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On *Jacob's Room*: The Figure and Ground of Protest

Sarah Cole, Anne E. Fernald, Paul K. Saint-Amour,
and Urmila Seshagiri

Abstract: Virginia Woolf's career entails a lifelong effort to think in public. In this essay-in-dialogue, four scholars spend an afternoon discussing Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, approaching it not as an anticipation of her later work but as an experimental variation on the protest novel. Their conversation begins with Woolf's central character, Jacob Flanders, whose strange hollowness makes him both figure and ground of feminist resistance in the novel. Later phases of the discussion touch on the role of proleptic mourning, the thwarted protagonism of Woolf's seemingly peripheral characters, and the indelible language of the women who love Jacob Flanders.

A DIALOGUE.¹

Persons: AF, US, PSA, and SC.

Scene: A table and benches outside a large classroom building on an urban campus. AF, PSA, and US have begun a conversation while waiting for their friend SC to arrive. It is a weekday afternoon, late in the calendar year.

The Hollowness

AF: Hi, friends—I'm hoping you can help. I'm teaching *Jacob's Room* this week, and I'm experiencing a bit of cognitive dissonance. My students are having a hard time connecting with it. *Jacob's Room* is, as

you say in your introduction to the new edition, Urmila, “an arresting novel” (xi), and, alas, it seems to have arrested some of my students entirely. At the same time, it feels as if we’re living inside this book, with two wars raging a few thousand miles away and so many young and old people being killed. Why do you think *Jacob's Room* feels both close and far in this moment?

US: Close and far: exactly. Do you think your students are struggling with the novel’s style—this is one of Woolf’s most formally off-putting and opaque works—or with the character of Jacob?

AF: Well, both. They’re baffled by Jacob as a character—he’s so inscrutable to them. Such an empty center. I was trying to help them understand that the inscrutability, the central hollowness, is the point: it’s one of the distinguishing features of the novel and it’s one of the ways Woolf lodges her protest against the war.

US: Protest is our students’ *lingua franca*. It’s how they think in public. Inviting them to locate that language in literary forms can make *Jacob's Room* more accessible. They intuitively grasp that “Art is our spirited protest” (291), to crib from Oscar Wilde’s “The Decay of Lying,” and they also understand a historical imperative to speak out against or for something. How do you connect this novel’s hollowness and the act of protest?

AF: I remind them that the novel isn’t called *Jacob Flanders*, but *Jacob's Room*, previewing for us, in its title, the final page, where the reader is left with Jacob’s mother and his best friend trying to make sense of the empty room of the deceased protagonist. But I’m left wondering: Why make Jacob a hollow center? What is Woolf refusing to satisfy in insisting on his unknowability?

PSA: I’m not teaching *Jacob's Room* at the moment, but I’ve been re-reading it. This time around I’ve been struck by its deep ambivalence about protagonism—about the conventions through which narrative action gets organized around a particular figure or figures and not around others. I need to keep thinking about this, but it’s connected to the novel’s hollow center as you’re describing it, Anne. I find that hollowness all the more chilling for the odd moments when it’s filled by a sudden influx of presence. There’s a passage where the narrator is lamenting that “life is but a procession of shadows” (56), but then asks “why are we yet surprised in the window corner by a sudden vision that the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us—why indeed? For the moment after we know nothing about him.” It’s as if the beloved had

appeared out of the darkness only to be swept, like Eurydice, back into that procession of shadows.

AF: And we can't know him in part because he's not a mature person yet—and will never be—which is part of what Woolf is raging against.

US: This unknowability sets Jacob apart from Woolf's other main characters. The novel grants some access to his interior world, but he remains impervious to critique, affection, and anger. Unlike, say, Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, who emerges for us through a combination of perception, event, and narrative comment, Jacob evades the understanding of the female narrator as well as of the characters around him. And this has gendered consequences, because Jacob's evasiveness is most painful to women who love him. It's when many of the female characters react to Jacob's unknowability that they become most fully realized as characters.

My heart always sinks toward the novel's end when Fanny Elmer (the artist's model Jacob abandons when he travels to Greece) visits a London map-seller and says, "This is life. This is life" (137) as she looks at a globe whose "equator swam behind tears." It's one of many instances in the novel of repetition without reassurance. The doubled sentence only reveals that Fanny cannot grasp, cannot accept, the knowledge she utters about the world she inhabits.

PSA: I love the way that description of the globe seen through tears lends a shop-window solidity to the *lacrimae mundi*. It also points us back to the novel's opening, where Betty Flanders feels a wave of sadness while writing a letter to Captain Barfoot and pauses her pen stroke until the ink welling up at the end of her nib dissolves "the full stop" (3) at the end of her sentence. The tears welling up in her eyes, meanwhile, distort both her vision and the reader's, since our sight is focalized through hers. From the first page, there seems to be neither writing nor seeing without the medium of tears.

US: To me, this is Woolf's darkest literary work because she builds her plot in a dead space between love and hope. Protest depends on hope.

PSA: But if protest depends on hope, won't it often happen precisely in the dead, dark spaces where hope is most necessary? I'm thinking here of Woolf's 1915 diary entry—"The future is dark, which is on the whole, the best thing the future can be, I think" (qtd. in Solnit 1)—that Rebecca Solnit writes so movingly about in *Hope in the Dark*.

US: The central darkness in *Jacob's Room* may be the opacity of other people, not of the future. There's the narrator's claim that "It is no

use trying to sum people up" (23, 123), which is another one of those verbatim repetitions that interest me. It's a kind of a thesis for *Jacob's Room*, a tale whose teller can't get past that statement through her art.

AF: This suggests a promising new direction: what if we don't just think of *Jacob's Room* as Woolf's first full-length experimental novel but instead reposition it along an axis of other protest novels? Sarah can light the way for us—here she comes! (*Standing up to wave.*) Sarah, we're over here. Come join us.

SC (*putting down her things and settling in*): Hello! I hope you've already started—my meeting ran a little long.

PSA: Anne has been teaching *Jacob's Room*, and Urmila was just saying she finds it to be Woolf's darkest work, in part because it can't summon the hope on which social protest depends.

SC: Yes, I also see it as a dark novel. It's a great point that protest requires hope. Yet that's not exactly how protest novels work, as I'm finding in this new work I am doing about the genre. In general, protest novels are overloaded with hardship, struggle, and dispossession. They're committed to showing the essential obstacles to human flourishing, and these are always forces that surpass the scale of the individual or the agency of anyone. Hence the depressing quality of these novels, and the fact that they never do or can end well. It's the reader who must learn from the novel (they are always didactic in some way) and take it upon themselves to change their societies.

Woolf, of course, has made her views clear when it comes to setting novels on a soapbox to preach. But *Jacob's Room* does condemn, loudly and persistently. It condemns war, and, more deeply, the entire patriarchal, cultural infrastructure that glamorizes war and sets young men into its path. Of all of Woolf's novels to thematize war and stand against it, this one is the least able to balance that attack within an aesthetic construct that works to smooth the surface or provide readerly pleasure. Even something as modest as allowing us to get close to the novel's named protagonist is forbidden. In other words, Woolf's protest in the novel is expansive; the rage about patriarchal war culture and its totalizing tendencies drives the narrative—its metaphors, its extreme formal constraints, its characterology.

US: Sarah, can you say more about the kinds of protest that the novel is willing to consider?

SC: Yes! What it is protesting, above all, is war—war and its allied projects: patriarchy, masculinism, the adulation of militarism throughout

western art and culture. The shaping presence of war and its forms in the novel has been much noticed and thoroughly discussed by critics, and indeed is difficult to miss. Except for the fact that World War I is never actually mentioned nor Jacob's death in the conflict ever narrated, war is everywhere in the novel, starting with Captain Barfoot's maimed fingers and the remains of Roman encampments in the hills behind the Flanders home, which appear very early in the novel. Casual mentions of soldiers or military music in Greece or Italy, as well as in Whitehall, supplement a nonstop stream of allusions and references to war figures from antiquity to the nineteenth century, and a landscape that is infiltrated by the memorialization of death in all its ubiquity. Bookending the novel with a mourning wife and mother, a classic and indispensable figure in war literature, helps to solidify the connection. Above all, it's Jacob himself who epitomizes the problem. He's so thoroughly interpellated into the masculine project of war that he can disappear into it without any ado.

AF: We were talking about this before you got here, how hard it is to reach Jacob, the hollowness that both defines and surrounds him.

SC: The longing and loss that surround Jacob really are extensive, and painful. Women, in particular but not exclusively, spend their days desperately missing the absent Jacob, and this is true even before he goes off to war, as if the whole project and its endpoint were always already contained in his story, from the start.

PSA: But, Sarah, what compels you to call *Jacob's Room* a protest novel? I think of protest novels as directly, even didactically, exposing a particular social problem and in some cases offering a narrative solution to that problem. Woolf's novel seems oblique by comparison, exposing social problems in its peripheral vision if at all. As for solutions, they don't seem to be part of its vocabulary.

SC: It's true that the novels more obviously in the protest tradition are quite unlike *Jacob's Room* in almost every way: take *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, or *The Jungle*, or *Untouchable*, or *Native Son*, or *Things Fall Apart*, or *1984*, or *The Overstory*. All of these engage a difficult and pressing subject, telling us what to think, hammering home their points, or providing expert testimony on the various complexities in play. They are educative in a basic sense. Many protest novels are sentimental. All of them focus explicitly on injustice and hardship. None of this is very Woolfian, admittedly.

US: In fact, almost the opposite!

SC: But *Jacob's Room* shares a fundamental orientation with these and other books that set out to make the reader uncomfortable enough about a specific issue that they may not sleep again until they try to address it. *Jacob's Room* is the protest novel in which Woolf sets out to attack and undermine patriarchal war culture. Isn't it better to describe the novel that way than to call it, say, "Jacob's Bildungsroman"?

PSA: I'm not sure, actually. But that's a very *Jacob's Room* thing you're doing there, Sarah, painting a negative-space portrait of the novel's genre.

SC: Right! Well, in this sense, *Jacob's Room* is closer to Woolf's two famous nonfiction polemics, *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, than to her other novels with a war theme, such as *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Between the Acts*. All of these are powerful anti-war novels, but they blend that polemic with more complex and contradictory literary projects. In *Jacob's Room* it drives everything.

PSA: I think you're helping me see why I'm more drawn to those later novels than I am to *Jacob's Room*. Their mixed projects make them less relentless. As a reader I feel that they allow me more interpretive freedom. There's something narrow and even foreclosed about *Jacob's Room*, the way it telegraphs his eventual loss from the first page.

SC: But that's exactly it. That inevitability is what most makes *Jacob's Room* a protest novel. It's so striking and so painful: Winston Smith will be broken and remade, Bigger Thomas will end up in the electric chair, Tom will be killed by Simon Legree, and the family at the center of *The Jungle* will be totally crushed by the massive forces of American capitalism against which they pathetically stand. The nature of social disaster demands that it demolish its people.

AF: Doesn't the inexorable force of social disasters depicted by these protest novels risk turning their readers into quietists or fatalists?

SC: There is a paradox here. The more the novel dramatizes the inevitability of totalizing, devastating world forces, the more it calls on its readers to fight against the system. Nowhere else in Woolf's work is this problem so palpable, nowhere else is such determinism the law of the land. It's baked into the form. Some of the most powerful metaphors in *Jacob's Room* are those that stress this determinism. The repetition of the phrase "unseizable force" (125), for instance, and the violence of "the wind now rushing down the sea of Marmara between Greece and the plains of Troy" (128), and the lights of Europe being "extinguished" (129), "one after another."

US: There's a perfect logic in what you say, Sarah, in that George Orwell's Winston, Richard Wright's Bigger, and Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom are fundamentally disadvantaged in the social-historical worlds of their novels. These characters are ideally suited to protest against systems that regard their humanity with indifference at best and murderous hostility at worst. But Jacob is an inheritor of privilege. The promises of the world he is born into are promises designed for him. Does Woolf expand the inevitability of what you call the "determinism [of] the law of the land" here?

SC: I think Woolf would want us to see that in war, there is no privilege; all are swept away. We can dispute that—think of the colonial wars that had not invoked all of this outrage and protest. But maybe war is a unique category, or at least a distinctive one.

AF: When we first talked about this, I rebelled against your labeling *Jacob's Room* a protest novel, but this is showing me the centrality of inevitability to the genre. One of the great challenges of teaching the novel in the United States in the twenty-first century is that Woolf builds the inevitability of Jacob's death into his surname, Flanders, the site of so much carnage during World War I, but our students seldom perceive this clue without our help. Any reader in 1922 would have experienced the novel as a slow, painful unfolding toward death, but to say that out loud today, for example on the first day of teaching, is to spoil the plot.

US: Anne, you're spot on! As the Great War recedes into an ever-more-distant past, our ability to recognize the fatalism of *Jacob's Room* recedes as well. I've tried to frame the force of Jacob Flanders's name for my students by inviting them to think about how the COVID-19 pandemic might embed itself in literature. A contemporary novel that introduced a character named "Corona" on the first page, I suggest, would immediately foreclose hope.

PSA: But even foreclosure has a sell-by date.

AF: That may be about ignorance or forgetting, but it may also be a testament to the human ability to imagine otherwise and to the ways in which crises block our imaginations. If our understanding of protest broadens from protest-as-demonstration toward smaller but still crucial gestures, such as the naming of moments of injustice, then not only do I better understand why calling *Jacob's Room* a protest novel matters, but also how protest novels matter for showing us those places where we struggle to imagine other ways of living, of telling our story.

SC: That is really lovely. I just want to return for a minute to the idea of fate. *Jacob's Room*, even more than Woolf's other novels, is obsessed with Greece and the Greeks, and we can see why, since the idea of fate is so powerful in Greek literature and culture. There is no single work at the forefront of the novel, no *Antigone* for instance, a work and figure to which Woolf returned repeatedly in her writing. But the larger Sophoclean wisdom certainly permeates: the littleness of these people against the forces that determine their outcomes, the way the human is, like *Antigone* herself, always doomed to end rooted to the spot, in her case walled into a living tomb. Greek literature manages to swell with the glory of human accomplishment even while it relentlessly recognizes the profound limitations of that power, with people stymied in their very expansiveness.

PSA: You're making me wonder here about *The Overstory*, which you mentioned earlier, and which is also deeply engaged with the ancient world, especially with Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. It seems to me Richard Powers's novel abandons its initial commitment to prophecy and destiny as it reaches its crisis. But, sorry, go on.

SC: It is easy to get distracted by *The Overstory*! For the Greeks, there are some compensations: order, the effective state, new social structures that contain the chaos if they cannot control the gods. Modernism's version of this could be the compensation of the work of art itself, whose formal triumph finds a way simultaneously to represent and to accommodate the fissures of modernity. For the protest novel, the solution must lie outside the work of art. It calls for action and work, for hard thinking and for even harder struggle. In many of the protest novels I'm studying, the reader is essentially told what to do next, given a little nudge, or even a shove.

AF: And Woolf herself moved closer to this in *Three Guineas*.

SC: Where does *Jacob's Room* fall along the spectrum from modernism to protest? We know what Woolf would allow; no check-writing demanded, no nudges or shoves. But this novel, I think, says otherwise. It is not a place to feel at home or satisfied; instead, it pushes us readers out into the world, to take our stand against war and—a more difficult task—against everything that the culture has built to obscure war's slaughter and declare its grandeur. The task is enormous but so is the gain, and, in any case, what can you do? Complacency, for *Jacob's Room* and for the protest novel, is not an option.

PSA: I agree with you, Sarah, that *Jacob's Room* opposes war. But I think I'd say that it deplores war more than abhors it. The novel's affective

response to war is to mourn and bewail it more than to rage against it in righteous protest. Alex Zwerdling and Linda Martin have written wonderfully about Woolf's novel as elegy. And I don't think I'll ever get over Ravit Reichman's reading of *Jacob's Room* as constituting "Woolf's effort at a new language for grief in general and postwar grief in particular" (29). For Reichman, the spaces and objects that Jacob leaves empty—his room, his wicker armchair, his shoe—are private cenotaphs. And the final chapter's verbatim repetitions of whole sentences from earlier chapters perform the predicament of mourning in a world that appears to be unchanged but feels fundamentally altered by the war. Urmila, I know you're interested in those repetitions, too, and in how they contribute to the hollowed-out character, and to the hollowing out of character, which we were discussing before Sarah arrived. In fact, that hollowness seems to me another trait of *Jacob's Room* that diverges from the protest novel.

SC: But do we have to choose between mourning and protest? I hope not.

US: This is where we have to map the possibilities—the responsibilities—our expectations—of critique itself. I'd meet Sarah's question with one of my own: does mourning (and, by association, grief) run parallel to critique? And maybe this is a problem that the dramatists and tragedians have solved, but that modern novelists still wrestle with . . .

SC: I'd say that the hollowing out of character, typically the protagonist, is actually a feature of the protest novel. So many of these novels opt for what E. M. Forster would call "flat" (102) rather than "round" characters. When the novel has set for itself to agitate on a social problem and to call for societal change, deep and complex characters (deep and complex anything!) can be more of a hindrance than a goal. There are exceptions, but the general principle of character being in some way subject to the project is a powerful one. In *Jacob's Room* the issue is not about flat or round, but rather that Jacob is simply foreclosed as a character from the start, as we have been saying. The novel presents the story of Jacob, essentially, as one of women and men who love him and cannot get close to him.

AF: Urmila, you drew our attention to Woolf's use of repetition in the novel, emphasizing Woolf's unusual insistence here on repetition without resolution or consolation. It's a literary technique that aligns Woolf with other modernist experiments, and it's also one that might help us better understand the novel in terms of protest. After

all, a familiar aspect of public protest is the repetition of chants and slogans in lived social contexts.

US: It's one of the novel's most fascinating techniques. Woolf repeats everything in *Jacob's Room*—not just motifs or tropes, as one might expect, but specific utterances that can be as ominous as Jacob's brother Archer calling out, "Ja—cob! Ja—cob!" (4) and fracturing his name (as his life and its story will fracture), or as seemingly insignificant as a cow's "munch, munch" (27). The one that really stuns me is the repetition, the resurrection of the description of Jacob's actual room. I love how the novel's final chapter is patched together using language from multiple earlier chapters. Woolf offers us a brilliant illusion of continuity and coherence, a performance of the hollow unities of Western imperial culture. She multiplies language to diminish its meaning.

AF: Sarah, can you apply Urmila's observation to your ideas about the protest novel? I take Urmila's point that here, repetition leads only to nothingness—contra Woolf's use of the technique in other works, when it creates and multiplies possibilities, where it produces layers of meaning.

SC: As I said, Woolf is withdrawing character as part of her protest in the novel itself. But it's a good question about the prospect of protest as a matter of bodies in action, in the streets, or acting collectively. It may be that these acts and this kind of collectivity is something Woolf is ready to explore in her nonfiction (especially *Three Guineas*) but less so in her novels. Then again, *Between the Acts*, another novel facing war, both behind and ahead, is extremely interested in forms of collective response to war and violence. But repetition: it seems pretty deadly. I do agree with Urmila!

US: Does the art of protest depend on a universal subject who must also be deeply historicized? For me, Gregor Samsa fits this description, as does his descendant, J. M. Coetzee's Michael K. Sarah, you observe Woolf's resistance to the modes of classical tragedy—perhaps this is what prevents Jacob Flanders's anonymity from flowering into universality? Or, put it this way: why can't we see *Jacob's Room* as an allegory of all modern civilizations?

SC: I see the future blocked, I see death. Pessimism is needed for action.

AF: I see old paper flowers, lank and forgotten in a bowl.

US: I see dark forms of hope.

Little Paper Flowers

PSA (*getting up from the table*): I see the dusk gathering.

The sun starts setting so early these days. All of us are in shade now. Could I suggest that we take to the streets while we talk and maybe get a little more light?

Urmila, you were wondering whether protest depends on the fiction of a universal subject and whether the emptying of Jacob also evacuates that fiction. I find your suggestion really persuasive. It makes me want to talk about the subjects who are arrayed around Jacob and whom we might expect to come rushing into the vacuum he creates in the reader's attention or attachment. They include a handful of male characters, but the female characters who love and observe and puzzle over and rage at Jacob seem by far the more compelling.

US: There's an abjection about the women who love Jacob Flanders. They're a cross-generational group of characters from different social classes: Betty Flanders (Jacob's widowed mother), Clara Durrant (the marriage-eligible sister of Jacob's Cambridge classmate, Timothy), Fanny Elmer (an artist's model), Florinda (a prostitute), and Sandra Wentworth Williams (the wife of an English political historian). Each woman is haunted by the specter of her own collapse or disintegration as she fails to attain emotional intimacy with Jacob. These specters are particularly grotesque for Florinda, who ends the novel pregnant, "with a dull expression, like an animal" (135) and "sunk, caught by the heel" as she tries to induce a miscarriage; and for Fanny Elmer, eating messy breakfasts where "the prongs of the forks were clotted with old egg yolks" (137) and letting the music of a street organ "turn her musings to rhapsody."

I'm especially interested in how formal techniques produce this abjection in the dinner party scene—it's in chapter 8, which opens with a beautiful passage about "little paper flowers" (65) that pays tribute to Jane Austen as well as Marcel Proust. I have my copy here; let me read the passage:

About this time a firm of merchants having dealings with the East put on the market little paper flowers which opened on touching water. As it was the custom also to use finger-bowls at the end of dinner, the new discovery was found of excellent service. In these sheltered lakes the little coloured flowers swam and slid; surmounted smooth slippery waves, and sometimes foundered and lay like pebbles on the glass floor. Their fortunes were watched by eyes intent and lovely. It is surely a great discovery that leads to the union of hearts and foundation of homes. The paper flowers did no less.

Austen's plots lead to "the union of hearts and foundation of homes," and Proust foliates lived experience by dissolving time. Woolf, for her part, refuses both forward narrative movement and the kaleidoscopic enrichment of her characters' worlds. The chapter's opening lines seem to uphold her injunction in "Modern Fiction": "Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small" (161). But the narrator demonstrates that life exists fully nowhere for the novel's female characters. Woolf shows us that women whose lives are defined by multiple, intersecting forms of patriarchy cannot think in public, concentrating our attention on the ineffectualness of the female characters' speech as well as their silence.

PSA: I see how, even as a hollow foreground figure, Jacob takes up so much space in the novel that the secondary and tertiary characters, especially the female characters, can't expand to fill it. But how are you getting to women's inability to think in public from the expandable paper flowers?

US: Well, look, for instance at Edwin Mallett's failed marriage proposal to Clara, an event denied climactic status. Hold on, let me read this bit too:

But when, between ten and eleven on a rainy morning, Edwin Mallett laid his life at her feet she ran out of the room and hid herself in her bedroom, and Timothy below could not get on with his work all that morning on account of her sobs.

"Which is the result of enjoying yourself," said Mrs. Durrant severely, surveying the dance programme all scored with the same initials, or rather they were different ones this time—R. B. instead of E. M.; Richard Bonamy it was now, the young man with the Wellington nose.

"But I could never marry a man with a nose like that," said Clara.

"Nonsense," said Mrs Durrant.

"But I am too severe," she thought to herself. For Clara, losing all vivacity, tore up her dance programme and threw it in the fender.

Such were the very serious consequences of the invention of paper flowers to swim in bowls. (66–67)

PSA: Ah, okay, I think I follow you now. Just before that, the narrator tells us, "Clara Durrant procured the stockings, played the sonata, filled the vases, fetched the pudding, left the cards, and when the great invention of paper flowers to swim in finger-bowls was discovered, was one of those who most marvelled at their brief lives" (66).

The paper flowers metonymize and sentimentalize a whole waking life of aesthetic, self-aestheticizing make-work.

US: Clara reacts to Edwin's marriage proposal by making herself invisible, her trauma an irritating disruption of her brother Timothy's "work." The dance card, "all scored with the same initials, or rather they were different ones this time—R. B. instead of E. M.," is as empty repetitious as the marriage plot's promises: it barely matters if Clara dances all night with the homosexual character Richard Bonamy instead of the heterosexual Edwin Mallett who courts her. Mrs. Durrant follows her maternal pronouncement, "Nonsense"—it's brilliant how she unwittingly condenses social ritual into meaninglessness—with the silent, pointless reflection that "I am too severe." Whereas feminist possibilities proliferate in Woolf's later fictions through fruitful alternations between the inner and the outer, *Jacob's Room* diminishes, depletes, halts women's capacities for self-expression. Even the serio-comic aspect of Clara's "losing all vivacity" and throwing her dance program in the fire carries overtones of death and immolation.

SC: I have trouble reading Woolf's tone in this passage.

US: I hear it as a crucial shift. The section ends with an ironic narrative intonation very different from the pretty lyricism of the opening lines: "Such were the very serious consequences of the invention of paper flowers to swim in bowls" (67). If the brackets Woolf uses in *To the Lighthouse* to contain the deaths of Mrs. Ramsay and two of her children shock the reader with their indifference to losses that we experience as monstrous, bracketing Clara's marriage proposal within a meditation on "little paper flowers" robs the event of its significance.

SC: I would just add that I find this whole sequence to be a good example of how opaque the narrator is in this novel, but not necessarily in a way I find as satisfying as in the later novels.

AF: Poor Clara! She's not even accorded the dignity of our attention to her failed romance and the light that her refusal of Mallett shines on her misplaced affections. Is she dancing with Bonamy because it's the best way to get close to Jacob, or does she actually like him?

US: Perhaps it's that Bonamy was modeled on Lytton Strachey, a Cambridge-educated homosexual conscientious objector who proposed to Virginia Woolf?

AF: Adding to the indignity, and rhyming with Jacob's hollowness, is the ordinariness of Clara's and all the women's attachment. Jacob is no more or less remarkable than any number of other young men

of modernism: a type, like W. B. Yeats's Major Robert Gregory or Edward Ashburnham from Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*. He's an ordinary man, but because he's a man, his ordinariness combined with the way he knows how to narrate his own life to himself as if he were the main character is persuasive to us. Jacob charms us, makes us cringe, excites our pity and our scorn; he stays in the frame. And he may even have been persuasive to Woolf. The novel is an elegy for the unfinished life of one young man, and a century of accumulated writing has taught us to understand the tragedy of his loss, and ours.

PSA: There's a difference here, though, isn't there? I mean, when Yeats mourns Major Robert Gregory, he's making a case for his extraordinaryness. Woolf takes that impulse and extends it to the global tragedy of mass death.

AF: Exactly: central to that tragedy is Jacob's unfulfilled potential; he matters, paradoxically, because we do not yet know why or how he might have come to matter. If we admit that the novel is never going to fulfill our desire to know Jacob, and if we begin looking elsewhere for what we can learn from the text, we notice the many women present: we have all the women Urmila mentioned earlier, and there is also Miss Julia Hedge, the feminist, who studies near him in the British library; Mrs. Norman, the mother of one of Jacob's university classmates; and a draft version included Angela Williams, a Cambridge undergraduate proud of the "A. Williams" nameplate on her dormitory door. *Jacob's Room* would seem to be offering us an image of modern womanhood that extends far beyond just types. Each could be a novel; none can fulfill her potential.

US: This catalog of women characters is so poignant precisely because of that sense of halted possibility. The nameplate "A. Williams" seems to anticipate what the narrator of *Mrs. Dalloway* will say about Septimus Smith: "London has swallowed up many millions of young men called Smith; thought nothing of fantastic Christian names like Septimus with which their parents have thought to distinguish them" (60). She is merely "a Williams," perhaps one among many millions of women named Williams, and thus as ordinary within history as she is extraordinary for attending Cambridge University. And that character is doubly silenced because she appears in a chapter that Woolf excised from the draft of *Jacob's Room* and published separately as a short story called "A Woman's College from the Outside": a kind of literary sex-segregation?

AF: Yes—it's as if the novel, despite all its many forgotten women, doesn't have time for a Williams. That protest against the exclusion from higher education for women (and even men with no money) was so near to Woolf's heart that I suspect she may have worried it came out a bit too raw.

Urmila, you talk about the abjection of the women who love Jacob, but I keep going back to a more worldly woman, one who does not love him, but whose actions both sharpen and broaden the novel's protest against prewar society. I'm thinking of Rose Shaw, a guest at Mrs. Durrant's party, for the ways she uses her imagination to stifle alternate narrative possibilities.

Rose has a mania for one narrative and one alone. Like Mrs. Ramsay, Rose seems to feel that "They must marry!" (*To the Lighthouse* 97). Rose almost rises to the level of a minor character in *Jacob's Room*. We meet her in chapters 7 and 8, talking to Mr. Bowley both times. Mr. Bowley has rooms in the Albany (where he still lives in *Mrs. Dalloway*); and Rose returns in the short story, "The New Dress," falsely reassuring the anxious Mabel that her gown is "perfectly charming" (171).

This section is a small, unexploded bomb at the novel's center, unobtrusive, self-contained, and wildly metafictional. Woolf's narrator comments, at some ironic remove, on two very minor characters who are themselves involved in futile and failed efforts to create a story with two who are little more than names. They cannot understand why it will not work; they do not know they are in a modernist novel; they do not know that human character has changed.

SC: Hah, I love that! But please go on.

AF: Mr. Bowley and Rose review the failed courtship of Helen and Jimmy; although to call it a courtship is giving too much to what seems only to have been a notion. Rose and Mr. Bowley conspire to throw two young people together, hoping for an engagement. "Who could resist her?" (68) Rose asks about Helen. Woolf ensures that we can. Almost all we know of Helen is her name: the only name synonymous with feminine irresistibility. Perhaps there was no other Troy for her to burn; however, the pairing of her mythic name with the ordinary, nicknamed Jimmy, discourages mythmaking. We are left, stuck between echoes of Troy and twentieth-century reality. Rose and Mr. Bowley return to this nonevent, this engagement that never happens, in two freestanding paragraphs in chapter 8.

US: Those freestanding paragraphs are fascinating. Anne, what do you think Woolf is doing?

AF: I really want you to hear this little scene of murmured conversation on the side of a party. Can we stop for a second under this streetlight and I'll get my glasses? Here it is:

Rose Shaw, talking in rather an emotional manner to Mr Bowley at Mrs Durrant's evening party a few nights back, said that life was wicked because a man called Jimmy refused to marry a woman called (if memory serves) Helen Aitken.

Both were beautiful. Both were inanimate. The oval tea-table invariably separated them, and the plate of biscuits was all he ever gave her. He bowed; she inclined her head. They danced. He danced divinely. They sat in the alcove; never a word was said. Her pillow was wet with tears. Kind Mr Bowley and dear Rose Shaw marveled and deplored. Bowley had rooms in the Albany. Rose was re-born every evening precisely as the clock struck eight. All four were civilization's triumphs, and if you persist that a command of the English language is part of our inheritance, one can only reply that beauty is almost always dumb. Male beauty in association with female beauty breeds in the onlooker a sense of fear. Often have I seen them—Helen and Jimmy—and likened them to ships adrift, and feared for my own little craft. Or again, have you ever watched fine collie dogs couchant at twenty yards' distance? As she passed him his cup there was that quiver in her flanks. Bowley saw what was up—asked Jimmy to breakfast. Helen must have confided in Rose. For my own part, I find it exceedingly difficult to interpret songs without words. And now Jimmy feeds crows in Flanders and Helen visits hospitals. Oh, life is damnable, life is wicked, as Rose Shaw said. (76)

US: The phrase “civilization's triumphs”—amazing! Woolf repeats it, with an even sharper satiric edge, in *Mrs. Dalloway* when Peter Walsh calls the ambulance carrying Septimus Warren Smith's mangled body “one of the triumphs of civilisation” (107).

AF: Yes! The ending of this little scene is both devastating and a portent of what is to come. The narrator abjures responsibility for interpretation, noting how difficult it is “to interpret songs without words” before immediately telling us that Jimmy has died in Flanders and Helen grieves by consoling the wounded. The matchmakers' failure and the narrator's fussy uncertainty are both rendered ridiculous by the war. The war that kills Jimmy and divides them forever is a product of the civilization that produces “dear” Rose and “kind” Mr. Bowley.

In Rose, we have a version of failed potential: her status as a so-called triumph of civilization strengthens the novel's indictment of civilization's failure, despite how civilization is understood to be

a valued concept within Woolf's circle. Urmila, in your introduction to *Jacob's Room*, you note that "unique among Woolf's fictions, *Jacob's Room* refuses to offer art as a consolation for the ravages of history" (xi). This paragraph illustrates, with devastating violence, the extent of Woolf's refusal.

SC: Yes! The protest novel again . . .

PSA: The two sentences about the fearsomeness of beauty in the middle of that passage you just read, Anne, give me the chills. They seem to follow on the narrator's first moment of sudden self-portraiture a couple of pages earlier, when she identifies her age and gender while observing Jacob drenched in light from a streetlamp, like the one we're standing under now: "Granted ten years' seniority and a difference of sex, fear of him comes first" (74–75). It's as if his youth and male beauty prompted the narrator both to describe herself and to misplace the first-person pronoun that the opening phrase modifies. Then she again expresses fear, this time "bred" by two kinds of gendered beauty: "Male beauty in association with female beauty breeds in the onlooker a sense of fear. Often have I seen them—Helen and Jimmy—and likened them to ships adrift, and feared for my own little craft" (76).

So many questions follow for me. Does the narrator fear Helen and Jimmy because she occupies the same social world they do and might be sunk if they collide with her, or with each other in proximity to her? Does she fear their reproductive power as an ostensibly straight couple? Or is she afraid because, being beautiful, they're wordless and therefore threaten her expressive project?

AF: Rose's misdirected imaginative power does seem to undo the novel's narrator, Paul. Woolf depicts Rose as the least helpful kind of woman: a woman who does not protest, resist, or even create, but sits on the edge of a party and gossips people into straitjackets of the most ordinary and predictable nature. That the objects of her gossip don't fit into Rose's ready-made narratives suggests something of the hidden explosive power of Woolf's critique.

US: That's a subtle point, Anne, about a very subtle kind of insurrection. It's a way of outflanking opposition to feminism—I'm thinking of Molly Hite's description of the risks involved in writing the "feminist polemical novel" (65), which brought private concerns into the public sphere where women novelists "were vulnerable to attacks that often included personal disparagement." Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* fits perfectly into your sense of novels with "hidden explosive power."

But if, as Sarah was saying earlier, protest novels meet a social issue head-on in order to discomfit readers into action, can subtlety or hiddenness of the kind you're describing ever cross the threshold of efficacious social critique? If what you called the "unexploded bomb" of the Mr. Bowley and Rose and Helen and Jimmy saga never explodes, how can we really measure its critical power?

SC: Exactly. I keep thinking that Woolf's novel wants to be doing these supersubtle and metatextual insurrections, undercutting the domestic novel (anticipating the Jacob plot could be seen as a kind of spoiler here) but at the same time, its outrage about war bubbles over into a more aggressive presentation of protest.

AF: To understand how conventional characters break with convention, I wonder if it would help to think about obedient ones. We've already talked about Clara, and to her example we can add May Sinclair's *Life and Death of Harriett Frean*, which was published the same year as *Jacob's Room*. (Have any of you read it? It's bitter, short, and terrific and demands to be more visible in modernist scholarship and syllabi.) Neither Clara nor Harriett Frean acts independently. That failure to act independently helps explain what is challenging about taking action when no action is expected, and when the very act of acting risks suspicion. So, one of my questions about women and protest comes from thinking in dialogue with Allison Pease's exploration of boredom's adjacency to political protest and Sara Ahmed's of the promise of happiness.

For Pease, "Sinclair focuses on the experience of boredom in women's lives in order to explore the ways that . . . British culture rewarded women for renouncing their desires" (56). In Clara and Harriett Frean, Woolf and Sinclair give us accounts of what it might have felt like to witness the changes of the twentieth century and find yourself unable to adjust. Clara recedes, so boring and without consequence that she does not make a ripple on the plot. Harriett Frean, by contrast, is the very present center of Sinclair's novel. Through her, Sinclair shows us the catastrophic withdrawal of the world's interest in her. Unyielding and unchanging, her bewildered anger grows as her irrelevance increases. Pease asks, "How might representing boredom—and the passivity it requires and entails—serve as a form of feminist protest?" (59).

SC: Great question. There are, of course, all kinds of protest novels by and about women, from, say, Radclyffe Hall and Sinclair to Ann Petry and Margaret Atwood. I have not found boredom to be at the center of these per se, but, then again, take something like *The Handmaid's*

Tale, to jump ahead by sixty years. The narrator's boredom, or rather the reduction of her life to a series of scripted gestures and words, represents the realizing of women's total dispossession. Overall, my feeling is, the more we can recognize where and how protest operates in the novel, the better.

US: I don't want to take us off track here, but I'm struck by the scale of these two scenes, for both Clara and Rose—drawing room scenes that are tiny and public, miniscule and yet earthquakes in the plot. Woolf seems to be playing with moments in the Victorian novel where narrators wonder that something as small as a bit of gossip at a dance can change everything.

AF: The scale matters here, and Woolf's play with it is related to, and importantly different from, how the presumptively male narrators remark on such apparently trivial events in earlier novels. I am thinking of how Henry Fielding proposes to "draw a curtain" (469, 723) over intimate scenes, as if to protect the reader, or how William Makepeace Thackeray, in *Vanity Fair*, jokes about the unknowability of woman, about whom "the present writer of course can only speak at second hand" (440). Those jokes are meant to elicit a condescending chuckle, even from female readers. They acknowledge, but do not propose to disturb, a gendered hierarchy.

That's different from how the women novelists handle such scenes, as Woolf emphasizes in "On Not Knowing Greek," where she equates Electra's cries in *Agamemnon* with Emma agreeing to dance with Mr. Knightley: "There comes a moment—'I will dance with you,' says Emma—which rises higher than the rest, which, though not eloquent in itself, or violent, or made striking by beauty of language, has the whole weight of the book behind it" (41). Woolf reveres how Jane Austen makes an earthquake of that moment. With Clara and Rose, she shows how well she has learned that lesson.

The Shoes

AF: If we reframe our sense of *Jacob's Room*—if, instead of asking for Jacob or grieving his loss, we see him as just one man among many women—we may begin to see how it is not only the war, but something poisonous, limiting, and violent within civilization itself that stands in the way of our flourishing.

PSA: How is Woolf playing with or even thwarting those expectations in the novel's final scene, where Bonamy and Mrs. Flanders stand helplessly, holding up Jacob's empty shoes?

AF: I think the ending shows us the inability to act in the face of a grief so shocking that you cannot move. That seems connected, to me, to Urmila's argument about the novel's refusal of consolation. And both of these things are persistent ideas in Woolf: they return in "Women Must Weep, or Prepare for War," the essay she wrote connected to *Three Guineas*. I think she is trying to think beyond the dead ends of Cassandra and Antigone—these bootless (oh—a terrible pun, but maybe appropriate, as shoes matter here) protests that are unheeded and lead to death. (I'm very influenced here by Bonnie Honig's suggestion that we look not to Antigone but to Ismene for a possible mode of protest that does not end in martyrdom.)

SC: It's good to reclaim Ismene, since she does survive. My argument about the protest novel is that, ultimately, it is unfinished. Those two standing helplessly at the end of *Jacob's Room* show us the problem. The novel is formally highly complete (ending where it began, and so on), but it is ethically incomplete. I think ending with a question, "What am I to do with these . . .?" (142), makes the point well. There is work to be done.

PSA: We've been talking off and on about the major and minor characters in *Jacob's Room* as if they were in a kind of oppositional relation, the one flourishing at the other's expense. It occurs to me that something like this happens, at a completely different scale, in both world wars: as the young and middle-aged men mobilize, their roles as the protagonists of the national economy—the main characters of the public workforce, if you will—are ceded to sexual and gender minorities, older people, people with disabilities. We might wish that Woolf had written a novel satisfyingly depicting that supersession—Sarah Waters's *The Night Watch*, maybe? But instead, she writes something more off-putting, strenuous, and unforgiving: a novel with a flat male protagonist and insurgent minor characters who can never fully realize their insurrection. If *Jacob's Room* is a protest novel, one of the things it's protesting is the realist character system it can neither accept nor supersede. Like that horrifying image in *Between the Acts* of the toad lodged in the snake's gullet: "The snake was unable to swallow; the toad was unable to die" (99). We might see *Jacob's Room* as staging a kind of impasse at the cusp of two regimes of the novel. That would also, I'm suggesting, be an impasse at the cusp of two supposedly distinct regimes of national protagonism: "peacetime" and "wartime."

I think Woolf leaves us to extrapolate from peripheral but totally arresting scenes such as the one you led us to, Anne, about what a

novel—and maybe a social totality—with a less centripetal model of protagonism might look like. That would make *Jacob's Room* a true precursor to *Three Guineas*, as you and Sarah have both suggested. It would be Woolf's thinking in public, and quite radically, about which minoritized voices might become audible and even central if the social scaffolding of protagonism were to be fully withdrawn or nebulized. Maybe the emptiness and stale repetitiveness we've referred to in the final scene mark what the text hopes will be the tomb of the kind of novel *Jacob's Room* wishes to but can't fully cease to be. Which might then send us back again to its wonderful, agonizing, populous middles.

Oh, I think I hear them. We must be getting close.

AF: Yes. Before we join the rest, can we talk for another moment about the alternative versions of *Jacob's Room* we might wish for? For me, that idea of wishing it were otherwise gets at the heart of a central challenge for protest novels. Their didactic quality and the way they tend to point readers toward taking action in the world means that they will always fall short. A romance can satisfy us simply by bringing the couple happily together forever at the story's end, but how could a protest novel satisfy?

We know what many of the most celebrated protest novels sought to achieve. Unsurprisingly, Woolf's cause, if we can even call it that, is far more diffuse and complex. We might well wish for something more from Woolf's protest novel—and we do get more elsewhere, especially in the feminist essays. *A Room of One's Own* offers a straightforward feminist critique of educational inequality; *Three Guineas* opposes war and fascism while considering the dangers of propaganda to art. Here, however, the protest can seem muffled and muted. That diminished quality is part of Woolf's critique of patriarchy and of the ways the structures of power discourage us from noticing how they operate on us. In the early chapters of *Night and Day*, Katharine and Mary attend a meeting of young people and eavesdrop as the conversation turns away from literature to larger matters: "I wonder why men always talk about politics?" Mary speculated. "I suppose, if we had votes, we should, too" (45).

Here, Woolf has the women, one of whom is a suffrage worker, notice how they have been conditioned to avoid talking in public. In *Jacob's Room*, Woolf continues her insistence that we attend to what is not there—how Rose and Clara continue to limit their conversation to matters of marriage.

SC: I feel the urge to return, as we join this crowd, to Woolf's "Thinking is my fighting" (285), and to the well-worn Bloomsbury proposition that talk matters. Radical intellectual and aesthetic work, and what is achieved when people live, work, converse, publish, make . . . together . . . are essential features of Woolf's own work and of her world. *Jacob's Room* may trouble this in some ways, but it also stimulates us to return to those convictions.

AF: Here we are.

US: It looks as if the candles are over there, just on the far side of the names of the dead.

PSA: So many people have come. As many as there are fallen leaves on the green. Such confusion everywhere!

(A harsh and unhappy voice cries something unintelligible. And then suddenly all the leaves seem to raise themselves.)

SC: Let's leave nothing just as it was.

Notes

1. As this is a dialogue, citations are minimal. In addition to the works cited directly here, we also draw on our reading of the following: Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*; Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel"; Bishop, "The Subject in *Jacob's Room*"; Froula, *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde*; Hollander, "Novel Ethics"; Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted*; Hussey, "Mrs. Thatcher and Mrs. Woolf"; James and Busse, "The Forms of War"; Kostkowska, "*Studland Beach* and *Jacob's Room*"; Martin, "Elegy and the Unknowable Mind"; McIntire, *Modernism, Memory, and Desire*; Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*; Wall, "Significant Form in *Jacob's Room*"; and Zwerdling, "*Jacob's Room*."

Salient works by the authors include Cole, *At the Violet Hour*; Fernald, Introduction to Mrs. *Dalloway*; Saint-Amour, *Tense Future*; Seshagiri, "Making It New."

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