INTRODUCTION

# *Virginia Woolf's Late Style*

> Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
> The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
> Of dead and living. T. S. Eliot, "East Coker"

In *Mortality and Form in Late Modernist Literature*, I study the writings that Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and Wyndham Lewis composed in the 1930s and 1940s. I argue that these authors build their later work, in formal and thematic terms, around questions of what it means to be mortal and embodied – "fastened," as a sixty-year-old Yeats puts it in "Sailing to Byzantium," "to a dying animal" and deeply embedded in historical time (*Poems*, 408). Their poetry and prose from the early 1930s through sometime during or after the Second World War, written when they were in their fifties and sixties (these four writers were all born within six years in the 1880s), can be readily distinguished from their achievements of the preceding decade; they explicitly and self-consciously take their work in new directions during this period. They assess – sometimes building upon, sometimes repudiating, often revising, always weighing – their own earlier writing. In a phrase from the first part of "East Coker," Eliot describes a circle of dancing couples as "keeping time" (*Poems*, 124), conveying his sense that the body itself, moving to music, gathered into the artifice of the dance, performs its mortal nature by stepping in measured patterns analogous to minutes on the face of a clock or words arranged in sequence on a page.[1] And since the couples dance to celebrate "matrimonie," they keep time, too, in the different sense of holding on to their passing lives, resisting death's inexorable pull by marking in this ceremony, on this occasion, something worth remembering precisely because of its brevity: their physical health, their happy moments of "concorde" (*Poems*, 124). Central to each of the texts I address is the irony that embodied form is an ultimately doomed but therefore consequential act of resistance to time's passing. "The body" in my book means most

literally, most immediately, each author's aging body, but also points to readers' bodies, to the figurative bodies of the texts and, on larger, social scales, to the collective bodies of an imagined or actual audience and of that vexed, powerful modern figuration: the geographical, political, ideological "body" of the nation-state. Theological, philosophical, political, and aesthetic provocations spur these writers to ponder their embodiment and their positions in historical time. Each is further compelled to confront her or his visibility and vulnerabilities due to insistently circumstantial causes – fame, illness, aging, the deaths of others, and threats of physical destruction.[2] Death and endings command attention with demonstrable vehemence as the Second World War begins, as people and nations are forced to realize that they are "committed" again, as Woolf puts it in her diary in mid-September 1938, "to public misery": "1914 but without even the illusion of 1914. All slipping consciously into a pit" (*Diary*, V: 170). The decade and a half with which I am concerned seemed increasingly certain to lead toward any number of lethal ends with every passing year. Writing primarily from countries (England and France) tangled in the events that will bring the world to war for a second time in their adult lives, these writers compose what we might think of as especially complex position pieces: formally ambitious texts that record and assess – that register – their writers' existential and sociopolitical locations in time. These texts can be considered "late" in a number of senses. I have already mentioned their retrospective aspects and their readiness to display affiliations to their authors' earlier writings and to other texts and thinkers more generally. A fit image for this entailment is Eliot's musing in "East Coker" (1940) over the "old stones" marking those buried in the village churchyard (*Poems*, 129). The meditation reminds him, even more pointedly than when he had first coined the phrase two decades before, that the dead are "that which we know" (*Essays*, 6). Those dead and their pasts, however, are also a riddle, a mystery to which we continually return. On a shorter chronological scale, Eliot assesses his "twenty years" as a writer, asking what he has accomplished in this interim between world wars (*Poems*, 128). Answers to pervasive questions about the value of art do not come readily, especially when these questions are posed in, to, and about a civilization that brings itself to such ruinous ends twice in these writers' lives. To catch that ruin in a corresponding image, we might place, against Eliot's old stones, a grotesque vignette from the end of Lewis's *The Vulgar Streak* (1941). His protagonist, Vincent Penhale, turns himself into his own memorial emblem: a hanging body with writing on it. This "artist or dilettante of the arts" (*Vulgar Streak*, 94) makes of his suicide performance art:

> [H]anging from the disused gas-suspension . . . was Mr Penhale, his tongue protruding, and his face black. A piece of white paper, in the manner of a placard, was attached to his chest. (*Vulgar Streak*, 229)

There, in black and white and black on white, we find this testimentary modern body, expressive of what had come to seem the inescapable, death-directed inclinations of its era. In a canceled draft of a letter that Lewis wrote about his novel to H. G. Wells in 1942, Lewis asserts that "[t]he time in which we live appears to me, qua period, to be a 'shocker.' A 'thriller' is too mild a term for it. Well, the rather shocking nature of my book was to my mind a faithful interpretation of an epoch where violence is everywhere" (*Letters*, 332).[3] Eliot could not decipher the time-worn stones at his feet. We can read Vincent Penhale's bold text – some cross between writing on a tombstone, a telegram, and a headline broadcast to all comers – but it constitutes an abdication rather than an assertion of meaning:

> WHOEVER FINDS THIS BODY,
> MAY DO WHAT THEY LIKE WITH IT.
> *I* DON'T WANT IT
> *Signed*. ITS FORMER INHABITANT (*Vulgar Streak*, 230)

This is writing that presents itself boldly only to say that we, its readers, have arrived too late to do much more than dispose of the remains it designates. At almost the same time as Eliot coldly surveys his collected works in "East Coker" and Lewis forces us to stare at Vincent's hanging body, Woolf's secretive, mostly silent poet, Isa, also wonders how writing adds up, whether it amounts to something. Hers is a question that occurs in various forms to all the writers in this book: "What remedy was there for her at her age – the age of the century, thirty-nine – in books?" (Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 19).[4] Isa does not formulate an answer, though she does look for one, and she continues to quote scraps of older writing as talismans and slight comforts throughout her time in Woolf's own last book.

The work I study is "late" also in that it comes after the writing for which each artist first became famous (which is not necessarily equivalent to being read or even widely admired), the writing that made each author's name. We find an expressive figuration of this identity shift in Stein's well-known description of the "little shock of recognition and nonrecognition" when she and Alice get out of a cab in New York, near the beginning of their American tour in 1934: "and then we saw an electric sign moving around a building and it said Gertrude Stein has come and that was upsetting" (*Everybody's Autobiography*, 180). Literally seeing her name in lights changes

her own sense of who she is and, as her American lectures and all the writing that follows demonstrate, what and who her writing is for: "The next day was a different thing. . . . it would never be again what yesterday had been" (*Everybody's Autobiography*, 181). "A different thing" is a label that might be attached to Woolf's fiction after *The Waves*, to Eliot's poetry after "The Hollow Men," and to Lewis's fiction after *The Apes of God* as well as his polemics after Munich.

The texts in this book fall on the far side of an apogee that was already coming to be known, at around the time so many of its creators were moving into different terrain, as "modernism."[5] Whatever we take that word to mean, however we apply it now or it was applied in the first three decades of the twentieth century, it comprises writings that are built and work differently from the texts I have gathered for *Mortality and Form*. These differences occur on so many levels, for such varied reasons, that it is possible to construct any number of plausible narratives illuminating reasons for the changes. Jed Esty, Sebastian Knowles, Marina MacKay, Tyrus Miller, Margot Norris, Adam Piette, and others have argued convincingly for aesthetic, sociocultural, and political causes underlying what Miller usefully named "late modernism" in 1999. The authors I study (central to these and many other narratives concerning the trajectories of modernism in the 1930s and 1940s) are employed by and often serve these general narratives. I have chosen to devote my attention throughout this book to the details of how each writer moves into a new phase of his or her own work – in ways that sometimes fit perfectly with and sometimes resist larger narratives about what late modernism is and what its accomplishments are. It has been the particular elements of the "turns" toward new forms of writing – to invoke a verb that is central to Eliot's poetry and my chapter on his work – that concern me. Woolf interrogates her own earlier stylistic mastery and, in her recalibrated syntax and diction, discovers the expressive potential of a carefully ordinary, artfully repetitive, differently allusive kind of prose. From the late 1920s on, Eliot writes as a Christian poet; he undertakes a sustained, rigorous exploration of his faith and does so by means of an inquiry into new formal resources for his poetry. Stein writes to and for an audience about historical events unfolding in time. Who would have thought, in the 1910s or 1920s, that she would end up writing a book called *Wars I Have Seen* about a war that she had, indeed, seen? Her philosophical positions and the alternating lucidities and opacities of her prose manage to evade and, sometimes, to speak expressively to conditions of life in wartime. In the late 1930s, Lewis works not only to recant some of his political analyses from earlier in the decade but also to write a new kind

of fiction. He struggles to realize the idea of a world that can survive his powerful inclinations as a satirist.

I choose four authors from among others whom I might have included in this study,[6] and I do so not only for the reasons I have begun to enumerate but also because these four may be fit together in pairs, each pair revolving around the philosophical, aesthetic, psychosocial category of what Eliot (so usefully for so many critics from 1919 to today) labeled "impersonality." For Eliot and Woolf working in the 1930s and early 1940s, this means writing that moves away from representations of "the intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible" (Eliot, *Essays*, 126), from inwardness, the private voice, the motions of the meditating mind, from psycho-sexual crises – from what Woolf calls the "difficult business of intimacy" (Woolf, *Essays* 3: 431).[7] The Woolf that concerns me in this book explores repetition, cliché, and social and aesthetic conventions as a way of interrogating her own earlier work and of scrutinizing modern culture and modern history in the making. In Eliot's later poetry, liturgical structures, the repeated forms of prayer, and the disciplines of Christian thought contribute to poetry that is in many ways as pared down, as spare, even – sometimes – as full of repetition as Woolf's late fiction, but for profoundly different, theologically rooted reasons. Both writers turn away from calibrating their words to what Eliot describes in 1915 as an "[i]nfinitely suffering thing" (*Poems*, 13). As she developed her proposal for newly oriented fiction near the beginning of her career, Woolf had famously encouraged her readers to use their inner lives as a point of reference and evaluation, to consider "the complexity of your feelings. In one day thousands of ideas have coursed through your brains; thousands of emotions have met, collided, and disappeared in astonishing disorder" (*Essays* 3: 436). No longer are we to ask that her prose and Eliot's poetry beat with the blood shaking our hearts.

The austerities of late Woolf and late Eliot bring them into an orbit with Lewis and Stein, who come to this distant star system from another side of the galaxy, since their work before the late 1930s falls already so far from inner lives. Bound together not by friendship, as is the case with Woolf and Eliot but, at Lewis's insistence, by enmity, Stein and Lewis share a complex and often contradictory attitude toward the body as it might be captured in writing, as well as a theoretical objection to temporality and forms of mimesis in the arts. Both are obsessed by and write a great deal about the war that shadows their later years. Both bring to their late work complex theoretical and narratological revisions of decades of prior practice. While they never quite show us nerves in patterns, they do bring us newly into historical time and present us with strange facsimiles of psychologically textured interior

space. Lewis joins his old enemy Stein in creating works during and about the Second World War that are filled with a peculiar collection of puppets and shells and only partly completed models for humans. The antihumanist strains in the works of both of these avant-garde writers come uneasily into contact with their wartime inclinations to write something less "cold," more hospitable to historical and psychological time.[8]

Running through virtually all of the texts I study in this book, swelling in volume as these writers drift toward the cataract of September 1939, is the current of war, which brings further, urgent resonance to lateness and mortality as conditions for and subjects of this writing. The meaning of "modern" itself retains an ironic edge already honed in the First World War, as newer weapons, newer kinds of violence, newer regressions to barbarism become the province of this next, even more up-to-date war.[9] This late writing, then, not only turns on each author's earlier writing; it also responds to the return of global war. Turns and returns mark these texts in quite specific ways – at the level of syntax, in stylistic details and thematic elements, and in larger poetic and narrative forms. The writers' memories of their own writing lives and of the Great War that they lived and wrote through in their late twenties and early thirties conspire to mark these later works with repetitions. "Make it new" – already, of course, an ancient command, brought out of the archive and dusted off when Ezra Pound first recovered and broadcast it – might be more aptly formulated, for the period with which this book is concerned, as "Make it again."[10] And even that phrase, less hortatory than its earlier version, can easily become for each of these authors also a question resonant sometimes with determination, sometimes with despair: "Make it again?"

In my book, the line of demarcation between "late" and what comes before is drawn by the artist him- or herself. It is often linked to historical or biographical events. Age, too, is central to every aspect of late style.[11] It is often the most significant, certainly the most intimate, always the ultimate determinant of lateness, but its effects are, in many cases, the most difficult to discern or measure (not all writers are as explicit as Yeats about the conditions of their mortal dress). Indeed, the body is not itself a central subject of *Mortality and Form*, though its failings and its fragility are conditions for the work that fills this book. Edward Said opens *On Late Style* by pointing out that, at the elemental human level, "lateness" describes the last phases of the narratives, the "histories" we tell ourselves and others about our changing bodies, our aging minds:

> The body, its health, its care, composition, functioning, and flourishing, its illnesses and demise, belong to the order of nature; what we *understand* of

> that nature, however, how we see and live it in our consciousness, how we create a sense of our life individually and collectively, subjectively as well as socially, how we divide it into periods, belongs roughly speaking to the order of history that when we reflect on it we can recall, analyze, and meditate on, constantly changing its shape in the process. (*Late Style*, 3)

Michael Wood's powerful introduction to Said's posthumously published, unfinished book, presents us with a wonderfully expressive evocation of how the aging artist's own sense of time and understanding of mortality can be both pervasive and subtle, the shades of the prison house at once recognizable and surprising:

> But death does sometimes wait for us, and it is possible to become deeply aware of its waiting. The quality of time alters then, like a change in the light, because the present is so thoroughly shadowed by other seasons: the revived or receding past, the newly unmeasurable future, the unimaginable time beyond time. (*Late Style*, xi)

I hope to help my readers discern this altered light in the texts I collect for this book.

Most of the remainder of this introduction discusses Woolf's late fiction and the ways that her late style can be connected with the anticipation and then the accomplished fact of war. But it is necessary here, as I move from overview to Woolf's exemplary case, to account quickly for the disposition of my book's chapters. What follows this chapter centered on Woolf are chapters on Eliot, Stein, and Lewis, respectively. The discussion of Eliot takes up the subject of his Christian poetry, from *Ash-Wednesday* (1927–1930) to *Four Quartets* (1936–1942). My next chapter studies Stein's work from her *Lectures in America* (1935) to her wartime pieces and her last, posthumously published musing on the atomic bomb (1946). The chapter that follows concerns Lewis's polemics of the 1930s and his three most important late novels (each of which is differently entangled in the subject and the conditions of the wars he wrote so furiously against). In my conclusion, I look at aftermaths and, as Eliot puts it, world's ends: Woolf's last description of Asheham Down in the winter of 1940–1941, a rubble-filled library in London in the days after the nighttime bombings of the Blitz, a field on the edge of the village of East Coker where it is at least sometimes possible to see the dead dancing again. This last chapter is centrally occupied with aesthetic responses to ruin, exploring the means by which humans build and attempt to rebuild structures of understanding – how we make the world fit to inhabit, how we restore that world after loss. But *Mortality and Form* is by no means proposing aesthetic form as an

antidote or solution to those losses. My book offers an explicit and, in my own reading and writing practices, an implicit defense of a mode of engaging with literature that is formalist in its method. And yet it is not only a portrait of art's promises and triumphs. Aesthetic and moral failures also mar the work of these artists engaged in writing about matters of such consequence. The stakes of this writing, though to some degree less immediate, less urgent today, are more wholly visible to us now than ever before, given the comparative clarities of history. We cannot and should not read this work without measuring it by the stringent demands of the times in which it was written. These texts assay states of absolute loss, of complete dispossession and also test the capacities of aesthetic form to express – and sometimes to compensate for – that loss. I hope to bring together the chronological "lateness" Said, Wood, Theodor Adorno, and others have written about, and the period "lateness" named by Miller and critics after him. This book is a study of four mature writers reckoning the significance of their work and their careers. It is also an account of literary modernism coming to terms with itself, its inheritances, and its legacies.

## The Returns of War: Late Woolf

There is a moment in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, noted by many who have written on the novel, when Mrs. Ramsay, lost in private musings, finds herself unpleasantly recalled to a more ordinary, more public mode of expression. Ironically, it is in part the rhythms and vaguely articulated meanings of her own thoughts that precipitate her betrayal. She "attaches herself" to a phrase, "which had been lying in her mind"; other phrases, each less idiosyncratic than its predecessor, follow:

> "Children don't forget, children don't forget" – which she would repeat and begin adding to it, It will end, it will end, she said. It will come, it will come, when suddenly she added, We are in the hands of the Lord.
>
> But instantly she was annoyed with herself for saying that. Who had said it? Not she; she had been trapped into saying something she did not mean. (*To the Lighthouse*, 63)

The passive construction of that last sentence expresses the pervasive, diffuse power that has accrued to the Judeo-Christian tradition over a millennium. Without warning, and without knowing how, Mrs. Ramsay slips from thoughts that are particularly precious to her because they are hers alone into this conventional blessing of an ending, this renunciation of agency, this cessation of thought itself, this cliché. Her failure to sustain her own

language amounts to a brief but significant betrayal of literary modernism as Woolf and many others describe and practice it in the 1910s and 1920s. Staging this rejection of dead language within the body of the novel itself not only confirms the authenticity of Mrs. Ramsay's "identity"; it is also one of the ways that *To the Lighthouse* stakes its claim as a work of modernist fiction – a very brief instance of what James Joyce achieves with the cliché-saturated "Eumaeus" chapter of *Ulysses*.[12]

Within a very few years, Woolf will be writing books that, far from resisting the world's ordinary language, instead welcome passing platitudes, hackneyed phrases, received ideas, and familiar, if botched, quotations from English literature onto their pages. The shape of her sentences will change utterly; the aesthetic finish of her prose will be deliberately marred by repetition, misplaced rhyme, broken rhythms. Woolf's last two novels, *The Years* (1937) and *Between the Acts* (1941), the former written in what one historian has called the "new Dark Age" of the 1930s (Overy, *Twilight Years*, 3), the latter written in the shadow of the Second World War, differ in many ways and for a variety of reasons from the fictions up to and including *The Waves* (1931).[13] In offering explanations for the dramatic shifts in her work during the thirties, Woolf's critics have not adequately connected the local details of her style during this period with the fact of the large-scale sociopolitical catastrophe that is the return of war. Her inventively exhausted prose articulates her late-modern estimation of the state of language, of contemporary thought, of the possibilities for action that might lead to cultural renewal. "Surely it was time someone invented a new plot," Isa complains near the end of *Between the Acts* (215); Woolf registers the force, the importance of this complaint everywhere in the samenesses of her late prose fiction.

*The Years* and the draft "essay-novel," *The Pargiters*, from which it and *Three Guineas* originated, form a cluster of texts around which critics have assembled readings of late Woolf. It is worth pausing briefly to survey a map of those readings with the aims of appreciating how important *The Years* is to narratives of Woolf's oeuvre and understanding what remains uncharted in this field of inquiry. Woolf herself, in essays and letters and – when they begin to be published (first in 1953) – in her diaries,[14] offers the foundational outline of her career: after *The Waves*, her most extensive experiment in representing human consciousness and the complexities and isolation of the human subject, she turns to writing that attends primarily to externals, to facts. She works with "granite" rather than "rainbow," object instead of subject, outer before inner, the world and its contingencies as they impinge upon the self. *The Years* is a novel fractured by or fruitfully exploiting this

turn.[15] With the messy world rather than the shaping human subject at its center, *The Years* can be seen as an anti-novel, a "deliberate failure" in Woolf's own words[16] (critics have disagreed on how successful, ideologically and aesthetically, is its broken form). It is a novel that refuses all gestures toward closure and celebrates open-endedness.[17] Alex Zwerdling, in his seminal *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (1986), was one of the first critics to place Woolf in an appropriately historicized frame, and others have added a great deal to our understanding of how fully Leonard and Virginia Woolf and their writings are engaged with the politics of the 1930s and, particularly, with the coming of war.[18] None of Woolf's other works are as complex in their textual origins and history as *The Years* and its companion-piece, *Three Guineas* (in a well-known diary entry, Woolf looks back over "six years floundering, striving, much agony, some ecstasy: lumping the Years & 3 Gs together as one book – as indeed they are" [*Diary*, V: 148]) – and textual scholarship has provided a number of rich interpretive approaches to Woolf's writing of the thirties.[19] Readings that combine textual, biographical, and historical frames have been applied with particular success to *The Years*, which can come to seem Woolf's most heavily coded novel, burying secrets of sexual abuse and other traumas under excised scenes and private references made newly legible by critics.[20] But there is a constellation of textual effects, closely related to one another and bound, as well, to the events of the decade that none of these studies fully explains. Scarcely a sentence from *The Years* or *Between the Acts*, even if pulled out of context, could be mistaken for something Woolf would have written in the 1920s, and readings that fail to take this fact about the very contours of Woolf's prose into account are missing a crucial aspect of her late work.

Woolf's new style can be introduced, characterized, explained, and even partly illustrated by a couple of phrases from an entry in her diary, written in the middle of an incongruously "fine summer day" in the second week of September 1938, just before Chamberlain's flight to Munich, as Woolf contemplates the "chaos" and "public misery" that now seem unavoidable. I have quoted it already; it is the most succinct and terrible formulation of twentieth-century historical pattern that I know: "1914 but without even the illusion of 1914. All slipping consciously into a pit" (*Diary* V: 170). The first phrase firmly ties this coming war to its precursor, accomplishing in its shorthand both a comparison and a distinction; its repetitive circling around "1914" speaks to a failure of historical progress and an advance only in the cynicism with which people everywhere will understand this latest instance of collective insanity. As Harold Nicolson puts it in his