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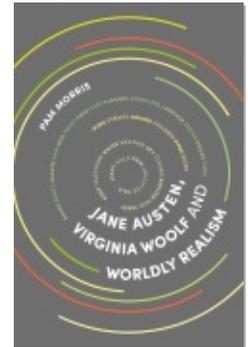
Published by Edinburgh University Press

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Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf and Worldly Realism.

Edinburgh University Press, 2017.

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The Years: Moment of Transition

There seems a pleasing comic irony in setting the conclusion of *The Years* (1937), a novel charting the disintegration of the bourgeois family, in the office of an estate agent. This location accords with Woolf's own anti-individualist ambition for the future of the novel, that it will 'escape a little from the common sitting room'.¹ As I have suggested, from *Sense and Sensibility* through to *Persuasion*, Jane Austen propels her female protagonists out from the patriarchal place into ever wider, more socially heterogeneous spaces. A similar process can be traced in Woolf's fiction. In *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs Dalloway*, a culminating meal or party in the private home is the location for the dropping away of individualism, division and differences in an experience of shared commonality, a moment of common life. In *The Waves*, this experience of shared being occurs in the public space of a restaurant among those who have no family ties. The culminating party in *The Years* is located in a commercial office whose sole function depends upon social mobility. The occasion produces no moment of shared communality among the heterogeneous guests. This is perhaps unsurprising since in *The Years*, Woolf explores the challenges as well as the desirability of the common life, underpinned by shared creaturely necessity.

That the greater part of the 'Present Day' section of *The Years* takes place amidst sales notices for desirable domestic properties would have been taken by Woolf's first readers as indicative of the novel's topicality. During the whole of the 1930s, housing was an issue rarely out of the news. 'We are all housing reformers now', declared the *New Statesman* in 1935. Also in 1935, the Archbishop of York spoke out on the subject of housing conditions, as did the Prince of Wales in 1933 and H. G. Wells, Rose Macaulay and Hugh Walpole in a letter to the *New Statesman* that same year.²

Maynard Keynes put forward a proposal to set up a National Housing Corporation also in 1933.³ Parliament, newspapers and multiple public bodies conducted an energetic and endless debate on issues of housing throughout the decade. By common consent the most urgent problem was that of the appalling conditions and over-crowding of working-class housing. Almost as contentious was the ribbon development of new, identical dwellings for the property-aspiring middle class along arterial roads, but also in areas of slum clearance within urban centres and inner suburbs.

The language of Woolf's novel at times parodies the language of estate agents. Martin, the most money-minded of the Pargiter children, designates Digby's home in Browne Street 'a house of character' and Abercorn Terrace as a 'convenient family mansion'.⁴ But Woolf is not just having fun or being merely topical. The house as a physical thing forms the location of transitional exchange between human existence as creaturely beings subject to bodily necessity – need for shelter from the elements, even if only a cave, as Sara points out – and as socio-cultural creators (p. 170). 'I was going to have thanked this house,' says Nicholas towards the end of the story, 'which has sheltered the lovers, the creators, the men and women of good will' (p. 383). This duality of bodily-cultural being is, indeed, a major theme of *The Waves*, an insistence underwriting Woolf's attack upon idealism in that text. The need of shelter by all embodied creatures points to the basis of common life in shared physical vulnerability.

Yet the house that arises out of this commonality is also pre-eminently the site of individualistic privacy and possessiveness, as Martin's comments above indicate. Woolf's materialist imagination understands the house not only as a point of exchange between the biological and the social but also as a nexus or gathering of complex structural forces and processes. The house demarcates the division of public from private, it provides the physical geography of gender and class inequalities and hence the DNA of self-identity. 'Better than any other symbol,' John Burnett writes in *A Social History of Housing 1815–1970*, 'the house conferred and announced status.'⁵ The house, Burnett goes on to suggest, is the stage on which the social codes of middle-class respectability and domesticity are repeatedly performed and reinforced. Thus at the beginning of *The Years*, Woolf depicts Milly imitating a grown-up voice as she reproves Martin for his language and Rose for her dirty dress, thereby reimposing across the generations the division of the proper from the improper (p. 10).

But if the house has a conservative function in perpetuating the embodied conduct and demeanour whose reiteration preserve gender and class divisions, it has a proactive role in generating the consumer demand that drives capitalist expansion and hence social change. Woolf has an acute grasp of the ramifying political and social implications of technology as substantiated in things. In *Mrs Dalloway*, cars function as a complex metonymy of new disciplinary systems of mass control and conformity. In *The Waves*, Woolf recognises the way communication technology and consumer capitalism further modern economic imperialism. In *The Years*, she foregrounds the house as agent of change. The 1930s saw a massive increase in house building and thus constituted a moment of transition in which invisible consumables, like gas, electricity and water, underwent vast expansion with radical consequences for the relations of the public and private realms, of the state to its citizens, of class relations and even of self-identity.

In *The Years*, Eleanor, aboard a bus, notes, as the district of shops turns into one of housing, ‘there were big houses and little houses; public houses and private houses [. . .] Underneath were pipes, wires, drains’ (p. 90). Beneath the surface difference of big and little, private and public distributions of property and wealth, in other words, there is testimony to common human needs. The demand for domestic supplies of gas, electricity and water inevitably involved state intervention in the previously privatised housing sphere. It also brought into being a new expanded public realm in that local authorities increasingly replaced private providers. As early as 1903, the Metropolitan Water Board was formed in response to public indignation at the inability of the nine private companies to provide adequate supplies of water to the capital. The ‘water famines’, as they were called, brought to public attention the contradictory nature of water supply: water is a physical necessity of all living creatures, a basic requirement for common life, yet it is also a commodity. In 1926, the Electrical Supply Act set up the Central Generating Board and the National Grid. In 1933, the *New Statesman* wrote approvingly that in its annual report for 1932, the Central Electricity Board had announced that the ‘grid’ was now nearly complete. This meant that ‘Britain’s experiment in the new method of socialisation, by means of public corporations, is fully established.’⁶

This ‘socialisation’ shaped a new understanding of local and national communities. Despite differences of wealth and divisions of class, people increasingly became sharers of common utilities that were coming to be seen as absolutely necessary to physical

well-being. Embodied life was the interface with infrastructure. The common life seemed about to be joined up, given substance, in pipes and wires. Yet, like all social processes, this was a transition characterised by contradictions. Basic bodily needs for hygiene and food became drivers of a vast new realm of capital enterprise. Suppliers of electrical goods, in particular, were quick to seize upon the potential of such a huge market, especially in relation to women as consumers. At the beginning of the novel, the Pargiter women struggle to get a primitive kettle to boil; at the end, Eleanor admits she could not do without hot water and electricity (p. 297).

The Electrical Association for Women was founded in 1924 by the manufacturers, who also published a journal entitled *Electrical Age for Women*. In 1930, the upmarket furniture store, Heals, exhibited an all-electric 'Bachelor Girls' flat.⁷ Electrical devices freed middle-class homes from the need for live-in servants but paradoxically this actually expanded the domestic responsibilities of middle-class wives as they began to undertake the work of cooking, laundry and cleaning for themselves. At the other end of the social scale, Labour councils were putting cable into working-class districts and offering credit schemes to assist with house wiring and installing penny slot meters to enable working-class consumers to buy electricity and gas. What was being inaugurated alongside the inception of public provision was a fundamental convergence of life styles, self-image and aspiration between the middle and working classes. This could be seen as a cultural movement towards recognition of the common life as brought about by public provision for shared needs.

On the other hand, the 1930s also marks the moment when domestic property became a central feature within national wealth flow and increasingly a primary financial asset dividing those who could buy property from those who had to rent. Because of the high demand for houses and despite, or perhaps because of, the Depression, borrowing became the widespread means of acquisition. Building Societies increased rapidly in number during the years between the wars, offering credit at relatively low interest and with a much-expanded time for repayment. Banks also began to offer mortgages for property purchase. Property development and investment became a new means of speculative wealth creation and expansion, offering the promise of much greater rewards than traditional sources of middle-class income. In *The Years*, Abel Pargiter accumulates more wealth from investment than his brother, Digby, gains from his prestigious public career. In London, especially, the flow of capital and wealth was increasingly channelled through property.

When Eleanor tells her sister-in-law, Celia, that the estate agent is advising her to cut up the family home into flats and just previously the house in Browne Street has been snapped up by a ‘party from China [. . .] [who] had business in the city’ (pp. 185, 132), Woolf is indicating the centrality of property to developing forms of speculative capitalism that present-day inhabitants of London would very easily recognise.

The image of the house, recurrent throughout the text and foregrounded in the final setting of the ‘Present Day’ section, points metonymically to many interrelated and changing worlds: physical, private, public, domestic, gender and class. The word ‘world’ is, indeed, much repeated in the narrative. In 1914, Kitty on the sleeper train, heading north, feels she is ‘passing from one world to another; this was the moment of transition’ (p. 244). The very first paragraph of the novel offers a sweeping horizontal perspective of the overlapping and interlinked worlds that constitute human existence. Narrative viewpoint is never still, like the weather, it is ‘perpetually changing’ (p. 3). It flows across the continuum of the natural world of sky and clouds to farmers in the countryside apprehensive for their crops, to the city streets where shoppers shelter under umbrellas. These four worlds – human and physical, countryside and city – are held, within the narrative perspective, in a relationship wrought by their interdependence upon weather. This brilliantly condensed style marks a moving on from *The Waves* in which the life of the universe is separated out structurally from the human. In its universal relevance to all of human existence, the weather, in the opening of *The Years*, even provides a shared topic of conversational exchange across the class divide between shop assistants and lady shoppers.

Within these four larger general worlds, invoked in the first paragraph, other more specific worlds co-exist. Despite the egalitarian continuity of narrative perspective, however, these are worlds constituted by social divisions. The separation between them is mapped onto actual physical geography. London streets are zoned into East and West ends, with the West end being the domain of lady shoppers, forming ‘interminable processions’ to department stores like Whiteley’s. The East end is the male domain where ‘business men’ parade the pavements ‘like caravans perpetually marching’ (p. 3). The depiction of gendered worlds continues in the following pages with Colonel Pargiter dining in his Piccadilly club with old friends who, like himself, have spent lives in the male public sphere as soldiers, civil servants, colonial administrators. The world of London

opens out, in this sense, to men's access to the wider intercontinental spaces of India, Africa and Egypt. Meanwhile, in the far smaller female realm of the private house, women preside over tea-tables or, like Mira, wait upon the arrival of the men on whom they depend. The ingrained frugality this economic inequality produces is indicated in the care taken by elderly spinsters to measure out the exact number of teaspoons of tea. The harsh contrast in scale marks out the severe limits of the world of women at the end of the nineteenth century compared to expansive male horizons.

Relations of both inequality and interdependence also typify two other distinct worlds present in the opening paragraph: the world of middle-class respectability, money and status and the world of the working-class poor. These hierarchically separate domains are substantiated in vertical physical space. The servant girl brings the silver teapot up to the drawing room from the basement that she inhabits. Colonel Pargiter looks down upon the teeming traffic in the streets from the panoptic elevation of his club window. While the affluent streets of London's East and West ends throb with the noise and bustle of shoppers, business men and traffic, in effect, of the flow of money, the streets where the poorer inhabitants of the city live are more accustomed to the cries of street sellers and musicians. Shops like the Army and Navy Store, however, constitute a site of interaction between middle and working classes that indicates the presence also of a new social world jostling with an older traditional world. The space within shops is more horizontal, less hierarchical in so far as shop assistants cannot be confined to the basement. Moreover, shop work provided women with an alternative to domestic service which, despite the exacting discipline imposed on the shop floor, offered female employees more independence and better wages than that of the live-in servant. In depicting the less deferential interaction between shoppers and assistants, Woolf marks a moment of transition in female employment and autonomy. This new, more egalitarian consumer culture contrasts pointedly to the traditional world of aristocracy and royalty still decked out in 'frock coats' and 'bustles' (p. 3).

Separating out for the purpose of critical commentary, the many distinct worlds Woolf indicates within the condensation of a single paragraph tends, unfortunately, to render the writing static. In fact, the swift motility of narrative viewpoint functions to enhance the dominant sense of energy and movement. These are worlds in constant flux, subject, like the sky, to ceaseless change. The effect of Woolf's worldly realism is to constitute physical existence as

kaleidoscopic, comprehensive and wholly non-hierarchical. It is an egalitarian regime of the perceptible in which everything is worthy of representation. Single sentences slide from pigeons to ladies in many-coloured frocks and from the Princess to servant girls in cap and apron. What is conveyed is a horizontal sweep of myriad forms of life. The continuous interaction of one domain with another, the physical with the social, is reinforced by the image of the 'mixed light of lamps and setting sun [. . .] reflected equally in the placid waters of the Round Pond and the Serpentine' (p. 4). The concluding sentence of the paragraph expands to encompass human life within the impersonal immensity of universal space and time: 'Slowly wheeling, like the rays of a searchlight, the days, the weeks, the years passed one another across the sky' (p. 4). The poetic condensation of sentences like this, integrated within the text, are perhaps more successful in evoking the continuum of human life with the vast processes of existence than are the separate non-narrative interludes in *The Waves*.

Reading the novels of Turgenev was a critical factor influencing the powerful sense Woolf has of the novelist's need to represent the most comprehensive sweep of life. In 1933, while busy with *The Years*, Woolf was also writing her essay on his fiction in which she claims him to be one of the few novelists able to combine the truth of both fact and vision. Hermione Lee rightly observes that Woolf's reading of Turgenev's novels strongly influenced the writing of *The Years*.⁸ In her *Diary*, 16 August 1933, Woolf notes that 'T, wrote and rewrote. To clear the truth of the unessential.' In the paragraph immediately above this she groans of *The Pargiters*, 'Oh Lord how am I ever going to pull all that into shape! What a tremendous struggle it'll be!'⁹ In her essay on Turgenev, she returns to the notion of artistic struggle. The novelist achieves his extraordinary complex simplicity only by means of 'a long struggle of elimination', she argues.¹⁰ Critics have perhaps tended to read *The Years* too much influenced by Woolf's own despairing comments on her struggle to eliminate and rather less in the light of the insights into what she wanted to achieve by that struggle and that she gained from Turgenev and also from Chekhov. Undoubtedly, the 'extraordinary complex simplicity' of the first paragraph of *The Years* is indebted to her reading of Turgenev and of Chekhov but she gains more from them than formal mastery. She gains a sense of form wrought by the needs of a vision of actual life in its substantive fullness.

In her essay on Turgenev she imagines him 'to be gazing out over the houses far away at some wider view' (*Essays*, 6.9). She notes

approvingly that although his characters are utterly convincing they do not exert an individualistic domination over the story, 'because they are not the whole of life, but only part of the whole' (*Essays*, 6.13). This aspect of Turgenev's art chimes with Woolf's own artistic and political aim to create an anti-individualistic form of the novel in which human life is recognised metonymically as part of the much greater whole of the physical universe. Woolf, too, wants to look beyond the houses. In addition to the experiences of the characters in Turgenev's fiction, she points out, 'many other things seem to be going on at the same time. We hear the hum of life in the fields; a horse champs his bit; a butterfly circles and settles. And [. . .] we notice, without seeming to notice, life going on' (*Essays*, 6.13). This comment articulates the new egalitarian regime of the perceptible that Woolf seeks, an inclusive aesthetic, as recognised by Jacques Rancière, in which everything is worthy of notice. It constitutes the comprehensive, horizontal perspective of worldly realism which, as in the opening of *The Years*, sustains a sense of life, in all its myriad forms and sounds, 'going on'.

There was a production of Turgenev's play, *A Month in the Country*, at the Westminster Theatre in London in October 1936. The appreciative reviewer, in the *New Statesman*, noted that, as always with Turgenev, the invisible protagonist is Time. 'The play', the reviewer comments, 'foreshadows Chekhov.'¹¹ Also in 1936, there was a much applauded production of Chekhov's *The Sea-Gull*, starring Edith Evans, Peggy Ashcroft and John Gielgud. The Old Vic put on *The Three Sisters* in 1935. *The Cherry Orchard* was performed in 1933, to critical acclaim. Desmond MacCarthy wrote a long, intelligent review in the *New Statesman*.¹² It seems very likely that Woolf would have gone to these productions and she certainly went to see *The Three Sisters* in 1926 (Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 505). Writing of Chekhov's short stories, Woolf argues that although he is clearly appalled by suffering and injustice, subtly analytical of human relations, and concerned with the health of the soul, none of these aspects seems adequately to convey his effect. Compared to English writers, she says, in his work 'nothing is solved, we feel; nothing is rightly held together' (*Essays*, 4.185). Yet, 'as we read these little stories about nothing at all, the horizon widens; the soul gains an astonishing sense of freedom' (*Essays*, 4.185). In contrast to this it is 'the teapot that rules in England; time is limited; space is crowded' (*Essays*, 4.187). As in Turgenev, Woolf recognises in Chekhov a much fuller and more expansive perception of reality than that conveyed in English fiction. The Russian novelists pursue

a worldly realist form of writing that refuses to privilege the individual, positioning human life within a wide scope of time and space.

Alex Zwerdling quotes Woolf's lament after reading the first reviews of *The Years*: 'No one has yet seen the point – *my* point.' Given the failure of most recent critics to appreciate the novel, Zwerdling concludes, 'her fears were well grounded'.¹³ The majority of critics who regard the novel unfavourably locate the problem in Woolf's failure to artistically assimilate what they take as a realist concern with factuality. In his Introduction to *The Pargiters*, Mitchell A. Leaska sees a 'deadly conflict' between fact and feeling.¹⁴ As Anna Snaith points out, in *Virginia Woolf, Public and Private Negotiations*, many of those critics who stress the flawed nature of the text come to it through an examination of the radical process of cutting and omissions that Woolf imposed upon her original material.¹⁵ Snaith suggests instead there should be more focus upon what Woolf adds to the narrative during the revisions. She points to the way Woolf's research on women's education develops and changes through the six years of writing, concluding, 'Just because Woolf leaves out the essays and direct references does not mean their influence is dissolved or erased' (*Public*, p. 101). The priority for Woolf, in the final version of the novel, Snaith argues, 'is not accuracy but rather the recognition of history as discourse itself' (*Public*, p. 111).

History, as a temporal process of change, is undoubtedly a determining presence in Woolf's fiction, as it is in Turgenev's and Chekhov's. Yet, her priority, like theirs, is with the transformation of material forces, literally the nuts and bolts, shaping embodied existence. Part of the problem for many recent critics is the negative identification of 'facts' with realism. There is almost a sense of embarrassment that Woolf should follow such an iconic modernist text, as *The Waves*, with an apparent retreat to traditionalism. For modernist critics, Woolf must either be deemed to have failed because she is tempted into a conventional representation of the real world or she must be rescued for modernism by recognition that realism is not her aim at all. The most ready means to hand for such exculpation is to understand her texts as meta-fictions about discourse, and history 'as discourse itself'. Linden Peach, for example, begins his chapter on *The Years* with an apologetic recognition that 'it displays at times the verisimilitude associated with traditional, social realist fiction'.¹⁶ He then redeems the text by reading it dialogically as staging a discursive debate that facilitates release from three conflicting and falsifying discourses of the family dominating the inter-war years. In addition,

he claims, the novel is yet more complicated, driven by awareness 'of the precarious, partial and changing nature of the social and cultural archive' (Woolf, p. 180). Yes, but, one wants to ask, what about the changing nature of the material world in which women necessarily live out their embodied lives? And how can we judge discourses to be false if there is no access to 'facts' beyond yet more discourse and archives?

Readings like those of Peach and Snaith offer valuable insights into Woolf's concerns as she wrote the novels responding to her own times. Historicised studies, such as Snaith's and Peach's, have provided a much richer and more nuanced understanding of the politics of Woolf's fiction. It is certainly the case, moreover, that Woolf was acutely aware of the often repressive power of discursive codes, especially those perpetuating an idealist regime of the perceptible. It is, however, not solely the intertextuality of discourse that Woolf seeks to represent. In line with her appreciation of Turgenev's art she wants to convey the textuality of material existence. In her essay on Turgenev's novels, she offers, as an example of his 'truth to facts', his description of a pair of gloves picked up by a character. They were 'white chamois-leather gloves, recently washed, every finger of which had stretched at the tip and looked like a finger-biscuit' (*Essays*, 6.11). What such writing brings home to our perception is the imprint of the processes of existence upon the very fabric of otherwise mute things. The physical is not always voiceless, as the worn gloves are not inarticulate. Woolf's writing is typified by a democratic stylistics that comprehends the life of what she memorably calls 'all breathing beings', but equally the worlds of plants, sky, inanimate objects and molecular existence, finding for what is mute, a voice.

In a literal sense, a house is an inanimate object, yet in *The Years*, it is shown to exert an active force upon human life. The house can be seen as a gathering point out of which radiate, rather in the manner of Eleanor's doodle on blotting paper, metonymic relations to past, present and emerging ideologies, consumer demand, material production, financial systems and structures of inequality. The specific houses inhabited by the first generation of Pargiters in the *The Years* can also be thought of in terms of de Certeau's distinction between a place as location of the static, hierarchic order of the proper, on the one hand, and of space as the arena of movement and possibility on the other.¹⁷ Just as Austen represents both Hartfield in *Emma* and Kellynch-hall in *Persuasion* as places hostile to time and change, so too Woolf represents the family houses in Abercorn

Terrace, Browne Street and Oxford as places perpetuating a stultifying patriarchal order, resistant to time and change. Masculine privilege is materialised in house geography. While Eleanor, Milly and Delia occupy the drawing room, their presence there is largely ordered by a male itinerary: their day is organised around the return of brothers and father. In contrast, Abel Pargiter has the privilege of a study and Martin the exclusive use of the schoolroom. Rose shrinks at the doorway when she wants to speak with him, while he threatens her like an intruder. House geography also orders the vertical hierarchy of class. The servants of all three houses are inhabitants of the basements, often damp and lacking light. It is only as Crosby is leaving the house after all her years in service that Eleanor notices ‘how dark, how low it was’ (p. 195).

Patriarchal authority is perpetually reiterated in daily routines and ceremonies inscribed in the domestic objects of the house, a regulatory recurrence which defies the possibility of change. Martin hastily gets out of his father’s designated chair when Abel Pargiter is heard entering the house, but it is Martin not the girls who has been sitting in it. Only sons can occupy the place of the father. Similarly, Abel is handed tea in the cup that had belonged to his father, a ritual of continuity that he upholds even though he dislikes tea. In the Lodge at Oxford, the painting of ‘the old gentleman who had ruled the college over a hundred years ago’ imposes itself when the lamps are lit. To Kitty, the portrait looks singularly like Dr Malone, her father, and current Master of the College. The authority that seems to be immune to change largely depends upon the material power of money and its unequal distribution. When Martin has done well at school his father rewards him with sixpence. Immediately prior to this, he has responded to Milly’s trip to Whiteley’s by commenting sharply, ‘Spending money, eh?’ (p. 12). Mrs Pargiter, on her death-bed, is still troubled by the need to account for any spending, ‘The expense, Delia, the expense – that’s what worries me’ (p. 21). In Browne Street, Eugénie may be less subdued by domestic codes but she, too, is subject to the pervasive disapproval of her spending by Digby, her husband, and, as he sees it, her lack of responsibility. His daughters hear him interrogating Eugénie as to whether she has locked the house securely, and his voice sounds ‘peremptory [. . .] querulous and cross’ (p. 128).

As this suggests, speech is also organised hierarchically within the home; audibility is not democratic. Men interrogate women and children, holding them accountable. Women’s sphere of speech is domestic, the regulation of servants and children. Eugénie never

interrupts when Abel and Digby discuss politics (p. 111). Servants are rendered almost mute, unable to do more than speak when they are spoken to. Kitty wonders irritably of the butler, Hiscock, ‘Why can’t you talk like a human being?’, failing to recognise that he is denied the full visibility and audibility of one (p. 66). Any movement over the allotted speech boundaries is met with rebuke or ridicule. When a woman guest at a dinner party in Oxford offers unsolicited knowledge, she is mocked by ‘the great Dr Andrews’ whereupon ‘with a wave of the hand dictated by centuries of tradition, Mrs Larpent drew back her foot, as if she had encroached upon one of the chalk marks which decorate academic lintels’ (pp. 50–1).

The rigidity of domestic order ensures that the house is experienced more as a place of repressive decorum than the ideal of home perpetuated within middle-class domestic ideology. Martin thinks back with dislike on the house ‘where all those people had lived boxed up together, telling lies’ (pp. 200–1). Men escape the claustrophobia and limitations of the domestic house into the more expansive, if more individualistic and competitive, public world of school, university, clubs, professions and business. The house marks out the boundary of public and private and, by extension, the invisible chalk marks that divide what is circumscribed and proper from what is excluded from the perceptible as improper and dangerously unbounded. As the text makes clear, this is a division that bears primarily upon girls and women. Men, like Colonel Pargiter and later his son Martin, have licence for improper relations outside the home.

In the early part of the narrative, women frequently look out of and throw open windows, as if in need of greater space. Windows offer glimpses of the world beyond the house but visibility is frowned upon as improper for respectable girls. Delia relieves her sense of tedium by looking down at the street, calling to Milly to join her when a young man gets out of a cab. ‘Don’t be caught looking’, Eleanor says warningly (p. 17). Shortly afterwards, Crosby comes in to draw the ‘thick sculptured folds’ of the curtains, whereupon the ‘world outside seemed thickly and entirely cut off’ (p. 18). Kitty is also oppressed by her sealed-off, stuffy room, drawing back the curtains and throwing open the window, even while remembering her mother scolding her, ‘Anybody might see in’ (p. 54). Edward Pargiter identifies Kitty with Antigone who was immured alive for trespassing beyond the bounds of what is deemed proper for women. Kitty, as an adult, goes to the opera,

Siegfried, in which the heroine Brünnhilde is imprisoned in a deep sleep and encircled by a ring of fire. Her awakening and release depend upon acceptance of marriage to Siegfried and renunciation of her improper powers.

The Years enacts the moment of transition or dissensus as women begin to rebel against and escape from the imprisoning codes of domestic respectability. This entails a rejection of the house as physical building. Not all the Pargiter women are equally successful in escaping from a house-bound life. Delia and Kitty, who had most chafed against the limitations of family and dreamt of romantic escape to the improper worlds of Irish republicanism and working-class freedom from propriety, ironically settle for the mirror images of their dreams, as Kitty marries the aristocratic Lord Lasswade and Delia a staunch defender of Unionism and traditional order. Milly does not even want to escape, hoping to and succeeding in perpetuating the family home in her own married life. Eleanor is the only one of the sisters to find a wider life of movement and change that satisfies her. As a child, Rose transgressed most radically against proper limits, slipping through the locked door into the street to suffer a horrific encounter with male sexual violence. As an adult, she returns to the spaces of danger and possibility represented by the streets to fight in the public domain for women's right to equality. For this further transgression, she is incarcerated and subjected to the legalised violence of force feeding.

In Eugénie's house in Browne Street, the windows are thrown wide open, while in the garden the daughters of the house, Maggie and Sara, are encouraged by their mother to dance around an enormous bonfire of leaping flames as Eugénie shouts 'Make it blaze! Make it blaze!' (p. 110). Unsurprisingly, Sara is the least conforming of the second generation of women whilst Maggie's marriage to a Frenchman with a foreign name causes consternation to the more conservative in the family. Of the men of that generation, only Morris perpetuates the patriarchal order of the house-owning family. But the choices taken up by the other two are even more individualistic. Edward remains in his elite Oxford college and Martin has a plush bachelor apartment in a fashionable part of London. By contrast, Rose, Maggie, Sara and Eleanor have only sufficient financial means to live in small rooms or flats in the poorer city streets. In that sense, they have moved well beyond the proper place, geographically and financially, of middle-class respectability and out into spaces of possibility as well as threat. This, too, was Woolf's artistic aim for women writers, to move out of the private drawing room into a wider sense of the world.

This anti-individualism is central to Woolf's attack upon an idealist regime of the perceptible that elevates the realm of the mind at the expense of the embodied self as part of the whole material world. Woolf recognises that for women, strictly bound in by rules of the proper, this expanded sense of self is more difficult to acknowledge. The contrast between men's greater freedom of bodily life and women's circumscribed identity is illustrated comically as Martin admires a young girl at Kitty's dinner party, dressed demurely in virginal white and pearls, whilst he thinks 'only an hour ago I was lying stark naked in my bath' (pp. 225–6). There is less insistence upon the physical body in *The Years* than in *The Waves*. Nevertheless, characters are represented as beings whose experience, even of culture, is as much physical as mental. As Edward reads *Antigone* and sips wine, 'A soft glow spread over his spine at the nape of his neck' (p. 46). When Martin looks up at the dome of St Paul's Cathedral, 'All the weights in his body seemed to shift' (p. 205). Peggy experiences a disturbing conflict of emotion as a thrill runs 'down her thigh' (p. 295). When Peggy mentions sanitary towels, a previously taboo subject, Eleanor feels that 'A knife seemed to slice her skin, leaving a ripple of unpleasant sensation' (p. 303). Sara, in some ways the most interrogative character in the novel, directly challenges the idealist claim: "And he says," she murmured, "that the world is nothing but [. . .] thought" [. . .] Well [. . .] she would let herself *be* thought [. . .] She stretched herself out. Where did thought begin?" (p. 118). Sara's attempt to be pure thought convinces her that it is an impossible endeavour; what she experiences when she tries is an imaginative sense of her body.

In *Persuasion*, Austen draws attention to the embodied nature of human life by the recurrent physical accidents and illnesses experienced by the characters. Similarly, in *The Years*, there are frequent references to bodily deformity, mutilation and injury. Like 'all breathing kind' human beings are vulnerable to physical necessities and harm (p. 43). The story opens with anxiety about damage to crops from the wet weather and shoppers putting up umbrellas as shelter against the rain. Shortly afterwards a sudden squall sends children scudding home. In addition, Eleanor's housing project is troubled by a roof that lets in the rain, while her sister-in-law, Celia, has to warn of a shortage of water for washing due to the hot, dry summer. Crosby, unable to afford transport, struggles against snow and mist: 'She looked so hunched and small that it seemed doubtful if she could make her way across the wide open space shrouded in white mist' (p. 273). The most threatening need for physical shelter

in the story, however, is not as protection from the weather but from enemy bombers. The physical fear experienced by all those in Maggie's and Renny's cellar, sitting in breathless silence as a 'violent crack of sound' explodes right above them would resonate keenly with Woolf's first readers (p. 262). By the mid-1930s, war seemed increasingly inevitable and news of German rearmament proliferated in the press; so, too, did public apprehension about the imminent danger of air raids and the need to provide what came to be called 'shelters'. The effect of the unemotional pages of the government's handbook on air raids and anti-gas precautions, the *New Statesman* observed in 1935, 'is to turn what had hitherto been an horrific fantasy into a close and appalling reality'.¹⁸

The Years draws attention to the need of embodied creatures to find shelter from the blast of both bombs and weather. Yet the sheltering enclosure of middle-class privacy shuts out the possibilities of fuller existence. The text equally points to the opposite anti-individualist need for reconnection with the larger common life of the world. As the fear of the German air raid subsides, Nicholas speculates that human beings need to live more 'naturally', that the whole being wishes to expand, whereas now 'we live, screwed up into one hard little, tight little – knot' (p. 267). Delia, cooped up in Abercorn Terrace, notes 'a wildness in the spring evening, even here'. Dropping the blind on the scene, she exclaims desperately, 'Oh my God!' (p. 17). Eleanor feels a similar urge to escape the confined world of the Law Courts. Once outside, 'She felt herself expand. It was still daylight here; a rush, a stir, a turmoil of variegated life came racing towards her. It was as if something had broken loose – in her, in the world [. . .] Above was the dazzle of a watery but gleaming sky' (p. 99). When Sara tries to confine her being solely to thought, what she experiences is a sense of her bodily self extending into the physical being of a tree (p. 118). In Kensington Gardens, Martin asks himself that recurrent question in Woolf's texts, 'What would the world be [. . .] without an "I" in it?' (p. 218). As if in answer, 'the sun dappling the leaves gave everything a curious look of insubstantiality as if it were broken into separate points of light. He too, himself, seemed dispersed.'

In such passages, Woolf aims to re-perceive human life as part of the molecular flow of shared material existence, the very opposite scale to that of the tea-pot regime she associates with English writing. At times, in *The Years*, the perceptibility of normally silent and invisible forces of vitality strikes into the awareness of the characters in the story. Equally there is recognition by the third-person narrator.

As Colonel Pargiter makes his way towards the street where his mistress, Mira, lives, he fails to notice that ‘there was a sparkle, an animation everywhere’ (p. 6). As Martin talks with Maggie in the park, everything is ‘full of the stir, the potency, the fecundity of spring’ (p. 221). A similar sense of tangible, physical vitality opens the 1914 section of the novel: ‘Even the air seemed to have a burr in it [. . .] it vibrated, it rippled [. . .] The air over London seemed a rough sea of sound through which circles travelled’ (p. 202). As this suggests, Woolf radically expands the regime of the perceptible so that the muteness of the common life of the physical world within which we live becomes audible as a voice. Kitty, alone on the Yorkshire moors, looks over the billowing land, ‘uncultivated, uninhabited, existing by itself, for itself [. . .] A deep murmur sang in her ears – the land itself, singing to itself, a chorus’ (p. 251).

Eleanor has a similar experience after the air raid: ‘A broad fan of light, like the sail of a windmill, was sweeping slowly across the sky. It seemed to take what she was feeling and to express it broadly and simply, as if another voice were speaking in another language’ (p. 271). Further on in the story, Eleanor looks out from her window high over roof tops, squares and gardens to a blue line of hills in the distance and the view seems to her ‘like another voice speaking, to fill up the pause’ (p. 296). These auditory experiences are attributed to characters, yet in a novel that foregrounds the pauses, the incomplete, fractured and interrupted nature of human intercourse, the writing seems to intimate the possibility of more inclusive communication across the chalk marks that divide individual and social existence from the common life of the universe. This may well be a metaphysical proposition but it is not a dream of transcendence. It is the physical world to which Woolf seeks to give voice, not the spiritual.

Indeed, equally with the natural realm, the text foregrounds the social world of city streets. Throughout Woolf’s fiction, streets are represented as spaces of complex, interactive energies. Like the shared physical world, the common life of the streets, in *The Years*, contains both threat and possibility. Rose’s childhood experience evokes an extreme sense of violent sexual otherness. The man’s sucking mouth and mewling noises seem to come from a non-human form of life. The poorer working-class streets in which characters live or visit are frequently represented as sites of squalid drunkenness and casual violence. Maggie and Sara can hear the ‘sound of brawling in the street outside; a scuffling and trampling as if the police were hauling someone along the street against his

will' (p. 169). Later, they hear the 'hammer, hammer, hammer' of the drunk husband banging on his door (p. 171). The area, 'sordid' and 'dirty', is scrawled with a swastika, indicative of a more endemic will to brutality (pp. 280, 279). Eleanor, driving through such a neighbourhood, thinks, 'here was the vice, the obscenity, the reality of London' (p. 101).

At other points, the narrative voice draws attention to what is excluded from the clean and proper realm of the respectable and prosperous. The wind scatters along the pavement the disgusting detritus of bodily life: 'twists of hair, papers already blood smeared, yellow smeared' (p. 131). The effect is of revulsion from, rather than any embracing of, the common life of physical being. Perhaps the greatest unease in the text is registered by the undefined menace of women whom poverty seems to have rendered more animal than human. Such is the woman looking out on the street where Eleanor has her houses: 'Her eyes, rapacious, greedy, like the eyes of a bird of prey, were also sulky and sleepy, as if they had nothing to feed their hunger upon' (p. 86). The same word 'rapacious' is used of other women, 'raking' the street with a 'dissatisfied stare' (p. 102).

Yet this sense of threat and otherness is far from being the whole of the life of the streets represented in *The Years*. Even Maggie, admitting that 'the night is full of roaring and cursing; of violence and unrest', allows 'but also of beauty and joy' (p. 170). Pre-eminently, the streets express movement, noise and vitality: the 'turmoil of variegated life' that races towards Eleanor as she emerges from the Law Courts, or the crowds of travellers, workers and shoppers who swirl around the entrance of Charing Cross Station (pp. 99, 100). The images of caravans and processions like 'tribes migrating in search of water, driven by enemies to seek new pasturage' suggest the perpetual movement of peoples across the spaces of geography and time in search of new possibilities of life (p. 115). Europe in the 1930s was witnessing mass displacements in those countries threatened by Nazi expansionism. The shopping and business streets of London are filled by the noise of traffic, but in the poorer districts the 'swarm of sound' comprises not only 'the rush of traffic [but also] the shouts of the hawkers, the single cries and the general cries' (p. 146). Throughout the text, street musicians, muffin men with their bells and barrel organ players are heard, while from open windows comes the sound of singing practice and a trombone player (p. 285). The social life of the city, like the life of the natural world, is comprehended as sound, its unarticulated complexity given voice.

During the time that Woolf was writing *The Years*, a vigorous campaign was being waged against street noise. The *New Statesman* was unsympathetic to the Anti-Noise League which in 1935 succeeded in outlawing milk-carts during the early morning hours. 'There was a kind of joy-bell gaiety in the clanging of can and bottle,' the writer declares, 'The joy of life expresses itself in a crowded chorus [. . .] With street cries I should never dream of interfering.'¹⁹ In an earlier defence of street musicians against their detractors among the respectable classes, the *New Statesman* notes that some of the noisiest participants on the streets are young boys who seem intuitively to know that 'where there is noise, there is life'.²⁰ In *The Years*, the sense of the streets as embodying a force of unbounded vitality is reinforced by the omnipresence of children. Whenever the text mentions poorer streets, there are children, playing, skipping, running, always curious and responsive to events. When a barrel organ begins to play, 'the children all rushed in that direction' (p. 7). The contrast of the children of the poor to those, like Rose, kept within the bounds of the proper, is stark. The children, moreover, make chalk marks on the pavement and skip in and out of 'their chalk cages', suggestive of a creative energy with potential to overrun and redraw defined boundaries (p. 9).

What Woolf does not explicitly indicate, but what her first readers would have known, is that most of the children to be seen in city streets would be malnourished. The hungry rapaciousness of the working-class women in the text was only too real in the actual world beyond. There was, indeed, 'nothing to feed their hunger upon' (p. 86). The insufficient diet of the poor was as much in the headlines during the 1930s as was housing. Lack of proper shelter and diet were twin faces of poverty and causally related. While there was general consensus that slum housing needed to be cleared there seemed an unsolvable problem of how to provide new housing at rents the working class could afford. As many experts on the subject pointed out, increases in rent only had the effect of aggravating 'the evils of malnutrition – to shift the incidence of poverty from housing to the food budget'.²¹ The problem was exacerbated by the government's policy of promoting private sector provision where the drive for profits also led to jerry building, such as Eleanor is faced with in the novel. In an article on 'The Health of the People' in 1933, the *New Statesman* commented that despite some improvement 'slums, foul milk supply, inadequate medical services' still damage the standard of health for much of the population and 'evidence of malnutrition in children is widespread'.²²

The government's decision to cut welfare provision to the unemployed resulted in even poorer diets, to protests from the British Medical Association, many individual GPs, nutrition experts and other concerned groups as well as trade unions. In 1934, Eleanor Rathbone set up a Committee for the Children's Minimum to campaign publicly for recognition of the minimum standard of nutrition required by children to maintain health as set out by medical authorities. One ameliorative measure urged by Rathbone's Minimum Committee and by many others, was the provision of free milk to school children.²³ In another of those moves during the era that marked a transition from private to public ethos, the Milk Marketing Board had been set up to regulate the supply, price and quality of the milk produced by the great number of independent farmers. For this reason, milk was also a topic prominent in the news and public debate. The *New Statesman* commended the Milk Marketing Board in 1933 as a 'most important experiment' in what it called 'socialisation', the expansion of public provision and structures for the welfare of the whole population, an implicit recognition of the common life.²⁴ In 1935, the journal was pointing out that 'cheap milk for schoolchildren could not have been organised on a national scale without the existence of the board'.²⁵ Even so, in 1936, Sir John Orr revealed shocking evidence that half of the country's population was living on a diet which was below the standard required for the maintenance of perfect health and he warned that the scandal of actual starvation in the country would inevitably result in disease, stunted growth in children, poor physique in adults.²⁶

In *The Years*, Colonel Pargiter points to the high seasonal price of milk when Eleanor presents him with the household accounts, a reference to the unstable fluctuation of supply and cost in pre-Milk Marketing Board days. The text also takes repeated note of the undersized bodies of many of the working-class characters. Crosby's insect-like physique is frequently commented upon and her prominent eyes would also indicate childhood malnutrition. When Kitty visits the Robson family she is struck by how short they all are, feeling she has to alter the focus of her eyes to suit their smallness (p. 63). The exception is their son, Jo, who is tall and handsome, a beneficiary of the improved diet the family enjoys due to Mr Robson's rise in status. Eleanor observes the 'little underfed body' of Mr Duffus, the builder (p. 89). He is also bandy-legged, the common result of childhood rickets, a disease caused by ill-nourishment. The exigency of physical need that human beings

have in common with all living things shapes the actual bodies as well as identities of the poor.

Woolf is sometimes thought to avoid class issues in her work. *The Years*, nevertheless, is pervasively concerned with the constitution and policing of the boundary, or chalk marks, between working-class and middle-class worlds, a rigorous disavowal of any common life. The text marks a moment of transition in the relations between the respectable and the poor; the beginning of a process of convergence between the two. For the first and second generation of the extended Pargiter family, however, the two worlds remain distinct and separate. In *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: The Social Organization of Normality*, Elizabeth Shove notes that, ‘the social order is defined and reproduced through rituals of everyday life; rituals that in turn confer meaning on goods, artefacts, even infrastructures [. . .] they are implicated in the management of boundaries between social groups’.²⁷ Woolf is always astute in recognising the way artefacts or things provide substance for structures of belief. In *The Years*, Mrs Malone registers her maid’s neglect of duties by cushions not shaken sufficiently. Her daughter Kitty responds to a feeling of being snubbed by the Robson family by indicting the inferiority of their things. Everything in their house is ugly, she thinks, reviewing with disgust the cheap curtains, darned tablecloth and ‘florid’ china (pp. 60–2). Kitty pushes from her mind all the ponderous things in the Lodge that oppress her.

Eleanor has a similar urge to Kitty’s desire to extend her relations with the working-class people in her housing project. In particular, she is drawn by the glimpse of Mr Duffus’s large family life, always ‘hoping they might ask her in’ (p. 87). But, suspecting that he is swindling her, she ‘adopted the tone of the Colonel’s daughter [. . .] She saw him turn sullen before her eyes [. . .] You have to bully them or else they despise you’ she thinks (p. 89). Where the two class worlds are in intimate daily contact in the middle-class household even more drastic social strategies are required to maintain the fiction of separateness. Although servants inevitably acquire the most intimate knowledge of the family they serve, conversation is abruptly interrupted in their presence. Celia halts what she is saying to Eleanor when the maid comes in to clear away the coffee, turning to polite trivia and ‘adapting her voice to the presence of servants’ (p. 186). Crosby colludes in pretence that she is mute, deaf and invisible, stifling her laughter at the Colonel’s jokes. Despite her long service for the family she remains, even in retirement, unable to speak for herself in their presence.

The most powerful dividing line between the world of respectability and the world of the poor, however, is that written on the body. This is not surprising since embodiment constitutes the basis for recognition of creaturely communality. Otherness and division must therefore start from the body. Not only are the working-class physically stunted and malformed, they are also deemed unhygienic. The class line cleaves apart what is perceived as clean and proper and what is designated dirty, improper and loathsomely other. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, published in 1937, George Orwell declared that the smell of those often termed the 'great unwashed' was an insuperable barrier between the classes. Even those working-class people, like family servants, who were known to be clean were 'faintly unappetising'.²⁸

In *The Years*, the respectable characters appear almost eager to notice any absence of cleanliness in those perceived as beneath them in social status. As one of her tenants waddles in front of her, Eleanor notices fastidiously that a 'wisp of yellow hair hung down behind her dirty ears', the unhealthy, wispy hair adding somehow to the sense of unwholesomeness (p. 89). Martin describes the caretaker in the basement of the empty house in Browne Street as 'a dirty old woman' (p. 135). Eleanor's repulsed response to the estate agent, who comes to evaluate the family home after her father's death, makes quite explicit the way notions of cleanliness function viscerally at the interface of class antagonism. Eleanor looks at the man's neck, 'washed imperfectly in some sink in Wandsworth'; she was annoyed at the way he had gone round their house, 'sniffing and peering, he had indicted their cleanliness, their humanity [. . .] He was hauling himself up into the class above him, she supposed' (p. 194). Eleanor's class resentment at the man's lack of deference to the middle-class home renders her unaware that she equally indicts *his* humanity as identified with cleanliness. Her disparagement of his need to wash in a sink points also to the way material infrastructure, like plumbing, perpetuates, exacerbates or can erase class boundaries.

Inevitably, the bathroom, as the site of interface between the self as body and the self as individual cultural identity, is a site fraught with potential conflict and tension. For the confined middle-class family the bathroom sanctioned the right to privacy, maintaining a disavowal of bodily being, in contrast to the zinc tub in the common kitchen or backyard which had to serve as washing facility for the working class. Even into the 1940s, whether or not a house or flat had its own bathroom was 'one of the major dividing lines' of social class (Ravetz, *The Place of Home*, p. 134).

For all these reasons, the enforced intimacy of a shared bathroom, and even more so the bodily matter exuded there, was source of deeply-felt fear and revulsion. Sara's account of the detritus of body hair and grease left in the bath by her Jewish neighbour, whom they can hear, while she speaks, coughing and clearing his throat, infects North with revulsion and disgust almost as strong as Sara's. 'North felt a shiver run through him. Hairs in food, hairs on basins, other people's hairs made him feel physically sick' (p. 307). This visceral response to a sense of contamination from the emissions of unhygienic otherness is not confined to middle-class fastidiousness. Far from pointing to the commonness of embodied life, it fuels the abhorrence and hatred directed at any groups or identities deemed unclean and other, whether of race or sexuality or appearance. Crosby calls the Belgium Count who spits in the bath 'a dirty foreigner' and 'a dirty brute', not properly human in his disgusting habits. Earlier in the story, in Oxford, Edward's friend, Gibbs, who is to marry Milly, expresses the disgust he feels for Ashley, a homosexual, by terming him a 'dirty little swine' (p. 49). The scrawled swastika points to the violence implicated in such processes of othering.

Alongside this recognition of social divisions based upon what is deemed the clean and proper body, there is an almost comic reiteration in the text of middle-class rituals of bodily hygiene. Delia admires her father when he comes down for dinner: 'He looked so pink and clean and genial in his dinner jacket' (p. 32). Whenever a middle-class character turns in for the night, the narrative dutifully records the ceremony of teeth-cleaning. After dinner at the lodge, Kitty in her bedroom 'began to brush her teeth', Eleanor decides to put off thinking about the poor families she is helping 'till she was brushing her teeth at night' (pp. 55, 29). Similar attention is given to the hot water left in many bedrooms during the story for a final wash before sleep, as when Eleanor washes herself 'methodically but carefully' due to the water shortage (p. 178). Characters make announcements that they are going to take a bath and the Pargiter children share a memory of being washed by a slimy cloth in their infancy (pp. 29, 140). Eleanor, returning from Spain, notices all the soap in a shop window and thinks 'how thoroughly people wash in England, even the air smells of soap' (p. 175). By the end of the novel, Eleanor is proudly showing off her modern shower (p. 278). There is, indeed, a reference to washing or cleanliness at least once in every ten pages of the story. Whatever else Woolf cut from her original chapters, she clearly did not want to omit these multiple details of hygiene

rituals. It is hard to think of any other novel that so highlights the performance of bodily cleanliness. The textual reiteration seems to mimic the habitual everyday practices whereby the proper, hygienic, middle-class body is produced.

If Woolf is having fun at the expense of middle-class mores, there is, nevertheless, more serious irony involved. The cleanliness of the respectable classes is largely dependent upon the labour of the unhygienic unwashed. The 'water-jug [. . .] swaddled up like an old woman' in a guest's bedroom has been lugged all the way up from the basement by a servant and the used, dirty water will be carried down again by a servant (p. 53). The same physical effort is required for all the other water made available in respectable bedrooms throughout the narrative. In addition, the text refers many times to the washing of clothes and linen. The child Rose comes down in a dirty dress because the laundry has not been returned (p. 10). Before the arrival of the national grid, which made electrical goods available, all dirty washing had to be done by hand. Laundering was one of the most gruelling, physically demanding of all women's work, and for that reason only done by the most impoverished. The harsh soap required and the heavy lifting of wet cloth took a quick toll on health. Mrs Levy, confined to bed, speaks of 'when I was left a poor widder woman scrubbing and mangling', and she stretches out her arm 'which was wrung and white like the root of a tree' (p. 27). Her hard labour that has kept the middle-class household clean and proper has rendered her an object of physical disgust.

Yet Woolf does not represent the poor as pitiable victims. Crosby, despite the frailty of her body as she struggles against the weather, 'seemed to express an unconquerable determination; she was not going to give in; she was bent on surviving' (pp. 274–5). Deploying de Certeau's concept of the 'tactic' it is possible to see the various working-class people in the text as actively making use of what possibilities come their way and creatively producing their own possibilities. A tactic, de Certeau explains, exists outside the regime of the proper, the structures and routines of respectability. Those who have to rely upon tactics must always be on the look out for opportunities and must constantly manipulate events to turn them into opportunities (*Practice of Everyday*, p. 37). The exploited, of necessity, have to be able to exploit. Perhaps the clearest example of this in *The Years* is the waiter who seizes the chance of getting a double tip from Martin, a licit and an illicit one (p. 210). Eleanor thinks Mr Duffus has taken advantage of her, 'swindled her', by

passing off shoddy workmanship. Eugénie clearly believes Mr Toye has exploited her gullibility, promising that tomorrow she will confront him and declare, ‘No, Mr Toye, you have deceived me once too often’ (pp. 89, 130). Meanwhile, there is the suggestion that her housemaid manipulates Eugénie’s guilt at her untidiness. The maid waltzes around with a hat Eugénie has given her to ‘atone for the mess in the drawing room’ (p. 104).

Even Crosby seizes upon opportunities that come her way: ‘for many years she had been hoarding odds and ends with a view to her retirement. Indian elephants, silver vases, the walrus that she had found in the waste-paper basket’ (p. 196). Almost certainly the family would have given her these things had she asked, but this would have underlined her dependence rather than assert a right to ownership as the secret hoarding does. As she slowly clears the table and draws the curtains the prolonged and irritating creaking of her cheap shoes is surely a tactic of self-assertion in defiance of her muted presence in family life. In her early days, Kitty was piqued by the refusal of the Robson family to treat her as one of themselves. As Lady Lasswade, her maid, Baxter’s, politely impersonal attendance and ‘inscrutable, pursed-up’ expression still renders her uncomfortable (p. 241). Baxter is an altogether more modern servant than Crosby, being unafraid to draw her own boundaries of where her responsibilities end and of pursuing a life of her own quite independent of those who employ her. Crosby, herself, comes up against the non-deferential attitude of a new generation of working women. ‘It was all take-it-or-leave-it now,’ Crosby mutters, addressing in imagination, ‘the red-haired servant girl who had flung out of the house without warning. *She* could easily get another job’ (p. 274).

In a somewhat reverse direction, sections of the middle class, especially women, were moving towards what could be termed downward class convergence. In *The Years*, Maggie and Renny manage without servants, although Renny admits this necessitates some disregard for middle-class mores: ‘we are extremely dirty’, he says (p. 255). Eleanor’s final home in the novel had previously been a workman’s flat, and Sara lives in a lodging-house that North calls a slum (pp. 296, 283). These rooms would have been rented from private landlords whose properties were often inferior to new rented housing offered to working-class tenants by local authorities. A correspondent to the *New Statesman* pointed out that working-class flats being built in Euston were an improvement on middle-class flats available in central London.²⁹

Sara's outrage and disgust at the habits of the neighbour with whom she has to share a bathroom suggests that convergence does not necessarily produce community feeling. As electric wiring and indoor plumbing became increasingly standardised features of new or improved working-class housing during the 1930s, the better-off of the working class were able to espouse the complex values of respectability and privacy that modern convenience allowed. As Shove suggests, 'Cleanliness values bore on all who wished to better their lives or felt the sting of invidious class comparisons' (*Comfort*, p. 100). Whereas, into the beginning of the twentieth century, regular washing marked out middle-class status, as it does for the characters in *The Years*, by the 1930s, it had become 'a basic condition of social acceptance' (Shove, *Comfort*, p. 102). A condition of respectability was beginning to be available to the labouring population and with it, perhaps, recognition of a potential common life shared by middle and working classes alike and materialised in the national grid and piped water supply.

Clearly, housing was the central factor driving this transition of life styles and values. The years 1933 to 1938 witnessed a great boom in house building so that by 1939 approximately one-third of all houses were new. As a result, the possibility of home ownership extended down to the lower middle class and to the upper levels of working-class occupations. This mass market in home ownership was facilitated by a concurrent expansion of building societies. In 1910, the amount societies advanced was just over £9 million, while in 1938 it was £137 million. The result, writes John Burnett, was 'a growing convergence of standards between the established members and the new entrants to the class' (*A Social History*, p. 245). Not only was there a growing standardisation of housing, with amenities of running water, electricity and gas, but there was also a convergence of the values and ambitions derived from homeownership. 'Above all,' Burnett claims, for those 'able to buy a house instead of merely renting it, and to luxuriate in the sense of security and achievement which property-buying brought, [was a] [. . .] predominant ambition' (*A Social History*, p. 245).

Woolf's precise notation on types of housing throughout the narrative traces this very material process of transition. The need of embodied beings for shelter produces a social history given substance in houses as well as archives. At the end of the novel, Eleanor thinks, 'Always there were rooms [. . .] Always from the beginning of time' (p. 384). The rooms inhabited by the main characters at the beginning

of *The Years*, in Abercorn Terrace, Browne Street and the Lodge, are spacious and the houses themselves imposing private family dwellings. As the story progresses these high-status properties move down the social scale, to become multiply-rented rooms and lodgings. The old houses in Milton Street, where Sara lodges, ‘had seen better days’ and the doorway and stairs of the lodging house ‘had once been [part of] a gentleman’s residence’ (pp. 280, 281). Meanwhile in Oxford, Dr Malone so dislikes the ‘cheap red villas’ that characterise the neighbourhood in which the Robson family and Miss Craddock rent housing that ‘he would always make a round to avoid them’ (p. 56). The Robsons, unlike the very poor, can afford a house that has two ground floor rooms allowing for the status-enhancing, never to be used, front parlour. Dr Malone’s dislike of the new cannot hold back the process of time. By the end of the novel, Milly is complaining of ‘brand-new villas everywhere’ (p. 339). As Eleanor and Peggy drive to Delia’s party, the cab takes them down ‘mild respectable little streets where every house had its bow window, its strip of garden, its private name’ (p. 299). There is suggestion here of both conforming sameness and, paradoxically, of aspiring individualism, as asserted in private names. Nevertheless, the villas seem more part of the current of life than the glimpsed ‘pale pompous beauty’ of the ghostly stucco columns of Abercorn Terrace that the two women glimpse from the cab window.

What is at stake in this transitional moment materialised in the types of building seen on a drive through London? Is it a movement away from the pale pomposity of the middle-class house with its geography of vertical hierarchy, its life-restricting codes of privacy, properness and individualism? Is it a moment of dissensus, an opening out into possibilities of a more egalitarian sense of life and self as a horizontal continuum with the vitality of the natural world and of the social energies of city streets? This would entail a dismantling of the traditional vertical regime of perceptibility structured by idealist individualist values, to be replaced by an inclusive, comprehensive regime of the perceptible recognising as worthy of notice all domains of human existence – cultural, social and natural. It could be argued that the shared physical necessities of human life were leading, in the 1930s, to ever-greater degrees of commonality as materialised in the infrastructure of utilities and in the movement from private to public provision. These are possibilities and ideas that preoccupy the characters at the end of *The Years*. Eleanor, for example, recognises that identity comes not from private life but from social interaction: ‘My life’s been other people’s lives’ (p. 331).

North imagines an extension of self as comprehending a larger reality. He wants 'at the same time [to] spread out, make a new ripple in human consciousness, be the bubble and the stream [. . .] myself and the world together' (p. 369).

On the other hand, does a world of little red villas, each with their private name, suggest rather that the individualism and divisiveness of the private house are coming to dominate an ever larger section of the social world? The Anti-Noise League was campaigning against the vitality and noise of the city streets in the name of decency, privacy and house-owner rights. The house, whatever its size, is pre-eminently a stage for the performance of possessive individualism. There is certainly plenty of egoism on display at Delia's party. Peggy is bored by the 'I, I, I' of a young man's conversation but she compares its heedless persistence to a vacuum cleaner or a telephone bell, suggesting such male assertion is as commonplace in the present day of domestic technology as in earlier decades (p. 325). North wants to shield Maggie from the 'contamination of family life' that Milly represents, only to realise that Maggie is equally ready to talk 'about *her* children now'. None of them is interested in other people's children, he thinks, 'Only in their own; their own property; their own flesh and blood [. . .] How then can we be civilized?' (p. 341). Yet Peggy later thinks that he too 'would produce little Gibbises, more little Gibbises' (p. 357). The estate-agent advertisements and the talk of houses with several bathrooms, moreover, suggest the continued dominance of consumer acquisitiveness, of the quest for privacy and disavowal of physical necessity.

Delia's party itself attempts to stage social convergence. She has invited people who are commoners and those who are noble; there are those in formal evening dress and those who are not; some ignore decorum and drink soup out of mugs, some wait for spoons. 'That had always been her aim;' she thinks, 'to mix people; to do away with the absurd conventions of English life' (p. 359). Eleanor can also be seen to further the movement of convergence when she asks her brother, Edward, to encourage the son of her porter in his desire to go to college. Edward, too, approves of this widening of class opportunity. He points approvingly to one of Delia's guests, Chipperfield, who is a great railway man and son of a railway porter. Yet Chipperfield epitomises the equivocal outcome of class mobility. He has bought himself a 'delightful house' with two or three hundred acres for shooting and 'old masters' upon his walls. During the 1930s, there was public debate, much of it critical, as to the changes in life style and modes of speech by those of working-class origin

who had risen to prominence as members of the Labour Party and trade unions as well as in business.

That Delia's husband, the arch conservative, Patrick, calls the property advertisements 'a manifesto' is surely a highly ironic joke. Property was indeed the manifesto, not of class revolution, but of respectability for those anxious to gain a higher social status; it was equally the lynch-pin holding in place vertical social structures and individualist values. North looks at his fellow guests and thinks that for all Delia's pride in her promiscuity, 'where are the Sweeps and the Sewer-men, the Seamstresses and the Stevedores?' (p. 364). Kitty is one of the most robust in insisting that she can drink her soup from a mug in defiance of convention. Much earlier in her life she had been tempted to throw decorum much more radically to the winds in her attraction to working-class young men. Later, as Lady Lasswade, she attends the opera *Siegfried* and as the hero hammers the sword that will destroy the old order, she is reminded of the 'Hammer, hammer, hammer' she heard coming from the garden of the Robsons' house from which a young man, their son, emerged with wood shavings in his hair (p. 165). Yet, ambivalently, in the text, this also echoes the 'Hammer, hammer, hammer' of the drunken working-class man beating at the door.

In the 1930s, there was almost universal recognition that the older order was giving way to new social and material structures. As always, the outcomes of such moments of dissensus were difficult to predict. Many hoped for, and possibly even more feared, the end of class and gender inequality. In addition, by the late 1930s, European war seemed almost inevitable. In this respect the last section of *The Years* strikingly echoes the ending of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*. In each work, the main characters stand hesitant before the future, fearful yet desirous of change. Chekhov's world was about to be irrevocably transformed by the Russian Revolution and Woolf's by the Second World War. Characters at the end of the novel express yearning for a new order very much in the way Chekhov's characters do. 'To live differently . . . differently', North thinks (p. 381). Nicholas raises his glass to 'The human race [. . .] now in its infancy, may it grow to maturity' (p. 383). 'There must be another life,' Eleanor insists to herself, 'She felt as if she were standing on the edge of a precipice with her hair blown back' (p. 385). As in Chekhov's plays, there are no concrete proposals, no programmes or manifestos for a prescribed new world, only the desire for an opening up of the horizons of the possible, for a redistribution of the perceptible.

Woolf's novels are always highly dialogic, an orchestration of multiple voices within the social continuum. In the final section of *The Years* perspectives and voices change constantly. The novel, however, concludes with two striking images that resonate like alternative possibilities. As dawn comes, Eleanor watches as a young man and woman get out of a cab before a house. The man fits his latch-key to the door, and opens it. They stand for a moment on the threshold and then the door shuts behind them with a little thud (p. 391). If this represents the future, it seems an ominous turning away from the fullness of life, a retreat into the sheltered privacy of the house. This is the limitation of space that Woolf hoped future women writers would escape from. That 'little thud' of domestic enclosure is also the fate that, one hundred years earlier, Jane Austen had resisted for her female protagonists.

Just before Eleanor sees the young couple step out of the cab and enter the house, Delia brings up from the basement, where so many of the servants in the novel have lived invisibly, the children of the caretaker and, like Marie Antoinette, she offers them cake.³⁰ They eat hungrily but when asked to sing for their supper, they sweep fierce or frightened eyes over the assembled guests and break into a song that is pure sound with no recognisable words. They sing harshly, fiercely and discordantly. 'As they stood there they looked so dignified; yet they made this hideous noise' (p. 387). This, in itself, seems a moment of transition, the mute and invisible newly, shockingly perceptible. It stages an aesthetic and political dissensus, at once hilariously carnivalesque, yet equally tender, hopeful and terrifying.

Are these the voices of the future? Earlier in the novel Woolf had made audible the wider social and physical worlds that are largely rendered mute and unseen in regimes of representation structured upon individualism and idealism. In *The Years*, the common life of the physical world expresses itself as sound as well as visibility. The life of the city streets is also materialised as voices, as street cries, musicians and children singing as they skip over chalk marks. In *The Waves*, Louis desires to draw a steel ring of pure poetry around the physical energies and appetites of common life and thereby discipline it into an abstract universal order. Woolf resists any imposition of meaning upon the children's voices. The moment resonates without any interpretive screen placed upon it. It remains pure possibility.

The Years has been much criticised for its failure to be wholly realist or wholly modernist. Yet Woolf's writing moves well beyond

earlier traditions of social and psychological realism. She practises a form of worldly realism that emphasises self, not as individual mind, but as embodied being and part of a material continuum with social structures and processes, with the whole physical universe, and with the potent world of things. From a modernist concern with technology, she produces a radical materialist history. This egalitarian, mobile perspective and aesthetics wholly undercuts the idealist, vertical representative regime still dominant within so many political and cultural domains today.

Notes

1. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 86
2. *New Statesman*, 1935, January–June, p. 625; 1935, July–December, p. 664; 1933, July–September, p. 751; 1933, October–December, p. 480.
3. *New Statesman*, 1933, January–March, pp. 155–6.
4. Virginia Woolf, *The Years*, ed. Anna Snaith, pp. 132, 133.
5. John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing 1815–1970*, p. 107; for contemporary accounts see the *New Statesman*'s detailed articles and correspondence on housing development and debates during the 1930s.
6. *New Statesman*, 1933, April–June, p. 467.
7. See Alison Ravetz with Richard Turkington, *The Place of Home: English Domestic Environments, 1914–2000*, p. 123.
8. Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 642.
9. *Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 4.172.
10. *Essays of Virginia Woolf*, 6.9.
11. *New Statesman*, 1936, July–December, p. 509.
12. *New Statesman*, 1936, April–June, pp. 858–60.
13. Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*, p. 47; the quotation is from *Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 5.70.
14. Mitchell A. Leaska, 'Introduction' to Virginia Woolf, *The Pargiters: The Novel-Essay Portion of The Years*, p. xv.
15. Anna Snaith, *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations*, p. 99.
16. Linden Peach, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 168.
17. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 117.
18. *New Statesman*, 1935, July–December, p. 211.
19. *New Statesman*, 1935, July–December, p. 275. Woolf also appreciated street musicians: see her essay on 'Street Music', *Essays of Virginia Woolf*, 1.27–32.
20. *New Statesman*, 1933, July–September, p. 68.
21. *New Statesman*, 1936, April–June, p. 247. As with housing, the journal contains frequent articles and correspondence on malnutrition, especially of children.

22. *New Statesman*, 1933, July–September, pp. 344–5.
23. *New Statesman*, 1934, January–June, p. 215; p. 439; pp. 873–4; p. 993.
24. *New Statesman*, 1933, April–June, p. 467.
25. *New Statesman*, 1935, January–June, p. 311.
26. *New Statesman*, 1936, January–March, p. 174.
27. Elizabeth Shove, *Comfort, Cleanliness, and Convenience: The Social Organization of Normality*, p. 13.
28. George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, pp. 112–13.
29. *New Statesman*, 1933, April–June, p. 411.
30. A correspondent to *New Statesman*, in a letter advocating more home baking by poorer women, refers to Marie Antoinette’s supposedly infamous suggestion, 1936, July–December, p. 122.