

When Virginia Woolf published her first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), just after the start of World War I, the world she inhabited was much changed from the one in which her father served as the inaugural editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* between 1885 and 1891. The First World War had erupted on July 28, 1914, seemingly out of nowhere, and after four brutal years, those who could not imagine anything worse would come to call it “The Great War” or “The War to End All Wars”—epithets that soon came to seem quaint. Nothing like this had ever occurred in Leslie Stephen’s lifetime. But it is, at the same time, impossible to deny the obvious continuities between the time of Leslie Stephen’s triumphant reign at the *Dictionary* and that of Virginia Woolf’s struggle to complete *The Voyage Out*. In 1914, on the eve of war, women still did not have the right to vote. The Irish still did not have Home Rule, let alone an independent republic. Labor unions remained in their infancy. The French and the Germans hated one another just as fervently as before, due to the festering legacy of the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871). South Africa was a political morass riven by Dutch-English enmity, as had been the case for decades, and Africa as a whole was still carved up by European empires. The British Raj was no less than ever the British Raj, and the United States was not yet equal economically or militarily to the great powers of Europe. The Austrian Empire remained firmly in control of the Habsburgs, and the Ottoman Empire was every bit as much the so-called “sick man” of the continent, and the Russian Empire was no less the semi-feudal property of the Romanovs, exactly as it had been twenty-five years earlier. Just as important, from a budding writer’s perspective, the novel continued to be primarily dedicated to supplying, with sufficient verisimilitude, a social, historical, and economic mirror of reality, little different in scope or purpose from the late Victorian novels of George Eliot. At least in Britain, the realism of George

Gissing, Thomas Hardy, H. G. Wells, and Arnold Bennett dominated the book trade.

Most of the above litany would be swept away by the end of World War I. But we often fail to appreciate the extent to which this entire edifice of truisms already sat on crumbling foundations before the war began. It is true that by 1896, Britain, like the United States and much of the continent, had emerged from a “long recession” that began with the Panic of 1873 and produced another Panic in 1893. In the later 1890s, it even seemed to many that a new prosperity was in the making. Europe was, relatively speaking, at peace. The last major war ended in 1871, with the birth under Bismarck of a united Germany, which now assumed a stabilizing dominance on the continent. The First Boer War had ended with the Pretoria Convention of 1881, while the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 had temporarily ameliorated the problems of imperial rivalry in Africa, especially in the Congo. Queen Victoria had been quite cynically crowned Empress of India in 1877 after narrowly avoiding rebellion there in 1857–1858, and the problem of Irish nationalism had reached a kind of deliberate stalemate in Gladstone’s Parliament. The Married Women’s Property Act, which undermined “coverture” and allowed married women in Britain to buy, own, and sell property of their own, was passed in 1882. The stranglehold of the Church of England on social mobility via education had ended in 1871, when Parliament passed the Universities Tests Act, which allowed members of all religions (or none) to attend and teach at Oxford and Cambridge. In France, the Third Republic was successfully integrating its hodgepodge of villages and vernaculars into a unified national culture through standardized education, and in Germany, Bismarck had forestalled more radical political demands by instituting the first national system of social security, pensions, and health care for workers. In a superficial sense, one might justifiably conclude that only a few years after Leslie Stephen ended his tenure at the *Dictionary of National Biography*, things began looking up, and decidedly so for the cultured bourgeoisie of Britain and Europe.

Even the world-weariness that captured the imaginations of mid-Victorian elites in such works as Edward FitzGerald’s “The

Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám” (1859) and Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” (1867) had largely disappeared, though to be fair, both FitzGerald’s Schopenhauerian pessimism and Arnold’s religious retreat were perhaps more affectation than true angst. By the 1890s, Arnold’s receding “sea of faith” no longer stirred passions as much as they had before. When Thomas Huxley revisits in 1892 the often-overheated debates between faith and agnosticism (Huxley’s preferred term for his view) that had preoccupied him since the publication of Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* in 1859, he came to a peaceful accommodation with religion itself. He even finds a rather hopeful message in scripture, one that had contributed to the previous half-century of democratic and socialist revolutions in Europe and Latin America and the nearly complete end of slavery in Christian lands. “Throughout the history of the western world,” Huxley writes,

the Scriptures, Jewish and Christian, have been the great instigators of revolt against the worst forms of clerical and political despotism. The Bible has been the *Magna Carta* of the poor and of the oppressed. . . . Assuredly, the Bible talks no trash about the rights of man; but it insists on the equality of duties, on the liberty to bring about that righteousness which is somewhat different from struggling for ‘rights’; on the fraternity of taking thought for one’s neighbor as for one’s self. (Huxley 57)

Huxley refers now to the Bible as “the most democratic book in the world” (58). Moreover, he claims that Reformation Protestantism promotes political freedom to the same extent that it acknowledges no authority beyond scripture. More radical atheists continued the fight against religion, and the debate over science and faith would resurface throughout the twentieth century. But, for a time, even “Darwin’s Bulldog” had concluded that there might not be all that much wrong with the world after all.

Despite all this seeming social progress, however, it needs to be kept in mind that the popular understanding of the *fin-de-siècle* in America as the “Gay Nineties” (a term actually coined after World War I) and in Britain as the “Naughty Nineties” involved a small

dollop of reality and a great deal of intellectual obfuscation. There was indeed some economic growth after the long recession; cultural mores were being challenged if not actually loosened very much, and war on the European continent had, for a time, been avoided. Yet the cultured world in which Virginia Woolf, born in 1882, came of age, a world captured in part by her depiction in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) of the pre-war vacations her family enjoyed at St. Ives on the coast of Cornwall, was also a world that hid the most threatening and shameful parts of daily life behind the veil of culture. While Woolf's father was an "eminent Victorian," as Lytton Strachey might have (but did not) put it, her mother had been a model for the popular pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones in the 1860s. Noel Annan, the biographer of Leslie Stephen, placed Woolf's family among the "intellectual aristocracy" of England, and Woolf herself was more than passingly aware that her male ancestors had been writing books for a century before her (Annan 244). This was in many ways a charmed life, and for those of Woolf's class and background, it was easy to ignore the cracks in the façade, long recession or not.

A more troubling sort of intellectual turmoil was not hard to find, especially on the continent, if one knew where to look. Between 1872 and 1888, Nietzsche had been dismantling the claims of Judaism and Christianity (not to mention Buddhism and Hinduism) to some sort of moral truth, but poor sales, his sister's control of his estate after his madness, and partial or distorted translations meant that few professional philosophers addressed his work before World War I. He was known largely in quasi-legendary terms. Dostoevsky's novels, especially the "Grand Inquisitor" episode of *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), presented Europe with an existential choice between violent anarchy and a return to Christian piety, but his work found no widely read translator until Constance Garnett after 1912. J.-K. Huysmans' *À rebours* (1884)—usually translated as *Against Nature*, though it also means *Against the Grain*, *The Wrong Way*, and simply *Backwards*—repudiated both the era's pretense to social and moral progress and the novel's project of "realism," but Huysmans' work remained compartmentalized as an example of extreme, if not immoral, European intellectual decadence. In Britain,

the conclusion of Walter Pater's *The Renaissance* (1873) had proven so offensive, in part for its seeming advocacy of personal hedonism and narcissistic sexuality (the code word for homosexuality, even before Freud), that Pater quickly issued a retraction. Oscar Wilde's *The Decay of Lying* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, both published in 1891, slyly affronted Victorian earnestness and the supposed value of realism in literature, but Wilde's self-promotion and unwise legal decisions made him more a martyr to conventional, homophobic opinion than an effective rebuttal of them. Henrik Ibsen's startlingly realistic plays in the 1880s, first in Scandinavia and then in England, and George Bernard Shaw's satirical comedies in the 1890s would prove scandalous, especially where the desires and rights of women were concerned. But the scandal for both playwrights was primarily the hypocrisy of a modern bourgeoisie that preached morality as it practiced something rather different, and by the 1890s, the bourgeoisie of Europe and Britain was fairly inured to being told by its artists that modern bourgeois life was full of hypocrisy. Despite their immense impact, neither Ibsen nor Shaw demonstrated anywhere near the skepticism about the future of the European social order that emerged in Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. At the end of *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Nietzsche had written: "As the will to truth thus gains self-consciousness—there can be no doubt of that—morality will gradually *perish* now: this is the great spectacle in a hundred acts reserved for the next two centuries in Europe—the most terrible, most questionable, and perhaps also the most hopeful of all spectacles—" (Nietzsche, Third Essay, sec. 27). While Nietzsche's prophesy would seem eerily prescient to his later twentieth-century readers, almost no one who read it in the 1890s was inclined to take it all that seriously.

By the turn of the century, a number of events proved disturbing or sensational enough that the relatively complacent newspaper-reading public started to take notice, and some (Woolf among them) could sense that fairly profound changes were at work. The Second Boer War erupted, in even greater Afrikaner-English enmity than before. Reports of horrific atrocities (hands and ears of African laborers chopped off) in King Leopold II's "philanthropic" Belgian

Congo were splashed across front pages, a crisis immortalized by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). The first modern imperial war, between the United States and Spain, broke out in Cuba and the Philippines. Explicit evidence of widespread anti-Semitism in France dominated the Parisian press with the Dreyfus Affair, and in response, the far right-wing, "integral" nationalist movement *Action française* (led by a journal of the same name) emerged under the leadership of Maurice Pujo and Henri Vaugeois in 1899, soon attracting the talents of Charles Maurras. Finally, the first true socialist revolution of the era, including industrial workers, peasants, intellectuals, parts of the military, and the first formation of a worker's "soviet" (or council) in St. Petersburg, roiled Russia throughout 1905. When it was finally suppressed by troops loyal to Tsar Nicholas, the government adopted cosmetic reforms designed to limit royal power. All the same, a threshold had been crossed. A new kind of revolutionary terrorism had been adopted. Assassinating the nobility became routine during the revolution and would be adopted in turn by the revolutionary Serbian Gavrilo Princip in the shooting of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in June of 1914, thus prompting a new kind of state terrorism, not to say total war, in response.

The 1905 Russian Revolution was, in many ways, the raw harbinger of things to come. When Yeats wrote in "The Second Coming" (1920) that "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed," he was referring to the much grander Russian Revolution of 1917 (Yeats 187). But almost everything that emerged on the big stage of 1917 was already apparent in the microcosm of 1905, and the lessons to be learned were not lost on the statesmen of Europe and Britain. The arts also took notice. "Primitivism" in the visual arts, music, and dance was ubiquitous, much of it derived from the bacchanalian, collective, and violent "Dionysian" force that Nietzsche had juxtaposed to individuating, "Apollinian" rationality. Tribal art, especially from European colonies in Africa, Asia, and the South Pacific, had been appearing more frequently throughout the late nineteenth century in European cities, in part the consequence of expanded ethnographic investigations and in part simply the spoils of empire. Visiting

Tahiti, Paul Gauguin produced seemingly idyllic paintings of Tahitian life throughout the 1890s. But in the first decade of the twentieth century, a new urgency emerged, one linked to the thrill of primitive ritual violence and religious sacrifice. Igor Stravinsky's *Sacre du printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*) opened the 1913 season of Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* in Paris, with choreography by Vaslav Nijinsky. The insistent, hypnotic bass thrum of the opening, imitating archaic drumming and an even deeper sort of primal heartbeat, prefigures the dance's climax taken from pre-Christian Russian myth: a sacrificial girl dances herself to death.

In short, an era had come to an end, even before World War I told everyone it had. The ameliorative administrative measures that had worked well enough in the 1880s and 1890s, from the gradual expansion of male franchise, to the slow emancipation of women and religious minorities (including Jews), to the endless parliamentary debates over Irish independence, to the legal wrangling with labor unions, to the piecemeal solutions to European rivalry over expansive empires in Africa and Asia—all this was coming undone. Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) is about the gentlemanly “Great Game” of espionage played by Britain and Russia in the highlands of India and Afghanistan in the late nineteenth century. But *Kim* was already out of date when it was published. Conrad's bitterly satiric *The Secret Agent* (1907) revealed a rather different level of discontent, nihilism, and global terrorism—comically absurd yet mindlessly lethal—that was far beyond anything Kipling had imagined. By 1910, a new sort of social and political environment had arisen in a Britain that Kipling had seen only later in life, a Britain he thought quite strange. Labor unions demanded a greater voice, and a menace beyond the unions threatened. In Britain in 1904, Samuel Mainwaring popularized the idea of a “general strike” (in a publication of the same name), and in France in 1908, Georges Sorel published *Reflections on Violence*, a related blueprint for anarchist revolution that depended on “direct action” independent of the guidance of union leadership and Marxist intellectuals. In 1903, when Emmeline Pankhurst founded the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) on the principle that direct action, rather than more discussion, was

henceforth required, the previous decades' fairly genteel struggle for women's rights turned increasingly towards violence. Two women demonstrators were killed in police actions (largely supported by the public) in November of 1910. By 1911, otherwise respectable bourgeois women, pulling out stones and hammers hidden in their handbags, walked down the streets of London smashing windows in the Home Office, the War Office, the Foreign Office, and other government buildings, and repeated the gesture several months later for the edification of shopkeepers in the West End (Dangerfield 165, 171). A wave of arson followed. As Pankhurst observed in 1912, "The argument of the broken window pane is the most valuable argument in modern politics" (Dangerfield 170). The Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, faced with a recalcitrant, befuddled House of Lords and increasing unrest in the streets, turned to force-feeding the arrested women in prison—a political strategy almost guaranteed to fail in London, just as it would later fail in the United States. Nevertheless, with David Lloyd George as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Asquith's cabinet had little choice but to seek changes—increased taxes, Home Rule for Ireland, a diluted House of Lords—that were interrupted by World War I.

After the war, in one of the age's most famous literary proclamations, Woolf wrote that "human character changed" in December 1910, which for her was a moment of irrevocable democratization in the relations between "masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children," a transformation framed by "a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature" ("Mr. Bennett" 320–321). The last month of 1910 was far less eventful than the one preceding it, when two suffragette demonstrators were killed by the police on "Black Friday" (November 18). It was the first time that any protesting suffragette had been killed by the state. But Woolf is clearly registering a psychological reality as much as a social one, from a distance of more than a decade interrupted by a tremendous loss of life. In that sense she is describing a transformation that had also been decades in the making. Woolf was twenty-eight in 1910, often paralyzed by depression, struggling to make her way as a writer, and keenly aware of the intensifying battle

over the rights of women. To the more established novelist of 1924, 1910 perhaps seemed like a fairly positive turning point in social relations. It signaled for her a turning point in literature and culture as well. And yet, *The Voyage Out*, on which Woolf was engaged at the time, does not end at all happily, and as critics have noted, its semi-autobiographical heroine dies a delirious and untimely death that seems more like a desperate escape from marriage, family, and respectability than a function of anything demanded by the plot. The unexpected, unexplained, and decidedly “unrealistic” sickness unto death of the novel’s newly betrothed Rachel Vinrace perhaps symbolically tells us more about why “the center cannot hold,” as Yeats put it later, than any more realistic novel published before the war. In so many ways, Woolf’s fractured plot implies, the war was not finally, or primarily, what made “things fall apart”; they were already falling apart, for good and for ill, when Rachel Vinrace set out for her doomed South American adventure.

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Woolf’s initial attempt at a novel was only the beginning of a career that would change the genre quite demonstrably for a general readership and community of novelists, and for subsequent women writers in particular. When Erich Auerbach turned, during World War II, to the question of the modern novel in the last chapter of his epoch-making *Mimesis* (1946), it was the extraordinary stocking-measuring scene from the opening of Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* that he chose to explicate. Auerbach had read James Joyce and Marcel Proust and Thomas Mann, and he easily could have selected a text from one of these eminent modernists as the sermon for his conclusion. But he focuses on Woolf instead, and the choice says volumes quite apart from Auerbach’s unsurprisingly perceptive exegesis of the passage. Woolf scholarship has come a long way since Auerbach. Yet the fact that the greatest literary scholar of the century, a German Jew isolated without a library in Istanbul as a refugee from Hitler’s insanity, decided to conclude his treatise on the “representation of reality in Western literature” with a discussion of

Woolf—a discussion that was designed, as we read in the epilogue, to demonstrate how deeply literary history in the West was indebted to the story of Christ’s incarnation in a common humanity—tells us a great deal about what Woolf’s writing had come to mean in the period between the two world wars. Even before her death, David Daiches had singled out Woolf’s prose as one of the significant technical achievements of the era:

Public belief becomes a matter of technique, and when it ceases to exist writers have often to find new technical devices to compensate for the loss of a device no longer available. To convey the individual sensibility of the writer directly and impressively to the reader, without first referring it to common notions which link reader and writer and in terms of which the meaning can be objectified and universalized, demands new kinds of subtlety in expression, which we find in, for example, the novels of Virginia Woolf. (Daiches 83)

There is no evidence that Auerbach knew of Daiches’ earlier appraisal. But they shared the view that Woolf had found a way to embody for her readers complex levels of meaning in narrative representation, even after the deterioration of a shared “public belief” (religious certainly, but also a broader cultural tradition) had called that project into question.

All the same, World War I for Virginia Woolf was in no sense a straightforward event. The Great War meant different things to different people. As the recent PBS Masterpiece television production, *Downton Abbey*, has demonstrated to a new generation, the old order of class, gender, and familial relationships that changed for Woolf in 1910 seemed all the more clearly swept away by 1918. But many things had not changed at all. In some cases, precisely what we often assume had been swept away would recur with a vengeance.

A prime example of this phenomenon would be the way we tend today to understand the polarity of nationalism versus cosmopolitanism in the early twentieth century—and *Downton Abbey* is no exception here. Nationalist chauvinism, we assume, was more in evidence *before* World War I and indeed seems to have caused

it. An ethno-nationalist Serbian assassin kills an imperial Austrian Arch-Duke and his wife and sets off a chain of events predestined, as it were, by international treaties designed to maintain a “balance of power” among the European states. The Austrians, sorely tried by the ethnic nationalism stirring within a far-flung empire, are willing to shut down rebellious urges in the Balkans once and for all, and they know Germany will back them up. The Russians want to expand the buffer zone separating them from the Austrian Empire and are happy to defend their Slavic brothers in Serbia. They also want more distance from the new German Federation, which means finding the opportunity to take more of the Baltic and Poland (defunct since 1795) than they already have. The Germans, in what would turn into a national obsession in a few decades, see a chance for an in-gathering of German-speaking peoples under one imperial rule, though they want to appear (as they had during the Berlin Conferences on the Congo) as disinterested referees in territorial disputes among their neighbors. The French, having long wanted to avenge the losses of the Franco-Prussian War, are easily drawn into the conflict as allies of Russia. Nationalist “jingoism” in Britain, going back to the Boer Wars and exemplified by Kipling’s rousing poems, rises to new heights, including the banning of German classical music once the war begins. And the Ottoman Turks, badly over-extended, militarily weak, trying to maintain territories in the Middle East and North Africa that are ripe for the taking, see their only defense against Russia to the North as an alliance with Austria and Germany. The most significant literature of the Edwardian era, including Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*, Arnold Bennett’s *The Old Wives’ Tale* (1908), H. G. Wells’ *Tono-Bungay* (1909), and E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* (1910) reflect a similar national focus, though all these novels are biting satire about Britain itself. Conrad details British naiveté and the near incompetence of its political elite in facing threats from abroad, while Bennett follows two sisters, one more adventurously cosmopolitan (that is, Francophilic) than her provincial sibling, though they wind up back in Britain at the end, equally drained of life and with an oddly comparable “experience” of life. Wells, from an overtly socialist position, details the hollow

mendacity of the entrepreneurial spirit and the consumer capitalism of his time, while Forster, in what may be the most obvious of the four in his focus on the question, “Who shall inherit England?” explicitly denounces the unredeemable villain of the piece—the male-chauvinist, imperialist, capitalist Henry Wilcox—as a *threat* to good, honest, yeoman Englishness, since “the Imperialist is not what he thinks or seems. He is a destroyer. He prepares the way for cosmopolitanism, and though his ambitions may be fulfilled, the earth that he inherits will be grey” (Forster 229). None of these novels presents cosmopolitan worldliness in a positive light, and all worry about the future of Britain’s national identity.

If we compare this pre-war situation to what we find after the war, the contrast seems superficially clear. Woodrow Wilson arrives at Versailles with his “Fourteen Points,” aimed at dismantling large empires, and with the outlines of a “League of Nations” designed to prevent future war. “Internationalism” is the shibboleth of the day, now no longer limited to student groups and left-wing societies. Three great dynasties—the Habsburgs, the Romanovs, and the Ottomans—no longer exist, and the German Federation, facing huge losses in territory and the burden of war reparations, as well as the French occupation of its rich Ruhr Valley coal fields and a barely suppressed communist revolution, becomes a politically dead-locked, but, in Berlin, sexually liberated, culturally avant-garde, and thoroughly cosmopolitan Weimar Republic. (Christopher Isherwood’s 1939 novella, *Goodbye to Berlin*, captures the mood of the early 1930s and is later transformed into the theatrical musical and movie *Cabaret*). Refugees of many nations are on the move as national boundaries are redrawn, and a new urban environment emerges, especially in Paris, where a “lost generation” of expatriate Americans rubs shoulders with French, Russian, and Spanish writers and artists, while listening to an African-incubated “jazz” music fresh from America. The literature of the immediate post-war period reinforces this sense of what seems to be a wholesale shift to the cosmopolitan: T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses* were both published in 1922, and no two works in the English-speaking world defined a new “modernism” as clearly

as these did.¹ In contrast to *Howards End*, both seemed dramatically cosmopolitan in theme and form. Eliot refers, albeit cryptically, to “Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant” and “Phlebus the Phoenician”; he invokes, as exemplars of a decaying civilization, “Falling towers / Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London / Unreal”; he cites Wagner in German and Dante in Italian, and ends for good measure with a flourish from the Upanishads in Hindi (Eliot 43, 46, 48). Eliot realized the poem needed footnotes, and he soon supplied them, only later to denounce them. Joyce’s mock epic conjures an Irish Jew as its principle protagonist, one whose sympathies are decidedly *not* nationalist, and while the action occurs on one day (though ten years before the start of World War I) and in one city (Dublin), Joyce’s densely-packed, hypertrophied system of allusions to world literature both inside and outside of the English language was unprecedented, in perhaps any language. Surely, this was an effort to “make it new,” in Ezra Pound’s phrase, and Woolf implicitly acknowledged as much. Her first major novel, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), was a self-conscious homage to the “Wandering Rocks” episode of *Ulysses*. It reflects a much more intricate sense of cosmopolitan interrelations, even nominally confined as it is to London, than had her earlier *Voyage Out*, which took place in a Brazil that was almost completely a figment of her imagination.

This sort of reasoning, however, can be taken too far. Wilson’s “League of Nations” foundered without US Congressional ratification of it, and the dream of internationalism did, too. Wilson’s “Fourteen Points,” articulating the rights of all peoples to national homelands with a common language, economy, and defensible borders, was clearly designed to supersede European land empires. But the doctrine only threw fuel onto the fire that had initially led to war—rampant ethno-nationalism—and, if anything, made it more acceptable, more like a universal right. What had been the relatively polyglot and peaceful (even if not completely harmonious) mixtures of ethnicities and religions within the older and hardly efficient Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires suddenly became a mass of new (or reborn old) states, each with its own claim to a place in the sun of a new world order. Poland rose (albeit once again briefly)