestic sphere in *A Room of One's Own*, as well. On the same page, she makes her observations more pointed as she "turns the light of this observation to real life" (35):

> Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice his natural size . . . Whatever may be their use in civilised societies, mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic action. That is why Napoleon and Mussolini insist so emphatically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge. This serves to explain how restless they are under her criticism. For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished. How is he to go on giving judgment, civilising natives, making laws, writing books and dressing up and speechifying at banquets, unless he can see himself at breakfast and dinner at least twice the size he really is? (35-36)

In this passage, Woolf claims that, in a functioning patriarchy, female inferiority is a necessary condition for male superiority. In order for men to feel powerful – to conquer and subdue – to commit actions that Woolf terms at once "violent" and "heroic," they must be bolstered by a false sense of superiority.

The mirrors she describes do more than merely reflect. Like the mirrors in *Mrs. Dalloway,* they present images which distort reality. When Clarissa Dalloway gazes at herself in the mirror, she constructs an artificial identity and fashions herself into the role that society expects her to play. As she conforms to her role as "Mrs. Richard Dalloway," she substantiates the patriarchal system, which demands that she define herself in relation to her

husband. Septimus, who serves as a mirror in the text, presents an image of the ugliness of war, of nationalistic sentiment, and of patriarchy's failures. Because his very real pain subverts the patriarchal system, society chooses to see his reflection as a distortion, one that "lacks proportion," to use the words of Sir William Bradshaw.

The mirrors in *A Room of One's Own* are rather like "fun house" mirrors–women somehow amplify men to twice their natural size. This distorted reflection creates a false sense of confidence. Woolf intentionally invokes Mussolini, a figurehead of Fascism, and the conqueror and dictator Napoleon, both men notorious for their small stature. The actions inspired by this false sense of confidence are by no coincidence ones that perpetuate the sense of dominion that already pervades intergender relations in this description. Fascism, conquest, and warring sentiment, Woolf implies, are all results of the masculine sense of superiority.

But these violent and heroic actions take place on a smaller scale, as well. It is at the "breakfast and dinner" tables that men gain the strength to carry out the responsibilities of public life in Britain–"giving judgment, civilising natives, making laws, writing books, and . . . speechifying" (35). The same distorted mirroring effect lies behind both the Fascist dictatorships abroad and the English patriarchy, in which men bolster their confidence by feeling themselves superior to women.

While Woolf's ideas as presented in *A Room of One's Own* are explicitly and radically political, the same ideas find expression in a more oblique way in her novels and other works. In the first section of *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay hosts a dinner party for her large family, a few friends, and some of her husband's academic associates who are visiting at their house. In this dinner scene, which dominates the first section, the "mirroring effect" Woolf

describes in *A Room of One's Own* is made poignantly concrete. For example, Mr. Charles Tansley, a young academic staying at the home of his dissertation advisor, Mr. Ramsay, is preoccupied with his "scholarly work" and with establishing himself and gaining the respect of his mentor. Mr. Tansley is uneasy at dinner and contemptuous of the women with whom he must interact, a contempt that simultaneously bolsters his sense of intellectual worth and renders him painfully conscious of his social ineptitude. The reader is witness to his discomfort:

> He felt extremely, even physically, uncomfortable. He wanted somebody to give him a chance of asserting himself. He wanted it so urgently that he fidgeted in his chair, looked at this person and that person, and tried to break into their talk, opened his mouth and shut it again. They were talking about the fishing industry. Why did no one ask him his opinion? What did they know about the fishing industry? (91)

Mr. Tansley panics as he tries in vain to have others recognize and value him. He desperately wants someone to "give him a chance of asserting himself." In the pattern Woolf describes in *A Room of One's Own*, he attempts to preserve his own self-confidence by assuring himself of the inferiority of others: "What did they know about the fishing industry?".

But readers are not the only ones privy to Tansley's discomfort. Lily Briscoe, the Ramsay's adopted daughter – a free thinker and Modern painter – observes as well. She notes Mr. Tansley's discomfort and the ardent desire to assert himself which lies behind his attempts to break into the conversation. And although she knows she could relieve his discomfort by helping him enter the conversation, she does not want to assist him. She is disinclined to do so because she remembers his insult – his statement that women "can't write and can't paint"– a criticism that is intensely personal for Lily, herself a painter. Charles

Tansley, like Woolf's angry professor in *A Room of One's Own,* insists on the inferiority of women in order to guard against his own insecurities and to ensure his own superiority. Lily, conscious of Tansley's desire to assert himself at her expense, is loathe to "magnify" him by aiding his entrance into the dinner table conversation.

Woolf proceeds to comment on this very relationship as she describes further Lily's reaction:

> There is a code of behavior, she [Lily] knew, whose seventh article (it may be) says that on occasions of this sort it behooves the woman, whatever her occupation may be, to go to the help of the young man opposite so that he may expose or relieve the thigh bones of, the ribs of his vanity, of his urgent desire to assert himself, as indeed it is their duty to, she reflected in her old maidenly fairness, to help us, suppose the tube was to burst into flames. Then she thought, I should certainly expect Mr. Tansley to get me out. But how would it be, she thought, if neither of us did these things? (91)

Lily feels herself to be under obligation, as a woman, to help Charles Tansley "relieve himself" of his

vanity. The obligation is almost a formal one–Lily feels as if she must act in response to a "code of behavior." Indeed, Woolf argues, there is a structure to the English patriarchy–it is built upon the certainty that women will "magnify" men.

There is a role for men to play as well–Lily would expect Mr. Tansley to save her if there were a fire in the tube. And that expectation is a burden. Woolf notes the constraining nature of masculine gender roles in *A Room of One's Own*. The men who control patriarchy "*have* to conquer," and "*have* to rule," regardless of their own inclination or fitness to do so. And here, Lily articulates the expectation of masculine physical prowess. The expectations attached to gender roles, for both males and females, are problematic. And the frustration of

such expectations can be devastating for individuals. When Septimus's combat experiences in the trenches of World War I fail to resemble the myth of masculine valor in combat, his character is forever altered.

In this scene at the table in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf reveals the personal to be political. Tansley's uneasiness is more than mere social anxiety. It is barely veiled insecurity, a lack of self-confidence, one that is reflected on both social and national levels in the persistence of the systems of English patriarchy and of Fascism. Lily's conditioned response to his need for help is an expression of the same gendered power relationship that Woolf describes in *A Room of One's Own*. Female inferiority is as necessary for sustaining the English patriarchy as it is to propagating the Fascist regime of Mussolini. Both systems are sustained by a consistent and intentional effort to marginalize and undermine the opinions and status of anyone outside of the established power structure – women, Jews, homosexuals, and other minority groups. If Lily gives in by helping out Mr. Tansley, she will magnify his ego at her own expense. If she assists this man who believes she "can't write or paint" to regain his sense of self-confidence, she will unwittingly affirm his perception of her own inferiority.

While in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf challenges her reader to be part of creating a new tradition of feminine thought and writing, in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf seems to consider what might be the terms of a new gender order. Illuminating the destructiveness of rigid gender roles and exposing the power structure of English patriarchy, she leads the reader to ask, with Lily Briscoe, "how would it be . . . if neither of us did these things?".

CHAPTER IV

THE DRAMA OF THE PUBLIC THEATER AND THE HOME FRONT:

Mirrors and War in *Between the Acts*

In Virginia Woolf's novel *Between the Acts*, Lily's question resonates in the political situation suggested by Woolf's depiction of village and Big House culture. *Between the Acts*, composed in 1939 in the midst of Hitler's continental military aggression and Britain's increasing involvement in the escalating conflict, is the story of a single day in the lives of a remote group of English aristocrats. The action centers around a pageant, to be performed at Pointz Hall, home of the Oliver family, by local villagers. An annual event, this year's pageant is a panoply of English history, up to and including the present day, the present moment, and even "ourselves." The pageant is framed within a larger story–the interaction between the members of the Oliver family and their guests. These events that occur "between the acts" form the real drama of the novel.

Woolf's characters are unhappy. They are frustrated, angry, and fearful. The atrocities of war and the threat of a Nazi invasion of England loom large in their thoughts and conversations. But these anxieties are only secondary to the sense of unhappiness generated by interactions within the home. In *Between the Acts,* as in *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway,* these two spheres – the larger realm, in which world war takes place, and the smaller one, in which the daily interactions between husband and wife assume larger-than-life proportions – are connected in important ways. In *Between the Acts*, however, Woolf takes a different approach to exposing their relationship. The play, framed within the larger narrative, challenges its audience to "calmly consider themselves" (187). The members of the audience, and of Woolf's larger audience, her readers, are encouraged to look honestly at

themselves. In *Between the Acts,* Woolf calls on the audience members and her readers to explore their individual contributions to the tyrannies both of the home and of fascism.

She begins by developing a situation of discontent in the home. This discontent manifests itself most clearly in the portrayal of Isabella Oliver (Isa) and her husband, Giles, a businessman, whose marriage is in crisis. Isa is dissatisfied with herself, and Woolf reflects that dissatisfaction when she describes Isa as "abortive": "'Abortive,' was the word that expressed her [Isa]. She never came out of a shop, for example, with the clothes she admired; nor did her figure . . . please her" (15). Isa is more than critical of herself. The strong word abortive implies that Isa thwarts her own happiness. She holds herself to unrealistic expectations, and fails to "please" herself. Like Mrs. Dalloway, whose body seems to her foreign, an inappropriate reflection of her inner life and character, Isa, too, is uncomfortable in her own skin. But Isa does not suffer merely from her own criticism–she also fears her husband's: "she was afraid, of her husband. Didn't she write her poetry in a book bound like an account book lest Giles might suspect?" (50). Isa, through her poetry, keeps "account" of her experiences and her perspective. Her fear of sharing this part of herself with Giles reflects the drastic disparity of their experiences, and the uneven power structure implicit in their relationship.

Isa is a highly self-conscious character. Although she was once passionately in love with Giles, her feelings have changed. Yet even though she finds herself attracted to other men (on this June day, to the farmer Rupert Haines), she still has an emotional attachment to Giles. Woolf sets the scene as he enters the story in the dining room of Pointz Hall: "'He is my husband,' Isabella thought, as they nodded across the bunch of many-coloured flowers. 'The father of my children.' It worked, that old cliché; she felt pride; and affection; then pride

again in herself, whom he had chosen. It was a shock to find . . . how much she felt when he came in, not a dapper city gent, but a cricketer, of love; and of hate" (48). Isa's feelings for Giles here are contingent upon her status as his wife and the mother of his children. This "cliché" is a role that Isa occupies, and that she is clearly conscious of occupying. It is a role, a self-conception, that defines and sustains her, giving her pride in herself as Giles' chosen wife. But it is also a limiting role: like Mrs. Dalloway, Isa, without an alternate vocation or creative outlet besides marriage and motherhood, must continue to derive her self-worth through those roles. For these women, both their bodies and their domestic roles fail to give expression to their respective identities.

Isa has conflicting feelings of both love and hatred for her husband; a predictable outcome of her constraining role. Her feelings are roused in this scene by Giles' appearance. Before joining his family at lunch, Giles changes from the "city clothes" that reflect his London job as businessman, to "cricketer clothes," the outfit of a country gentleman. Isa is attracted to this "rural" version of Giles, an interest that mirrors her attraction to Rupert Haines, a farmer. Giles himself wanted to be a farmer: "Given his choice, he would have chosen to farm. But he was not given his choice. So one thing led to another; and the conglomeration of things left you flat; held you fast, like a fish in the water. So he came for the week-end, and changed" (47). Giles, who feels he had no choice but to become a businessman, feels trapped in his role. His inability to choose his profession has left him with the sense that he is powerless. This feeling is the chief source of his frustration, which manifests itself in all aspects of his life, particularly in his relationships with women–with his Aunt Lucy, upon whom he projects his anger, and with his wife, to whom he looks for support and admiration.

Giles feels impotent, unable to act, and this feeling is powerfully frustrating for him. In the dining room scene, the reader gets the first sense of his frustration: "He must change. And he came into the dining room looking like a cricketer, . . . though he was enraged. Had he not read, in the morning paper, in the train, that sixteen men had been shot, others prisoned, just over there, across the gulf, in the flat land which divided them from the continent? Yet he changed" (47). It is in this significant moment that Woolf first mentions the war, a topic that figures in the consciousness of almost every character in *Between the Acts*. Giles' "real life"–the life of a businessman with a country home, the leisurely life of an aristocrat – frustrates him in the face of the conflict overseas. He projects this frustration onto the people that surround him, particularly onto his Aunt Lucy:

> Giles nicked his chair into position with a jerk. Thus only could he show his irritation, his rage with old fogies who sat and looked at views over coffee and cream when the whole of Europe–over there–was bristling like . . . He had no command of metaphor. Only the ineffective word 'hedgehog' illustrated his vision of Europe, bristling with guns, poised with planes. . . . He, too, loved the view. And blamed Aunt Lucy, looking at views, instead of–doing what? What she had done was to marry a squire now dead; she had borne two children, one in Canada, the other, married, in Birmingham. His father, whom he loved, he exempted from censure; as for himself, one thing followed another; and so he sat, with old fogies, looking at views. (54)

Like Septimus, Giles is caught between his real vocational desire–farming–and his conception of himself as an English gentleman. As a patriotic Englishman, well aware of the tradition of military service and valor, Giles no doubt feels pressure to volunteer to defend his nation. His irrational frustration at the apparent apathy of his Aunt Lucy, who, as a woman, is under no obligation to "serve her country" in the military, may be seen as a reflection of his own guilt

and insecurity.

Giles longs for a vital, action-filled existence. He, like Charles Tansley in *To the Lighthouse*, wants to assert himself, and in order to obtain the self-confidence necessary to do so, he searches for affirmation from women. His flirtation with Mrs. Manresa, a wealthy woman who visits Pointz Hall for the play, bolsters Giles with a false sense of empowerment. Manresa is flattered by his attentions and willing to flatter Giles. He reflects that Manresa "was a thorough good sort, making him feel less of an audience, more of an actor" (108). Woolf inserts dramatic language to emphasize Giles' longing to act. He does not want to be audience to the drama of the war, or to the drama of the home. But because his desire to act does not find simple expression, he, like Tansley, and like the very tyrants who perpetuate the continental conflict, looks to women in order to gain confidence. The term "actor" also implies that Giles is playing a part–in order to assert himself, he must assume a role. Here, he plays "hero" to Manresa's admiration: "Taking him in tow she [Manresa] felt: I am the Queen, he my hero" (107). Mrs. Manresa also defines herself in terms of a stereotypical gender role; she acts the part of "Queen" in need of rescue by her "hero," Giles. What is left "between the acts"and behind the scenes in this role-governed interaction is the power dynamic implicit in the male/female relationship.

As is the case for Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus, Giles and Isa find the roles they play to be self-defeating. The result of their "role play" is a pervasive unhappiness. This unhappiness surfaces elsewhere in the story, as well. Giles' father, Bart, terrorizes his grandson with insensitive teasing. Giles dislikes his Aunt Lucy. He hates William Dodge, a young homosexual man, who visits his home with Mrs. Manresa. And Isa is frustrated by Mrs. Manresa's effect on Giles. The group assembled at Pointz Hall on this June Day of 1939 is

a tangled web of jealousies, fears, and frustrations.

It is to this group that playwright and director Miss La Trobe presents her pageant. The Oliver family and their guests are temporarily and superficially unified as they watch her play. They witness a pageant of their common history–Shakespeare, Queen Elizabeth, the Age of Reason, and the Victorian Period are offered up for review. But this "common history" is a false construction; it is a distorted picture of England's history. While it reflects some aspects, it deliberately leaves out other, equally significant, elements. And, between the acts, this artificial unity appropriately dissolves. Giles flirts with Mrs. Manresa, Isa searches for farmer Rupert Haines, and the disparity of impressions between the various audience members are exposed.

As Miss La Trobe listens from her hiding place behind a tree, she hears the audience's reflections on the play:

> 'They're not ready . . . I hear 'em laughing' (they were saying). '. . . it's pleasant now, the suns's not so hot . . . That's one good the war brought us–longer days . . . Where did we leave off? D'you remember? The Elizabethans . . . Perhaps she'll reach the present, if she skips. . . . D'you think people change? Their clothes, of course . . . But I meant ourselves . . . Clearing out a cupboard, I found my father's old top hat . . . But ourselves–do we change?
>
> 'No, I don't go by politicians. I've a friend who's been to Russia. He says . . . And my daughter, just back from Rome, she says the common people, in the cafés, hate Dictators . . . Well, different people say different things. . . .'
>
> '. . . It's the wives that make the trouble. . . ."
>
> 'And what about the Jews? The refugees, the Jews . . . People like ourselves, beginning life again . . . But it's always been the same
> . . . (120-121)

The very fragmentary structure of the narrative itself reflects the disunified impressions of the audience. It is clear that La Trobe's play has provoked her audience. One individual

wonders, perhaps inspired by the pageant of history, if humans "really change." But their conversation is also colored by the events of the "larger world"– the implications of war, the perceptions of dictatorship, and, cleverly imbedded in the midst of this chatter, issues of gender. The audience, preoccupied by the frightening reality of the present fails, to unite in, to be absorbed by, Miss La Trobe's depiction of the past.

Given the audience's preoccupation with the present, and the grave real-life drama simultaneously being enacted on the continent, the culmination of Miss La Trobe's pageant becomes particularly poignant. The audience reads on the program the title of the last act: "The Present Time. Ourselves" (178). Indignant, they wonder how La Trobe might represent the present day: "But what could she know about ourselves? The Elizabethans, yes; the Victorians, perhaps; but ourselves; sitting here on a June day in 1939–it was ridiculous. 'Myself'–it was impossible. Other people, perhaps, . . . But she won't get me–no, not me" (178). The audience resists definition–they refuse to believe that Miss La Trobe will "get them," to believe that she can represent them in an accurate way. Also notable is the irony in the audience's willingness to agree that the Elizabethans could be easily known and represented in the pageant, and that, to a lesser degree, the Victorians might be accurately represented, given their own resistance to representation. It would seem intuitive that it might be possible to give a more accurate representation of recent history than of the remote past. What is clearly communicated here is the audience's unwillingness to be defined.

Miss La Trobe begins her presentation of "The Present Time. Ourselves." with a "dousing of reality," a real-time attempt to make the audience experience the present. When reality appears "too strong" and the audience becomes confused and restless, she is saved by a fortuitous rain shower (179). She presents next a backdrop representation of "Civilization

(the wall) in ruins; rebuilt (witness man with hod) by human effort; witness also woman handing bricks" (181), and then a smattering of popular music. Finally, Miss La Trobe surprises her indignant audience. As the village children emerge from the trees carrying mirrors, the audience members sit in shock:

> What's the notion? Anything that's bright enough to reflect, presumably, ourselves?
> Ourselves! Ourselves!
> Out they leapt, jerked, skipped. Flashing, dazzling, dancing, jumping. Now old Bart . . . he was caught. Now Manresa. Here a nose . . . There a skirt . . . Then trousers only . . . Now perhaps a face . . . Ourselves? But that's cruel. To snap us as we are, before we've had time to assume . . . And only, too, in parts . . . That's
> what's so distorting and upsetting and utterly unfair (184).

The mirror distorts reality by reflecting men at twice their size in *To the Lighthouse* and *A Room of One's Own*. Here, the mirror forces a people in crisis to take an honest look at themselves. The audience is caught in fragments – a nose here, a skirt there. This honest look is a "cruel" one, because it captures the audience members in parts only. The structure of this passage is similar to the structure of the dialogue that occurs "between the acts." It seems to be spontaneous and fragmentary in the same way that the reflections are broken and partial. The reflections are also seen as "cruel" because they capture the audience before they have had time to "assume"– before they have gathered themselves for presentation. Like Mrs. Dalloway, who looks in the mirror and collects her reflection into a unified image to present to the world – "Mrs. Richard Dalloway"– in spite of her own realization that she is composed of disparate parts, these individuals want to assume their own roles before presenting themselves to be looked upon. Revealing the "different" and "incompatible" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 37) parts of the self is a cruel intrusion because it makes individuals vulnerable, renders them

transparent to others and to themselves.

But this "cruelty" has a function in Miss La Trobe's play and in the larger novel, as well. The audience–Giles, Isa, and the rest included–are caught before they can define themselves and identify others in terms of the roles that have proven both sustaining and destructive. Miss La Trobe takes advantage of this moment of vulnerability, addressing the still stunned audience from behind the trees:

> *let's talk in words of one syllable, . . . Let's break the rhythm and forget the rhyme. And calmly consider ourselves. Ourselves. Some bony. Some fat.* (The glasses confirmed this.) *Liars most of us. Thieves, too.* (The glasses made no comment on that.) *The poor are as bad as the rich are. . . . Consider the gun slayers, the bomb droppers here or there. They do openly what we do slyly.* (187)

The audience cannot hide from the mirrors. Nor can they run from La Trobe's challenge. They have no choice but to "calmly consider themselves." The mirrors reflect faithfully the physical appearance of the audience members–some are fat, others are bony. And with the same fidelity, Miss La Trobe constructs a verbal reflection. Here, in the English garden, she implies, are the seeds of the "gun slaying" and "bomb dropping" that threaten and anger the audience. Woolf, writing for the playwright Miss La Trobe, makes explicit the connection between the personal and the political, and, specifically, the military. It is the reality of war that catalyzes the power of La Trobe's mirrors, that provokes the audience to an earnest and introspective gaze inside.

Having made vulnerable her audience and challenged them look at themselves honestly and critically, Miss La Trobe returns to the image of Civilization (the wall) being rebuilt by human effort, by man and woman together (181). She implores them: "*Look at ourselves, ladies and gentlemen! Then at the wall; and ask how's this wall, the great wall, which we call, perhaps*

miscall, civilization, to be built by (here the mirrors flicked and flashed) *orts, scraps, and fragments like ourselves?*" (188). La Trobe's assertion that the wall of civilization needs "rebuilding" is significant. Indeed, she suggests that "civilization" may not be civilized at all. For Miss La Trobe, the "bomb dropping" and "gun slaying" of the European wars become an opportunity to rethink just how the "wall of civilization" should be rebuilt.

This honest look in the mirror has implications not only for civilization in the abstract, but also for the domestic sphere of home and family. In *Between the Acts,* Virginia Woolf provides the reader with a portrait of a family in decline. And as the novel draws to a close, after the actors and audience have returned home, the narrative returns to where it began – to Isa and Giles, alone for the first time in the novel. Woolf describes the scene:

> Alone, enmity was bared; also love. Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the field of night.
>
> Isa let her sewing drop. The great hooded chairs had become enormous. And Giles too. And Isa too against the window. The window was all sky without colour. The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks.
>
> Then the curtain rose. They spoke." (219)

For Giles and Isa, the "house has lost its shelter." The drama that they are performing is age-old, and, in the language of this passage, they have become actors. The drama of the home, the events that take place "between the acts," are as significant as the pageant of canonized British history. There is hope in this passage – hope that the family might be rebuilt, recreated, through open communication; hope that Giles and Isa, acting in the age-old drama of love and marriage, may rethink traditional roles. Woolf suggests that if enmity and love are bared, if humans look honestly at themselves, then real communication might take place.

If Isa and Giles fight, then they will be able to embrace, and this embrace will be a creative one.

Communication, then, is key to rebuilding the home and family. But as the pageant and the novel draw to a close, the audience and reader are still left wondering, "How should the wall of civilization be rebuilt?". Just as she captures her audience's attention, confronts and provokes them, Miss La Trobe steps away from her platform, and allows the local clergyman, Rev. Streatfield, to sum up the pageant with his own impressions and a plea for church donations. What Miss La Trobe (and Virginia Woolf) leave the audience and reader with are questions, and a hint that those questions may be the best way for "rebuilding the wall".

In a self-reflexive moment, as the audience begins to head home, one individual reflects on Rev. Streatfield's commentary:

> He said she meant we all act. Yes, but whose play? Ah, that's the question! And if we're left asking questions, isn't it a failure, as a play? . . . Or was that, perhaps, what she meant? . . . that if we don't jump to conclusions, if you think, and I think, perhaps one day,
> thinking differently, we shall think the same? (200)

Woolf suggests here a possible role for the artist. In the pageant, Miss La Trobe asks questions of her audience that lead them to question themselves. The audience is left wondering exactly what she *meant and* why she meant it. They are forced to examine their own relationship to the "gun slayers" and "bomb droppers," and to wonder, with the playwright, "How can the wall of civilization be rebuilt?".

Woolf leads her own audience, the reader, to the same sort of self-examination. She suggests that if individuals continue to attempt to communicate, continue to ask questions, that perhaps they may eventually find common ground. And on this common ground, they may begin to rebuild the "wall of civilization".

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Woolf's optimism, her hope that, by communicating openly, men and women may hope to "rebuild the wall of civilization," which has been damaged by years of war and of oppression at home, is echoed in *Three Guineas*. In the uniqueness of the gentleman's letter, which asks a woman for her opinion on how best to prevent war, Woolf sees a spark of hope – his request for help becomes a move towards open communication and mutual respect between men and women. In the body of her works, Woolf writes to expose connections between the public and private spheres – she compares the tyranny and oppression of Fascism to the marginalization of women in English patriarchy. But the connection between the public and private spheres transcends one of blame. As she concludes her response to the gentleman in *Three Guineas,* Woolf writes:

> such will be our ruin if you in the immensity of your public abstraction forget the private figure, or if we in the intensity of our private emotions forget the public world. Both houses will be ruined, the public and the private, the material and the spiritual, for they are inseparably connected. But with your letter we have reason to hope. For by asking our help you recognise that connection; and by reading your words we are reminded of other connections that lie far deeper than the facts on the surface. (143)

Woolf asserts that, only by working together, by continuing to question and to ask for help from one another, can men and women hope to prevent war. And implicit in this assertion is the idea that "peace" – harmony in the public sphere – can only be effected if it is a magnification of harmony in the private sphere – the home.

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