CHAPTER 5

The voice of witlessness
Virginia Woolf and the poor

From the foregoing analysis of Egerton's fiction, and in particular her experiments with impressionism and the stream of consciousness, it is easy to see why she, more than any other New Woman novelist, has been so frequently linked with Virginia Woolf and High Modernism. A text such as *Keynotes* is clearly what Sally Ledger has in mind when she describes New Woman novelists of the *fin de siècle* as having "acquired a certain cachet as the literary 'mothers' of female modernists," while Lyn Pykett is even more explicit, connecting "an impressionistic and intuitive, rather than a pathological, forensic, categorising naturalism" developed in the 1890s with "the attempts of Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf to develop a specifically feminine voice and form for fiction."[1] Like Ledger and Pykett, I have been interested in charting the formative influence of *fin de siècle* writing on what we consider to be the modernist moment of the early twentieth century, seeing not only Egerton but also Moore as helping to create a space within which better-known authors such as Joyce and Woolf would come to operate. Pykett's association of impressionism and naturalism echoes my own understanding that it is the conjunction of those two movements that we can understand as the origin of literary modernism, by recognizing the stream of consciousness as in many respects merely naturalism turned in upon itself.

Thought of in these terms, examples of a modernist naturalism (or, if you prefer, a naturalist modernism) can be seen all over the literary landscape during the period that separates Egerton from Woolf: in women's fiction, we might mention not only Richardson but also Rebecca West and Gertrude Stein; meanwhile, among male writers, D. H. Lawrence and John Dos Passos could usefully exemplify a continuing struggle at the limits of naturalism's methodology that looks back to Zola's founding principles as well as forward. For this chapter, I want to focus on Virginia Woolf, not because she best embodies the intersection between naturalism and modernism, but because she represents a high modernist *sine qua non*. Her

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novelistic practices seem as far from our received notion to naturalism as you can get, to instantiate a pure stylistics that might set itself against what Fredric Jameson causally apostrophized as naturalism's "rummaging around in alleyways" and obsession with "content as such."[2] Jameson's point, of course, is that this isn't an accurate image of naturalism, and is, instead, the projection of precisely the idea of a high modernism that depends upon separating out form from content. If that image of naturalism is a faulty one – Jameson terms it the product of "the modernist stereotype" – then its dialectical opposite is too. What happens, this chapter begins by asking, if we imagine even a novelist like Virginia Woolf as engaged with the problems raised by naturalism, working incessantly and often unsatisfactorily to try to produce a coherent ethical attitude and a complementary style of representation that might do such an attitude justice?

As with the school of Joyce criticism with which I ended Chapter 3, and in particular the tendency of Anglo-American readers to identify naturalism with an embarrassing adolescent phase that the mature Joyce soon outgrew, the dominant view of Woolf is invested in distancing her from such low associations. Even Alex Zwerdling, who has perhaps gone furthest is seeking to counter the image of her as uninterested in the social world, insists that Woolf was barely touched by "the complex example of Dickens" or by "the rival tradition of French naturalism," two claims that this chapter will contest.[3] The question of Woolf's relation to the poor is a particularly long-standing one, and a useful way of considering where we might locate an engagement with naturalism as well as the blindness of critics to it. Even those who have sought to rescue her from accusations of snobbish condescension have been reluctant to engage with her occasional representations of poverty. Zwerdling, for instance, generalizes about her novelistic output as being "characterized by a refusal or inability to describe anyone below the rank of the middle class in persuasive detail," and thus as content to treat "[a] whole section of society . . . as *terra incognita*."[4] Alison Light has more recently reconstructed the novelist's famously intense relationships with her own servants to give a fuller picture of her social attitudes, and yet she prefaces her study with a story about the self-censorship of Woolf's writing, focused on a manuscript sketch of a lavatory attendant. "The shadowy outlines of the poor and of servants can be seen in many of the earlier versions of Woolf's work," Light concludes, before asking, "Why did she so often blue-pencil them out?"[5] Her impulse to delete such figures is undeniable, and yet it is possible to overstate it, thereby losing sight of the telling examples that survived. They are hard for us to see because we are not sure what to make of them.

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There has been a larger critical effort to rethink Woolf as a political writer, revisiting the image established by her husband Leonard of her as "the least political animal that has lived since Aristotle invented the term."[6] Important work by Jane Marcus and Patrick Brantlinger has pointed to the Bloomsbury Group's collective writings on war and empire, for instance, with the latter concluding that the collective record far exceeds "the narrow, bourgeois liberalism and elitism" of which they are routinely accused.[7] Such rejoinders have been forced to contend with the powerful account of the "Bloomsbury fraction" outlined by Raymond Williams, however, in which even the group's progressive political commitments are understood to flow from a collective egotism that prioritized the reform of the ruling class over any desired improvement of the lives of the lower classes. As a "fraction" in only partial opposition to the values of their larger class formation, Bloomsbury approached those below them as the "underdog," according to Williams, with "very strong and effective feelings of sympathy with the lower class as victims."[8] What thus emerges as an antidote to imperialism, war, and class society is the sensibility of Bloomsbury itself, or "the contents of the mind of a modern, educated, civilized individual" as the ideal norm: "this higher sensibility," he concludes, "is the kind of life which is its aim and model, after the rational removal of ('unnecessary') conflicts and contradictions and modes of deprivation" (245–6). In its most negative connotations, Williams' assessment suggests an underlying strain of self-promotion and aggrandizement at the heart of Bloomsbury ethics, one that readily meshes with accusations concerning Woolf's snobbery.[9] On its best reading, "The Bloomsbury Fraction" implies an imposed distance from social others that might well be salutary in avoiding charges of condescension and slumming, but also risks succumbing to solipsistic navel-gazing.

The problem becomes more complicated when we consider Williams' suggestion that the preferred currency of Bloomsbury was intellectual and not economic capital, through its promotion of the educated and civilized mind as both its norm and its model. Such a mind is, as Woolf argues in "Modern Fiction" (1921), one that "receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel."[10] The valued consciousness is thus the same one that was being sketched by William James and by George Egerton in passages I cited in the last chapter, one that is necessarily complex, associative, capable of considering issues and problems from multiple viewpoints simultaneously, and defined by transitive motion rather than substantive conclusions. In this sense, Woolf's own experiments with representing the stream of consciousness

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might provide one way of connecting her with the naturalist tradition, if the argument I made in that chapter about a shared commitment to descriptive fidelity is a valid one. If Egerton's attempts to record the mind in free-associative motion can be seen as naturalistic, in their turning of the observational impulse back upon the narrator's own consciousness, can the same be said for Woolf?

This is not an easy question to answer, in part because it begs the issue of exactly what we understand by stream of consciousness narration. In an attempt to make clear distinctions, the George Moore scholar Richard Cave suggests a division very much like Regenia Gagnier's opposition between sensation and nerves. In an effort to question the primacy sometimes accorded to Edouard Dujardin's novella *Les Lauriers Sont Coupés* (1886–7), a text that both Moore and Joyce recognized as having influenced their own writing, Cave proposes a two-stage process that is initiated by "an anterior movement of the mind, its unconscious receptive activity prior to that selection of sense-data for conscious awareness that constitutes perception."[11] For Cave, Dujardin's novella represents the first stage only, what Gagnier terms "the outside world coming in through the senses,"[12] and this would disqualify it from consideration as a true "stream-of-consciousness" text. By the same token, it would place Dujardin squarely within the naturalist tradition I have been outlining, and indeed position *Les Lauriers* as a significant intersection between naturalism and impressionism. My reading of Egerton's *Keynotes* similarly focused on its ambition to record the mind engaged in the complicated act of receiving sensory data, as opposed to selecting out and patterning particular nodes of experience through which we come to understand the perceiving subject – but these are clearly not the distinct and watertight categories that Cave's and Gagnier's dichotomies suggest.

For Virginia Woolf, even in the case of the major mature novels such as *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), it is a harder than might be expected to decide the relative emphasis that is placed upon external sensory data versus their inward processing. One of her last manuscripts, "A Sketch of the Past," which was left incomplete at her death in 1940, has been thought to provide a clue. "If I could remember one whole day I should be able to describe, superficially at least, what life was like as a child," Woolf considers. "Unfortunately, one only remembers what is exceptional," she goes on to qualify, before introducing the well-known idea of such exceptional "moments of being" that nonetheless find themselves "embedded in many more moments of non-being." The idea of "non-being" lends weight to the view that for Woolf experience is only meaningful – and,

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indeed, only recoverable – when it is internalized in thought, so that to posit that "A great part of every day is not lived consciously" is to declare naturalist detailing both irrelevant and impossible.[13] On this model, the material world might come to resemble the famous emblems that open *Mrs. Dalloway*, the royal car and the letter-writing that trails behind a commercial airplane, each of which becomes knowable only through its lingering effects. Clarissa Dalloway wonders why the street is blocked, sees a chauffeur and "a disc inscribed with a name" in the hand of a footman, sees a policeman redirect traffic for a vehicle to pass, and reconstructs the scene's meaning as it is "disappearing," having "left a slight ripple which flowed through glove shops and hat shops and tailors' shops on both sides of Bond Street." Even then she is unsure if the vehicle belonged to the Queen, the Prince of Wales, or the Prime Minister. By the time the car enters a gate that would presumably confirm the identity of its occupant, Clarissa and the other Londoners in the scene have been distracted by another set of evanescent ripples from a plane that might be spelling out "KREMO TOFFEE" (we only get as far as the first F), but even as it is disappearing the plane is also being processed as a set of interchangeable metaphors: "a bright spark; an aspiration; a concentration; a symbol (so it seemed to Mr. Bentley, vigorously rolling his strip of turf at Greenwich) of man's soul; of his determination, thought Mr. Bentley, sweeping round the cedar tree, to get outside his body, beyond his house, by means of thought, Einstein, speculation, mathematics, the Mendelian theory."[14]

The implication seems clear: without such thoughts – to which we can add a growing list of others, to do with war, power, ceremony, advertising, and so on – to elevate them into "moments of being," the experience that occasioned them would recede into "non-being" and not become part of the record of Clarissa's day. This would be the basis of the argument Alex Zwerdling makes that Woolf was untouched by a naturalism that insisted upon the materiality of lived experience, but I am reluctant to simply leave it at that and want to consider two other moments in her fiction at which the balance between sense experience and internal processing is weighted differently. The one that superficially resembles the opening of *Mrs. Dalloway* is drawn from later on in the same novel, when Clarissa has to consider the basis of her rage against her daughter's companion and tutor, Doris Kilman. Here, the material keynote is an item of rainwear that Clarissa visualizes even before she sees it: "outside the door was Miss Kilman, as Clarissa knew; Miss Kilman in her mackintosh, listening to whatever they said." The functioning of this garment as symbol, as an occasion for extended thought, is immediately signaled in the next

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paragraph: "Yes, Miss Kilman stood on the landing, and wore a mackintosh, but had her reasons. First, it was cheap; second, she was over forty; and did not, after all, dress to please. She was poor, moreover; degradingly poor" (123). The mackintosh thus provides a shorthand for Clarissa's assessment of Miss Kilman, which she proceeds to modify by enumerating a set of extenuating circumstances, most notably that – coming from a family "of German origin" (originally Kiehlman) – she had become impoverished by refusing to "pretend that the Germans were all villains." On that basis, Clarissa moderates her extraordinary repugnance, but not the felt contempt for Miss Kilman's style of dress. At first, then, we learn how "the idea of her diminished, how hatred (which was for ideas, not people) crumbled, how she lost her malignity, her size, became second by second merely Miss Kilman, in a mackintosh," and yet as soon as the women leave Clarissa's rage returns: "now that the body of Miss Kilman was not before her, it overwhelmed her – the idea. The cruelest things in the world, she thought, seeing them clumsy, hot, domineering, hypocritical, eavesdropping, jealous, infinitely cruel and unscrupulous, dressed in a mackintosh coat, on the landing" (126). Less an idea than an *idée fixe*, the mackintosh is inseparable from its wearer here and not so much the occasion for a set of following thoughts as their center; in this way, what marks its functioning in these passages is Clarissa's inability to fully process it or make it merely symbolic, so that the garment remains irreducibly material rather than being transformed into evanescent ripple effects.

At other times in Woolf the world of things has a similarly recalcitrant quality that can interrupt the stream of consciousness as well as help to direct it. In *To the Lighthouse*, the perpetually busy Mrs. Ramsay has to catch occasional moments for her own thinking, often needing to occur beneath or above the surface of quotidian arrangements, such as while she is reading to one of her children: thinking of two of her guests that she would like to pair up, she wonders "where were they now?" while "reading and thinking quite easily, both at the same time; for the story of the Fisherman and his Wife was like the bass gently accompanying a tune, which now and then ran up unexpectedly into the melody."[15] But if such a scene provides a literal instance of harmony between inner and outer worlds, we see them in dissonant discordance only a few pages later, as Mrs. Ramsay meditates upon "the eternal problems: suffering; death; the poor. There was always a woman dying of cancer even here." The train of thought extends to the responsibilities of parenthood, and the existential problem of raising children in such a world, but finds itself interrupted by the most banal of issues: "And yet," the passage continues, "she had said to all these children,

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you shall go through it all. To eight people she had said relentlessly that (and the bill for the greenhouse would be fifty pounds). For that reason, knowing what was before them – love and ambition, and being wretched alone in dreary places – she had often the feeling, Why must they grow up and lose it all?" Like the mackintosh, the greenhouse bill emerges here as a minor leitmotif in the thought process; in the next paragraph, for instance, we read that "Marriage needed – oh, all sorts of qualities (the bill for the greenhouse would be fifty pounds); one – she need not name it – that was essential; the thing she had with her husband" (60). In the terms diagrammed by "A Sketch of the Past," the bill would seem to represent a moment of "non-being," although the second instance might indicate why it is retrieved at this point: her worrying about domestic finance and repair is, like her reading to their children, what enables the Ramsays' marriage because it frees up Mr. Ramsay to maintain an extended existence in a realm of pure and philosophical thinking.

As Liesl Olson has suggested, in such scenes we can recognize the importance to Woolf of making distinctions, so that the novels, "which always mark the disparities between the upper and lower classes and especially between men and women[,] seem to acknowledge rather than to overlook the radical differences in how the everyday is experienced."[16] This already brings her closer to a naturalist practice that (at least implicitly) assumed a differential index of subjective determination, according to which you are either more or differently the product of your environment the lower down the social scale you exist. Later in this chapter, I will consider self-conscious reflections upon just this model by Frank Norris and Stephen Crane, but first I want to finesse it a little in the case of Virginia Woolf. After all, Mrs. Ramsay and Clarissa Dalloway each has a degree of privilege that ought to purchase them some distance from greenhouses and mackintoshes; as women, but more particularly as wives and mothers, they find everyday life harder to bracket or to relegate permanently to the level of bass notes or background noise. For *poor women*, on whom I will focus for the bulk of this chapter, the difficulty is only compounded by the demands of wage labor, which extend the obligation felt by these women of privilege to devote significant portions of their daily lives to doing things for and thinking about other people. Writing about such women involved Woolf in a complex play of identification and difference that we can think of as moving outward from the autoethnographic impulse to document one's own processes of thought, thereby engaging her in a set of ethical and aesthetic questions that have come to define the problem of naturalism.

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Mrs. McNab and the rusty pump

As Clarissa Dalloway's husband Richard is crossing Green Park in London, laden down with roses on his way home to tell Clarissa he loves her, his thoughts are briefly sidetracked by a return to his profession of politics; having observed "whole families, poor families" enjoying the public greenspace, he is forced to wonder about (and finally throw up his hands at) the problem of the homeless, asking "what could be done for female vagrants like that poor creature, stretched on her elbow . . . he did not know." The two of them have the briefest of silent interactions, but it is the asymmetry of their responses that is most telling: the woman laughs at the sight of Richard, "[b]earing his flowers like a weapon," whereas he – even while "smil[ing] good-humouredly" – finds himself "considering the problem of the female vagrant" (116). We might see this scene as illustrating the opposing forms of characterization that Woolf famously discussed in her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1928): the unnamed woman is able to see Richard as an individual, and indeed to laugh at him on account of his idiosyncratic appearance, whereas he sees only a *type*, forcing her to stand for an entire class of people. Hers is of course the preferred mode of relating to others, especially according to Bloomsbury ethics, and far superior to his politician's tendency to generalize. Indeed, the latter is reminiscent of what "Mrs. Brown" identifies as an unsatisfactory mode of observation that Woolf associated with Edwardian writers such as Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells, and John Galsworthy, in which the person under scrutiny paradoxically dematerializes under a weight of accumulated material details: such writers, she concludes in a thought experiment, have "not so much as looked at" Mrs. Brown before providing their hypothetical portraits, with Galsworthy in particular seeing in his subject only "a pot broken on the wheel and thrown into the corner."[17]

Along these lines, Alex Zwerdling smartly uses the scene from *Mrs. Dalloway* to draw out a form of political critique in the novel, one that is directed against the mentality of a governing class that can "compartmentalize in order to control and make things manageable" and that keeps itself "unruffled by viewing all social problems as involving distinct categories of people different from themselves" (128–9). I will return later to this issue of typology, which was so central to Georg Lukács' promotion of realism at the expense of naturalism. First, though, I want to consider what might be at stake in Woolf's very different depiction of the female vagrant, and a cluster of characters like her. She is, most obviously, drawn as an amalgamation of physical features: she is said to be "impudent" and

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"loose-lipped," and leans on one shoulder "as if she had flung herself on the earth, rid of all ties, to observe curiously, to speculate boldly, to consider the whys and the wherefores" (116). Taking our cues from naturalism, we might characterize Woolf's characterization in three ways, each of which might get us closer to pinpointing what is distinctive about her lower-class figures: most obviously, it highlights *visible detail* as a preferred mode for comprehending those from other social classes; it also relies upon *negation*, emphasizing what the vagrant fails to share with her privileged counterpart as a consequence of her material deprivation; and, finally, it depends upon *metaphor*, that pivotal "as if," to ground its speculative efforts at understanding her internal mental processes. Each of these is, as we shall see, also a hallmark of similar representations of the lower classes in both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*.

The easiest connection we can make is to the figure of another female vagrant, this time seen in Regent's Park by Septimus and Rezia Smith. It may, of course, be the same woman, or it may be that we are supposed to recognize a typology here – even if such thinking might exonerate Richard Dalloway from the charge of abstract categorization mentioned above. This woman is also depicted at length and through external detail, as "the battered old woman with one hand exposed for coppers the other clutching her side," though what Woolf adds this time is a voice. It is telling, however, that what the vagrant voice projects looks like gibberish on the page, "*ee um fah um so/Foo swee too eem oo*" – sounds that have been identified as the residue of what was once Richard Strauss's song "Allerseelen."[18] This "old bubbling burbling song" that once spoke of lost love "streamed away in rivulets over the pavement and all along the Marylebone Road, and down towards Euston, fertilizing, leaving a damp stain" in what we might read as an emblem of modernist dismay at the dissipation of high cultural forms (81–2). In this sense, the vagrant's Straussian song resonates with a larger concern – articulated most forcefully in Eliot's "The Waste Land" – at the evaporation of cultural meaning that occurs when texts outlive their own moment and/or pass into the possession of the lower classes.

An earlier context, within which this song might still be capable of signifying something, can barely be glimpsed on the horizon, though it is here that we must acknowledge the distance that comes to separate Woolf from her imaginative creations. Like naturalist characters, including those Irish figures that Moore and Joyce depicted in *The Untilled Field* and *Dubliners*, these vagrants register largely as negative signs, bearing the marks of a loss that they themselves may be incapable of comprehending. In common with the vagrant that Richard encounters, the Regent's Park woman is

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all negation, "a voice bubbling up without direction, vigour, beginning or end, running weakly and shrilly and with an absence of all human meaning," and indeed one "of no age or sex." The force of this negative characterization is not offset – and indeed, in many ways is enhanced – by a cluster of pastoral images that compare her to "a wind-beaten tree for ever barren of leaves" and her voice to "an ancient spring sprouting from the earth." The latter image is undercut in turn by two more prosaic metaphors that convey the same meaning without any of the attendant idealization: her mouth is "a mere hole in the earth" and her body is twice imaged as "a rusty pump" that can presumably no longer issue the water that would flow from an "ancient spring" (80–82). "Poor old woman" is the response she elicits from Rezia Smith, one that is both strikingly anticlimactic given the lengthy description of her we have been given and as casually dismissive as Richard's reflexive shift into the categorical mode of (non-) engagement.

If we turn to *To the Lighthouse*'s housekeeper Mrs. McNab, we find a similarly lengthy portrait contained in a single paragraph that is most striking for the ways that it differs from all the other character portraits we get in the novel. We can cross-reference her with the poor women of *Mrs. Dalloway* to outline a clear pattern of characterization. Like the second vagrant, she is singing a snippet of melody while she cleans the empty Ramsay house in the "Time Passes" section,

> something that had been gay twenty years before on the stage perhaps, had been hummed and danced to, but now, coming from the toothless, bonneted, care-taking woman, was robbed of meaning, was like the voice of witlessness, humour, persistency itself, trodden down but springing up again, so that as she lurched, dusting, wiping, she seemed to say how it was one long sorrow and trouble. (130)

Mrs. McNab, too, may have lost touch with the cultural meaning of the song, assuming she ever had it or it ever possessed one. Instead, it feels like the rhythmic accompaniment to a monotonous labor that is itself largely pointless, maintaining a house for an absent family that is dying off in Woolf's clipped parenthetical phrases. Just two pages later, for instance, we can read how "[Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth . . .]," in a manner that is sharply distinct from the interruptive force of Mrs. Ramsay's dwelling on the cost of greenhouse repairs.

As with the Regent's Park vagrant, metaphors work to dehumanize Mrs. McNab, who "rolled like a ship at sea," while the physical body that

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Woolf describes as that of a "toothless, bonneted, care-taking woman" who at paragraph's end "continued to drink and gossip as before," can be situated in a long history of poor female grotesques. Indeed, some of the same imagery attaches itself to Doris Kilman in *Mrs. Dalloway*, as Elizabeth takes her shopping for petticoats and she is said to need guiding around as if she were "an unwieldy battleship," and to move by "rocking slightly from side to side" and "lurching with her hat askew, very red in the face" (130; 133). As with Miss Kilman, there is some measure of self-recognition on the part of Mrs. McNab – "she was witless, she knew it" – and yet Woolf seems reluctant to leave it at that, perhaps mindful of how readily such a description might lend itself to the familiar charges of snobbery and condescension. But what looks like a greater effort to imagine Mrs. McNab's thought process only ends up only widening the distance between character and narrator. Woolf attempts a form of free indirect discourse, recording for instance that "It was not easy or snug this world she had known for close on seventy years," but includes a series of conditional phrases such as "she seemed to say" and (as in *Mrs. Dalloway*) "as if" that cause us to doubt the accuracy of the reconstructed line of thought. Consider the following passage, speculating about her song and whether "indeed there twined about her dirge some incorrigible hope."

> Visions of joy there must have been at the wash-tub, say with her children (yet two had been base-born and one had deserted her), at the public-house, drinking; turning over scraps in her drawers. Some cleavage of the dark there must have been, some channel in the depths of obscurity through which light enough issued to twist her face grinning in the glass and make her, turning to her job again, mumble out the old music hall song.

The passage is a fascinating conjoining of the certainty of knowable detail with the self-doubt that comes when Woolf challenges herself to really imagine other kinds of people, the two impulses meeting in the repeated phrase "there must have been." The passage ultimately abandons whatever hope it had of penetrating beneath the surface or of showing Mrs. McNab as capable of doing so for herself: unlike mystics or visionaries who get some answer (even if "they could not say what") to questions like "What am I" or "What is this?" the female domestic is left hard at her manual work, and capable of finding consolation only in "drink and gossip" (130–31).

It is hard to know what to make of a passage such as this, or the type of the poor woman that it – along with similar descriptions in *Mrs. Dalloway* – works so hard to articulate. If one accusation against Woolf is (in Zwerdling's charge) that of "a refusal or inability to describe

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anyone below the rank of the middle class in persuasive detail" then we could offer such examples to refute it, even as we might want to pause and consider what "persuasive" could mean in this context: Who, after all, does Woolf need to persuade? We might also want to consider the difference between refusing and being unable to do something. At the very least, we need to examine the effort itself, and the sincerity of purpose that is made palpable through all of the twists and turns of these passages, rather than simply dismissing them as instances of what Mary Childers has labeled as Woolf situating herself "on the outside looking down."[19] That having been said, it is clear that such passages imagine the minds of these poor women as something other than the ideal of complexity that was being prized by Bloomsbury, and their personalities according to a very different model of characterization than that which is deployed whenever Woolf portrays figures closer to her own social class. To put it crudely, nobody else is identified by their drinking habits or by how many teeth they have. If, as Tamar Katz has suggested, *Mrs. Dalloway* provides us with metaphors to link its characters through "a figurative resemblance that lies beneath the details of their lives" and that define them "through a register that is less clearly social or historical," it would be hard to make a case for including rusty pumps or ships rolling at sea in such a catalog of images.[20]

There is, then, a tangible difference between these passages and those that describe the thought patterns of characters whose life experience we recognize as being closer to Woolf's own. It is tempting, as I shall suggest in a moment, to think of such passages as *citations* of naturalism that embed its thematic and stylistic concerns within a larger narrative structure that they inhabit but don't really engage. And yet, while there's an undeniable tendency to equate naturalist practices with the lower classes – precisely as if only the poor ever got drunk or had missing teeth – this is also to miss the point that trying to delineate the thought patterns of Londoners on seeing promotional skywriting over their heads, or a mother as she reads to her children, owes just as much to naturalism's emphasis on detailed observation and analysis. In that sense, it might be more accurate to consider Woolf as operating across different social and aesthetic registers, and in the process articulating and sometimes disarticulating the ways that we habitually assume that particular representational modes are appropriate for some classes of characters but not others. In the following detour into the work of two American writers of the 1890s, Stephen Crane and Frank Norris, I consider a parallel set of investigations that more clearly signaled themselves as occurring under the sign of naturalism as a way of indicating

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Woolf's larger, and equally self-conscious, engagement with many of the ethical and aesthetic questions that naturalists have been asking ever since Zola wrote *The Experimental Novel*.

Misery or luxury: The metafictions of Norris and Crane

Woolf's drift toward a particular kind of imagery – especially one rooted in material details and dehumanizing qualities – as soon as the poor come into focus is an impulse that was associated historically with naturalism. In an American context, June Howard defines as one of "the most distinctive element of naturalism" its simultaneous "construction of two polarized categories of characters – one of sign-producers, one of signs," with the former treating the latter as "other" in spite of liberal inclinations toward empathy.[21] In many ways, American practitioners of naturalism, Frank Norris and Stephen Crane in particular, were much more explicit about this gap separating themselves from their subjects, which means that their reflections upon the topic can shed a useful light upon Woolf's own ethical hesitations, which I will be considering in the next section. Each American writer produced metafictional pairs of stories, in which one example both embodies and reflects upon a naturalist methodology while the other tackled the same subject matter in another social register that entailed a different style of writing. In the process they simultaneously underscore and denaturalize the tight association of naturalism with lower-class subjects that is implied by Woolf's depictions of vagrants and servants.

Norris, for instance, produced a series of short vignettes in 1896 of which each takes for its subject the generic action "Man Proposes," thereby dramatizing a perceived but unspoken connection between particular social realities and preferred aesthetic techniques. In his "'Man Proposes' – No. 1," a scene of courtship plays out between an unnamed man and woman at a seaside hotel. Little is said between them, and this is Norris' point, since what matters is that they share an unspoken connection that the reader can access via interior monologue. As the man puts his arm around the woman's waist, for example,

> he choked down a gasp at his own temerity. It was astonishing to him how simply and naturally he had done the thing. It was as though he had done it in a dance. He had not premeditated it for a single instance, had not planned for it, had felt no hesitancy, no deliberation. Before he knew it, his arm was where it was, and the world and all things visible had turned a somersault.[22]

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316018668.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Naturalist characters typically act this way, on instinct and without forethought, but they almost never renarrate their actions after the fact. What is significant is the ideal of transparency that is being represented, with the man in full understanding of what he has done and hopeful that his action is received accordingly.

In the terms I derived from Gagnier and Cave at the beginning of this chapter, external sense-data are not only recorded but more importantly shown to have been processed; an action that might have come to him "naturally" is thus the subject of self-conscious reflection that minimizes what might initially have been experienced as shocking. As the man waits for some acknowledgment, he proceeds to read the woman's body language, noticing with satisfaction how she starts to lose balance and "swayed toward him, and throwing out her hand instinctively, seized his shoulder furthest from her." This in turn authorizes him to catch hold of her hand, just as later the charming scene of her watching over her sleeping brother cues him to "put his arm around her neck and [draw] her head toward him. She turned to him then very sweetly, yielding with an infinite charm, and he kissed her twice." A fully mutual understanding connects the couple beneath the wordless surface of these minutely described interactions, making the desires and motives of each open to the other, and to us. "This was how he proposed to her," we read in conclusion. "Not a word of what was greatest in their minds passed between them. But for all that they were no less sure of each other" (57–8).

It is a very different story in what follows, "'Man Proposes' – No. II," a sketch that instead follows the standard script of naturalist writing. Its first words, "He was a coal heaver," immediately specify a social positioning that is absent from the first story, and all the other differences flow from that first one. Like Woolf's lower-class women, this man is described in physical details – with small eyes, a flat nose, an immense lower jaw "protruding like the jaws of the carnivora," a thick lower lip – and via metaphors that link him to the natural world and animals ("strong as a dray horse," for instance). Unlike his more privileged predecessor, he also possesses no apparent interiority, being delineated as a set of actions that could function as stage directions that tell us, for instance, how "He took his pipe from his lips and filled it, stoppering it with his thumb, put it back unlighted between his teeth and dusted his leathery palms together slowly." When he makes a proposal of sorts it is offered in words, but elliptically and with a menace that shows little concern for mutual understanding or desire, saying only "Say, huh, will you? Come on, let's" and then repeating "come on" in an effort to overcome the woman's resistance. The basis for her recoil

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is conveyed to us but seems inaccessible to her, an instinctive "No, no!" that she expresses "without knowing why, suddenly seized with the fear of him, the intuitive feminine fear of the male." There is no reconstruction on her part of why such a reaction might have occurred, and it is soon invalidated in a rare moment of interiority when we learn that she submits to his strength and persistence, "glad to yield to him and to his superior force, willing to be conquered." In the end, having "penn[ed] her into the corner of the room" as she stands laboring at the washtub, the man gets his way, and "they kissed each other full on the mouth, brutally, grossly."[23]

We have a different pattern of characterization here, in which the protagonists either have no interiority or (in the case of the woman) have a will that strangely runs contrary to their own instincts and intuitions – although the gap between them is known only by the reader, and as a result of a minimally intrusive narrative editorializing. Stylistically, we can recognize that the "Man Proposes" series pivots on what June Howard has termed "a generic opposition" in which it is a set of representational modes and not their associated realities that are being contrasted: a "sentimental courtship vignette" in the first instance, versus a "fragment of sordid 'naturalism'" in the second.[24] It would be as wrong to assert the greater "realism" of the second sketch as it would be to claim an inherent superiority for the life described in the first, however, just because it might feel more familiar to us. Does the first couple's silent yet mutual understanding make their courtship feel any less scripted? Does having some access to their thoughts individualize them, or do they nevertheless remain at the generic level of "man" and "woman," just like their lower-class counterparts? Indeed, are they not that much less "real" or "rounded" for having no apparent occupation or social positioning?

The clearest effort to address such questions occurred two years earlier in Stephen Crane's paired sketches "An Experiment in Misery" and "An Experiment in Luxury" (1894). Both are presented as speculative acts of impersonation in which an unnamed protagonist seeks to understand and describe the lifestyles of the very poor and the very rich, respectively. What initially registers as an even-handed investigation, presumably undertaken on behalf of a putative middle class, soon comes to feel asymmetrical, however. Whereas the first "experiment" is undertaken out of simple curiosity, because seeing a passing tramp leads the investigator to "wonder how he feels," the second proceeds from another premise entirely, seeking to test the clichés that "the millionaire is a very unhappy person" because "miseries swarm all around wealth."[25] As a consequence, as Alan Trachtenberg

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has suggested, "Luxury" contains a significant degree of "discursive self-reflection" as it moves to disprove these myths and link itself to the first experiment by insisting that such consolations only help to propagate the ignorance of poor lives that "Misery" aimed to redress.[26] As with Norris' "Man Proposes" sketches, Crane's make an implied correlation between social reality and the act of perception, insisting on the tangible details of poverty while figuring the investigation into wealthy living instead as the actions of "a man who had come to steal certain colors, forms, impressions that were not his" (45).

But if we are tempted to an easy conclusion here, that naturalism and impressionism are the appropriate modes of representation for these respective class realities, Crane gives us grounds to question both assumptions. "An Experiment in Misery" opens and closes on a familiar note of social cleavage, insisting at the outset that the feelings of the poor cannot be known "unless you are in that condition yourself. It is idle to speculate about it from this distance." At its conclusion that distance is recognized again, but it is now confronted from the other side of experience, as it were, so that those walking "in their good clothes . . . expressed to the young man his infinite distance from all that he valued. Social position, comfort, the pleasures of living, were unconquerable kingdoms" (42–3). What has produced the change? Cynically, we might say it is a cosmetic one, brought about by the observer having traded his own good clothes for a version of "rags and tatters," and we might equally say that his final conclusion, that he still has no understanding of the beggar's point of view even as his own "has undergone a considerable alteration," does very little for the poor themselves.

In a pivotal scene, the young man spends the night in a doss-house and hears a fellow resident "utter long wails that went almost like yells from a hound, echoing wailfully and weird through this chill place of tombstones, where men lay like the dead." But if those similes, invoking clichéd images of the poor as animals and the dead, prove unsuccessful, the narrative nonetheless finds it necessary to turn the wailing into thoughts, even if they are not ones that its utterer himself would be capable of thinking or understanding: it "expressed a red and grim tragedy of the unfathomable possibilities of the man's dreams," for example, and was "to the youth . . . the protest of the wretch who feels the touch of the imperturbably granite wheels and who then cries with an impersonal eloquence, with a strength not from him, giving voice to the wail of a whole section, a class, a people." If this sounds overwritten, it is surely supposed to be; the next morning's sun seems to wash away all such thoughts,

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rendering the room "comparatively commonplace and uninteresting" (39). In so doing, Crane seems to indict his own experiment as rooted in a flawed mode of perception, one that is only too willing to put thoughts into poor characters' heads but thereby enacts a narcissistic projection according to which they can only think what the privileged observer thinks them liable to think in the first place. Ultimately, as the ending insists, this has been about his own "point of view" all along – an implication, we might say, that is preferable only to a status quo in which the poor can only function in metaphorical terms, as Zolian *bêtes humaines* or the walking dead.

If "An Experiment in Misery" only seems to be about material reality but focuses increasingly on the process of subjective perception, "An Experiment in Luxury" moves in the opposite direction. It announces itself as concerned more with impression and yet repeatedly exposes such a focus as mystification, and just as much an extension of the lifestyle it is describing. As the investigator begins to adapt to the life of the idle rich, for instance, he experiences a loosening of his initial exasperation at what he previously had termed "the eternal mystery of social condition," back when he had been prepared to ask how he could allow "a mass of material" to intimidate him when he recognized their true meaning as the signs of "a lavish expenditure" and nothing more. A newfound acceptance of life the way it is, however, turns out to be the real trap, as signs and signifiers come to take on the self-evidence of material facts. "It was necessary that it should be so," he now comes to think of the division between rich and poor: "Thus it was written; it was a law, he thought. And anyway, perhaps it was not so bad as those who babbled tried to tell" (47). We can recognize in this a seduction by wealth, in which privilege comes to justify itself according to abstract and unquestioned principles, and the language of impressionism emerges as its preferred aesthetic coding; after all, the initial premise that millionaires suffer as much as the poor highlights a perception of hardship, never actually substantiated, that seeks to gloss over the material realities that "Misery" documents. What Crane seeks to reminds us of is the recalcitrant facts of social existence that enable the life of luxury, especially toward the end when a servant hovers at the periphery of the investigator's consciousness. As "[t]he lights shed marvelous hues of softened rose upon the table . . . the butler moved with a mournful, deeply solemn air" to clean up behind the millionaire and his family, introducing a discordant note that is all the more jarring because he is unnoticed by those he serves: "Upon the table there was color of pleasure, of festivity, but this servant in the background went to and fro like a slow religious festival" (50).

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As the repressed source of wealth, labor strives to make itself visible here, but only as another *metaphor* – and in doing so, it only indicates the extent to which we have immersed ourselves in the life of luxury. Whereas "An Experiment in Misery" does little more than document life at it might be lived at the other end of the social scale, while straining to imagine a language in which it might articulate the grievances of the poor, its counterpart enumerates the ways that such a message (assuming it could ever be spoken) would fail nonetheless to move its intended audience. "When a wail of despair of rage had come from the night of the slums," it concludes, the wealthy responded with the falsehood of their own suffering and had "stuffed this epigram down the throat of he who cried out and told him that he was a lucky fellow" (51). Even as the two sketches come together around this wailing of poverty, then, they underscore how the lives they describe never can. The separation of these social worlds becomes, as Trachtenberg has suggested, "a difference in perspective, in how the world is seen, felt, and accepted," and it is precisely this difference that the sketches adopt formally, just as Norris' paired marriage proposals take on the respective languages and narrative strategies of their characters.[27] In the process, for both writers, it becomes just as unthinkable to fully document the material basis of wealth as it is to provide an inner monologue for the poor.

By doubling as both instances and interrogations of naturalist methodology, these sketches by Norris and Crane are linked with the self-reflexive texts by Zola and Moore that I discussed in Chapter 2. Whereas the autoethnographic emphasis of *L'Œuvre* or *Parnell and His Island* turned naturalist determination back upon their authors in order to explore their background and subject positions, "Man Proposes" and Crane's experiments in misery and luxury investigate the ethical underpinnings of efforts to depict others. In the process, they also return us to a question raised by the reception of Zola in the 1890s: Is naturalism a *style*, with discernible aesthetic qualities and characteristics, or is it instead a consciously antiliterary method that sets itself against the idea of style itself as an exercise in mystification? If the effect of "'Man Proposes' – No. 1" and "An Experiment in Luxury" is to scrutinize the seemingly naturalized connection between lives of privilege and techniques such as impressionism or abstract figuration, their counterparts similarly defamiliarize naturalism's presumed association with poverty and material detail, implicitly posing the question of what exactly is lost or gained in the rejection of a supposed "literariness." In returning now to Virginia Woolf, I want to consider the consequences of this double bind, in which a writer is damned in her efforts to *be literary*

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and by the effort not to be, potentially at fault either for daring to write about people outside of her immediate class experience or for writing only from within her narrow scope of social experience. As we shall see, the act of analytical observation, which is so central to the naturalist enterprise, is shown to be one that is fraught with ethical pitfalls.

Writerly ethics and social observation

In Woolf's case, the question of the poor, as both a social and an artistic problem, was especially prominent in the prose writings of the early 1930s. Her 1930 essay on her work with the Women's Co-operative Guild, "Memories of a Working Women's Guild," usefully identifies a set of problems, and – since those memories originate in meetings Woolf attended prior to World War I – also indicates a long-standing effort to address them. Considering her relationship to the working women in the organization, the novelist is led to confess that the goals and desires that the women articulate – for material benefits such as "sanitation and education and wages, this demand for an extra shilling, or another year at school, for eight hours instead of nine behind a counter or in a mill" – fail to touch Woolf herself, because, as she acknowledges, if "every reform they demand was granted this very instant it would not matter to me a single jot." As a result, she recalls having felt "irretrievably cut off from the actors," at best a "benevolent spectator" and at worst "an outcast from the flock."[28] Woolf admits to sharing these "contradictory and complex feelings" with the other privileged women at Guild meetings, and she anatomizes that complexity by considering the terms of her potential identification with her working-class counterparts (142).

Because privileged women such as herself don't need the material goals being demanded, any sympathy they feel is inevitably said to be that of "the eye and of the imagination, not of the heart and of the nerves; and such sympathy is always physically uncomfortable." Interestingly, such a limited form of sympathy is characterized by Woolf as both "fictitious" and "aesthetic," by which she presumably means to stress the necessary work of the imagination to fill in a story that cannot be immediately understood and the importance of the eye as the privileged sensory receptor (140). When she tries to picture the life of an imaginary "Mrs. Giles of Durham City," for instance, Woolf produces in essence a set of naturalist clichés, complete with a washtub, a mining husband "thick with coal grime," no hot water, and dust in the saucepans, but she also admits the weakness of such an imagining, one that "is largely the child of the flesh. One could

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not be Mrs. Giles because one's hands had never wrung and scrubbed and chopped up whatever meat may be that makes a miner's dinner . . . One sat in an armchair or read a book. One saw landscapes or seascapes, in Greece or perhaps in Italy, where Mrs. Giles must have seen slag heaps and row upon row of slate roofs in a mining village" (137). Knowing about the life of women from other classes only through its visible manifestation becomes, in this sense, the equivalent of those material demands that the women make, and that have such a limited impact on their wealthier counterparts: a restricted understanding that only serves to remind somebody like Woolf of how little she knows, and how difficult the task of deeper sympathetic understanding really is.

It is worth asking at this point exactly what, besides seeing them in the flesh and trying to imagine what their lives are like, the novelist felt that she ought to be able to do for working women, and whether she is merely setting herself up for inevitable failure. Two possible answers suggest themselves, and each in its way gets us to the heart of the problem of Woolf's image as an apolitical snob and to the more general problematic of naturalist representation. On the one hand, she might have wanted to be able to extend sympathy in the direction of collective political action and yet felt hamstrung by her inability to value what the women were demanding. And, on the other hand, she might have wanted to push beyond a merely readerly relationship to her lower-class counterparts, one in which she must be content to witness and try to imagine working-class lives, and instead be able to actually *write about* them, especially if, as she frankly acknowledges in her assessment of the women's own writings, "as literature they have many limitations" (146). This second issue is addressed in a well-known letter that Woolf wrote, but never actually sent, to the *New Statesman* in 1932 titled "Middlebrow." In it, she offered a facetious – and yet, one suspects, at the same time absolutely *serious* – account of British class relations that made use of the popular metaphor of "brows" and at the same time exposed its dependence on distasteful echoes of animal husbandry and eugenics. Thus, the highbrow was, in Woolf's terms, "the man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a gallop across country in pursuit of an idea" and finds its natural counterpart in the lowbrow, "a man or woman of thoroughbred vitality who rides his body in pursuit of a living at a gallop across life."[29]

So far, the terms of her opposition – intelligence/vitality, mind/body, idea/living – are strikingly mundane, the kind of lazy binary thinking one might expect somebody like Woolf to abjure.[30] Matters don't much improve when we come to her titular third term, the middlebrow, who

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predictably comes to split the difference: "the man, or woman, of middle-bred intelligence who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige" (199). One of the most interesting aspects of this attack on middlebrow culture is the way it anticipates an identical assault that would be launched by one of Woolf's fiercest early critics, F. R. Leavis. In particular, they share the concern that middlebrow culture has no authentic basis, although they differ on what it borrows in order to make good the deficit: for Leavis, it is essentially high culture dumbed down for mass consumption, through such mediating institutions as the lending library and the book club, whereas for Woolf the greater sin of the middlebrow is that she or he dares to write about and speak for the lowbrow, thereby substituting for what was presumably at one time a vibrant folk culture. This returns us to one of the problems that haunts Woolf's fiction, and well as her experience with the Women's Co-operative Guild: that of speaking *for* the lower classes. "Middlebrow" rules out in advance the possibility that lowbrows might write for themselves, being much too busy with life: "Since they are lowbrows, engaged magnificently and adventurously in riding full tilt from one end of life to the other in pursuit of a living," it suggests, "they cannot see themselves doing it. Yet nothing interests them more" (198).

In this context, a couple of the distinctions I highlighted earlier come into play, though in unexpected ways. Like the privileged observers at the Guild meetings, lowbrows have no writerly relationship to life, in the terms developed by Roland Barthes, but a potentially strong readerly one.[31] This is why they shouldn't need middlebrow instruction: "how dare the middlebrows teach *you* how to read – Shakespeare, for instance?" Woolf asks. "All you have to do is to read him" (201, emphasis in original).[32] By the same token, they have experience of their own lives but are incapable of visualizing it ("they cannot see themselves doing it"), which means that they cannot take even the first unreliable step toward genuine self-representation. A capacity for visualization comes to seem like a prerequisite in this instance, even if it inevitably proves inadequate as a basis for representing the other. If lowbrows are unable to narrate their own lives and middlebrows prove unsuited to the task, it necessarily falls to the highbrows to step in, and it is here that we find the conceptual heart of Woolf's letter. What it imagines is a kind of symbiosis or mutual dependency, in which lowbrows are tasked with simply living, "magnificently and adventurously," while their "high" counterparts – figured, in what feels like a sad variation on *fin-de-siècle* uselessness, as "the only people who do not do things" – take up the

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challenge of representing that living back to them. Thus, "lowbrows are waiting, after the day's work, in the rain, sometimes for hours, to get into the cheap seats and sit in hot theatres in order to see what their lives look like," with the only pertinent question being whether they will accept the kind of middlebrow kitsch that found itself simultaneously under attack from Leavis or the Frankfurt School, or would instead trust the presumably disinterested version being proffered by highbrows (198).

It may be that Woolf actually believed all of this, although her own work gives little support for it. There remains the issue of how the highbrow should bridge the social gap, however. On this question, Woolf mimics the language of the naturalist or social scientist, explaining that "I love lowbrows; I study them; I always sit next the conductor in an omnibus and try to get him to tell me what it is like – being a conductor" – and the same goes, she continues, for stockbrokers, admirals, duchesses, miners, bank clerks, or prostitutes (197). As Alex Zwerdling notes, this image of Woolf as an amateur sociologist, "cross-examining those with access to worlds different from their own," resonates with firsthand accounts furnished by contemporaries, even if it is worth asking what exactly she imagined as the potential ends of such "eager research" (113). The "Middlebrow" letter, written in a tone of exaggerated self-confidence that borders on insouciance, gives a brief hint as to the limits she placed on her studies of lowbrows when she parenthetically notes that she "cannot imitate their style of talking" (201), at which point the distinction between the readerly and writerly relations I mentioned earlier reemerges. It is, after all, one thing to question a bus conductor and find out about his life, but quite another to be able to recreate the speech patterns and thought processes by which he might himself narrate that life; no bus conductors actually make their appearance in Woolf's novels, even at the moment when Elizabeth Dalloway finds herself liberated from her shopping expedition with Doris Kilman and decides to take a ride on top of a city omnibus. In this context, we can read the "*ee um fah um so*" of *Mrs. Dalloway*'s park vagrant, or Mrs. McNab's "voice of witlessness," as the tangible signs of Woolf's acknowledged inability to meaningfully ventriloquize lower-class speech patterns, and her repeated "as ifs" as signaling the gap that separates observation from empathic understanding. Firsthand research can readily translate into political sympathies, even if those might still be largely "fictitious" in nature, but cannot form the ground for an artistic practice that could do what "Middlebrow" insists upon as a simple good: the highbrow representation of working-class life in terms that would (like Shakespeare) be accessible to lowbrows themselves.

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It might be useful at this point to consider the example of Dickens, who provides a powerful model for converting observation and research (especially into lower-class life) into character and speech patterns. In a 1930 essay "Street-Haunting: A London Adventure," Woolf attempts the quintessential Dickensian experiment of a journey across the capital, nominally in search of a pencil but more pertinently to document her observations of urban life. Accordingly, her impressions are for the most part visual recordings made by what the essay terms "a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye." So far, so Dickensian, but what follows is an extended assessment of the limits of that eye's operation, especially as it works by "gliding smoothly on the surface" of life, not as "a diver, not a seeker after buried treasure" but like something caught on the current of a stream.[33] For that reason, we must "be content with surfaces only," at best scoring small victories but at the same time recognizing our inability "to compose these trophies in such a way as to bring out the more obscure angles and relationships" (157). If we are not to abandon entirely any efforts at sympathetic imagination or the representation of those unlike ourselves, this essay suggests we may have to be content with the observable details on which naturalist characterization is constructed.

However "enormous" or perceptive, though, the eye alone cannot answer the kind of questions (such as "What, then, is it like to be a dwarf?") that would allow recorded observation to be converted into sympathetic understanding, and thence into rounded characterization. As with her portraits of female servants and vagrants, Woolf finds herself stuck on the surface, never able to push through to the inside or (as the Dickensian model would dictate) to presume that we might indicate the latter by way of the former. There are a number of possible explanations for the collapse of that model, and of the authorial confidence it helped to project. Freudian psychoanalysis disrupted any simple equation of outside and inside, introducing layers of mediation and a kernel of the unconscious that could be knowable (if ever) only after painstaking analysis. Alternatively, limits placed on women's access to – and experience of – the city might have necessitated a more passive and fleeting form of observation for Woolf's narrator, who chooses to keep moving at the risk of cutting short her inquiries.[34] Finally, we might take that curtailment as a symptom of modernity itself, which dictated shorter social interactions conducted at higher speeds and in greater volume.[35] At one point, Woolf overhears part of a conversation concerning a woman named Kate who may not think someone else "worth a penny stamp," but "who Kate is, and to what crisis in their friendship that penny stamp refers, we shall never know; for Kate sinks under the

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warmth of their volubility; and here, at the street corner, another page of life is laid open . . . [T]he main stream of walkers at this hour sweeps too fast to let us ask such questions" (163).

An essay that commences in the style of the Dickensian ramble, with its confident tone and faith in the power of the "enormous eye," progressively fragments into an effort to comprehend what we don't and can't know about those around us, while the joys of urban wandering ultimately give way to the relief that comes with returning home. On the way, "one could tell oneself the story of the dwarf, of the blind men" and so on, and might even "penetrate a little" into each life, but only so far as "to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others" (165). This illusion is a feeling that Tamar Katz has compared to "window-shopping," an emergent pursuit of well-to-do female city dwellers in this period and one that similarly provided a fleeting simulation of possession over surrounding objects: "identification with others," Katz suggests, "is a luxury much like shopping; the street haunter remains separate from the spectacles she sees."[36]

The pretense of a deeper bond feels largely harmless in this instance, perhaps a necessary fiction for a "London adventure" like this in which we can sense Woolf's desire to try on Dickens' walking shoes. But the pattern embodied in "Street-Haunting," whereby an initial self-confidence in the art of storytelling modulates into an admission of failure and disconnection, is one that is repeated elsewhere, highlighting a symptomatic difficulty that arises whenever Woolf sets out to represent the lives of other classes. We might recall, for instance, the promise in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" to provide a "Georgian" depiction of character that could counteract those of the despised Edwardian trinity of materialists: when the moment arrives for modern fiction techniques to take center stage, however, Woolf first prevaricates and then confesses to having "pull[ed] my own anecdote to pieces . . . The incident had made a great impression on me. But how was I to transmit it to you?" (*CE* 1: 330–31). The admission feels coy, and yet we can read it as simultaneously acknowledging a problem that manifested itself in Woolf's major novels of the late 1920s: how do you write about other people when you only dimly glimpse their surfaces and are forced to try to imagine what's on the inside? Rather than dismiss the problem as a simple aesthetic failure, or as symptomatic of the social failure of snobbery, I would suggest a possible cause for Woolf's evident reticence that we might deem politically honorable: the affirmation that any effort at writing the lives of lower-class characters will inevitably invite accusations of bad faith,

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given the ways that Woolf herself figured the social divide and the obstacles to a genuine (as opposed to merely fictitious) sympathy across class lines.

Representation and agitation

The problem that Woolf set herself would have been a familiar one to late-nineteenth-century readers, who could connect it with the widespread concern that people saw the world in terms of narrow class interests and lacked a more generalizable view of common interests. Perhaps the most forceful statement of this dilemma came in Oscar Wilde's 1890 essay "The Soul of Man under Socialism," which argues that individuals – much less social classes – should consider themselves under no obligation to understand and help each other. The chief advantage of socialist reconstruction is thus, Wilde suggests, that it would "relieve us from that sordid necessity of living for others which, in the present condition of things, presses so hardly upon almost everybody." Instead, each should strive, as far as possible, "to isolate himself, to keep himself out of reach of the clamorous claim of others . . . and so to realise the perfection of what was in him [*sic*]."[37] Wilde holds to such a view despite his recognition (this is where the essay is at least nominally "socialist" in its politics) of the appalling poverty under which others are forced to exist, in lives lived "always on the burden of sheer starvation, . . . compelled to do the work of beasts of burden, to do work that is quite uncongenial to them, and to which they are forced by the peremptory, unreasonable, degrading tyranny of want" (1042). In the face of such conditions, any form of protest is justifiable on the part of the poor themselves, up to and including criminal acts, but almost no intervention on the part of the privileged can escape accusations of bad faith and condescension: as soon as you try, you not only succeed in creating "an absolute uniformity of type" for those you want to help (something like Richard Dalloway's "problem of the female vagrant") but also end up ruining your own life in the process (1063).

This all sounds clear and decisive, and what some might expect given the public image of Wilde, but it should also be clear that simply ignoring the poor is no better than trying to make their lives a little better. In that sense, the essay confronts exactly the same double bind that Woolf would encounter in her work with the Women's Co-operative Guild and in her attempts to write about the lives of others. Raymond Williams' criticism that the Bloomsbury Group in effect put themselves forward as the model of a better life for all in many ways adds them to a long list of social actors – from Thomas Carlyle's clergy and Matthew Arnold's sovereign,

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316018668.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

through Leavis' extolling of the civilized minority, to the Leninist conception of the Party as vanguard – who have claimed for themselves the disinterestedness necessary to speak for the organic whole, and Wilde also has his candidate. In "The Soul of Man under Socialism," the exception to the rule of separation is the agitator, whose job it is to "come down to some perfectly contented class of the community and sow the seeds of discontent among them." What creates the space for the agitator is the recognition that those living under conditions of poverty have no possible way of coming to consciousness of their deprivation on their own, which is presumably why they appear "contented." On this point, we might recall Woolf's insistence in "Middlebrow" that the lowbrow are too busy living to have time to reflect upon or represent their lives to themselves – to which Wilde would add also, to *protest against* such lives as not fully lived. This is why, for him, those "interfering, meddling people" he terms agitators "are so absolutely necessary. Without them, in our incomplete state, there would be no advance towards civilisation" (1044).

I have written about "The Soul of Man" before, and connected it to Wilde's opposition to naturalism in the 1890s, including his dismissal of Zola's characters as having "dreary vices" and "drearier virtues."[38] Highlighting its advocacy of agitation, however, would suggest a greater sympathy with the basic impulses of naturalist representation, and certainly with the ethical dilemmas that Woolf confronted; indeed, the simple fact that they continue to arise over a quarter of a century after Zola, Wilde, Norris, and Crane suggests something of their intractability, and of the continuing appeal of naturalism as a method even after its shortcomings had been so thoroughly documented. In the very different world of 1940, shortly before her death, Woolf would think again about these important questions of writerly ethics and politics in a lecture called "The Leaning Tower" that she delivered to the Brighton Workers' Educational Association. By now, her prime example is the politically committed writings of the so-called Auden generation. Using the image of a tower to represent the national literary tradition, Woolf finds it to once again be leaning leftward, with another group of writers determined to divest themselves of privilege in the service of a class far below themselves.

As with "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" or "Modern Fiction," Woolf starts by creating a set of categories for subdividing writers that are both chronological and stylistic, with class and character the key benchmarks. We begin with the nineteenth-century canon of writers, who are all (with the exception of Dickens) products of a common social and educational background. As a result, these novelists have so thoroughly internalized

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class divisions as to become "unconscious of them," and this in turn is what enables them "to create so many characters who are not types but individuals." This latter distinction, which seems on the surface consistent with E. M. Forster's influential division between "flat" and "round" characters in 1927's *Aspects of the Novel*, turns out to be misleading, however, because there is really no escaping from typology. In the case of the Victorians, Woolf argues, "the writer himself [*sic*] seems unconscious that he is only dealing with one type; with the type formed by the class into which the writer was born himself, with which he is most familiar," though it is precisely the inability to come to consciousness of that limitation that has proved to be such "an immense advantage."[39] By and large, the same pattern holds for the generation writing between 1914 and 1925, in which Bloomsbury names feature prominently, even if by now the stability of the social background – the tower that might well be constructed of ivory, given the formative role played by an Oxbridge education – has begun to feel less steady: "Even though the war cut into their lives, and ended some of them, they wrote, and still write, as if the tower were firm beneath them. In one word," Woolf concludes (with clear echoes of Leavis) "they are aristocrats; the unconscious inheritors of a great tradition" (139).

The immediate temptation here is simply to assign Woolf herself to the post – World War I cohort, especially given her stinging criticism of the one that follows. As we read about the Auden generation, we certainly find a version of Woolf's writer of bad faith, no better in many respects than an Edwardian materialist like H. G. Wells. For the writers of the 1930s the crucially unasked political question was whether they should divest themselves of the foundations of privilege, most notably wealth, as they articulated an ethical sympathy with the lower classes. Short of doing so – and for Woolf "it is death for a writer" to actually do so – they inevitably felt "trapped by their education, pinned down by their capital," and as a result developed a "state of mind . . . full of discord and bitterness, full of confusion and of compromise" (142). For the most part, "The Leaning Tower" has registered in Woolf criticism as a charge of false consciousness directed against bourgeois socialist writers who envisaged a simple process of identifying with the proletariat: Jane Marcus, for instance, offers a one-sentence summary, noting how it "chastises Auden and Spender and the poets of the '30s for their adulation of working-class men while neglecting to convert their own fathers to the cause of socialism."[40] And yet it seems to me possible to read Woolf's analysis differently, as at least in part a self-critique. When she arrives at the central question of characterization, for instance, she says of the "leaning-tower" writers' works what many

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have said of her own: that "they have been great egotists" and "wrote about themselves" in a time of considerable social and political upheaval, because "[w]hen everything is rocking round one, the only person who remains comparatively stable is oneself" (148).

Whatever else it is, "The Leaning Tower" is not a call to return to Victorian patterns of characterization, rooted as they are in an unconscious acceptance of class society. Painful as the struggles of the Auden generation might seem, they are for Woolf also necessary, and "have done a great deal to free us from nineteenth-century suppressions" (149). They might have produced some poor literature, in her opinion, written in a language that (recalling "Middlebrow") is deficient in being "betwixt and between," neither "the rich speech of the aristocrat" nor "the racy speech of the peasant," but the difficulty they faced was a very real one: "How can a writer who has no first-hand experience of a towerless, of a classless society create that society?" (147; 145–6). In her reassessment of American naturalism, especially in response to Lukács' withering dismissal of it as sharing in the failure of modernism to imagine possibilities of social transformation, June Howard says something similar, commenting that these are "writers for whom the historical opportunity to correlate individual action and social meaning in a single, unified figure has closed."[41] For them, there was no path back to the certainties of classical realism that Lukács continued to praise, just as surely as there was no path back to Victorian modalities either for Woolf or the Auden group.

Instead, "The Leaning Tower" imagines a Utopian future (one that it hopes will emerge after the inevitable forthcoming war) in which writers could write "a better novel than the old novel" by resurrecting in new and conscious forms the Victorians' ability to depict what they saw as individuals rather than types. These future novelists, Woolf hopes, "will have more interesting people to describe – people who have had a chance to develop their humour, their gifts, their tastes; real people, not people cramped and squashed into featureless masses by hedges" of class separation. In 1940, she could envisage such a future yet still recognize that writers at present were faced with "a deep gulf to be bridged between the dying world and the world that is struggling to be born" (151); in the meantime, it was difficult to see beyond typology, especially when dealing with classes with unfamiliar or inaccessible patterns of thought and speech. We can see Woolf's own cautious efforts at writing the poor into her fictions as produced out of this same dilemma, seeking to avoid both the simple egotism of writing the self and an unconvincing ventriloquism of her social others. It is hard not to view passages such as those describing female servants and vagrants

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as failures, precisely the sort of scenes on which we might wish that Woolf had used her blue pencil. But they exist nonetheless, and need to be read as symptomatic of an approach to fiction writing that, much like naturalism, emerged from and consciously reflected upon the gulf separating the past from the future, and the classes from each another.

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