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## True Lies: Virginia Woolf, Espionage, and Feminist Agency

*Mark David Kaufman*

Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them; it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping.

—Virginia Woolf (1929)

Secrecy is essential. (1938)

In the graphic novel *Black Dossier* (2007), the third volume in Alan Moore and Kevin O’Neill’s *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* series, Allan Quatermain and Mina Harker traverse an Orwellian, midcentury Britain in quest of a top-secret file containing a history of the “league,” a secret service composed entirely of characters from literature. Essentially, the dossier represents a sourcebook for the series, complete with accounts of earlier members of the illustrious group dating back to the Renaissance. The centerpiece of the collection, “The Life of Orlando,” traces Virginia Woolf’s immortal, gender-bending hero(ine) through centuries of outlandish adventures. We learn, for instance, of Orlando’s birth in Bronze Age Greece to the blind seer Tiresias, and we follow along as (s)he fights in the Trojan War, campaigns with Alexander the Great, serves as a Roman legionnaire, joins the Crusades, helps to found the first Elizabethan spy network, takes part in the French Revolution, and, finally, assists Quatermain and Harker in thwarting a plot against King George V at his coronation in 1910. The narrative ends in 1943, with the three-thousand-year-old Orlando listening to the air-raid sirens over London and reflecting on the “pointless wars” (2007, n.p.) and perpetual conflicts of human history.

Like most steampunk narratives, *Black Dossier* draws heavily from late-Victorian and Edwardian popular literature in constructing its pseudohistory of Britain. However, as the inclusion of Orlando indicates, steampunk also has a way of mining modernism for source material, often commandeering the most unlikely protagonists and tasking them with the defense of the realm. Like Moore and O'Neill's *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, Kim Newman's successful *Anno Dracula* series of novels incorporates a surprising range of characters from modern literature—Oscar Wilde's Basil Hallward, George Bernard Shaw's Mrs. Warren, E. M. Forster's Henry Wilcox, and D. H. Lawrence's Clifford Chatterley, to name a few. In pitting these characters against the likes of Count Dracula, Professor Moriarty, and Dr. Fu Manchu, steampunk approaches the problematic of modernism's political valence in an oblique but creative way. On the one hand, it is possible to read these fictions as lending to "high modernism" a sense of social responsibility that many commentators, following György Lukács, find lacking. On the other hand, perhaps steampunk merely emphasizes what is already there; even the most outrageous narratives sometimes contain a modicum of truth, an implied reading or uncovering of modernism's potential to intervene in world affairs. While Moore and O'Neill's treatment of Orlando in *League* bears little resemblance to Woolf's 1928 novel, their enlistment of Orlando calls to mind the author's famous observation in her diary that she and her sister, Vanessa, formed a "league together against the world" (1982, 118), a comment anticipating the alliance of politically engaged women that she advocates in *Three Guineas* (1938). Similarly, the Woolf of "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid" (1940), like the Orlando of *Black Dossier*, views all history as a continuous tragedy, one in which individuals should intervene not by taking up arms but by fighting "with the mind" ([1940] 1942, 244).

Steampunk is not the only genre to "recruit" modernism into the world of the thriller; the parallel genre of speculative biographical fiction engages in a similar operation but with a certain measure of realism. There are, in fact, two different spy novels in which Virginia Woolf herself serves as the heroic protagonist. The first, Ellen Hawkes and Peter Manso's *The Shadow of the Moth: A Novel of Espionage with Virginia Woolf* (1983), follows the "unlikely sleuth" as she works in parallel with the Security Service (MI5) to thwart a conspiracy to leak British military plans to the Germans in 1917, an investigation that leads her into an underworld of agents and

double agents, where books are used as secret codes and bookstores serve as fronts for shadowy cabals. The second, Stephanie Barron's *The White Garden: A Novel of Virginia Woolf* (2009), pits Woolf against the notorious Cambridge Spy Ring during the Second World War. More specifically, she uncovers a Bloomsbury plot to warn Stalin about Hitler's imminent invasion of the USSR, a scheme that involves encoding secret messages in the manuscript of *Between the Acts*. This discovery ultimately leads to her death—not by suicide but at the hands of sinister forces. Like *Shadow*, *White Garden* places the writer in opposition to a traitorous conspiracy involving the upper echelons of British society itself.

In spite or because of their sensationalism, these novels raise an intriguing question: can we take them *seriously*? In other words, is it possible to read *Shadow* and *White Garden* as informed treatments of Woolf? Or, is the presence of “Virginia Woolf” in these spy yarns a mere novelty, an imaginative conscription that has little or nothing to do with the *real* Virginia Woolf? To be fair, neither book offers itself as a genuine conspiracy theory or as a truthful representation of Woolf's life. Each begins with the customary disclaimer against confusing fantasy with reality. Hawkes and Manso's “Author's Note” states that the book “is a novel, and while Virginia Woolf and a number of her contemporaries appear side by side with fictional characters, the scenes in which we have placed them, as well as their dialogue, thoughts, and actions, are our own invention and should not be construed as historical fact” ([1983] 1984, n.p.). Likewise, Barron asserts that references to real people and places “are intended only to give the fiction a setting in historical reality” (2009, n.p.). Both books are, in short, what Graham Greene calls “entertainments.”<sup>1</sup> However, I want to suggest that, instead of rationalizing our dismissal, the pulp status of these novels justifies a uniquely Woolfian reading. Indeed, Woolf herself took an interest in what her biographer Hermione Lee labels “trashy novels” (1997, 408). In “Bad Writers” Woolf recognizes the “quality of unfettered imagination” that can only be found in popular fiction: “The bad writer seems to possess a predominance of the day-dreaming power, he lives all day long in that region of artificial light where every factory girl becomes a duchess, where, if truth be told, most people spend a few moments every day revenging themselves upon reality. The bad books are not the mirrors but the vast distorted shadows of life; they are a refuge, a form of revenge” ([1918] 1987, 328). In locating the agency of popular writing in its power to enact “revenge,” Woolf

draws our attention to fantasy's ability to imaginatively redress or intervene in (historical) reality. As "the vast distorted shadows of life," such texts shelter, Woolf implies, a kernel of truth, albeit in disguise.

Speculative fictions that revenge themselves upon historical and biographical archives, *Shadow* and *White Garden* correlate with Woolf's own interest in counterfactual inquiries. In *A Room of One's Own* (1929) Woolf begins her treatise by paradoxically emphasizing its unreality. That is, Woolf freely admits that the places she mentions have "no existence," that her "I" is but "a convenient term for somebody who has no real being," and that her evidence is compounded of "lies" ([1929] 2007, 3). Most famously, Woolf offers an account of "Judith Shakespeare," William's (nonexistent) sister, as a means of illustrating the economic and social factors that serve as the preconditions for literary production. In doing so, Woolf approaches the topic of "women and fiction" through the agency of fictional women, whom she juxtaposes with historical female authors—in particular, the seventeenth-century playwright, novelist, adventurer, and (appropriately enough) former spy, Aphra Behn. Woolf's rationale behind this unorthodox approach has much to do with the discursive and archival conditions of knowledge itself. Throughout *Room*, the author consults various institutions and authorities—"Oxbridge," the British Museum, and the library—in quest of a useful "truth" or an "authentic fact" (44) about women. Unable to find a satisfactory account, Woolf discovers that the very categories of facticity, authenticity, and truthfulness are themselves historically and rhetorically gendered. Ironically praising "man's writing" as "direct" and "straightforward" (109), the author suggests that a new conception of truth calls for a new medium, one employing tactics that are circuitous, oblique, and perhaps—like Behn herself—a bit "shady" (71). Both *A Room of One's Own* and its counterpart, *Orlando*, imply that Woolf's experimental fiction is also, in a sense, a new history of women. As such, Woolf's feminist texts dispute the myth that modernism is primarily invested in formalism or "art for art's sake." Far from being politically disinterested, Woolf develops a unique politics of form that troubles the fact-fiction dichotomy. From this perspective, *Shadow* and *White Garden*, while not exactly experimental, may be said to participate in a similar project: critically redressing memory through a narrative that trades on true lies.

To put it another way, these novels do not impose the world of the thriller onto Woolf; rather, they draw out and allegorize a *spy-function* that is already present in Woolf's fiction and nonfiction. Recent studies of spy

literature, such as Oliver Buckton's comprehensive *Espionage in British Fiction and Film since 1900: The Changing Enemy* (2015), tend to focus on espionage as a popular genre rather than as a literary mode open to writers who fall outside of the category of "spy novelists." Others, such as Allan Hepburn's *Intrigue: Espionage and Culture* (2005) and Erin Carlston's *Double Agents: Espionage, Literature, and Liminal Citizens* (2013), theorize a larger relationship between modernism and espionage, but they make little or no mention of Woolf, focusing instead on Marcel Proust, W. H. Auden, and other writers who take spying as a master metaphor for political and sexual alienation. In Woolf, we find a similar desire to play spy but one that moves beyond figurative associations to embrace a more performative (if hypothetical) dimension of espionage.

In what follows, I will begin by suggesting that what Lee describes as Woolf's attentiveness to "the relationship . . . between public and private, official and secret lives" (1997, 12), is not limited to her theory of biographical inquiry but characterizes her aesthetic and political outlook as a whole. Alice Wood, in her genetic study of Woolf's late writing, cautions against adopting the perspective that Woolf's work (and modernism in general) evolves in two separate phases: the aesthetically radical 1920s and the politically engaged 1930s; instead, Wood sees "Woolf's late cultural criticism as an extension of, rather than a departure from, the innovative feminist politics and aesthetic experimentation of her earlier writing" (2013, 4). In a similar vein, my goal is to show how the spy-function unites seemingly disparate aspects of Woolf's oeuvre. In a famous passage from *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe sits at the feet of Mrs. Ramsay and ruminates on the constitutive secret that animates personality: "[She] imagined how in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her, were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public. What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers?" (Woolf [1927] 1955, 79). This "art," which takes as its subject the undisclosed and ciphered domain, meets truth "half way" (78), yet it is able to accommodate a multiplicity of identities—or what Orlando's biographer calls a "variety of selves" (Woolf [1928] 2006, 226)—obscured by public facts and figures. Woolf reminds us that stream-of-consciousness writing is itself an aesthetic of disclosure. Moving from the realm of art to the field of action, I will then discuss the way Woolf, in *Three Guineas*,

figures feminism as a veritable spy ring, an “Outsider’s Society” that, while resolutely nationless, nevertheless operates from within social, cultural, and political spheres, and whose messages emerge through forms of public discourse, “sometimes openly in the lines, sometimes covertly between them” ([1938] 2006, 136). Unlike conventional spies, Woolf’s outsider is not, therefore, an agent of the state; on the contrary, her agency—her capacity to exert power and influence events—works in opposition to state-sponsored injustice. In her political writings on the eve of the Second World War, Woolf anticipates our current concerns over governmental and institutional transparency, stressing the need to expose what she considers to be the authoritarian regime at home: the academic, military, religious, and professional “procession” that privileges secrecy and violence. Woolf’s strategy, in effect, is to adopt a conspiracy of her own.

But, as in any good thriller, there is a final twist to the plot. Turning to *Shadow* and *White Garden*, I will consider the manner in which these Cold War and post-Cold War novels not only reflect but also appropriate Woolf’s outsider position for their own purposes. Both Ellen Hawkes, a feminist scholar invested in asserting the writer’s independence from the controlling Leonard Woolf, and Stephanie Barron, a former CIA analyst weaving a tale of Soviet incursions into Britain’s intellectual elite, succeed in imaginatively turning Woolf against her own avant-garde circle, enlisting the author in a rearguard action that is more a critique of liberalism than of fascism. That is, while allegorizing the Woolfian spy-function, both “entertainments” carry out a retroactive interrogation of Bloomsbury itself—which has always seemed, to suspicious observers, “a coterie conspiracy” (Lee 1997, 263).

## Strangers on a train

A committed pacifist, Virginia Woolf hardly seems, at first glance, a likely candidate for espionage, fictional or otherwise. As Lee illustrates, Woolf’s life was not particularly “sensational”:

She did not go to school. She did not work in an office. She did not belong to any institution. With rare exceptions, she did not give public lectures or join committees or give interviews. And in private terms her life-story is sensational only for her breakdowns and suicide attempts. She did not have children. Her sexual life, though unusual, was not dramatic or notorious. She

was not the subject of any public scandals or law cases. She did not engage in any hazardous sports or bizarre hobbies. She never flew in an aeroplane, or travelled outside Europe. Her exploits and adventures are in her mind and on the page. And here too, in her writing life, she is intensely private. (1997, 16)

Lee's synopsis manages to capture the general image that we have of the historical Woolf, but with one significant exception, a daring act that informs the author's work and helps to frame her conception of political engagement.

On February 7, 1910, Admiral William May of the British Royal Navy received a telegram from the Foreign Office instructing him to expect a delegation of "Abyssinian" (i.e., Ethiopian) princes who wished to inspect HMS *Dreadnought*, then flagship of the Royal Navy. When the delegation arrived in due course, Admiral May and Commander William Fisher rolled out the red carpet and ordered a naval band to play the anthem of Zanzibar (since the Abyssinian national anthem was unavailable). The officers then proceeded to show the dignitaries around the battleship, including its state-of-the-art—and highly secret—wireless system. After a pleasant visit, Admiral May and Commander Fisher escorted the royal party off the ship and cheerfully sent them on their way. All in all, it seemed a successful diplomatic encounter. The only problem was that the Abyssinians were not Abyssinians at all but a young Virginia Stephen (dressed as a man), her brother Adrian, and other friends wearing elaborate costumes and speaking in a tongue of their own devising.

The *Dreadnought* Hoax, as it quickly came to be known, is one of the more colorful incidents in Woolf's life. In a speech delivered to the Rodmell Women's Institute in 1940, Woolf describes how Adrian's friend Horace Cole ("the ring leader") and their fellow "conspirators" planned the escapade, arranged for the bogus telegram to be sent, and generally told "a variety of lies" to cover their tracks ([1940] 2008, 186). Their disguises were evidently quite good; even Fisher, who happened to be Virginia and Adrian's cousin, failed to see through the deception. Nevertheless, Woolf's account of the tour reads like a slapstick sketch, with the party constantly on the verge of exposure. Upon their arrival, the navy informed the delegation that they had an Abyssinian speaker on board—who just happened to be on leave that day. Climbing up a mast to view the wireless equipment, Virginia's beard nearly blew off in the breeze.



Invited to view the officers' bathrooms, she feared that the plot had been discovered and that the sailors would "give us each a good ducking" (192) before throwing the party overboard. Despite these close calls, the British navy fell for the ruse—hook, line, and sinker. In fact, the officers were so friendly that Virginia began to feel "slightly ashamed" (193).

A few days later, official tempers flared when Cole, who considered the hoax a "work of art," proudly informed the London papers of what had transpired, much to Virginia's horror. As she recalls, there were those in the government for whom the incident represented a significant breach of national security:

Some member of Parliament had seen the *Daily Mirror*—indeed the story had been in all the papers; and he got up and asked whether his Majesty's government were aware that a party of irresponsible and foolish people had dressed themselves up as Abyssinians and gone on board the *Dreadnought*. There were roars of laughter. But the speaker went on to point out that it was a very serious matter. He said that it reflected upon the credit of the navy. He said that it showed that anybody however foolish had only to send a forged telegram and he would take in the Admiral of the Channel Fleet. He said that we might have been German spies. He said that we had been shown secret instruments. . . . And he asked finally that steps should be taken to deal with us. ([1940] 2008, 196–97)

Luckily for the hoaxers, the 1911 Official Secrets Act did not yet exist. If it had, the "conspirators" could have been charged with a felony and sent to prison for entering an unauthorized zone. Indeed, it is wholly possible that the *Dreadnought* Hoax cast a shadow, the following year, over the drafting of the act itself, which designates a "prohibited place" as "any work of defence, arsenal, factory, dockyard, camp, ship, telegraph or signal station, or office belonging to His Majesty."<sup>2</sup> If so, then it would not be too much of an exaggeration to argue that Virginia Woolf played a small part in the creation of the modern security state. But we need not make so bold a claim in order to examine the significance of the hoax in Woolf's evolving conception of feminist agency.

That Woolf chose the *Dreadnought* incident as the subject for her 1940 talk—when she had, in fact, been asked to "speak about books" (Johnston 2009, 2)—suggests that she felt the hoax was in some way linked to her creative life and work. In the speech, "which made her

audience laugh themselves silly” (Lee 1997, 722), Woolf narrates how she and her companions got the better of the military and made them look ridiculous. Consequently, Woolf’s commentators regard the hoax as an early manifestation of her antiauthoritarian politics. Phyllis Rose describes it as “a primal event, the acting out of her own rebellion against paternal authority” (quoted in Kennard 1996, 151). Her problematic use of blackface has been viewed by Kathy J. Phillips and others as a gesture of solidarity with oppressed races, a sympathetic move that she repeats in her political writing by identifying the plight of women with that of the colonized (see Kennard 1996, 151). Additionally, the fact that Woolf dressed as a man has led some critics, such as Jean Kennard, to theorize the ways in which “cross-dressing . . . has the effect of carnivalizing political and cultural power and thus of undermining it” (152), an effect that would become central to *Orlando*.

Critics have neglected, however, to treat the hoax as a literal act of espionage that anticipates the figural spying we find throughout Woolf’s work. Although Woolf was the only female member of the party, her description of the hoaxers as “conspirators” is noteworthy given the word’s gendered connotation in her oeuvre. Appearing with surprising frequency and usually signifying a bond between women, the trope of “conspiracy” imparts a subversive tenor to the Woolfian “league . . . against the world” (1982, 118). In the draft of her memoir, “Sketch of the Past,” which Woolf worked on in the last years of her life, she observes that, as children, she and Vanessa “formed together a very close conspiracy. In that world of many men, coming and going, we formed our private nucleus” ([1939] 1976, 123). This early “conspiracy” correlates not only with the hoax but also with the secret societies and scenes of intrigue that inform Woolf’s fiction and nonfiction. “Her books,” Lee writes, “are full of images of war: armies, battles, guns, bombs, air-raids, battleships, shell-shock victims, war reports, photographs of war victims, voices of dictators” (1997, 336). Lee should have added “spies,” for Woolf consistently employs the imagery of espionage to figure not only her feminism but also her approach to writing. This embrace of clandestinity—an embrace that is itself a form of cross-dressing, of inhabiting the male-dominated world of conspiracies and secret agents—allows Woolf to develop a conception of both literary and political activity as a form of infiltration, whose ultimate goal is the sabotaging of the patriarchal “procession” by taking the wind out of its sails, so to speak.

Woolf's first literary representation of espionage comes in her 1921 short story collection, *Monday or Tuesday*. Two stories in particular, "A Society" and "An Unwritten Novel," embody, respectively, the political and aesthetic dimensions of spying that become more intertwined in Woolf's later work. As commentators have observed, "A Society" makes direct use of the *Dreadnought* Hoax, and it also gestures toward the "society" of female outsiders that Woolf would elaborate in *Three Guineas*. In the story, a group of young women take it upon themselves to "[judge] the results" of centuries of patriarchal rule by surreptitiously entering various male-dominated institutions, gathering intelligence, and reporting back to the group: "[We] made ourselves into a society for asking questions. One of us was to visit a man-of-war; another was to hide herself in a scholar's study; another was to attend a meeting of business men; while all were to read books, look at pictures, go to concerts, keep our eyes open in the streets, and ask questions perpetually" (1985, 119). As in her political writings, Woolf's primary targets are the military, the university, the church, and the professions, organizations with the ostensible goal of producing "good people" and making the world a safer and more productive place. More often than not, the spy ring discovers that these institutions are primarily concerned with maintaining power by reinforcing a particular image of themselves. In order to investigate the nature of gentlemanly honor, one of the members, Rose, dons the garb of "an Aethiopian Prince" and visits "one of His Majesty's Ships" (120). Upon discovering the deception, the captain seeks out the woman, who is "now disguised as a private gentleman" and demands "that honour should be satisfied." After trading symbolic strokes with a cane, the two retire to a restaurant, get drunk, and "[part] with protestations of eternal friendship" (121). Honor, Woolf suggests, is only a matter of surface formality. The other members of the ring have similarly disheartening experiences, coming to the conclusion that duty and glory are also empty concepts, mere ciphers for the truly important things in life: "aeroplanes, factories, and money" (125). The society concludes, finally, that there is only one thing left for an intelligent woman to believe in, "and that is herself" (130).

While "A Society" introduces the idea of a secret cabal of women who penetrate the strongholds of male power, Woolf's story "An Unwritten Novel" indicates that the role of the female artist, in particular, is also to surveil other women in an effort to reveal their hidden lives and thereby achieve a more naturalistic expression of character. As the title suggests, this story works as a kind of prospectus, a novel in miniature

that is also an implicit manifesto of the novelist's art. On a train "[rattling] through Surrey and across the border into Sussex" (1985, 107), an unnamed narrator quietly scrutinizes the woman opposite, attempting to reconstruct her story based upon her behavior and appearance in a manner not unlike that of Sherlock Holmes. Noting the particular "venom" with which the woman mentions her sister-in-law and imagining possible family dramas, the narrator believes she has cracked the woman's code: "Leaning back in my corner, shielding my eyes from her eyes, seeing only the slopes and hollows, greys and purples, of the winter's landscape, I read her message, deciphered her secret, reading it beneath her gaze" (108). The narrator constructs a complex but fragmentary world for the woman, dubbing her "Minnie Marsh." While doing so, however, she senses that there is always something of the other that is withheld or indecipherable. "Have I read you right?" the narrator wonders. "[Now] you lay across your knees a pocket-handkerchief into which drop little angular fragments of eggshell—fragments of a map—a puzzle. I wish I could piece them together!" (111). Silently observing this stranger, the narrator contemplates the notion of identity in general—the "life, soul, spirit, whatever you are of Minnie Marsh"—and the means through which the artist communicates personality. Minnie herself is ultimately one of many "unknown figures" who populate the writer's world and become subjects of writerly surveillance. "Wherever I go," the narrator thinks, "mysterious figures, I see you, turning the corner. . . . I hasten, I follow" (115).

As Lee points out, "An Unwritten Novel" parodies the sort of "first-class railway carriage" novels that Woolf associated with Edwardian fiction (1997, 400). It is also the story, Lee contends, that "turned Virginia Woolf into a modernist" (401); coming between *Night and Day* (1919) and *Jacob's Room* (1922), "An Unwritten Novel" develops the interior monologue, employing it to create a "female narrative." If so, the story also illustrates that Woolf's modernism takes as one of its governing metaphors the scene of intrigue—here, a loaded encounter between strangers on a train, a scene familiar to readers of that other Edwardian genre, the spy yarn. Although the intervention of the Great War may have signaled the belated demise of Edwardian culture, thereby moving prewar England into the realm of melancholic parody, the tropes of espionage emerge from the crucible of war as a newborn culture of intrigue. Significantly, Woolf's unnamed narrator begins the story reading in her newspaper about the Paris Peace Conference, only to engage in her own covert, peacetime

surveillance. Such operations, the story implies, persist in the postwar era; in spite of the armistice, the narrator traverses a world of borders, a world permeated by the rhetoric of secrecy and encryption, of figures to be followed and messages to be “deciphered.”

In her fiction from the early 1920s, Woolf draws correlations between reading, writing, and spying. In her later nonfiction, she merges the qualities of “A Society” and “An Unwritten Novel”—the interrogation of patriarchal institutions and the revelation of hidden lives—into a common political aesthetic, a modernist method focused not on the verification of individual identities but on disrupting traditional loyalties and transforming narrative techniques through a distinctly female intelligence. As in her experimental fiction, the encounter between strangers on a train serves as the narrative basis for one of Woolf’s most famous essays on modern literature and method, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924). Contrasting the “Edwardians” (H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, and John Galsworthy) with the “Georgians” (E.M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, Lytton Strachey, and, by implication, herself), Woolf points out the limitations of the former in treating “character in itself” ([1924] 1966, 327). To do so, she once again describes a train journey, this time from Richmond to Waterloo:

One night some weeks ago . . . I was late for the train and jumped into the first carriage I came to. As I sat down I had the strange and uncomfortable feeling that I was interrupting a conversation between two people who were already sitting there. . . . They were both elderly, the woman over sixty, the man well over forty. They were sitting opposite each other, and the man, who had been leaning over and talking emphatically to judge by his attitude and the flush on his face, sat back and became silent. I had disturbed him, and he was annoyed. The elderly lady, however, whom I will call Mrs. Brown, seemed rather relieved. . . . There was something pinched about her—a look of suffering, of apprehension, and, in addition, she was extremely small. . . . I felt she had nobody to support her; that she had to make up her mind for herself; that, having been deserted, or left a widow, years ago, she had led an anxious, harried life, bringing up an only son, perhaps, who, as likely as not, was by this time beginning to go to the bad. All this shot through my mind as I sat down, being uncomfortable, like most people, at travelling with fellow passengers unless I have somehow or other accounted for them. (321–22)

Woolf indicates that the situation smacks of intrigue, perhaps of crime. “Obviously,” she thinks, the man “had an unpleasant business to settle with Mrs. Brown; a secret, perhaps sinister business, which they did not intend to discuss in my presence” (322). After her entrance, the couple continues speaking in a kind of code, a forced conversation concerning mutual acquaintances. But Woolf’s interruption has disturbed the power relation between the two. In a sense, her desire to read or narrate “Mrs. Brown” also serves to temporarily dislodge the man’s hold over the woman, a hold that she then correlates with the male writerly gaze.

Woolf’s purpose is to demonstrate that each of her Edwardian colleagues—Bennett, Wells, and Galsworthy—would interpret the situation in his own way. Wells would scarcely take notice of the woman, for there are “no Mrs. Browns in Utopia” (327). Galsworthy would see only a manifestation of factories and social injustice, Mrs. Brown as “a pot broken on the wheel and thrown into the corner” (328). Bennett would notice every detail of the woman and then offer endless descriptions with little insight. For Woolf, though, Mrs. Brown is the “thing itself.” Once the suspicious man leaves and the two women are left alone, Woolf projects her “fantastic and secluded life” (324), surrounded by sea-urchins, ships in bottles, and her dead husband’s medals. “The important thing,” Woolf insists, “was to realize her character, to steep oneself in her atmosphere. I had no time to explain why I felt it somewhat tragic, heroic, yet with a dash of the flighty, and fantastic, before the train stopped, and I watched her disappear, carrying her bag, into the vast blazing station.” “The story ends,” Woolf writes, “without any point to it.” We never learn the “secret” of Mrs. Brown, but we are given to understand that a prewar aesthetic is insufficient. If Mrs. Brown is to be “rescued,” it must be through the “smashing and crashing” of old forms and conventions: “Thus it is that we hear all round us, in poems and novels and biographies, even in newspaper articles and essays, the sound of breaking and falling, crashing and destruction. It is the prevailing sound of the Georgian age” (333–34). Woolf establishes a connection between politics and narrative, arguing that experimental forms, though often “failures and fragments” (335), have the best chance of liberating both women and women’s writing from what she designates in “An Unwritten Novel” as “the man’s way” (1985, 113).

In her short stories and essays, Woolf’s campaign against patriarchal authority thus involves two interrelated strategies. First, she exposes and deconstructs what she considers to be the strongholds of power: the university, the church, the military, the government, and the professional

sphere. Second, she focuses on reading and writing the lives of women as integral to the first—not just the lives of the famous but also those of the unknown and even the nonexistent. For Woolf, the biography—or, more specifically, the *fictional* biography—is a privileged form of knowledge. As the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, the editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and as a good friend of the iconoclastic biographer Lytton Strachey, author of the ironically titled *Eminent Victorians* (1918), Woolf was well aware that “life writing” could both reinforce and resist nationalist ideologies. But her investment in biographical inquiry is unique, I would emphasize, in its manipulation of counterfactuality. It is not important, Woolf insists, that we believe the subject is “real,” that we know the “truth” of Mrs. Brown; what is important is that, through our idea of her, we approach the essence or “atmosphere” of the “thing in itself” that is irreducible to facts, dates, and numbers. Arnold Bennett, who observes “every detail with immense care” and provides “facts about rents and freeholds and copyholds and fines” (Woolf [1924] 1966, 328, 330), never really sees Mrs. Brown. A device of Edwardian realism, the accumulation of data is likewise a means of establishing and maintaining power, a method of bureaucracies and professions. Woolf’s response is to represent women’s lives without reducing them to a collection of figures.

For Woolf, such aesthetic choices have political consequences. Throughout her work in the 1920s, she continually emphasizes that the contemplative, literary study of personality—the cultivation of sympathy—has the potential to disrupt the machinations of power. In *Jacob’s Room*, the narrator observes that “men in clubs and Cabinets,” representatives of both social and political spheres, “say that character-drawing is a frivolous fireside art, a matter of pins and needles, exquisite outlines enclosing vacancy, flourishes, and mere scrawls” (Woolf [1922] 2008, 216). When the “battleships ray out over the North Sea” and “blocks of tin soldiers” invade foreign fields, when these “actions, together with the incessant commerce of banks, laboratories, chancelleries, and houses of business, are the strokes which oar the world forward,” what use is literature in the face of such “an unseizable force” (217)? The answer, she suggests, is that sympathy—which is, for Woolf, a form of conspiracy—works against the false “loyalties” that drive both department stores and dreadnoughts. But literature is not the only weapon at hand; Woolf also advocates a more dynamic approach, a vision of the engaged feminist agent who is, in her own way, dangerous to authority.

## Femme fatale

In the first chapter of *The Years*, the ten-year-old Rose Pargiter has something of a late-night “adventure” (Woolf 1937, 26). Stealing her nurse’s latchkey, she sneaks out of the family house in Kensington (where Woolf herself grew up) to visit Lamley’s toy shop. Along the way, she imagines herself “riding by night on a desperate mission to a besieged garrison”: “She had a secret message—she clenched her fist on her purse—to deliver to the General in person. All their lives depended upon it. The British flag was still flying on the central tower—Lamley’s shop was the central tower; the General was standing on the roof of Lamley’s shop with his telescope to his eye. All their lives depended upon her riding to them through the enemy’s country” (27). Drawing from what Rudolf Glitz identifies as iconic images of “military Victorianism” (2005, 15)—the Indian Mutiny, the fall of Khartoum, and the Charge of the Light Brigade—the child reenacts the martial and imperialist escapades romanticized in popular culture. However, Rose’s fantasy abruptly ends when she encounters a strange man on Melrose Avenue, a flasher who makes sucking noises and proceeds to “[unbutton] his clothes” (Woolf 1937, 29). Terrified, she flees, imagining as she does the sound of “his feet padding on the pavement” behind her. Whether or not this incident exerts an influence on Rose’s troubled adulthood—her violent and suicidal tendencies—this short scene treats, in a complex way, the position of the female subject within the patriarchal order. On the one hand, as Glitz points out, the fantasy alludes “to cases of male imperialists falling victim to the very power structures they helped to defend” (2005, 15). On the other hand, in emulating these lionized shades of imperial sacrifice, Rose is brutally reminded of her own outsiderism, her subjection to a power structure marked by exhibitionism and sexual aggression. As the narrative portion of Woolf’s projected “novel-essay” *The Pargiters*, *The Years* dramatizes the critique of patriarchy that Woolf develops in her polemical treatise, *Three Guineas* (1938). But while the knife-brandishing, brick-throwing Rose Pargiter represents one type of feminist agitator, Woolf’s book-length essay endorses a more peaceful, but still forceful, mode of opposition to authority. Like Orlando, whom we initially find chopping away at the mummified head of a Moor, full of quixotic longings for conquest and glory, and who finally chooses a life of critical inquiry, the transition from the militant Rose to the anonymous subjects of *Three Guineas* characterizes Woolf’s conception of



how contemplative, literate women may make a difference in “the world outside” (quoted in Lee 1997, 610) without resorting to physical violence.

While Woolf’s first book-length essay, *A Room of One’s Own*, focuses on the role of the female artist, *Three Guineas* more ambitiously takes on the social and political agency of women in general, particularly at a time of escalating international conflict. In doing so, Woolf’s later treatise draws together and develops the various aspects of the spy-function that emerge in her earlier stories, novels, and essays—her critique of militarism, her concept of the secret society of women, and her emphasis on biographical investigation as a means of establishing a feminist counternarrative—while presenting them for the first time in the form of an imperative, a call to action. The primary targets of Woolf’s critical project in *Three Guineas* are what she calls the “unreal loyalties” ([1938] 2006, 95) fostered by various institutions. For Woolf, these “processions” may take any number of forms, from the parading of the military to the solemn splendor of the academic ceremony, to the pomp and pageantry of imperialist display—in short, any institution that renders competition, conquest, and warfare as honorable and beautiful pursuits. Although primarily concerned with women, Woolf declares that all people should aim to free themselves from these ideological constraints: “By freedom from unreal loyalties is meant that you must rid yourself of pride of nationality in the first place; also of religious pride, college pride, school pride, family pride, sex pride and those unreal loyalties that spring from them” (97). The “real loyalties,” for Woolf, are “the full development of body and mind.”

Structurally, *Three Guineas* appropriates key qualities of the elitist and esoteric “procession”—its secrecy and invasiveness—and turns them against authority. Taking the form of three letters in which Woolf responds to questions posed by various societies seeking donations (hence the guineas), the text positions the reader as a kind of eavesdropper. To put it another way, in *Three Guineas* reading is indistinguishable from perustration, the interception and inspection of private correspondence that one would normally associate with an intrusive security state. In the first place, this structure grants *Three Guineas* a measure of subterfuge; layers of (fictional) letters, hypothetical letters within letters, and extensive textual apparatuses often make it difficult to decide when—or if—Woolf is being ironic. In the second place, Woolf is able to employ the epistolary form as a means of productively dissolving the border between public and private spheres. Addressing her first (male) correspondent, Woolf

characterizes the letter as a view “of your world as it appears to us who see it from the threshold of the private house; through the shadow of the veil that St. Paul still lays upon our eyes; from the bridge which connects the private house with the world of public life” (22–23). St. Paul, whom Woolf describes in a note as “the virile or dominant type, so familiar at present in Germany” (198), comes to represent a whole tradition of subjugation. One of her most salient points is that those who are “veiled” and do not live by the sword may still die by the sword; wartime photographs of “ruined houses and dead bodies [of] men, women and children” remind us that “the public and private worlds are inseparably connected; that the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other” (168). The dangerous intersection of these “worlds” serves as a justification for Woolf’s offensive, though nominally “passive,” posture; women must intervene as a matter of survival.

The problem, though, is that women’s entry into the academic and professional spheres will inevitably involve accepting “unreal loyalties.” “If you succeed in those professions,” Woolf warns, “the words ‘For God and the Empire’ will very likely be written, like the address on a dog-collar, round your neck” (85). This leaves few options: “Behind us lies the patriarchal system; the private house, with its nullity, its immorality, its hypocrisy, its servility. Before us lies the public world, the professional system, with its possessiveness, its jealousy, its pugnacity, its greed. . . . It is a choice of evils” (90). The solution, she believes, rests in uncovering the lives of women, past and present, whose lived “experiments” provide models of engaged citizenship that resist ideological assimilation (91). To find them, one must move beyond the standard archives and repositories of knowledge by reading “between the lines” of patriarchal discourse (93). Here, Woolf points out, one finds individuals like the author, archeologist, and policy maker Gertrude Bell (1868–1926), “who, though the diplomatic service was and is shut to women, occupied a post in the East which almost entitled her to be called a pseudo-diplomat.” In reality, though Woolf does not mention it specifically, Bell’s pseudo-diplomacy extended into espionage during the war, making her—alongside Aphra Behn—one of the writer’s exemplary secret agents. Others, like the Victorian educational reformer Josephine Butler (1828–1906), are notable for their desire to avoid recognition and reward. All of the women whom Woolf offers as examples had, she explains, “the same teachers”: “Biography thus provides us with the fact that the daughters of educated

men received an unpaid-for education at the hands of poverty, chastity, derision and freedom from unreal loyalties” (95). In the end, Woolf asserts, “ridicule, obscurity and censure are preferable, for psychological reasons, to fame and praise” (97).

Based on her analysis of the “procession,” as well as her investigation into the hidden history of professional women, Woolf concludes that modern women, while deserving greater access and initiation into these traditionally male-dominated spheres, should simultaneously seek an “outsider” position from which to resist and critique the “unreal loyalties” and “interested motives that are at present assured them by the State” (134). She therefore proposes the formation of an “anonymous and secret Society of Outsiders,” a kind of league of extraordinary women, whose members would devote their energies to “liberty, equality, and peace” (126). At a time of international conflict, the Society would pursue its agenda vigorously—and contentiously—by refusing “to fight with arms,” “to make munitions,” or “to nurse the wounded.” Crucially, it must also avoid the bureaucratic trappings of the “procession”:

[What] chance is there, you may ask, that such a Society of Outsiders without office, meetings, leaders or any hierarchy, without so much as a form to be filled up, or a secretary to be paid, can be brought into existence, let alone work to any purpose? Indeed it would have been waste of time to write even so rough a definition of the Outsiders’ Society were it merely a bubble of words, a covert form of sex or class glorification, serving, as so many such expressions do, to relieve the writer’s emotion, lay the blame elsewhere, and then burst. (135–36)

Renouncing fame and reward, the Society would abandon the very structure of the traditional organization, its committees and hierarchies, even its physical space, in favor of a rhizomatic network of independent members. “Happily,” Woolf writes, “there is a model in being,” but one that must be apprehended “furtively,” for it “dodges and disappears” (136). “[Evidence] of their existence,” she continues, “is provided by history and biography in the raw—by the newspapers that is—sometimes openly in the lines, sometimes covertly between them.” Woolf quotes examples from newspaper clippings of women who are already living and working against the grain: the Mayoress of Woolwich’s refusal to “darn a sock to help in a war” (137); the decision on the part of women’s sports teams

to withhold trophies and play the game “for the love of it” (137–38); and the growing “paucity of young women” (139) attending Church of England services. Marked by denial or abstention, such examples, the author implies, pull the rug from under the false loyalties and misplaced allegiances that license violence in the name of patriotism, competitive spirit, and religious devotion.

Although Woolf characterizes these measures as a “passive experiment” (139), *Three Guineas* also outlines a more dynamic program of resistance, one that requires her hypothetical recruits to work in a manner consistent with her colorful adjectives—that is to say, *furtively* and *covertly*. Women’s entry into the working world, provided they are able to avoid its ideological entrapments, would place them in a privileged position for gathering information on the uses and misuses of power. The outsiders should therefore “bind themselves to obtain full knowledge of professional practices, and to reveal any instance of tyranny or abuse in their professions” (132). Refusing to participate in any activity or organization “hostile to freedom, such as the making or the improvement of the weapons of war,” the Society’s members would likewise

refuse to take office or honour from any society which, while professing to respect liberty, restricts it, like the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. And they would consider it their duty to investigate the claims of all public societies to which, like the Church and the universities, they are forced to contribute as taxpayers as carefully and fearlessly as they would investigate the claims of private societies to which they contribute voluntarily. They would make it their business to scrutinize the endowments of the schools and universities and the objects upon which that money is spent. (133)

Like her earlier short story, “A Society,” in which a group of women infiltrate various strongholds of male power for the purposes of “asking questions” (1985, 119), *Three Guineas* sketches a similarly intrepid program. But now the veil of fiction has been rent and Woolf presents her Society as a real-world possibility, one in which the group’s findings are no longer confined to the private drawing room but potentially made public. If the *Dreadnought* Hoax of 1910 made waves at a time of growing international conflict, perhaps even nudging Britain—or at least a handful of irate politicians—toward the creation of a modern

national security state, Woolf's 1938 polemic likewise foresees current debates over government transparency and the ethics of leaking classified information. As Judith Allen has suggested, Woolf proposes a means of resistance not dissimilar from what we would today call whistle-blowing (2015, 26), a disclosure targeting nothing less than the authoritarian kernel at the heart of democracy.

Such intrigues require a certain amount of caution. Just as the rhetorical (epistolary) structure of *Three Guineas* creates a level of ironic distance, the Society's real-world investigations should, similarly, be conducted *sub rosa*. "Secrecy is essential," Woolf insists. "We must still hide what we are doing and thinking even though what we are doing and thinking is for our common cause" ([1938] 2006, 141). The reasons she offers for the necessity of "concealment" are financial security—"Fear is a powerful reason; those who are economically dependent have strong reasons for fear" (142)—and an ambiguous but deep-seated resistance to gender equality embedded in culture and religion. However, this appeal to discretion notwithstanding, one suspects that there is another factor as well: secrecy is pleasurable. Like Orlando, a poet in disguise who employs a "cypher language" ([1928] 2006, 207), an adventurer who recognizes "the value of obscurity" and "the delight of having no name" (77), Woolf arguably positions her Society of Outsiders as a response to—or even parody of—the kinds of esoteric gentlemen's clubs she encountered throughout her life. This is not to downplay the seriousness of Woolf's project, or to suggest that her hidden motive is actually "secrecy for art's sake." Rather, the Society serves as a crucial counterweight to the restrictive veil of the Apostle Paul. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf repeatedly points out that the "procession" has traditionally employed secrecy to bar women: "[There] are many inner and secret chambers that we cannot enter. What real influence can we bring to bear upon law or business, religion or politics—we to whom many doors are still locked, or at best ajar, we who have neither capital nor force behind us?" (28). Shut out from "leagues, conferences, campaigns" (134), and other venues of power, Woolf offers her secret Society as an extension of the sororal alliance "against the world"—an underground, feminist version of Leonard Woolf's own Cambridge Apostles, or an answer to his beloved but ineffectual League of Nations.

The image of *Black Dossier's* Orlando gazing out upon a scene of Blitzkrieg and brimstone, meditating on the "pointless wars" and "millions

slaughtered” in the course of human history, neatly crystalizes the writer’s own position at the dawn of the Second World War as she wages an imaginative assault on officialdom and the culture that legitimizes hero-worship and bloodshed. If in the popular imagination the spy is typically an agent of the state, Woolf’s Society exists beyond national boundaries. Cosmopolitan outsiders, they are thus able to view their own culture with a critical eye. The implicit argument in Woolf’s 1938 treatise is that fascism is as much at home in Britain as it is in Germany and Italy. Consequently, the mission of the Society is not to combat a threat from abroad—for the outsider, Woolf observes, “there are no ‘foreigners,’ since by law she becomes a foreigner if she marries a foreigner” ([1938] 2006, 128)—but rather a domestic one. Woolf’s conception of British fascism is much more explicitly stated in her wartime essay “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid,” in which she aims “to drag up into consciousness the subconscious Hitlerism that holds us down” ([1940] 1942, 245). Drawing a correlation between “the Englishmen in their planes” and “the Englishwomen in their beds”—“We are equally prisoners tonight,” she declares—Woolf argues that the best way to combat fascism on both sides of the channel is not to take up arms but to convert thought into action, to “fight with the mind.” There is a relationship, Woolf indicates, between militarism and sexual oppression, and it falls to women to defuse “the desire for aggression”: “We must help the young Englishmen to root out from themselves the love of medals and decorations. We must create more honourable activities for those who try to conquer in themselves their fighting instinct, their subconscious Hitlerism. We must compensate the man for the loss of his gun” (247).

Within this wartime context, Woolf’s 1940 talk on the *Dreadnought Hoax* for the Rodmell Women’s Institute takes on a more critical and subversive character than the original act itself. In demystifying the military, Woolf continues the project of *Three Guineas* by trivializing the often absurd demands of honor; the “ceremonial taps” to the backside suffered by Woolf’s fellow “conspirators,” which she also lampoons in “A Society,” seem as ridiculous as the chests full of medals and dandyish uniforms she derides in her treatise. Moreover, as an admission of espionage, even in jest, Woolf’s talk plays on contemporary fears of leakage, particularly those involving women. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have observed, the Second World War brought about “a resurgence of patriarchal politics” (1994, 212); in addition to figuring women as symbols

of maternity to be protected from the invader, wartime propaganda also characterized women as potential threats to national defense: “Posters enjoining silence as a protection against spies implied that women’s talk would kill fighting men. The female spy, the femme-fatale or vamp whose charms endanger national security, was sinister in her silence, for her allure could penetrate the security needed to keep the fighting forces safe” (230). While it is admittedly a stretch to picture Virginia Woolf as a “vamp” or as attempting to identify with such an image, we should keep in mind that this was precisely the effect of the hoax in 1910; after the incident went public, Willy Fisher informed Adrian Stephen that the sailors were calling Virginia “a common woman of the town” (Fisher quoted in Stephen [1936] 1983, 52). Thirty years later, we find Woolf putting the constellation of female sexuality and national (in)security to use in her conception of the engaged conspirator for whom the leak is not a liability but a strategy, a means of exposing and defusing the “subconscious Hitlerism” that constitutes the true enemy of freedom and equality.

This perspective compels us to redefine the writer’s relationship to her contemporaries, as well as her significance to our own security-conscious culture in the twenty-first century. In the first place, to think of Virginia Woolf in the way I have been suggesting—as identifying the artist-activist with the figure of the spy—is to conceive of a late-modernist Woolf who is more in company with the so-called Auden generation than she is with the pantheon of “high modernists.” The tropology of train journeys, border crossings, disguises, and clandestine meetings so common in the early poetry of Auden and the novels of Christopher Isherwood finds an unlikely parallel in the mysterious passengers and secret societies that populate Woolf’s writing. Like them, Woolf comes to the realization that fascism is not only a continental but a British disease, sees the necessity of converting art into action, and figuratively recruits the writer as a secret agent in an ongoing war against the establishment. In doing so, she shares with Auden, Proust, and other spy-minded writers what Erin Carlston has characterized as an “intelligent, productive disloyalty” (2013, 10). For “men writers,” Carlston contends, “images of espionage and treason” offer “a way of registering a genuine and profound sense of alienation, skepticism, or even outrage [for those] who are nonetheless far too assimilated to their social worlds and too embedded in their national identities simply to reject them” (6). It would seem that for women writers too, and for Woolf in particular, spying provides a means of

expressing opposition to authority from within the “procession” itself. But while Carlston emphasizes parallels between literary history and historical espionage—the Dreyfus affair, the Cambridge spies, the Rosenbergs, and so on—Woolf’s project reveals an important link between modernism and the new millennium. By investigating and publicizing abuses of power, her *Society of Outsiders* anticipates the hacktivist mentality of organizations such as WikiLeaks and Anonymous.<sup>3</sup> Essentially, Woolf hypothesizes an alternative model of citizenship based on noncompliance, a form of engagement that recognizes strategic disclosure as the first step in the process of dismantling ideological loyalties. Like the cyber-radicals of our own time, Woolf recognizes the necessity of becoming what Julian Assange has termed a “spy for the people” (2013, n.p.).

## Afterlives

From this vantage point, Woolf’s starring role in the spy yarn seems less a forced conscription than a natural consequence of her lifelong investment in tropes of espionage and secrecy. Both Hawkes and Manso’s *The Shadow of the Moth* and Barron’s *The White Garden* characterize the author as an intrepid investigator who simultaneously resists patriarchal authority within her own circle and uncovers acts of exploitation, warmongering, and betrayal within the greater establishment. In other words, both dramatize the writer’s conception of feminist agency through the device of the contemporary thriller—by subjunctively speculating as to the form such agency *could have* taken in Woolf’s own life.<sup>4</sup> In effect, these novels stage what Woolf in her final work, *Between the Acts*, calls the “unacted part” ([1941] 2008, 104), the heroic self *in potentia* that exists outside of historical and biographical time.

However, while exploiting the relative freedom of invention afforded them by the subjunctive narrative, *Shadow* and *White Garden* also carry out their own projects of revenge that depart from the Woolfian spy-function by shifting the emphasis away from fascism toward leftist politics. Writing in the wake of Quentin Bell’s 1972 biography,<sup>5</sup> Hawkes arguably attempts to reverse Bell’s portrayal of the writer as a sheltered and neurotic “virgin,” opting instead for an aggressive Woolf who exposes the ideological blindness of her (male) Bloomsbury associates, who are unable or unwilling to see the global conspiracy taking root in Westminster, a scheme to prolong the war and thereby bring about “a new



order . . . superseding all national affiliations” (Hawkes and Manso [1983] 1984, 255). Throughout the novel, the young Virginia is in constant conflict with Leonard Woolf, who believes her actions to be motivated by madness, and Clive Bell, who likewise suspects that her interpretation of events is nothing more than an empty conspiracy theory, the product of an overactive imagination. Significantly, just as the narrative ultimately corroborates Woolf’s spy-mania, thereby establishing the naïveté of her protectors, it also suggests that intellectual and artistic circles, in their effort to remain above and beyond the machinations of politicians and extremists, become implicated in acts of violence. No doubt Hawkes took a certain pleasure in depicting Quentin’s father, Clive, as the unsuspecting dupe of a shadowy cabal bent on world domination, who skillfully exploit modernism’s supposed autonomy—Bell’s naive insistence that his work is a matter of “art, not politics” (238)—as a cover for political and economic gain. By representing Bloomsbury as a coterie so easily manipulated by malevolent forces, Hawkes and Manso’s novel carries out an oblique indictment of the modernist notion of “art for art’s sake,” implying that art, politics, and conspiracy are inextricably intertwined.

*White Garden* is a fantasia on a similar theme, but while Hawkes and Manso’s narrative focuses on a vaguely cosmopolitan menace—like the SPECTRE syndicate in a James Bond novel—Barron extends this critique to an undeniably communist threat, a plot involving the Cambridge Apostles, the esoteric society that numbered not only Leonard Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, Lytton Strachey, and other Bloomsbury notables but also two of the most infamous double agents in the history of modern espionage, Guy Burgess and Anthony Blunt. In the novel, the two Soviet spies learn of Hitler’s intention to break the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact from a German agent who has been captured and “turned” by MI5’s XX (“Double Cross”) Committee. In an effort to warn the Soviet Union of Germany’s imminent invasion, Burgess and Blunt enlist the help of Leonard, who contrives to smuggle the information out of Britain in his capacity as a publisher—more specifically, by slipping a secret message to Stalin in the page proofs of *Between the Acts*. Although Virginia is ultimately unable to expose the plotters publicly, leaving it to future Woolf scholars to discover her secret diary and bring about retroactive justice, she maintains a feminist resistance to patriarchal power that is, ironically, made to serve in the interests of national security.

In both novels, therefore, the real Woolf’s potentially subversive politics are recuperated as a kind of patriotic policing, a mole-hunt for

British traitors. Her fictional counterparts are more akin to what Oliver Buckton calls the “accidental spy,” characters who, in the manner of a John Buchan or William Le Queux invasion yarn, “become caught up in international conspiracies against British security and respond to the challenge” (2015, 33). Accordingly, both novels suggest that Woolf’s 1941 death by drowning was not, as is commonly believed, a suicide, but a murderous cover-up—a liquidation, we might say. While neither of these texts claims the status of a conspiracy theory, this counterfact is ideologically consistent with the fictional transposition of Woolf’s adversarial focus from nationalism to *internationalism*. If the writer’s real-life suicide may be interpreted as a final gesture of protest, of a profound distress in the face of warring nations, then murdering her also has the effect of robbing the act of its critical force. Early Cold War thinkers recognized the symbolic weight of Woolf’s suicide; in *The God that Failed*, a 1949 collection of essays written by famous ex-communists, Stephen Spender relates the anecdote of a Marxist poet and literary critic “who, when Virginia Woolf took her life in 1941, wrote in a manner of congratulating her on having chosen the path of historic necessity, and indicating that other bourgeois writers could be expected to follow her example” (1963, 267). Understood as a symptom of capitalistic decline, the writer’s suicide offered Soviet critics a high-profile example of the moral bankruptcy of the West. If so, its reversal becomes a positive affirmation of Western values, particularly in *White Garden*, which not only (virtually) contains Woolf’s dissenting politics but also redirects the Woolfian spy-function in opposition to communism. Appropriately, considering Barron’s history with the CIA,<sup>6</sup> this fictional “turning” fits in with the Anglo-American intelligence community’s historical incursions into the world of arts and letters. As a complement to writers who worked as propagandists, or whose books were used as gambits in the Cold War *Kulturkampf*,<sup>7</sup> the subjunctive fantasy permits the spectral recruitment of the “literary agent,” summoned from beyond to defend the realm. The author of *Three Guineas* may not have lived to take part in the CIA-backed Congress for Cultural Freedom, which solicited the unwitting contribution of so many of her contemporaries, but it is noteworthy that the first issue of that organization’s literary journal, *Encounter*, edited by Spender, featured “Pages from a Diary” by Virginia Woolf.<sup>8</sup>

Regardless of whether *White Garden* and *Shadow* remain faithful to their subject’s vision, these speculative fictions succeed in opening a space for considering the real Woolf’s call to vigilance and its resonance for

the twenty-first century. As they do so, they reveal the peculiar rapport between modernism and espionage that we find throughout the author's life and work. Perhaps it is appropriate that the fictional Leonard Woolf in *White Garden* should choose to encode his secret message between the lines of *Between the Acts*. In Woolf's final novel, set in 1939, high and popular culture are juxtaposed in a way that suggests even the most outlandish of fantasies may contain a modicum of truth. If books "are the mirrors of the soul," Woolf writes, then the Pointz Hall library evinces "a tarnished, a spotted soul":

For as the train took over three hours to reach this remote village in the very heart of England, no one ventured so long a journey without staving off possible mind-hunger, without buying a book on a bookstall. Thus the mirror that reflected the soul sublime, reflected also the soul bored. Nobody could pretend, as they looked at the shuffle of shilling shockers that week-enders had dropped, that the looking-glass always reflected the anguish of a Queen or the heroism of King Harry. ([1941] 2008, 12)

Here, the presence of "shilling shockers"—the sort of "bad books" that Woolf in "Bad Writers" describes as "not the mirrors but the vast distorted shadows of life" that "[revenge] themselves upon reality" ([1918] 1987, 328)—signifies more than the "soul bored" and in need of pulp to satisfy "mind hunger"; the intrusion of the thriller into high culture embodies a desire, particularly at a time of crisis, for fictional worlds in which one may act out the "unacted part," the heroic persona that exists somewhere in the half-light of daydreams.

It may be that among the speculative "histories" and steampunk yarns that incorporate, alongside their Victorian forebears, a bizarre array of modernist authors and characters, there are those that justify Woolf's interest in the truth value of popular genres, especially in their potential to offer a critical angle on modernism itself—through a spy-glass. Just as intelligence officers and espionage historians frequently resort to modernist metaphors when attempting to describe the experience of intelligence work—the secret agent's Joycean mantra of "silence, exile, and cunning" (Joyce ([1916] 1977, 247), the field of operations as an Eliotic "wilderness of mirrors" ([1920] 1958, 33), and so on—the tropes of espionage perform a similar function for modern literature, making visible through fictional agencies and imagined complicities the plots (*les intrigues*) of modernist politics and aesthetics.



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## Notes

1. Graham Greene used to subtitle his early thrillers “entertainments” to distinguish them from what he considered to be his more serious works of fiction.
2. UK Official Secrets Act, 1911, 1 and 2 George V, chapter 28, section 3.
3. Indeed, various websites associated with Anonymous have shared a quotation usually attributed to Woolf: “For most of history Anonymous was a woman.” This is, in fact, a misquotation of a line from *A Room of One’s Own*: “I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman” ([1929] 2007, 53). The original is arguably less meme-friendly.
4. Wai Chee Dimock has characterized the subjunctive mood as “hovering just below the threshold of actualization, casting its shadow on the known world” (2009, 243). Like the popular fantasies that constitute, according to Woolf herself, “the vast distorted shadows of life” ([1918] 1987, 328), Dimock’s conception of the subjunctive is that of a “syntactic underground” offering “thinkable versions of the world” (243). *Shadow* and *White Garden* extend the syntactic subjunctive to the level of narrative; as “underground” stories, these novels investigate the relations between art and action, artist and agent, by treating Woolf *as if* she were involved in wartime espionage.

5. Ellen Hawkes (Rogat) is a Woolf critic with a history of challenging the predominant image of the author as a pacifist introvert. In response to Quentin Bell's 1972 biography of Woolf, Hawkes published an essay in *Twentieth-Century Literature* titled "The Virgin in the Bell Biography," in which she criticizes Bell for offering a vision of his aunt as "a neurotic virgin cloistered from experience" (1974, 96), thereby eliding Woolf's "sense of herself as a woman . . . and her criticism of culturally and publicly defined masculine values [which] are at the heart of both her fiction and, as one would expect, her diaries" (98). In this light, *Shadow* may be read as a further corrective to the Bell biography.

6. According to her website, Stephanie Barron (Francine Matthews)—the author of (among other things) a series of Jane Austen mystery novels—spent four years as an intelligence analyst for the CIA in the late 1980s and early 1990s, during which time she took part in a number of investigations, including the 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland (see Barron n.d.).

7. For more on the CIA's investment in art and literature, see Saunders 1999. For a more recent discussion of the role that modernism in particular played in the Cold War, see Barnhisel 2015.

8. See Woolf 1953. The diary excerpt, which constitutes the first feature of the issue, includes entries dated from 1926 to 1933, mostly focusing on Woolf's relationships and conversations with other writers (Thomas Hardy, Arnold Bennett, and George Bernard Shaw), as well as entries concerning her ideas about writing, the transmutation of thought into art, and so on. The selection is immediately followed by Leslie Fiedler's "Postscript to the Rosenberg Case," a vitriolic attack on the myth of the couple's innocence and their image as martyrs. This is a curious juxtaposition of texts, perhaps an attempt to correlate high-modernist aesthetics with anticommunist politics.

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