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Everyday War: Sylvia Townsend Warner and Virginia Woolf in World War II

MAUD ELLMANN

War in the Air

H. G. Wells's prophetic 1908 novel *The War in the Air*, described by its author as a "fantasia of possibility," foresees the wholesale destruction of civilization by aerial bombardment. In a preface to the second edition, Wells explains: "[W]ith the flying machine war alters in its character; it ceases to be an affair of 'fronts' and becomes an affair of 'areas'; neither side, victor or loser, remains immune from the gravest injuries, and while there is a vast increase in the destructiveness of war, there is also an increased indecisive-ness. Consequently, 'War in the Air' means social destruction instead of victory as the end of war" (*War* 278). On its first publication, the novel's apocalyptic finale was greeted with hearty derision, but as Wells points out in 1921, this ending no longer seems "quite so wildly funny" after World War I. It seemed even less funny twenty years later, when Wells, in a preface to the wartime edition of 1941, permits himself to chide, "I told you so" (279).¹

This essay explores the implications of "war in the air" for Sylvia Townsend Warner and Virginia Woolf. Most obviously, war in the air refers to "the extraordinary battle in the sky," as Elizabeth Bowen describes the London Blitz (*Heat* 105). But war in the air also suggests that war has seeped into the atmosphere, becoming as pervasive and familiar as the weather. For Woolf and Warner, war is "in the air" in the sense that it suffuses everyday life, invading every dimension of existence, including the air itself. Hence the everyday can no longer be regarded as an insulated zone of peace or war as a bounded event that can be declared and entered. Now that war has taken to the air, it is no longer a crisis but a presence: "there is always war," as Gertrude Stein declares (*Wars* 3). For Britons during World War II, air was both the source of mass annihilation and the medium in which the danger was communicated "on the air," enveloping everyday life in an atmosphere of terror.

Woolf and Warner respond to this atmosphere by turning to the English countryside, reworking the conventions of pastoral under the pressure of the national emergency. Woolf's posthumous novel *Between the Acts*, written from 1939 to 1941, portrays a "remote village in the very heart of England" on the brink of war (12).² Warner's *The Corner That Held Them* (1948), also written during the war years, chronicles the collective life of an isolated medieval convent in the Norfolk Broads.

¹ My title, "Everyday War," is borrowed from Mary A. Favret, "Everyday War." I have also benefited from Favret's *War at a Distance*. See also my "Death in the Air," which focuses on Woolf's *The Years* and Warner's short stories "English Climate" and "The Museum of Cheats" (Ellmann).

² Unless otherwise indicated, all page references for *Between the Acts* are to the edition edited by Mark Hussey.

At first glance, both novelists might be suspected of escapism. Neither confronts the immediate reality of war, and Warner beats a retreat into the fourteenth century. Both avert their gazes from the metropolis under siege to investigate the rhythms of everyday life in the countryside. Yet this pastoral setting, traditionally idealized as a refuge from strife, offers no security against catastrophe. Both novels show that there is no elsewhere and no “elsewhen,” no place or time immune to upheaval and destruction. Neither author addresses air war directly, but air itself looms large in both their works, in the “airy world” of Pointz Hall, as Woolf describes the rural setting of *Between the Acts* (Diary 141), and in the pestilential atmosphere of the Black Death in *The Corner That Held Them*.

The next section of this essay maps some of the ways that the “war-climate,” to borrow Bowen’s phrase, structures everyday life in Britain during World War II (Mulberry 95). A discussion of Warner’s story of a minor pestilence, “The Cold” (1945), prefaces an analysis of her historical novel *The Corner That Held Them*, which responds to the pestilential atmosphere of war by revisiting the era of the Black Death.³ A final coda compares this medieval novel to Woolf’s *Between the Acts*, a modernist “day novel” set on the eve of World War II. Despite their evident differences, both novels look to the English countryside in search of a national tradition antecedent to imperialism, a tradition that befits a “shrinking island” (Esty).⁴

War Climate

Winter in the Air, the title of Warner’s 1955 collection of short stories, implies that winter is approaching but also that its chill has already arrived. The same ambiguity applies to “war in the air,” which signifies that war is imminent and immanent, both near and here. As Stein remarks, “However near a war is it is always not very near. Even when it is here” (Wars 4–5). Stein’s *here* and *near*, which could refer to time as well as space, suggest that war is never fully present in the present tense but always looming in the offing. Its time belongs to the “tense future,” to borrow from the title of Paul K. Saint-Amour’s book on the “interwar” period: a period, he argues, that persists to this day (Tense 55–60). The prospect of air war, whether in the form of chemical weapons or aerial bombardment, has now become a means of controlling populations terrorized by the anticipation rather than the fact of injury. Even the concept of “total war” belongs to this arsenal of terror, insofar as war is never *yet* as total as it threatens to become.

War in the air means that there is no immunity for bodies against missiles or for minds against incursions from the airwaves. In Britain during World War II, these airwaves were largely devoted to disciplining the home front, partly by transmitting censored news. In Patrick Hamilton’s wartime novel *The Slaves of Solitude*, the put-upon heroine, Enid Roach, resents “the endless snubbing and nagging of war,”

³ “The Cold” was first published in the *New Yorker* in 1945 and later reprinted in Warner’s *The Museum of Cheats*, to which my citations refer.

⁴ See Jed Esty, who focuses on the “anthropological turn” in late British modernism as a symptom of imperial contraction. While he does not address Warner’s fiction in this context, his masterly study of *Between the Acts* has influenced my reading in this essay (85–107).

“the gauntlet of ‘No’s’ and ‘Don’ts’ thumped down on her from every side”—like fallout from the air raids (100–101). Such no’s and don’ts—the monotonous soundtrack of the emergency powers that suspended civil rights in Britain during World War II—pervaded the atmosphere of the home front, making arbitrary prohibitions seem as everyday and ineluctable as air. Wartime propaganda trained civilians to adapt to war and its scolding as a way of life, as if “Jerry” and his pyrotechnics in the sky were business as usual. Hence Humphrey Jennings’s famous propaganda movie, *London Can Take It!* (1940), shows London’s bowler-hatted male professionals striding past bombsites on their way to work, barely glancing at the smoking ruins.

Such scenes were not restricted to the movies. H.D.’s lover Bryher, who had returned to chaotic London from neutral, provident, efficient Switzerland to brave the war among her friends, claims that “‘London can take it’ was not a slogan, it was a statement of fact” (16). During the October Blitz of 1940, Bryher visited a grocer’s shop in search of “some small, as yet unrationed article”: “The alert had sounded but I had not bothered about it. Suddenly the floor heaved up, the assistant and I rolled to the ground as inextricably intertangled as a brace of lobsters, while the dust of ages enveloped us from the ceiling. ‘And the next thing, madam?’ the grocer inquired as, shaking ourselves, we rose to our feet” (16–17). Writing thirty years after the Blitz, Bryher recalls that the majority of Londoners just “got on with it” (16). Of course they had no choice, but propaganda egged them on, praising adherence to routine and lending docility a glow of heroism. England’s “daily island life,” as Stein called it, was extolled as a defense against the country’s enemies as well as a reward to be wrested out of victory (“What” 31–57). Thus the everyday itself became a “front,” the “home front,” which was indeed the only front now that war had “ceased to be an affair of ‘fronts’ and become an affair of ‘areas,’” as Wells had predicted in his preface. Symptomatic of this change, the word *front* migrated from the realm of war to that of weather. In the interwar period, Norwegian meteorologists V. Bjerknes and J. Bjerknes, a father-and-son team, introduced the term *front* to describe air masses of differing thermodynamic properties, based on the analogy between these masses and “the battle zones of Flanders” (Fitzpatrick 2).

In Britain’s war climate, war and weather are often difficult to tell apart. In a diary entry of June 14, 1940, Warner reflects that “the giving of news by wireless, which is *non-geographical*, has tended to give the war-news something of the quality of news of a pestilence. It has made it, in a fashion, an atmospheric rather than a territorial phenomenon” (*Diaries* 104). Both in the air and on the air, war has become an epidemic rather than a singular locatable event, spreading into the intimate recesses of the home: “[W]e hear Hitler’s voice as we sit at home of an evening,” Woolf laments (“Leaning” 261). In Warner’s diary entry, it is unclear whether she is likening the war or the war news to a pestilence. The ambiguity is telling in that war is not only reported but actually conducted on the air, the wireless serving as a propaganda weapon to mobilize the home front. In the battle for civilians’ hearts and minds, the wireless provides the affective equivalent of gas and firepower.

The pestilential nature of the war and the war news may have inspired Warner to explore the world of the Black Death in *The Corner That Held Them*. But the “trope of

infection” was itself infectious, judging by other fiction of the period.⁵ Henry Green’s wartime novel *Party Going* (1939), for example, chronicles the antics of a group of wealthy socialites who find themselves stuck in an urban railway station, their train having been delayed by fog. Like the nuns in Warner’s medieval novel, these “bright young things” are trapped in space as well as time, but the corner that holds the partygoers is a plush hotel room that looks down on a restive “swarm of people” in the station below (*Loving; Living; Party Going* 395). In this upstairs-downstairs arrangement, Green’s novel “translates class difference into spatial separation,” as Thomas S. Davis points out (8). While the rich, idle companions while away the time with cocktails, gossip, and flirtation, a debutante’s dotty aunt, Miss Fellowes, succumbs to a delirium in which she dreams about the sea converging with the sky, symbolically obliterating the distinction between above and below.⁶ Davis interprets Miss Fellowes’s fever dreams as a symptom of the “infectious nature of the crowd,” whose voices and tobacco smoke waft up into the heights, thereby threatening to breach the boundaries of the social hierarchy (10). Evidently the trope of pestilence in *Party Going* owes a debt to another foggy novel, Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House*, where the spread of smallpox, the disfiguring disease that the heroine catches from a street sweeper, shatters the illusion that the rich can be immunized against the poor.

A Cold in the Head

When Britain declared war against Germany in September 1939, Sylvia Townsend Warner and her partner Valentine Ackland were visiting the United States, where their American friends urged them to stay put. On September 5, 1939, the novelist William Maxwell, who was Warner’s editor at the *New Yorker*, pleaded, “If your soul shows signs of becoming self-sacrificial or even patriotic, catch the first train to New York and I’ll drop everything to argue you out of it” (Warner and Maxwell 4). Warner replied:

[N]o type is sufficiently small and cringing, no ribbon faded enough, to add that I am sailing for England on the Manhattan, Oct. 4th. It seems that in the depths of my being I am an unappeasable idiot. I have the profoundest doubts about this war. I don’t feel that it is being fought against Nazidom, and while Chamberlain is around I doubt it will be. . . . But for all that I feel that my responsibilities are there, not here, and an unacted responsibility is worse than nettlerash. (5)

Warner, who had joined the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in 1935—in a 1935-ish kind of way—had little faith in the British government’s opposition to fascism, especially with the appeasing Chamberlain in office. Nonetheless, her loyalty to England compelled her to return to the Dorset countryside, which she

⁵ See Thomas S. Davis’s brilliant analysis of this “trope of infection” in *The Extinct Scene: Late Modernism and Everyday Life* (7–10).

⁶ Miss Fellowes “would notice small clouds where sea joined sky. . . . As this cumulus advanced the sea below would rise” (423).

found “unreally green and peaceful” under threat of aerial bombardment (5). From this rural vantage-point she wrote short stories about wartime England for the *New Yorker*, a journal she described as her “gentleman friend” because it provided her with a reliable source of income (Harman 242).

Rejecting one of these stories in 1939, William Maxwell softens the blow by praising Warner as “the founder of a school of fiction.” He notes that “now there are a number of English writers who approach contemporary problems through the eyes of the tiny English village. . . . It’s become the established way of writing about England’s problems” (Warner and Maxwell 6). As Maxwell notes, other British writers at this time of crisis followed Warner’s lead in reporting from the corners that held them, providing off-center perspectives on the national emergency. Similarly, the Mass Observation movement, spearheaded by the anthropologist Tom Harrison, the poet and critic Charles Madge, and the film director Humphrey Jennings, invited ordinary people to become anthropologists of their own communities. By compiling this multiauthored documentary of everyday life, the Mass Observers hoped to track what they described as “weather-maps of public feeling in a crisis” (Harrison, Jennings, and Madge 155; also see Hubble).

Like the Mass Observers, Warner addresses war from the sidelines, focusing on the “weather” of everyday life. In this war climate, as Bowen observes, “a bomb on your house was as inexpedient, but not more abnormal, than a cold in your head” (*Mulberry* 98). Warner draws a similar analogy in her wartime story “The Cold,” which charts the mock-heroic exploits of this everyday plague as it travels through a “tiny English village.” Written with Warner’s characteristic wry humor, “The Cold” tells the story of a rector’s household “[i]n the sixth autumn of the war,” succumbing one after another to the quintessentially English virus of the title (36). “Everyone has [colds], they are part of English life,” according to the rector’s bossy daughter Geraldine. “Foreigners have things with spots, the English have colds”; “having a cold [is] part of the national tradition like playing cricket and Standing Alone” (40). The cold, accompanied by the sly narrator, insinuates itself around the village rectory, alighting first on Mrs. Ryder, the rector’s wife, who blames her infection on getting chilled while waiting in the village shop for an unwed mother to decide whether to “spend her points on salmon or Spam” (34). The cold then leaps onto the rector’s aged, cultivated, disgraceful parents, newly evacuated from London, who hastily stub out their cigarettes and their lively debates about Savonarola when Mrs. Ryder comes knocking with the supper tray. Next the cold descends through the third and fourth generations of the household, reducing the rector to snivels on the way.

Worst of all, the cold pounces on the Ryders’ invaluable servant Stella, a “treasure” unique among her obsolescent class in being sound of body, mind, and morals. In Mrs. Ryder’s free indirect discourse: “Stella was functionally perfect: she did not dawdle, she did not waste, she did not gossip, she was clean, punctual, reliable, she was always cheerful and willing . . . and though, of course, her wages were perfectly adequate, no one could say that the Ryders bribed her to stay with them—Stella stayed through devotion, she could have got twice as much elsewhere” (37). Even better, Stella is a virgin—“a strong womanly virgin”—unlike the unwed mother dithering over her ration points (*ibid.*). When Stella suddenly

announces her intention to quit, Mrs. Ryder momentarily abandons her high-mindedness, entertaining the “harlot hope” that her servant’s apron may be hiding a “solitary slip” that compassion could overlook (43). But no, the culprit is the cold, now making its second circuit through the household: a real “snorter,” in Geraldine’s opinion (40). “It’s nothing but one cold after another,” Stella cries. “Cold, cold, cold! Work, work, work! It’s not a fit place for me” (43). Mrs. Ryder, “in her sternest Mothers’ Union manner,” rebukes the servant for running away from a head cold when “our boys are shedding their blood without a moment’s hesitation,” but this appeal to patriotism does nothing to deter the girl’s resolve (*ibid.*).

“The Cold was such a treacherous type of cold. When you thought you’d got rid of it, it came back” (38). Given that “The Cold” is set in the sixth year of the war, the recurrence of this airborne infection may allude to the resumption of German aerial bombardment earlier that year during the so-called Little Blitz of January–April 1944. “When you thought you’d got rid of [the Luftwaffe], it came back.” Felling one Ryder after another, the progress of the cold also evokes the epidemic advance of war across the globe, embroiling nation after nation. Such analogies, however, collapse into bathos under scrutiny. The cold makes a farcical allegory for war in the air. Rather than allegory, Warner’s wartime fiction engages in a form of anthropology, comparable to Mass Observation’s investigation of everyday life on the home front. While mapping the rampages of the cold, Warner’s story also diagnoses the infectious influence of war climate on village life, an influence that takes the form of shortages and ration points, war savings rallies and blood drives.

In addition to these pressures, the story hints at deeper changes in social mores, especially with regard to class and gender. “The old simple natural order of things was upset by all these changes: the grocer’s son actually a Captain . . . the resolutions at the Parish Council only to be described as Communist” (36). Meanwhile, the unabashed presence of unmarried mothers signals a loosening of moral fiber in Mrs. Ryder’s view—though even this prudish rector’s wife is prepared to sacrifice her scruples for the sake of a good servant when her neighbors are snatching at “trousered and cigarette-smoking evacuees” prepared to “help with light domestic duties” (37). Indeed, Stella’s departure is a symptom of the wholesale defection of the servant class. In the 1930s servants still numbered around 1.6 million, comprising nearly a quarter of the female workforce, and domestic service remained the most common entry-level job for women until World War II. After the war, as Lucy Delap has shown, the decline of live-in servants meant that ““these servantless days’ became a common cultural cliché, despite the continuing reliance on chars and cleaners” (14). The cold, spreading democratically from master to servant, indifferent to hierarchy and distinction, signals the breakdown of the prewar social order.

The Historical Novel

In *The Corner That Held Them*, pestilence not only signals but actually precipitates the downfall of the feudal order. In a historical note appended to the American edition of the novel, Warner explains that the decimation of the serfs by the Black Death forced landlords to bribe laborers from neighboring manors to work for

them. In consequence, the “old cumbrous sleepy” reciprocities of feudalism came to be “replaced by the suppler but more cut-throat bargain of capital and labor” (“Note” 364). Landlords responded to the labor shortage by enclosing their acres for sheep rearing, which required fewer hands, while parliament introduced wage-fixing and price-fixing in an effort to keep peasants in their place. A poll tax, imposed by parliament to fund the Hundred Years’ War with France, proved to be the last straw, inciting the starving peasants to rebellion. The Peasants’ Revolt, which erupted in 1381, was brutally put down in the same year.

Although Warner sets her novel in these tumultuous times, she insisted that *The Corner That Held Them* is “not in any way a historical novel” because “it hasn’t any thesis” (*Letters* 79). This denial tells us more about Warner’s technique than about the genre she disclaims. Some historical novels have theses, but the major theorist of the genre, Georg Lukács, prefers those that present history “‘from below,’ from the standpoint of popular life,” a standpoint I argue is epitomized in *The Corner That Held Them* (Lukács, *Historical* 285). Lukács’s insights about the impact of war on the everyday life depicted in the historical novel particularly pertain to Warner’s wartime fiction.

In *The Historical Novel*, Lukács claims that the modern conception of history as an “uninterrupted process of changes” arose in response to the French Revolution and the wars that followed it: “It was the French revolution, the revolutionary wars and the rise and fall of Napoleon, which for the first time made history a *mass experience*, and moreover on a European scale.” Before this period, war was waged by small professional armies in such a way that “the civilian population simply would not notice it” (23). All this changed after the Revolution, when the fledgling French Republic was obliged to muster mass armies to defend itself against the coalition of absolutist monarchies. Propaganda became essential to recruitment, as the whole civilian population had to be convinced of the historical necessity of war for “the entire life and possibilities of the nation’s development” (24).

During the decades between 1789 and 1814, the people of Europe underwent “more upheavals than they had previously experienced in centuries,” and the rapidity of these changes made their “historical character” conspicuous (23). Yet the idea of history as a ceaseless process of change contradicted the Enlightenment conception of man’s immutable nature. Prior to the Revolution, Lukács argues, any alteration in the course of history had been understood as “merely a change of costume” (28)—a view that Lucy Swithin echoes in *Between the Acts*: “The Victorians . . . I don’t believe . . . that there ever were such people. Only you and me and William dressed differently.” To which William retorts, “You don’t believe in history” (125). Like the antirevolutionary modernist T. E. Hulme, Lucy believes that “man is an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant” (Hulme). In her view, history is a village pageant with familiar figures dressed in funny clothes.

This is the view of history, Lukács claims, that was swept aside by the French Revolution. The vast scale of the subsequent conflicts, in which “the whole of Europe becomes a war arena,” created an expanded conception of the world along with a sharpened awareness of the effects of large-scale change on everyday life (Lukács, *Historical* 24). Hence Lukács argues that the mass experience of these

events created “the concrete possibilities for men to comprehend their own existence as something historically conditioned, for them to see in history something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them” (ibid.). This argument implies that the modern concept of *world*, as well as that of *history*, was born out of international warfare. Also born was the notion of the everyday as the zone where history becomes visible as “something which affects [our] daily lives and immediately concerns [us]” (ibid.). Thus the concepts of history, world, and everyday life emerge out of the conditions of world war and depend on one another for their meaning. Understanding these interconnections becomes the task of the historical novel, which emerges in the early nineteenth century to investigate the impact of world and history on the micronarratives of daily life.

By this measure, *The Corner That Held Them* certainly qualifies as a historical novel despite Warner’s demurral, even though the decisive events of the fourteenth century occur offstage. Such an oblique approach is, in fact, essential to the genre in Lukàcs’s view. He contends that the best historical novels reveal the “indirect contact between individual lives and historical events” (*Historical* 285). Like the founder of the historical novel, Walter Scott, Warner shows how “important historical changes affect everyday life, the effect of material and psychological changes upon people who react immediately and violently to them, without understanding their causes” (Lukàcs, *Historical* 49). In *The Corner That Held Them*, Warner traces the “indirect contact” between a remote convent at Oby in Norfolk and the historical changes inaugurated by the Black Death (1346–53) that culminated in the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. Warner told a friend in 1946 that the novel “has no conversations and no pictures, it has no plot, and the characters are innumerable and insignificant” (*Letters* 91). Instead of an overarching plot, much of the action consists of everyday routines, the kind of habitual activities that correspond to the past imperfect tense in French. Absorbed in their daily schedule of prayers, the nuns are largely immured from world-historical events except as these impinge on their precarious finances.

Warner’s emphasis on the structures and practices of everyday life could be compared to her contemporaries in the *Annales* school of historians in France, whose work subordinates the history of events (*histoire événementielle*) to the *longue durée*. It is worth noting that Marc Bloch’s *French Rural History*, a masterpiece of the *Annales* school that traces the decline of feudalism in the French countryside, was published in the decade before Warner addresses English rural history in *The Corner That Held Them*. Warner’s method could also be described as prosopography, a form of group biography inaugurated by the *Annales* school, which explores the common characteristics of a group whose individual stories are untraceable (“innumerable and insignificant”) (Stone). Derived from the rhetorical term *prosopopoeia*, in which a dead, absent, or imaginary person is endowed with a “face” (*πρόσωπον*) and the power of speech, prosopography gives faces and voices to the anonymous actors of the past in order to account for patterns and relationships within a group. Similarly, Warner emphasizes social relations rather than individuals. Even her characters’ idiosyncrasies are symptoms of institutionalization rather than presocial impulses. The nun who hoots like an owl or the prioress obsessed with building a spire have both been driven mad in different ways by “routine and its slow mildewing of the mind” (*Corner* 199). This diagnosis, however, is left to the reader to infer, for Warner

neither judges nor evaluates her characters. Nor does she create what Lukács calls a “hierarchy of significance” between them (*Meaning* 34). Several are granted a moment in the limelight, but none is allowed to dominate the stage.

Rather than tell a single story, allegorical or otherwise, *The Corner That Held Them* seeks to reconstruct a habitus, or collective mode of life, composed of many intersecting forces—social, geographic, and ideological. To begin with geography, the convent’s isolation in the marshes conditions its inhabitants’ *mentalité* as well as the structure of the narrative itself, which mirrors the flatness of the landscape and its winding, inconclusive waterways. Invoking the antipastoral tradition exemplified in the poetry of George Crabbe, John Clare, and Thomas Hardy, Warner traces how the damp, infectious fenland marshes foster distinctive forms of art, such as the convent’s plainchant and collective needlework; the new polyphonic music of the fourteenth century, known as *Ars nova*, which was transplanted to England from France and Italy; and the demotic polyphony of gossip, a collective art of fabulation. Warner draws on all these arts in constructing a form of narrative that resembles needlework in its interweaving of several story lines into a tapestry while harking back to polyphonic music in alternating between voices and perspectives. Besides these medieval antecedents, Warner’s narrative techniques correspond to contemporary innovations in documentary, such as director John Grierson’s cinema, as well as to Mass Observation’s experiments in collective anthropology.

Pastoral Variations

Like other Marxist writers in Britain in the 1930s and 1940s, Warner wrestled with the problem of adapting the “bourgeois epic”—as Hegel termed the novel—to the purposes of proletarian art (qtd. in Cunningham 11). In an essay on this subject, William Empson discredits proletarian art as a “bogus concept” because it demands that the artist “be at one with the worker,” which is “impossible, not for political reasons, but because the artist never is at one with any public.” Empson concludes that “good proletarian art is usually Covert Pastoral” (15, 6). This diagnosis may account for the pastoral turn evident in *The Corner That Held Them* as well as in *Between the Acts*, although Woolf’s leftism stopped short of Marxism. Both Woolf and Warner, disaffected with the subjectivism of the traditional novel, were looking for new ways to open up the form to collective, “choral” consciousness. “[I] wanted to get some chorus; some quite different level,” Woolf wrote to Stephen Spender in 1937 apropos of *The Years*; an ambition that seems to have persisted in *Between the Acts* (*Letters* 123).

Another reason that these writers invoke the pastoral tradition and its anti-pastoral counterpart is to reevaluate the idea of Englishness at a time when the nation’s future is in doubt. The Englishness they seek, however, has little to do with racial purity. In contrast to the Nazi reverence for blood and soul, both Woolf and Warner emphasize the hybrid origins of national identity. The proper names in Warner’s novel, such as de Retteville, testify to the intermingling of Norman French and English, while the landscape in *Between the Acts* bears the scars of foreign invasion along with those of class conflict and war: “From an aeroplane . . . you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by

the Elizabethan manor house; and by the plough, when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic wars" (3). What Woolf and Warner look for in the pastoral tradition is not a pristine national identity unsullied by miscegenation but rather a common folk culture composed of mixed indigenous and foreign influences. This common culture inheres in the habits and ceremonies of everyday life, including such collective art forms as the village pageant in *Between the Acts* or the convent's needlework in *The Corner That Held Them*.⁷

Traditionally, English pastoral invokes an idealized countryside of piping shepherds and comely maidens, which provides a refuge from the hubbub and corruption of the city. Even so, the "first condition of Pastoral is that it is an urban product," as Frank Kermode has pointed out, in which an imaginary lost innocence is projected onto the green world and its rustic inhabitants (14). Warner, however, found country life a far cry from the bucolic idyll of the pastoral tradition. In fact, she attributed her political awakening to relocation to the countryside, where she soon learned that "the English Pastoral was a grim and melancholy thing" ("Way" 16). Similarly, Valentine Ackland's social survey *Country Conditions* (1936), for which Warner compiled the statistics of the Milk Board, pulls no punches in its exposé of rural immiseration and the loneliness of agricultural drudgery (198).

In *The Corner That Held Them*, the English pastoral also features as "a grim and melancholy thing"—in this case a soggy, depopulated wasteland. No shepherds serenade their flocks, nor do craft and productive labor flourish as in Virgil's *Eclogues*. The outer world is glimpsed mainly through the keyhole of the convent door, with few excursions beyond this narrow radius. Cloistered as the nuns themselves, the narrative rarely ventures outside Oby except in the company of men, who enjoy more freedom of movement than the captive virgins. Priests and bishops travel between dioceses, periodically descending on Oby to inveigh against the women's moral and financial turpitude, while laborers visit the convent in search of work and beggars in search of alms.

Among these beggars, only Annis is a woman, and it is she who precipitates catastrophe when her lurid threats of peasant rebellion frighten a mad nun into apostasy. This nun runs off with the convent's lavishly bejeweled and embroidered altarpiece, nearly completed after years of collective labor, an example of the "English work," or *Opus Anglicanum*, that was highly prized in Europe in the Middle Ages (Mulford 198). The novel's title *The Corner That Held Them* applies not only to the convent's remote location in the Norfolk Broads but also to "the corner that was still unfinished" of this exquisite needlework, which has held the nuns' attention for so long (259). "The loss of the altar-hanging was beyond the loss of money. . . . During the months they had worked on it together the nuns of Oby had become a community. Though in its early stages the needlework had been an instrument in the usual convent factions . . . as time went on it had become everyone's interest and everyone's purpose" (268).⁸ By stressing the magnificence of this needlework, Warner might be

⁷ In a letter to Stephen Spender of April 7, 1937, Woolf mentions her attempt to "exhibit the effect of ceremonies" in *The Years* (*Letters* 116).

⁸ The title's primary reference is to the passage from the Wisdom of Solomon 17.4 that provides the novel's epigraph: "For neither might the corner that held them keep them from fear" (*Corner* iii).

suspected of colluding in the patriotic cult of English “heritage.” The irony, however, is that this heritage is irrecoverable; all but a few fragments of *Opus Anglicanum* have gone the way of the Oby altarpiece, lost to theft, iconoclasm, or desuetude. In tracing the comic misadventures of this masterwork, Warner is not lamenting a vanished treasure of the past but revealing its utopian potential for the future: the possibility of building community through collective work. Her celebration of this work therefore owes more to socialist realism than to nostalgia for merry England.⁹

Another art form celebrated in *The Corner That Held Them* is *Ars nova*, the new polyphonic music that migrated from France and Italy to the eastern counties of England, where it came to be known as “English discant” despite its continental origins. In contrast to *Opus Anglicanum*, which was women’s work, *Ars nova* was a complex form of polyphony for male voices accompanied by an elaborate system of notation. Like modernism in the twentieth century, *Ars nova* and its rarefied successor, *Ars subtilior*, were resented as elitist in their day, a resentment that erupts in violence in *The Corner That Held Them*.¹⁰

Warner, herself a talented musician and composer who had planned to study with Schoenberg in Vienna until this ambition was scuppered by the outbreak of World War I, spent several years after the war on a Carnegie fellowship archiving Tudor Church music with her longtime secret lover Percy Buck, a married music master at Harrow School, where her father taught history. This research lies behind the epiphanic scene when Henry Yellowlees, custos of Oby, participates in an impromptu recital of *Ars nova*. The chaplain of a leper colony invites the custos to join him, along with a leper standing apart, in singing the three-voiced Kyrie of Machault, “a duple measure that ran as nimbly on its four feet as a weasel running through a meadow, with each voice in turn enkindling the others, so that the music flowed on and was continually renewed” (*Corner* 204). Henry Yellowlees feels “astray, bewildered by the unexpected progressions, concords so sweet that they seemed to melt the flesh off his bones” (203). Never has he seen a house so dirty as the chaplain’s, “[b]ut out came the music as the kingfisher flashes from its nest of stinking fishbones” (205). This ominous metaphor materializes shortly afterward, when the leprous singer informs Henry that the chaplain has been murdered: the other lepers rammed a stinking bone down his gullet to punish him for singing rather than providing them with food.

This musical interlude with its horrifying denouement bears little relation to the action—or inaction—at Oby, although it testifies to the rebellious spirit of the age. But the polyphonic music of *Ars nova* is reflected in the structure of Warner’s novel, “each voice in turn enkindling the others” in the same way that the burden of narration passes from one focalizer to the next. The a cappella, improvisatory structure of *Ars nova* provides a musical analogy for a narrative that dispenses with a unitary speaker or a one-way plot, substituting for the sense of an ending a self-renewing flow of variations. Warner herself drew analogies from polyphonic song

⁹ Jean-Jacques Lecercle has discussed the relation between socialist realism and Warner’s novel *Summer Will Show* (1936), a lesbian romance that begins in Jane Austen territory and ends up in the Paris Revolution of June 1848.

¹⁰ For a useful introduction, see Daniel Leech-Wilkinson.

to describe her narrative method. In a letter to Paul Nordoff of April 9, 1942, she writes: "I am contentedly vague about the plot. But [*The Corner That Held Them*] is being very obliging in the way it presents itself to me as I write it, lots of good fortunes about counter-subjects that turn out to be invertible or perfectly good canons, and so on" (*Letters* 79). Evidently, the musical felicities of "counter-subjects" and "canons" mattered more to Warner than a go-ahead plot.

The multivoiced, improvisatory music of *Ars nova* also resembles gossip, a polyphonic form of narrative that features prominently in Warner's medieval world. The vagrants who bring the plague to Oby also bring the news, which is embroidered with every repetition. Much of the novel's comedy derives from these fantastic variations on hard facts, where natural and supernatural jostle for narrative supremacy, and sorcery is readily invoked to make up for any missing links in the causal chain. Such gossip testifies to the creative genius of the folk, undaunted by the protocols of plausibility; these tall tales, quilted together at every social gathering, belong to a collective work-in-progress, comparable to the convent's *Opus Anglicanum*. Oby's gossip also looks forward to wartime Britain, when the island was equally abuzz with rumor, much of it stimulated rather than curtailed by the official channels of the *Times* or the BBC.

The Outward Turn

Thus Warner looks to *Ars nova* and *Opus Anglicanum* along with the demotic art of gossip as models for a "Marxian" narrative focusing on the everyday life of a community.¹¹ Warner's anthropological approach to convent life also bears a telling resemblance to contemporary innovations in documentary and cinema. As we have seen, Mass Observation called on ordinary people to become observers and narrators of their daily lives, with the aim of understanding "how, and how far, the individual is linked up with society and its institutions" (qtd. in Davis 33). Warner undertakes a similar project in *The Corner That Held Them*, although the carceral conditions of Oby mean its inhabitants are not just "linked up" but virtually soldered to the cloister. Their confinement induces uniformity. "They are like a tray of buns," muses one prioress about her sisters; "one can see that they all come out of the same oven. . . . A tray of buns, a tray of nuns" (*Corner* 34). Meanwhile, the narrative perspective flits from observer to observer with a kind of pestilential promiscuity, reminiscent of Mass Observation's campaign for the "observation of everyone by everyone" (qtd. in Davis 48). While Mass Observation's aim was to democratize the subject and object of the gaze, the organization was understandably accused of breeding spies, a danger realized in the paranoid, panoptic world of Oby.

Along with its affinities to Mass Observation, Warner's anthropological approach to convent life could be compared to documentary cinema, which also flourished in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Grierson, for example, describes his methods in terms that resonate with Warner's novel. With reference to his film *Drifters* (1929), a study of herring fishery, Grierson claims: "The life of Natural

¹¹ Warner claimed that *The Corner That Held Them* was based on "the purest Marxian principles" (qtd. in Schmidt and Werner 36).

cinema is in this massing of detail, in this massing of all the rhythmic energies that contribute to the blazing fact of the matter" (136). *Drifters*, Grierson insists, "is about the sea and about fishermen, and there is not a Piccadilly actor in the piece" (135). Similarly, *The Corner That Held Them* is about the Norfolk Broads and its forgettable inhabitants; no starlets overshadow the bit players. Grierson strives to heroicize his fishermen, claiming that "men at their labor are the salt of the earth" and applauding their virility in "the hauling of nets by infinite agony of shoulder muscle in the teeth of a storm" (135). Warner, by contrast, trains her attention on "that epitome of humdrum, a provincial nunnery," where heaving muscles are replaced by chilblains and the bleeding fingertips of needlework (*Corner* 124). Machismo aside, the massing of detail of everyday life, along with the minimizing of authorial commentary, aligns Grierson's documentary style to Warner's fiction.

Between the Acts

At first sight, *The Corner That Held Them* and *Between the Acts* seem antithetical. Warner situates her historical novel in the lost world of the fourteenth century, whereas Woolf sets her novel in the present, telescoping time into a single day. Warner meanders through four decades, focusing on "the cotton wool of daily life"—which Woolf tended to disparage—and playing down the epiphanic "moments of being" that Woolf valued (Woolf, "Sketch" 72). Where Woolf privileges instantaneity, Warner focuses on the *longue durée*.

Nonetheless, Woolf shows how the present is imbricated with the past through the habits and ceremonies of everyday life, notably the annual resumption of the village pageant, in which the community retells its own history. This twee performance presents the nation's past as a parade of kings and queens and literary stereotypes, thus reducing history to "mere costumery," as Lukács characterizes the historical novel before Walter Scott (*Historical* 19). Echoing this verdict, Esty has described the popular village pageants of the interwar period as "costumed amnesia" (75). History in the sense of *longue durée* emerges only "between the acts," in the interludes of everyday experience that interrupt the puppetry. The following passage, for instance, demonstrates how long-standing rhythms of daily life are jolted by change: "Every summer, for seven summers now, Isa had heard the same words; about the hammer and the nails; the pageant and the weather. Every year they said, would it be wet or fine; and every year it was—one or the other. The same chime followed the same chime; only this year beneath the chime she heard: 'The girl screamed and hit him about the face with a hammer'" (Woolf, *Between* 16). Here the everyday presents itself as ritual and repetition, reassuring in its boredom and predictability: "The same chime followed the same chime." But this continuum has now been shaken by a rape-trial that Isa Oliver read about in the morning newspaper. This trial, which was actually covered by the *Times* from June through July 1938, convicted two soldiers of raping a fourteen-year-old girl after a third had lured her into a stable to see "a horse with a green tail."¹² Evidently this ugly crime

¹² Stuart N. Clarke provides a useful account of this rape case. See also Gillian Beer's additional references in *Between the Acts* (2000) 133n20.

has penetrated Isa's stream of consciousness, interfering with the annual, inevitable chimes. The hammer is an added touch supplied by Mrs. Swithin, who has just appeared equipped with this blunt instrument: "[T]he girl was screaming and hitting him about the face, when the door (for in fact it was a door) opened and in came Mrs. Swithin carrying a hammer" (15). This passage indicates how *histoire événementielle* (here, the gang rape) permeates the rhythms of the *longue durée* (the same chimes), subtly altering the metronome of everyday life.

The passage also shows how memory is constructed in the present, its factuality compromised by random contingencies like Lucy's hammer. The process is reminiscent of the rumor mill in *The Corner That Held Them*, except that Isa's transformations of history are confined to her own creative mind. Yet these transformations are triggered by an outside stimulus, the newspaper, which pierces through Isa's mental skin. In *Between the Acts*, the newspaper, which "obliterate[s] the day before" (*Between* 128), assumes the office performed by vagrants in *The Corner That Held Them*, who spread the news along with pestilence and lice. The news remains contagious in *Between the Acts*, infecting Isa's private thoughts, and continues to breed fabrication, comparable to the gossip that embellishes the news in Warner's novel.

As Hegel famously observed, the newspaper has superseded daily prayers as a morning ritual of everyday life (see Anderson 35). However, the diurnal distribution of the newspaper, governed by the natural rhythms of sunrise and sunset, belongs to a different tempo from the news itself. As the term implies, the news has to be new, unprecedented, unrepeatable. Yet the one-offs headlined on its pages are cushioned by the daily resurrection and obsolescence of the medium, a rhythm that testifies to continuity and cyclicity ("the same chime followed the same chime") as opposed to the brusque irruption of the "new" ("a horse with a green tail"). Meanwhile the news alters in the minds in which it is absorbed, its hard facts "modified in the guts of the living," in Auden's phrase. These modifications occur at both the individual and the collective level. Benedict Anderson, who attributes the "imagined community" of the nation to the diurnal ritual of reading the newspaper, neglects the equally important ritual of gossiping about the news, in which the facts are disputed, distorted, and exaggerated in the choral consciousness of the community (Anderson 25–46).

Both Woolf and Warner strive to incorporate this choral consciousness into their narratives, partly through the use of free indirect discourse, which can encompass several different points of view. When Oby is raided by rebellious peasants in *The Corner That Held Them*, for example, the event is reported in these terms: "Oby had not even a distinction of ill-fortune to support its self-esteem. The loss of their altar plate, three tubs of butter, two sides of bacon, part of a roof, and one virginity was a small item in the general tale of outrage and spoliation" (*Corner* 293). The item that sticks out in this list is "one virginity," a reference to the rape of Dame Joan, which is ruthlessly downplayed in this ironic inventory. What the author feels about Dame Joan's violation cannot be read between the lines, for these express the mood of a community exasperated by Dame Joan's histrionics rather than an independent verdict. Compare the following passage from *Between the Acts*, when old Mr. Oliver is retreating after the pageant: "It was here, early that very morning, that he had destroyed the little boy's world. He had popped out with his newspaper; the child

had cried" (145). This passage refers to the scene at the beginning of the novel when Mr. Oliver, making a beak out of his newspaper, had charged like a monster at his grandson, reducing the little boy to tears. But the old man had reacted with impatience and complained to Isa that her child was a "cry-baby" (14). Thus the thought that he "destroyed the little boy's world" seems to come from someone else, perhaps the narrator or the little boy himself. It is therefore difficult to tell who thinks these thoughts or feels these feelings. In the airy, porous medium of free indirect discourse, the characters' perspectives interpenetrate.

In addition to the use of free indirect discourse, Woolf strives "to get some chorus" by bringing the audience onto the stage, most spectacularly in the scene called "Ourselves," when the performers, armed with cracked looking-glasses and reflective shards, hold the mirror up to their beholders. While this scene refers to Hamlet's famous mimetic advice for the players (and possibly to Stephen Dedalus's "symbol of Irish art," the "cracked lookingglass of a servant," as Esty suggests [Joyce 6; Esty 106]), Woolf also pays homage to Greek drama in her use of stichomythia, the vocal alternation of the chorus and the individual protagonist. In these stichomythic scenes, Miss La Trobe casts herself as tragic scapegoat, persecuted by a chorus of disapproval from the audience, which fails to understand her modernist, experimental stagecraft. In the stout figure of Miss La Trobe, Woolf parodies the avant-garde artist who combines "megaphonic" ambition with an abject need for appreciation from a public she affects to despise (*Between* 134). Desperate to maintain the unity of her production as well as to corral the attention of her audience, Miss La Trobe is constantly stymied by interruptions from the wings, the weather, and the crowd. But the jagged, paratactic texture of the novel conveys the sense that interruption is intrinsic rather than accidental to the work of art. Against the notion of the artifact as self-contained and autotelic, Woolf poses the airy, leaky fabric of the pageant in which actors and audience, drama and criticism, culture and nature, art and life overflow each other's boundaries. As its title portends, *Between the Acts* opens up the space between such oppositions.

Indeed, the space between grows animate in an unpublished portion of Woolf's manuscript, where the narrator attempts to imagine the spirit of emptiness that invades a room in the absence of living inhabitants:

This nameless spirit then, who is not "we" nor "I," nor the novelist either; for the novelist, all agree, must tell a story; and there are no stories for this spirit; this spirit is not concerned to follow lovers to the altar, nor to cut chapter from chapter; and write as novelists do "The End" with a flourish; since there is no end; this being, to reduce it to the shortest and simplest word, was present in the dining room at Pointz Hall, for it observed how different the room was empty from what the room was when—as now happened people [entered.] <were about to enter.> (qtd. in Hussey 153)¹³

¹³ I have adopted Mark Hussey's corrections to this passage (*Singing* 153). The typescript can be found in the Virginia Woolf Archive at the Berg Collection, New York Public Library. Woolf's thought experiment in this passage recalls Andrew Ramsay's illustration of his father's work on "subject and object and the nature of reality" in *To the Lighthouse*: "'Think of a kitchen table then,' he told [Lily Briscoe], 'when you're not there'" (26).

While Warner focuses on everyday life as it trundles on between the acts of history, Woolf strives to reach into the emptiness that lies beyond the actors. This emptiness defies narration—"there are no stories for this spirit"—but persists when subject and object are annihilated. Woolf provides a clue to the nature of this spirit in Isa's unfinished rhyme:

*"Where we know not, where we go not, neither know nor care," she hummed.
"Flying, rushing through the ambient, incandescent, summer silent . . ."
The rhyme was "air." (Between 11)*

What lies between the acts is air, and air is what remains at the end of history, when there are no more stories to be told and nobody to tell or listen to them. In Woolf's words, "there is no end" to air, no limit to betweenness.

Between the Acts ends with a premonition of air war—twelve airplanes in battle formation interrupt the vicar's banalities—but the quotation from the manuscript above, along with numerous allusions to emptiness within the published text, suggests that air war conquers everything but air itself. In fact, air wages a kind of war against the pageant, constantly interfering with the illusion that Miss La Trobe is trying to sustain. Time and again, the actors' words are blown away upon the wind: "[T]hey were singing, but the wind blew their words away." "The wind blew away the connecting words of their chant"; "the breeze blew gaps between their words." "Then the wind rose, and in the rustle of the leaves even the great words became inaudible"; "the words died away" (*Between* 90, 59, 100, 101). Air conquers human speech, leaving only the "primeval voice" of nature to take up the burden, when a bellowing herd of cows "[annihilates] the gap" in the performance (*Between* 101–2). This funny scene carries an apocalyptic sting in its tail, suggesting that the primeval voice is all that will remain after the human world of chatter and costumery dissolves into thin air.

Airy Nothing

In conclusion, Woolf and Warner both respond to air war by directing their attention to everyday life, not as a refuge from crisis but as a means of calculating the effects of large-scale change. Both invoke the pastoral tradition in search of an English common culture, although mocking the inanities of this tradition and unmasking what Empson called its "humbug" (9). Both also challenge the idea of history as the forward march of progress, adapting their narratives to accommodate the backward, the sluggish, the recursive.

The most conspicuous difference between their novels is that *The Corner That Held Them* is set in the remote past, whereas *Between the Acts* takes place in the "raw" present.¹⁴ However, Woolf incorporates the past through the device of the village pageant, a dramatic recapitulation of English history, along with references to H. G. Wells's *Outline of History*, which traces the nation back to prehistory, when the island had not yet been cut off from a writhing continent of "elephant-bodied,

¹⁴ Woolf describes the newspaper as "history in the raw" in *Three Guineas* (159).

seal-necked, heaving, surging, . . . barking monsters" (*Between* 6). Woolf splices scenes from the pageant with those of life between the acts, creating a montage where fragments of the past and present fuse into strange hybrids, like those composed by Isa's recollections of the newspaper. Thus dinosaurs rise up in Piccadilly, a shop-girl changes places with a queen, a primeval cow out-moos the human chorus.

Sometimes these fusions take place between minds, creating a sense of the contagiousness of thought and the pestilential invasiveness of the narrator. Like Warner, Woolf darts in and out of different minds, breaking down the hierarchy between the hero and the chorus. Although Isa and Miss La Trobe are granted fuller inner lives than other characters, neither provides a center of gravity in this airy, evanescent world. While democratizing their casts of characters, Woolf and Warner also do away with plot, their narratives composed instead of intersecting, inconclusive stories that bear more resemblance to a tapestry than to a triumphal progress toward a single goal. "Don't bother about the plot: the plot's nothing" (*Between* 66).

In this way, both novelists resist the rhetoric of war, which draws on a Whig conception of history to justify bloodshed for the sake of progress toward liberal democracy and economic growth. Against this teleological view of history, Woolf and Warner turn away from ends and beginnings to focus on the middle—between the acts—where alternative trajectories emerge and fade away.¹⁵ Both writers imply that history cannot be told in a straight line but requires new forms of narrative attuned to the "infinite possibilities" that time has ousted (see Joyce 21). For this reason, both look to the past for the promise of a different future. In Warner's novel, a great vernacular epic poem is stuffed into a pocket and lost, along with such masterpieces as the *Opus Anglicanum*, but these vanished works testify to the resurgent creative potential of the folk. Woolf's manuscript, more ominously, hints that the "nameless spirit" of emptiness outlives the pageantry of human life. By invoking this spirit, Woolf hints of a future after air war, but rather than a human future, this will be a time when airy nothing will prevail in the absence of a local habitation or a name.

* * *

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¹⁵ Gary Saul Morson coins the term *sideshadowing* for writing that avoids the determinism of unilinear accounts of history by revealing "untaken but possible paths that branched off to the side" (49). See also Saint-Amour's discussion of sideshadowing in *Tense Future* (264–66).

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