



## Queer Bloomsbury

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<https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474401692.001.0001>

Published: 2016

Online ISBN: 9781474422123

Print ISBN: 9781474401692

### CHAPTER

## Virginia Woolf's Queer Time and Place: Wartime London and a World Aslant

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<https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474401692.003.0016> Pages 276–293

Published: June 2016

### Abstract

Coates employs queer phenomenology proposed by Judith Halberstam and Sara Ahmed to explore the ways Virginia Woolf's modernist aesthetic queers events, characters, affects, and the phenomenological experience of time and space. Examining queer angles of vision in *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Waves*, and *The Years*, Woolf depicts a London irrevocably queered by war or its anticipation. Rendering familiar temporal and spatial frames suddenly askew, Woolf's queer analysis of wartime London calls us to heed the destructive consequences of a militancy facilitated by patriarchy and heteronormativity, while simultaneously inviting us to inhabit a city capable of offering radically alternative modes of social gathering.

**Keywords:** Bloomsbury Group, queer, Virginia Woolf, queer time, queer space, queer place, queer phenomenology, queer perspective, wartime London, Kimberly Engdahl Coates

**Subject:** Literary Theory and Cultural Studies

The letters Virginia Woolf writes beginning in 1939 describing her gradual severance from the 'passion of [her] life – the City of London' and her final retreat to Monk's House in the autumn of 1940 chronicle what a queer and disorienting time and place wartime London had become (*Letters* 6: 431). 'You can't think', she writes to her niece Angelica Bell in October 1939, 'how difficult it is to write a letter in this doomed and devastated but at the same time morbidly fascinating town.... [Y]ou don't know what a queer place London is' (6: 363–4). Later, in a January 1941 letter written to Lady Shena Simon, she exclaims:

No, I don't see what's to be done about war. It's manliness; and manliness breeds womanliness – both so hateful. [...] They said if women had as much money as men, they'd enjoy themselves: and then what about the children? So they have more children; more wars; and so on. (6: 464)

Woolf's comments not only acknowledge the patriarchy's inability to recognise women's labour and socioeconomic status outside of a gendered economic system, but like *Three Guineas*, they also link war with patriarchy, hetero-normativity and the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family that each of these supports.

And yet, if it is heteronormativity in part that fuels history's insufferable repetition of war, it is also, as Woolf's letters make evident, war's destruction that exposes London as such a 'queer' and 'morbidly fascinating' place. This essay attempts to reconcile precisely this paradox. In novels like *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *The Waves* and *The Years*, Woolf depicts a London irrevocably queered by war or its anticipation.

p. 277 Rendering familiar temporal and spatial ↪ frames suddenly askew, wartime London and Woolf's queer analysis thereof call us to heed the destructive consequences of a militancy facilitated by patriarchy and heteronormativity, while simultaneously inviting us to inhabit a city capable of offering radically alternative modes of social gathering.

Judith Halberstam has argued that 'queer time' and 'queer space' develop in 'opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction' and 'according to other logics of location, movement, and identification' (1). Such 'strange temporalities', she insists, may help us to rethink queerness as relevant not only in terms of sexual identity, but also more broadly and philosophically as a way of being in the world (1). Similarly, Sara Ahmed has examined the way in which spaces impress themselves upon, and in turn take shape within, bodies whose orientation disorients hegemonic assumptions about the experience of temporality and space. In its most general sense, notes Ahmed, phenomenology reminds us that spaces are not exterior to bodies; instead, spaces are like a second skin that 'unfolds in the folds of the body' (9). A queer phenomenology, then, might begin by redirecting or reorienting our attention toward queer moments, moments at which the world appears 'slantwise' (65). Accordingly, to become vertical, to pull one's self 'upright', would mean that the queer effect is being overcome and objects in the world no longer appear off-centre or slantwise. Ahmed asks her readers to consider what it might mean to live out a politics of disorientation, one that would insist we not straighten up, but rather continue to see slantwise:

If we think with and through orientation, we might allow the moments of disorientation to gather, almost as if they are bodies around a different table. We might in gathering, face a different way.. Indeed, to live out a politics of disorientation might be to sustain wonder about the very forms of social gathering. (24)

Disorienting our relationship to the power dynamics and hierarchies inherent in London's normative logic and reorienting us through the perceptual angles of subjects who struggle with 'seeing straight', Woolf's novels move us toward a broader politics of perception, laying bare the gendered and sexualised hegemonic space that is urban London in the early and midtwentieth century while also offering alternative and queer phenomenological encounters premised on contingency and flux. Keeping in mind Halberstam's and Ahmed's queer phenomenology, this essay will traverse the urban space of London as it is perceived and embodied in Virginia Woolf's war novels – most specifically *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *The Waves* and *The Years* – so as to elucidate what new narratives and alternative relations to time and space are opened up by the queer angles from which Woolf asks her readers to see London, a city where, as she writes in *The Voyage*

p. 278 Out, 'eccentricity must pay ↪ the penalty' (1). Woolf's work is, I argue, foundational to our understanding of how, as subjects, we are continually oriented, discursively and visually, toward lines of thought and action that encourage the repetition of gendered and sexualised hegemonic constructions. Orienting us toward an awareness of these hegemonic straightening devices, Woolf's war novels reorient readers perceptually by insisting that we follow lines of deviation, lines that encourage perpetual reorientation and refuse any easy return to history's seemingly irrevocable and upright march toward a repetition of the same.

## ‘Eccentricity must pay the penalty’: London’s Normative Logic

Rendered temporally exact by the chimes of its many clocks, Woolf’s London is an urban space that excels at coercing its inhabitants to remain vertical in stance and upright in carriage. However, while it spatially and temporally orients its dwellers away from more ‘obscure angles and relationships’, London, as Woolf’s essay ‘Street Haunting’ testifies, can also reveal them (483). The aesthetic disorientations of Woolf’s first experimental novel, *Jacob’s Room* (1922), were inspired by this tension between what she refers to as London’s ‘queer, incongruous voices’ (47) and Britain’s institutions, practices and ideologies, all of which she felt bore responsibility for the ‘preposterous masculine fiction’ that became World War I (*Letters* 5: 76).

The roving narrative eye and voice of *Jacob’s Room*, itself disoriented by the futile attempt to capture Jacob Flanders in any definitive terms, never takes us directly to the theatre of war but is instead concerned with what *will be* as a result of *what is*. Hence, Woolf exposes how Britain’s greatest city temporally and spatially disciplines bodies to straighten up, and through its institutions – for example, Cambridge and the Church – shapes the ideal masculine subject, a man in military uniform. Pointing to a war that will emerge from and be sustained by disciplinary structures and rituals that reflect and dictate London’s normative logic, Woolf requires that we entertain the narrator’s attention to the queer and incongruous facets of such logic. It is the queer meanderings of Woolf’s narrator that direct us, for example, away from Jacob into the lives of a Mrs Jarvis, Mrs Pascoe, or Florinda – women for whom time is a material abstraction, one that regiments their lives according to patriarchal temporal frames grossly out of sync with their own experiences.<sup>1</sup> Or again that we see Jacob striding freely and confidently through deserted streets, but are quickly reoriented to look towards the poor, who can be seen in ‘hordes crossing Waterloo bridge’, or to a young woman of twenty-two whose gaze is ‘bright and vague’ and whose attire is ‘shabby’ as she makes her way hesitantly across the road (117, 119). Not only does Woolf make it clear that to walk ↴ with Jacob’s ease and confidence remains a privilege available to his gender and class alone, she also exposes ‘the hoary city, old, sinful, and majestic’ and its masculine privileges as funded by young women’s bodies (68). Such queer narrative meanderings introduce a disorienting array of personal histories that force us to confront the gendered social and ethical implications of normative temporalities and their spatial equivalents.

If *Jacob’s Room* makes London’s normative logic abundantly clear and reveals how its hegemonic structures, temporal and spatial, are gendered and sexualised, it also acknowledges the heteronormative imperative behind reproducing such structures. Hence, as I discuss below, if as a young British man Jacob is rewarded by a city whose privileges are inherently masculine, he nevertheless struggles to remain vertical and to direct his passions along a straight line. Jacob’s efforts to straighten up, as will Septimus Smith’s failed efforts to do the same in *Mrs Dalloway*, serve as testimony to Woolf’s assertion that while ‘the streets of London have their map’, nevertheless ‘our passions are uncharted’ (*Jacob’s Room* 99).

## Struggling to See Straight: Uncharted Passions in *Jacob's Room* and *Mrs Dalloway*

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If, according to Sara Ahmed, a queer phenomenology redirects our attention toward queer moments, a world seen slantwise, then becoming vertical means overcoming the queer effect. How then, asks Ahmed, do individuals go about straightening queer effects? In both *Jacob's Room* and *Mrs Dalloway*, we witness characters succumb to, or, in the case of Septimus Smith, resist the imperative to straighten up. While in *Jacob's Room* the effects of World War I do not register as anything other than ominous shadows and whispers until the final chapter, which leaves us in Jacob's room with his mother and would-be lover after Jacob has died on the battlefield, in *Mrs Dalloway* post-war London is a city where queer moments increasingly take precedence over the mundane and the ordinary. Eve Sedgwick contends that counter to our understanding of a moment as a passing instant, irretrievable in its transience, a 'queer moment' is 'inextinguishable' and 'recurrent' (xii). Furthermore, as Sedgwick defines them, such moments are 'troublant' or troubling: they disturb the natural order of things. As such, queer moments can be particularly troubling due to their nature as 'multiply transitive', implying that multiple objects and/or persons of desire can be taken into their 'strange' and 'relational' orbit (xii). Transcending the spatial confines of both genre and domesticity and troubling the linear and heteronormative temporality of the marriage plot, Woolf's queer moments anticipate Sedgwick's definition. As we find them in the novels, such moments are indeed 'inextinguishable' (Sedgwick xii). They return, they haunt and they continually reverberate across the lives of Woolf's characters.

In *Jacob's Room*, queer is rendered conventional as long as it stays within the safe confines of the halls and dormitories of Cambridge: 'It was the intimacy, a sort of spiritual suppleness, when mind prints upon mind indelibly' (45). When this 'spiritual suppleness', which our narrator tells us leads Jacob to feel 'extraordinarily happy', shades into a deeper, more forbidden desire, that happiness shifts into avoidance: 'Simeon said nothing. Jacob remained standing. But intimacy – the room was full of it, still, deep, like a pool. Without need of movement or speech it rose softly and washed over everything.. But Jacob moved' (45). While Richard Bonamy, Jacob's closest friend at Cambridge and would-be lover, is clearly marked by others in the text as queer – he is rumoured to have a 'peculiar disposition', for example (163) – Jacob, as we see him through Bonamy's eyes, is resolutely straight:

But then Jacob Flanders was not at all of his own way of thinking – far from it. [...] The trouble was this romantic vein in him. [...] 'there is something – something' – [Bonamy] sighed, for he was fonder of Jacob than of any one in the world. (148)

Although Bonamy tends to dismiss this 'something' as wishful thinking, several moments in the novel lend it credence. It is very clear, for example, at the Durrant's dinner party, that Jacob finds the heteronormative bourgeoisie world represented by such social gatherings more than a little distressing. Having just returned from an idyllic sailing trip with Timmy Durrant to the Scilly Isles, Jacob goes through the motions of straightening himself up by donning a 'dinner jacket', which, as our narrator humorously notes, is the only thing that 'preserved him' and rendered the world 'stable', a fact for which '[h]e could not be sufficiently thankful' (57). While Jacob's efforts to 'straighten' himself here likely have much to do with the sea legs he developed on the sailboat with Durrant, in the context of the dinner party, the ulterior motives of which are clearly to encourage his relationship with Timothy's sister, Clara, Jacob's queer relationship to and feelings about the dinner's coercive normativity are worth noting. For Jacob participates in the meal feeling simultaneously detached and 'exposed without cover' (57). The bones of the cutlets dressed with 'pink frills' contrast objectionably with his memory of gnawing 'ham from the bone' only yesterday with Timmy Durrant, and the figures and objects around him appear like 'hazy, semi-transparent shapes of yellow and

blue' (57). Mrs Durrant, holding herself 'very straight', gazes at 'the extraordinarily awkward' Jacob interacting with her daughter Clara – "Shall I hold your wool?" Jacob asked stiffly' (61–2).

p. 281 That Jacob's struggle to straighten up even when well suited belies the 'something else' that Bonamy senses in him becomes apparent in Jacob's queerest moment, a moment which, if quickly repressed and checked by his supposed love for the unavailable, because married, Sandra Wentworth Williams, eddies and returns in the novel's final moments. While sight-seeing in Greece, Jacob finds himself overcome with a desire to see Bonamy and writes a telegram telling him to 'come at once', which he then immediately 'crumpl[es] in his hand and [throws] in the gutter' (157). Having heeded his desire, Jacob quickly rationalises why he is unable to follow through:

'For one thing he wouldn't come', he thought. 'And then I daresay this sort of thing wears off'. 'This sort of thing' being that uneasy, painful feeling, something like selfishness – one wishes almost that the thing would stop – it is getting more and more beyond what is possible. (157)

Delightfully vague while at the same time deliciously obvious, Woolf's use of unclear pronoun referents and innocuous nouns – the 'thing' that is 'beyond what is possible' – reveals, in a rare moment, Jacob's love for Bonamy. While he works hard to straighten that love, here it overwhelms him to the extent that 'if it goes on much longer', he may find himself 'unable to cope with it' (157, emphasis added).

Back in London, while paying a visit to Clara, Bonamy is feeling the same suffocating effects induced by conventional domesticity that Jacob had experienced at the Durrant's dinner: 'Bonamy kept on gently returning quiet answers and accumulating amazement at an existence squeezed and emasculated within a white satin shoe' (160). Disoriented by the experience of speaking to Clara, who unintentionally refuses him the opportunity to share his feelings for Jacob and instead brutally reminds him of the temporal frameworks induced by heteronormativity, Bonamy finds his world aslant suddenly forced straight:

For a man of his temperament, [he] got a very queer feeling, as he walked through the park, of carriages irresistibly driven; of flower beds uncompromisingly geometrical; of force rushing round geometrical patterns in the most senseless way in the world. (160)

As Bonamy himself recognises, this 'very queer feeling' has nothing to do with his own 'temperament', but is induced instead by the 'senseless' rush of 'geometrical patterns' he sees before him in the London square and the drive to be straight that such patterns demand. Patterns, which Bonamy also knows, at the level of society, orient Jacob's desire away from him toward what will always be the 'silent woman' between them.

p. 282 In the end, *Jacob's Room* confirms that it is precisely this senseless rush of patterns that needs to be done away with, for the price of submission is, quite literally, Jacob himself. We are left in Jacob's room with his mother Betty, whose vision we know from the novel's first pages has been slanted by grief. With Betty is not Clara Durrant but Richard Bonamy. As Jacob's mother and Bonamy survey the room and go through Jacob's things, Woolf's narrator calls our attention, as she had when first describing his room, to the 'distinction' of the eighteenth-century building and the room within; a room which, in its architectural shapeliness, gestures toward the order of its day but whose lines and decor, however predictable, however representative, could not prevent his death any more than they can contain his absence or the confusion it has caused. The novel ends with a recognition of that confusion – "Such confusion everywhere!" exclaimed Betty Flanders' – and offers readers a sign that the old order may yield to a world seen aslant as Bonamy's cry of 'Jacob! Jacob!' meets with Betty Flander's plaintive query as she holds up a pair of Jacob's old shoes, 'What am I to do with these, Mr. Bonamy?' (187). Significantly, Woolf's first experimental novel, as Vara Neverow has stated, offers us a 'bitterly caustic and yet elegiac inversion of the traditional marriage plot', thereby leaving suspended the possibility of a future where new relations and alternative plots might be available (lxxvii).



Woolf's second radical departure from conventional forms of the novel, *Mrs Dalloway*, takes us into that future – post-war London – where, as the queer moment of a long ago kiss eddies around the quotidian, the otherwise conventional Clarissa Dalloway struggles to remain within the narrow confines of her role as hostess, mother and wife, and where Septimus Smith, his mind ravaged by the war, remains increasingly unable to overcome the queer effects induced by combat and his love for another soldier. Conveying queer affinities with much more subjective intensity than had *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs Dalloway* accounts for how, with varying degrees of success, such affinities are brought back into 'proportion' or made to line up with London's hegemonic and heteronormative cartographies. Nevertheless, the novel begins to elucidate what new narratives and alternative relations to time and space might be opened up if we see London from the queer angles of a Clarissa Dalloway or Septimus Smith.

Clarissa Dalloway, seemingly 'light, tall, very upright' (12) and, according to Peter Walsh, 'straight as a dart' (76), plunges readers into inhabiting two temporal zones simultaneously: in the first – the present moment – Clarissa walks the streets of London, which, though intimately familiar, have been rendered strange by a war whose dead haunt every corner, and by an illness, which, having removed her temporarily from the 'army of the upright',<sup>2</sup> has left her seeing askant. In the second temporal zone, the arc of time is bent backwards toward her young life in Bourton and toward the most 'exquisite moment of her whole life', Sally Seton's kiss (35). While Clarissa is unlikely to move beyond the confines of her 'narrow bed', her perceptual ecstasies and their queer ripples inform a larger politics of perception that Woolf's novel in its entirety is intent on conveying. For pushing against the sensible sounds of Big Ben 'laying down the law, so solemn, so just' and against the supposedly progressive march forward of historical time, Clarissa's queer revelations amount to a theory of being in the world that marks the human as that which is most contingent, most transient and therefore most astonishing (128). Thus, the 'supreme mystery' is the old lady seen but not heard across the way: 'How extraordinary it was, strange, yes, touching to see the old lady [...]. [I]t had something to do with her' (127). This sudden and deeply felt affinity Clarissa finds herself having with others in post-war London – at this particular moment an affinity with an old lady who is not but indeed someday will be herself – renders her world indelibly queer.

Nevertheless, in order to move through a world that is oriented vertically, Clarissa understands, despite the effort it takes, that she must 'give her face point' and pull herself upright in order to extend her body into space (36). Sara Ahmed notes that

the queer moment, in which objects appear slantwise and the vertical and horizontal axes appear 'out of line', must be overcome not because such moments contradict laws that govern objective space, but because they block bodily action: they inhibit the body such that it ceases to extend into phenomenal space. (66)

Unlike Clarissa, Septimus, her alter ego, fails to straighten himself up. He ultimately chooses death as preferable to Holmes and Bradshaw's prescriptions for returning him to his position as a 'soldier in the army of the upright',<sup>3</sup> or to health and thus 'proportion'. Like Clarissa, Septimus glides on the surface of the present and sinks into the depths of the past. As Clarissa's memory bends her back toward Sally's kiss, so too does Septimus's memory throw him back on to his passion for Evans, who was killed 'just before the Armistice in Italy' (86). Although Woolf provides us with no explicit evidence for a homosexual relationship between Septimus and Evans beyond the homosocial bonds forged in combat, we do learn that prior to Septimus's enlistment, his employer, Mr Brewer, worries that 'something [is] up [...] he looked weakly; advised football' (85). Mr Brewer's need to bring Septimus back into line with a heteronormative British masculinity is met, as Woolf's narrator tells us, by 'the prying and insidious [...] fingers of the European War': 'There in the trenches the change which Mr. Brewer desired when he advised football was produced instantly; he developed manliness' (85–6). The final proof of what the war had taught him, Septimus realises, is that he is able to congratulate himself upon Evans's death for 'feeling very little and very

reasonably' (86). Any abiding affection Septimus had for Evans, who, as we learn from Lucrezia, was 'a quiet man [...] undemonstrative in the company of women', is lost in the defensive indifference with which he watches the war's last shells explode (86). Until, that is, having returned to Milan, he finds himself seized by the panic that he cannot feel and promptly becomes engaged to Lucrezia.

However, this attempt to pull himself upright, to move through the world as a 'normal' British male is wont to do, fails miserably. As Septimus sits on a bench in Regent's Park being beckoned by trees whose leaves seem to be 'connected by millions of fibres with his own body' and listening to the queer 'harmonies' echoing in the spaces between the sounds of 'sparrows fluttering, rising', Lucrezia tries desperately to pull him from the queer temporality the war has locked both of them into: "'Look", she implored him, for Dr. Holmes had told her to make him notice real things, go to a music hall, play cricket' (22, 25). However, her continued cries of 'look' cannot overwhelm the other voice Septimus hears: 'Look the unseen bade him, the voice which now communicated with him who was the greatest of mankind' (25). To emphasise the temporal disjunction being experienced by this husband and wife, Woolf abruptly switches readers to seeing them through the eyes of Maisie Johnson, a young Scottish woman, who is in London for the first time:

Both seemed queer, Maisie Johnson thought. Everything seemed very queer. [...] this couple on the chairs gave her quite a turn; the young woman seeming foreign, the man looking queer [...] how queer it was, this couple she had asked the way of [...] all seemed, after Edinburgh, so queer. (25–6)

By spinning readers outside of Septimus's and Lucrezia's perceptual field and into that of a London outsider, who somehow equates the city with the 'queer' couple she sees before her, Woolf implies that despite Big Ben's 'sensible sound', the war indeed has turned London and its inhabitants upside down (150).

Unable to disarticulate his past from his present, Septimus finds himself facing the ultimate straightening device: Sir William Bradshaw and his 'divine proportion' (99). Normative time takes hold with a vengeance in the pages of *Mrs Dalloway* dedicated to an account of William Bradshaw and his more benign compatriot Hugh Whitbread: 'Shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing, the clocks of Harley Street nibbled at the June day, counselled submission, upheld authority, and pointed out in chorus the supreme advantages of a sense of proportion' (100). Laying, 'very high, on the back of the world' his mind's eye slanted toward the 'queer harmony' he hears coming from London's streets, Septimus sees beauty 'made out of ordinary things [...] beauty, that was the truth now. Beauty was everywhere' (68, 69). As the trees wave and brandish their branches, Septimus's strange temporality clashes irrevocably with the time of Bradshaw's arrival: "'It is time", said Rezia. The word "time" split its husk; poured its riches over him' (69). From behind the branches, Evans appears, 'without mud, without wounds', leading Septimus to believe that his own time is 'real' time (70). Hence, to Lucrezia's continued query of "'The time Septimus [...] What is the time?'" comes the response: "'I will tell you the time," said Septimus, very slowly, very drowsily, smiling mysteriously. As he sat smiling at the dead man in the grey suit the quarter struck' (70). And, although he waits until the 'very last moment', he ultimately chooses his own queer time (149).

'Queer', Eve Sedgwick tells us in *Tendencies*, is 'relational and strange' (xii). If Woolf finds herself unable to actualise her queer moments in the larger social fabric, she nevertheless provides readers in *Mrs Dalloway* with a politics of perception that privileges disorientation and seeing 'slantwise'. Like Clarissa, Woolf asks us to inhabit 'queer little scenes' and to feel ourselves everywhere, not 'here, here, here' but 'everywhere' (*Mrs Dalloway* 51). It is the 'odd affinities', the relations Clarissa had with people to whom she had 'never spoken, to some woman in the street, some man behind a counter – even trees, or barns' that Peter Walsh remembers as he walks to her party at the end of the novel (153). Such 'odd affinities' ask us as readers also to 'face a different way' and thus offer what Ahmed contends are possibilities for creating new forms of social gathering (24).

## Seeing Slantwise: Alternative Forms of Social Being and Organisation in *The Waves* and *The Years*

New forms of social gathering born of temporal and spatial disorder are very much at the heart of Woolf's most highly experimental novel, *The Waves*, as well as *The Years*, the latter of which is perhaps most surprising in this regard, given its apparent return to the more conventional form of the Victorian novel.<sup>4</sup> More intensely than in either *Jacob's Room* or *Mrs Dalloway*, time is perceived in Woolf's later novels as constituting space too often shaped by the tyranny of the same. Both texts reveal the ultimate futility of hegemonic efforts to order and control lived experiences as well as the danger such efforts pose. Thus, Bernard thinks towards the end of *The Waves*,

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[I]t is a mistake, this extreme precision, this orderly and military progress; a convenience, a lie. There is always deep below it, even ↪ when we arrive punctually at the appointed time with our white waistcoats and polite formalities, a rushing stream of broken dreams. (189)

The invisible realities running beneath the ostensibly placid veneer of civilisation and the alternative temporal and spatial dimensions those invisible realities open up are precisely what Woolf folds into her 'play poem', *The Waves*; they brew as well beneath the ostensibly logical temporal divisions of *The Years*, where characters find themselves continually disoriented despite, and perhaps because of, temporal and spatial divides.

Woolf's struggle with what kind of aesthetic form *The Waves* should take illustrates this tension between precision and flux: 'I shall have two different currents – the moths flying along; the flower upright in the centre; a perpetual crumbling and renewing of the plant' (*A Writer's Diary* 140). She knew that this form must 'eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity' and also show 'the light through' (136, 138). But what, she asks herself as she struggles with the 'great pressure of difficulty' felt in writing the novel, 'is the light? I am impressed by the transitoriness of human life', and 'I am bored by narrative' (138). Ultimately, Woolf's 'play poem' emerges organically from the voices she creates and is less of a definitive form than it is a moving orchestration of sensate beings whose proximity to and impingement upon one another connect them until they are like the tissues of one body. 'The skin of the social', writes Ahmed, 'might be affected by the comings and goings of different bodies, creating new lines and new textures in the ways in which things are arranged' (9). In *The Waves*, Percival stands for – however ironically, given his fatal fall from a 'flea-bitten mare' – Britain's propensity for precision, order and progress; his death then 'abolishes the ticking of time's clock with one blow', leaving those left behind to trace new lines and discover new textures in the chaos of London's modernity (131).

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Following the news of Percival's death, as Bernard notes, they all 'see' a world that 'Percival sees no longer' (110). However, of the six 'states of soul', words I borrow from Woolf in lieu of the more conventional notion of 'characters' – Bernard, Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny, Rhoda – it is Rhoda who sees the world most consistently aslant.<sup>5</sup> As Rhoda walks through London and down Oxford Street she envisages 'a world rent by lightning' (115). According to Sara Ahmed, the work of inhabiting space involves a dynamic negotiation between what is familiar and unfamiliar: 'Familiarity is shaped by the "feel" of space or by how spaces "impress" upon bodies. This familiarity is not, then, "in" the world as that which is already given. The familiar is an effect of inhabitation' (7). Rhoda's walk down Oxford Street and her vision of 'a world rent by lightning' highlight precisely this 'effect of inhabitation' by disorienting ↪ us away from an ontological security based on the assumed stability of a civilised world and its material structures toward what Bernard refers to as a 'queer territory': 'London has also crumbled. [...] Could I prolong this sense another six inches I have a forboding that I should touch some queer territory' (134–5). Without clear dimensions either spatial or temporal, this 'queer territory' allows for uncertainty and indeterminacy, thereby contrasting markedly with the pageantry – the 'extreme precision, [the] orderly and military progress' embodied by



Percival. While writing *The Waves*, Woolf feared that this 'extreme precision' and military orderliness would find its fullest expression in fascism. If, however, the 'iron black boot' of fascism casts its dark shadow ominously across the pages of *The Waves*, the hope for 'some sort of renewal' (220) is invoked by the 'abysses of space' opening up beyond the canopy of a 'burnt out' civilisation and by the 'queer territory' Bernard senses he might touch as he sees London crumble before him. Such renewal is not redemptive in the definitive sense of the word, for Bernard's final meditations on time and space, like the novel in its entirety, speak instead to an 'eternal renewal' elaborated as an 'incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again' (220). As *The Waves* makes clear, such ebbs and flows do not come to a final still point but instead leave us like Bernard – 'looking up rather dizzily at the sky' – thereby inviting us to slant our vision toward an uncertain future (220).

If Percival's life and death initiate the journey into a 'queer territory' rife with ontological uncertainty, Rhoda, for one, recognises that the move into such a territory is enabled by her relations with the others: 'But these pilgrimages, these moments of departure, start always in your presence, from this table, these lights, from Percival and Susan, here and now' (101). *The Years*, frequently referred to as Woolf's 'London novel', is, like *The Waves*, vexed by ontological uncertainty. Taking us back to a war that for Woolf was well in the past, perhaps in an effort to grasp the war that she feared was to come, *The Years*' clear temporal divisions would seem to refute such uncertainty with a faith in chronology and linear progress; however, such clear divisions belie the anxiety of the characters, within whom the refrain 'Where am I?' continually resounds. This sense of disorientation only intensifies in the '1914' and '1917' sections of the novel where the war slants the world away from its normative temporal and spatial dimensions and toward a queer relationality.

In the '1914' section of *The Years*, the queer visionary Sara Pargiter and her cousin Martin, a presumably straight – though increasingly doubtful – military man, meet on the steps of London's St Paul's Cathedral and proceed to journey across the city from a chophouse, down Fleet Street, along the Strand to Charing Cross, there boarding a bus to Hyde Park Corner and walking to Kensington Gardens, where they come upon Martin's sister and Sara's cousin, Maggie, with her baby. As Eleanor McNees observes,

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their journey is significant, as it allows for a final pre-World War I summary both of the characters' movements within London from 1880–1914 and the various religious, commercial, monarchical, legal, and civilian aspects of a city on the brink of a war that would alter if not the landscape (as would World War II), then the consciousness of the people. (lxvii)

Indeed, while our attention is called to what is most familiar about London as a centre of historical tradition and commercial power, the chapter is most pre-occupied with how we see those familiar landmarks through the disoriented visual consciousness of the ostensibly straight man, Martin. Unlike previous novels where the clock as a temporal marker predictably regulates the hours in the day, whether or not individuals agree to march accordingly, in *The Years* these clocks are ominously either malfunctioning or out of sync: 'In the country old church clocks rasped out the hour' and '[t]he air over London seemed a rough sea of sound through which circles travelled. But the clocks were irregular, as if the saints themselves were divided' (212). Time indeed seems to have been abolished: '[Martin] looked up. "The station clock's always fast", he assured a man who was hurrying to catch a train. Always fast, he said to himself as he opened the paper. But there was no clock' (223).

If Sara, who consistently orients others toward rather than away from queer moments, remains unperturbed, Martin finds himself temporally out of sorts and feels increasingly dislocated by what should be London's familiar sights and sounds. As if to affirm the invisible forces rumbling beneath the city's ostensibly firm foundation, the narrative voice emphasises that those familiar sights and sounds only 'seem' to be what they are:

The omnibuses swirled and circled in a perpetual current round the steps of St Paul's. The statue of Queen Anne *seemed* to preside over the chaos and to supply it with a centre, like the hub of a wheel. It *seemed* as if the white lady ruled the traffic with her scepter [...]. The great clock, all the clocks of the city, *seemed* to be gathering their forces together; they *seemed* to be whirring a preliminary warning. (214–15, emphasis added)

As Sara and Martin move on down Fleet Street, the 'queer thrill' of the correspondence Martin had often felt in the past when encountering sites like St Paul's comes under further assault:

They began to walk along Fleet Street. Conversation was impossible. The pavement was so narrow that he had to step on and off in order to keep beside her. [...] People pressing against him made him step off the pavement. (221)

p. 289 If keeping himself on the straight and narrow path were not hard enough, Martin finds himself in the position of having to steer Sara, whose 'queer little shuffle' reminds him of a 'somewhat dishevelled fowl', back on to their designated path as she continually pulls him off line, skipping perversely wherever she pleases (216). Entirely disoriented by having to follow Sara's unpredictable movements as well as her odd exclamations and strange beholdings, Martin suddenly realises they have been walking in the wrong direction.

'Getting lost', writes Sara Ahmed, 'takes us somewhere; and being lost is a way of inhabiting space by registering what is not familiar: being lost can in its turn become a familiar feeling' (7). But, for Ahmed, as I mentioned earlier, this 'familiar feeling' is not a familiarity that is already a given:

The work of inhabiting space involves a dynamic negotiation between what is familiar and unfamiliar, such that it is still possible for the world to create new impressions, depending on which way we turn, which affects what is within reach. (7–8)

Woolf leaves us, at the end of Martin and Sara's long walk through the city, in a moment of 'primal innocence', a moment that suggests the impressions Martin is registering as a result of his queer time with Sara may have the potential to open out into a more ethical way of seeing and being in the world.

Woolf's odd couplings, Sara and Martin, and, as we are about to see, Eleanor and Nicholas, are absolutely central to this new ethics. Speaking to these affinities and relations, Stephen Barber writes, 'Woolf represents queer novelistic subjectivities in the defamiliarizing light of conspiratorial relationships between women and gay men' (403). In the '1917' section, the 'novel ethical possibilities', which Barber argues are inherent to 'Woolf's inscription of queer relationality' (405, 404), find explicit expression in the relationship that forms between Eleanor and Nicholas, the latter of whom, as Sara informs Eleanor, 'loves the other sex, you see' (282). On a frigid winter evening three years into World War II, Eleanor, Sara and Maggie Pargiter begin by dining in a basement with Maggie's French husband Renny and his queer Polish friend, Nicholas, and finish pressed against each other in a cellar as air raid sirens wail overhead. Prior to the air raid, the conversation had circled tensely around issues concerning nationality, religion, the law and identity, and those tensions only intensify in the close quarters of the cellar. The dissension in the room is palpable, but the honesty, as Eleanor finds it, is also invigorating and yields a new way of seeing the world. Whether blurred by wine or war, Eleanor's vision extinguishes the bodily boundaries between self and other – 'things seemed to have lost their skins' – replacing the usual 'surface hardness' with a new 'porousness' (272).

p. 290 Upon re-entering the drawing room, Eleanor feels a sense of expansion and 'great calm' as if a 'New World' were opening before her: 'It was as if another space of time had been issued to her' (278). Turning to the sage-like Nicholas, Eleanor asks, "'how can we improve ourselves, live more naturally ... better?'" (280). As

he speaks in hushed tones about the way they live their lives in tight little knots and argues for the need to embrace the ‘whole being’, for it ‘wishes to expand; to adventure; to form – new combinations’, Eleanor feels as if Nicholas has released in her ‘new powers, something unknown within her’ (281). However, Eleanor’s synchronic willingness to be captivated by the revelations of a moment, the here and the now, is interrupted by Renny’s diachronic awareness that history has always allocated violence in a non-democratic fashion and will inevitably continue to do so – “‘I have spent the evening sitting in a coal cellar while other people try to kill each other above my head’” (279). Aesthetically and philosophically speaking, it is this struggle between the diachronic and the synchronic that preoccupies Woolf in much of *The Years*.

As suggested by the searchlights fanning ominously across the novel’s final pages, new relations and ‘new combinations’ will take heroic efforts to sustain beyond the small moments that reveal them. Bringing our attention back, as Renny had also, to the war and its violence, the searchlights leave us with a sense that Nicholas and Eleanor’s vision of a new world born of a queer moment in an air raid shelter will remain vulnerable as history grinds tragically forward. Thus, as Eleanor’s last words in the novel indicate – “‘There?’ [...] “And now?’” – new worlds and their new combinations are best borne out moment by moment, a temporal unfolding with endless potential if it is continually and self-reflexively phrased as a question: ‘We have been there, and now?’

## Woolf’s Politics of Disorientation

It is toward the possibilities inherent in the ‘now’ that Woolf’s aesthetic disorientations in the novels are wont to move us. The temporal space of ‘now’, as queer scholar Carolyn Dinshaw observes, has no duration:

As soon as you fix on it, it’s gone, it’s a has-been, and we’re on to the next now. In fact, now is never purely there at all: it is a transition, always divided between no longer and not yet; each present now is stretched and spanned by a past now and a future now. [...] And because the present moment never comes – never is – longing in or for the present never can be fulfilled. [...] Now cannot specify a determinate moment after all. (2)

p. 291 Undoing, unsettling and recursively moving between more fixed ideological and material structures, this ‘now’, which is where Woolf’s most chronologically conscious novel *The Years* wants to leave us, necessitates a politics of disorientation. Aesthetically speaking, in the novels I have examined here, such disorientation is prompted by failed orientations induced by either the anticipation of a war to come or the memory of a war that has been. Losing their place in what should be a familiar world, they – Woolf’s characters – and we – Woolf’s readers – must continually register somatically and psychically a ‘becoming oblique of the world, a becoming that is at once interior and exterior, as that which is given, or as that which gives what is given in its new angle’ (Ahmed 162).

In inviting us to imagine what might be if we continually ask questions about what is, Woolf’s work models for us the critical force of queer and of a queer critical history and politics that does not naively idealise a ‘now’ as positing some sort of redemptive utopia, but instead mines that temporal moment for its constant unfolding of yet another possibility. ‘We look back’, writes Ahmed, ‘as a refusal to inherit, as a refusal that is a condition for the arrival of the queer’ (178). If the ordinary work of perception straightens the queer effect (in a blink, the slant of a kiss between women is straightened up), then Woolf’s work is bent on disturbing that ordinary work of perception and staying with the queer effects that follow such a disturbance. Thus, as we traverse the urban landscape that is Woolf’s London before, during or after a war, we are disoriented so as to be reoriented toward a more radical future. A future where sexuality is determined, as Ahmed has suggested, not only by object choice, ‘but as involving differences in one’s very relationship to the world – that is in how one “faces” the world or is directed toward it’ (68). Rejecting any

and all totalitarian truths, Woolf's 'Outsider's Society', to which 'elasticity is essential' (*Three Guineas* 134) and to which many of her characters no doubt belong, invites us into a queer territory where the time of 'now' – infinitely expansive, impossible to pin down – creates an awareness of space as that which shapes us and is shaped by us, but also space as that which can emerge from us. With this queer phenomenological awareness facilitated by Woolf in hand, we might, like Eleanor, look 'there' – always refusing any gestures of return – and move into the 'now' aware that, if we let it, that 'now' has the capacity to endlessly confound and lead us astray, but also to reorient us toward new and better worlds, moment by moment.

## Notes

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1. Here I invoke Sedgwick's emphasis on the etymological origins of the word 'queer': 'to transverse, to twist, to move across' (xii).
2. Woolf, 'On Being Ill' 321.
3. 'On Being Ill' 12.
4. Eleanor McNees reminds readers of *The Years* that Woolf saw her form as anything but conventional. She cites Pamela Caughie, who sees the novel 'as postmodern in its emphasis on relations instead of representation' (lvi).
5. In response to *The Times*' review of *The Waves*, Woolf writes on 5 October 1931, 'I wonder if it is good to feel this remoteness – that is, that *The Waves* is not what they say. Odd, that they (*The Times*) should praise my characters when I meant to have none' (*A Writer's Diary* 170). I take the phrase 'states of soul' from her observation that same year on 10 September: 'Really these premonitions of a book – states of soul in creating – are very queer and little apprehended' (*A Writer's Diary* 142).

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