Teaching War Literature in the War University

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TEACHING ~~WAR~~ LITERATURE IN THE ~~WAR~~ UNIVERSITY

PAUL K. SAINT-AMOUR

"I'm going out to buy a newspaper."
"Yes?"
"Though it's no good buying newspapers. . . . Nothing ever happens. Curse this war; God damn this war! . . . All the same, I don't see why we should have a snail on our wall."
Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail.
—Virginia Woolf, "The Mark on the Wall" (1917)

"The Mark on the Wall," Virginia Woolf's first published short story, is one of our most enduring meditations on the banalization of war. In the passage above—the story's conclusion, featuring its only lines of dialogue—an unidentified speaker interrupts the narrator's thoughts by cursing a war so far unmentioned in those thoughts, a war we are hearing about for the first time (1989, 89).[1] We never learn why it annuls the news, whether because it is a war of attrition, a war on pause, or a war only made to seem uneventful by state censorship of the press. But by subordinating it to the everyday act of buying a newspaper, the story reverses the figure and ground of most war literature. It casts war as a distant, uneventful

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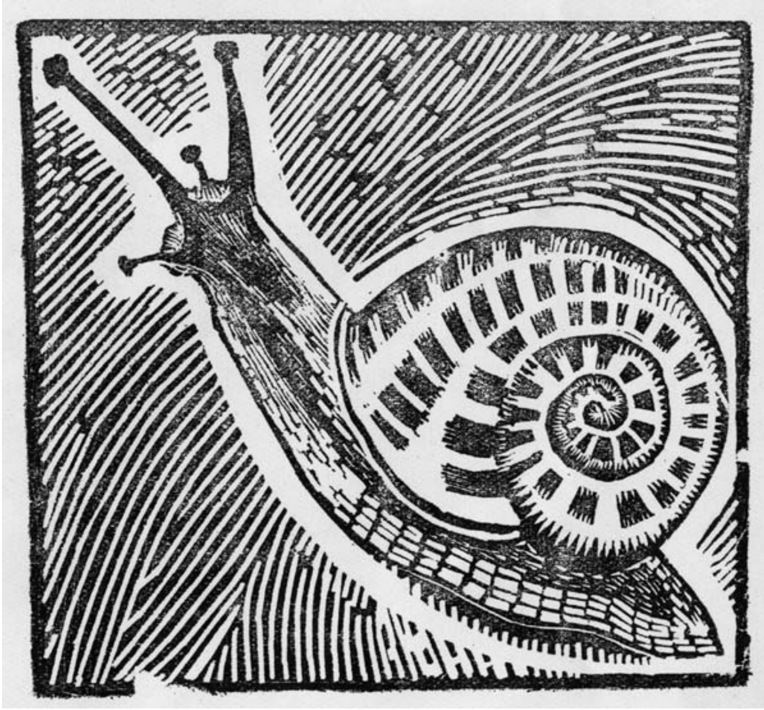

Figure 1. Woodcut by Dora Carrington that accompanied the 1917 Hogarth Press edition of Virginia Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall." Courtesy of the Library of Leonard and Virginia Woolf, Washington State University Libraries, MASC.

backdrop to civilian life, even as it turns a civilian's outburst about war's banality into a climactic event.

It's not all of civilian life that occupies the foreground of Woolf's story but civilian *mental* life in particular. Most of "The Mark on the Wall" is devoted to the narrator's speculations, anxieties, fantasies, and memories as she sits by her fire after tea, smoking a cigarette. Her thoughts are prompted by a small round black mark she notices on the wall a few inches above the mantelpiece. As long as the mark remains unidentified, she muses on many topics: the melancholy temperament of the English, the speed and anonymity of urban life, the reassuring solidity of domestic objects, a pastoral vision of the afterlife. It's not until the war is mentioned in the story's final exchange that we can pick out the martial notes in what precedes it: retired colonels who collect arrowheads, the military valence of the word "generalisation," the wish that on a winter's night "nothing tender [might be] exposed to the iron bullets of the moon." And it's only

on rereading "The Mark on the Wall" that it dawns on us: this is the story of someone trying, with only partial success, not to think about a war.

Woolf's story might best be classified, then, as "~~war~~ literature"—as literature that stages a mental avoidance of war even as it preserves and eventually foregrounds war through a failed attempt to cancel it out. It's concerned as much with *aboutness* as with war: with the ways war vexes our syntax of topicality, the way it can exert pressure on a mind trying to void itself of war. Yet we increasingly classify "The Mark on the Wall" as war literature. Nowadays you'll find it on the syllabi of a growing number of courses on the literature of the Great War. And you'll find it analyzed in scholarship on war literature, war and literature, war and modernism.[2]

In many ways this reclassification of "The Mark on the Wall" is a positive development. It reflects the story's genesis—its composition after German airship raids on England had ended in early 1917, its having been typeset later that year after the raids resumed, this time from waves of heavy bombers. It reflects our knowledge of Woolf the diarist who obsessively recorded the air raids from her perspective as a civilian living just west of London, and of Woolf the pacifist who wrote at numerous points in her career about the relationships among gender, militarism, and intellectual freedom. And it testifies to our expanding sense of what might be considered war literature: no longer only poems, memoirs, and fiction by combatants but also the writings of noncombatants.

Yet to encounter "The Mark on the Wall" for the first time in a course on war literature, or in scholarship on war writing, is to be handed upfront a topic, and with it a set of expectations, that Woolf's story reserves until its final lines. It's to be robbed of the story's unique delayed-detonation effect. For to read under the generic sign of war literature is to have the aboutness question—the very question "The Mark" labors to suspend and problematize—answered univocally in advance. And this, I would suggest, is true to varying degrees of any literary work read under the sign of war, a sign that may narrow, even predetermine, our response to a piece of writing by activating certain affective and heuristic codes while deactivating others.

What's more, the genre in question implies something troubling about what it excludes: that any writing falling outside the radius of "war literature" is outside the experience and hence the problem of war, has nothing particular to do with war, nothing authoritative to say about war. Even when we expand the territory of war literature to include war-avoidant wartime short fiction by a noncombatant, we continue to imply that beyond this territory lies the literature of peace. We endorse

a banal distinction—wartime versus peacetime—that we might well have set out to question.

But what's so banal about the distinction between wartime and peacetime? Surely effacing it is the trite move (from Latin, *tritus*, "rubbed," as in worn out), the move that erodes the particularities of wartime suffering and death, denying the exceptional ways in which war is imagined, rationalized, and prosecuted. It's the move that removes peace from our aspirations by merging it with war, painting everything—the everyday, the event, all conflicts, all relations, all literature—a drab olive. Insisting that some time is wartime, that some literature is war literature, would seem to rescue both the time and the literature of war from banalization. War must have boundaries if its abolition can remain thinkable.

Here, though, I want to defend a particular way of banalizing war. Not a way that impedes thinking, as Arendt wrote of the Nazi routinization of genocide, but one that aims to conduct our thinking around certain obstructions and across great physical and perceptual distances. We call something banal when we find it petty, stale, trivial, or boring; when it is common or commonplace. I suggest that some of our more habitual ways of thinking about war arise from our *failure* to recognize its commonplaceness, our failure to recognize that war is one horizon of the ordinary's very possibility in the United States. Elaine Scarry (1985) has taught us that war unmakes the world. But it is also the occasion for world making—for the production and shaping of everyday diets, habits, skills, infrastructures, and communities. When a hemisphere separates war from the world it produces, the inhabitants of that world can become oblivious to its warlike roots. Nick Turse of the *Nation* reports that in the last three years, US Special Operations forces have been active in more than 150 countries (2015). At present US forces are deployed in over 170 countries and territories. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, forty armed conflicts were active in 2014, the highest global total since 1999 (UCDP 2014). Yet what account are we able to give of the making of our world by war? What unremarkable elements of our supposedly peacetime lives are in fact secured by the immersion of others in wartime?

For scholars in the humanities, war is one of the elements our many institutions have most in common. True, only a few of us who teach literature in the United States today are working in war colleges or at campuses of the National Defense University. But a large proportion of us teach in colleges and universities supported by the 1944 G.I. Bill and subsequently by post-Sputnik infusions of defense-related federal research and development dollars. Our colleagues in other disciplines continue to

undertake research funded by and funneled into the war machine, which means that humanists are the beneficiaries, at least indirectly, of those same defense dollars. Meanwhile, many of us teach in general education curricula hatched a century ago to justify US involvement in the First World War.[3] As humanists, we may prefer to imagine that we are not implicated in war making. But we are working, every day, in institutions entangled in the prosecution and rationalization of war.

If reckoning with the university's war footing is banalizing it, we must intensify that move. We need to stress the university's past and present complicity in violence production, using that complicity as a fulcrum for shifting our institutions, not as a reason to give up on them in disgust. Our classrooms should be sites for this work. They should be places for piecing together some of the broken links between violence production and knowledge production; places for exploring alternative ways of constellating war, the university, and literature. We may decide that it is better to teach literature in what we frankly call the war university than to teach "war literature" in a university unconversant with its bonds to violence—a university that can only see war as over *there*, back *then*, something *they* wage.

"The Mark on the Wall," I said earlier, features a narrator who is trying not to think about a war. Had Woolf's story taken that project for its own, it might have made a fine mission statement for the university of disavowal. But by staging the failure of that project, and by clearing space for thinking war otherwise than *about* a distant phenomenon, "The Mark" might aid us with our work here in the university of complicity. Suspending war's status as topic or object, Woolf suggests, is not the same thing as claiming to be dissociated from it, can in fact be a way of insisting on one's daily implication in distant violence, of allowing it to draw near. By the same token, being at a spatial remove from war does not break or simplify our connection to war. Instead it obliges us to try out new ways of apprehending and documenting that connection—and new ways of teaching it—against its would-be effacement. When we can say how military conflict is linked to the most banal elements of a day—newspaper, hearth, wall, snail, the marks made by our own writing—without simply adducing war as a primary cause, we will have made a start.

NOTES

[1] Virginia Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall" was first published in 1917, accompanied by a woodcut of a snail by Dora Carrington that appears here as figure 1. At an earlier point the narrator refers to "the masculine point of view . . . which has become, I suppose, since the war half a phantom to many

men and women" (86). But "since the war" could mean "since the start of the current war" or "since the conclusion of a past war," and this ambiguity removes any emphasis from the moment. For a fascinating presentation and analysis of the versions of Woolf's story, see "Comparing Marks: A Versioning Edition of Virginia Woolf's 'The Mark on the Wall,'" edited by Emily McGinn, Amy Leggette, Matthew Hannah, and Paul Bellew (2014)

[2] See, for example, Karen L. Levenback, *Virginia Woolf and the Great War* (1999); Vincent Sherry, *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (2003); Rebecca Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (2006); and my own *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (2015).

[3] See Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (2010, 32–43). According to Menand, Columbia University's influential Contemporary Civilization curriculum originated in a course called War Aims, designed by philosopher Frederick Woodbridge at the Army's behest for the Student Army Training Corps that was instituted in 1916. Columbia's historian Robert McCaughey described War Aims as "a course in Allied apologetics, with no pretense at objectivity or balance" (quoted in Menand 2010, 33). Dartmouth, Stanford, Williams College, and the University of Missouri introduced similar programs during the First World War.

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