

The Work of the Witness: Leonard Woolf, Imperialism and Totalitarianism

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Let me begin with two accounts by a witness to early twentieth-century colonial trauma:

Some of the inhabitants of this place are scarcely human. Every male between the ages of 18 & 55 in Ceylon is liable to a road tax of rs 1.50; if he does not pay by March 31st he is liable to a fine of rs 10 or in default a month's imprisonment. At every place I stop, crowds of these defaulters are brought up to me by the headmen for trial & sentence. They bring down to me wild savages from the hills, spectacles incredible to anyone who has not seen them. Naked except for a foul rag round their loins, limbs which are mere bones, stomachs distended with enormously enlarged spleens, their features eaten away by & their skin covered with sores from one of the most loathsome of existing diseases called parangi, or else wild apelike creatures with masses of tangled hair falling over their shoulders their black bodies covered with white scales of parangi scab hobbling along on legs enormous from elephantitis. (*Letters* 140-41)

I had to go (as Fiscal) to see four men hanged one morning. They were hanged two by two. I have a strong stomach but at best it is a horrible

performance. I go to the cells & read over the warrants of execution & ask them whether they have anything to say. They nearly always say no. Then they are led out clothed in white, with curious white hats on their heads which at the last moment are drawn down to hide their faces. They are led up on to the scaffold & the ropes are placed around their necks. I have (in Kandy) to stand on a sort of verandah where I can actually see the man hanged. The signal has to be given by me. The first two were hanged all right but they gave one of the second too wide a drop or something went wrong. The man's head was practically torn from his body & there was a great jet of blood which went up about 3 or 4 feet high, covering the gallows and priest who stands praying on the steps. The curious thing was that this man as he went to the gallows seemed to feel the rope round his neck: he kept twitching his head over into the exact position they hang in after death. Usually they are quite unmoved. One man kept repeating two words of a Sinhalese prayer (I think) over & over again all the way to the gallows & even as he stood with the rope round his neck waiting for the drop. (*Letters* 133)

Both these accounts were written by the Jewish writer and political commentator Leonard Woolf in letters home, the first to his friend Saxon Sidney-Turner in 1908; the second to Lytton Strachey in 1907. They record his work as a colonial administrator and magistrate between 1905 and 1911, in charge of judicial and punitive matters in the Jaffna, Kandy and Hambantota districts of Ceylon. They also register his abhorrence and disgust – with the “scarcely human” victim and with his own role as functionary and overseer in an inhuman and barely functioning colonial machine. As a Jew in the Civil Service Woolf was somewhat ambiguously placed in

the colonial hierarchy of ethnicity and class, an ambiguity that was compounded further by his increasing ambivalence about the colonial enterprise and his own role within it. The letters he wrote during these years show Woolf staging himself alternately as observer and agent, witness and perpetrator, in a colonial life that, as Douglas Kerr has observed, unfolds as an endless series of degradations (Kerr 264). A more processed account appears in *Growing* (1961), the volume of Woolf's autobiography that deals with his time in Ceylon, where the experience is recounted as deeply traumatic, but also formative of "Leonard Woolf" as a prominent figure in British interwar intellectual and political debate. In this narrative, widely accepted among Woolf biographers and scholars, Woolf's early fiction, notably his 1913 novel *A Village in the Jungle*, plays a central role. Writing the novel is generally thought of as the making of Leonard Woolf the anti-imperialist and left-wing thinker on international relations, providing the means and the space, as he put it himself, by which he could "vicariously live their [the villagers'] lives" (1964: 47). The transnational stance the novel opened up for certainly informs Woolf's writing and political activism through the 1920s, as he established himself as a leading critic of empire whose analysis of global inequality and theories of international cooperation helped shape Labour Party policies as well as the development of the League of Nations. What is even more striking, as we shall see, is that the modes of thinking, the conceptual operations and tropes supplied by the colonial experience and put to work in the fiction, are re-found in various guises towards the end of the interwar period when Woolf establishes himself as an early and prescient critic of totalitarian ideologies and regimes.

The narrative I have sketched so far suggests that witnessing – the trauma of the complicit observer and reluctant yet efficient perpetrator – defines "Leonard Woolf" as a subject position in much of his writing and as an agent in interwar

intellectual and political debate. What interests me in this narrative are the kinds of thinking and writing the experience of witnessing sets in motion: first how the colonial trauma is processed and mediated in the early fiction, opening up for a political and ethical stance; next how it returns in different shapes and tropes at a moment of crisis, with the rise of European totalitarianism during the 1930s. Beyond its historical moment this “work of the witness” as I see it also has a bearing on current scholarly debate, implications that I propose to trace through a reading of four texts: first, the anti-colonial novel *The Village in the Jungle* (1913) and the short story “Three Jews”, composed in the context of anti-foreign sentiment during World War I; next, the anti-Fascist pamphlets *Quack, Quack* (1935) and *Barbarians at the Gate* (1939). It should be noted that the writing I examine is not testimony: it belongs to the genres of realist fiction and the political pamphlet. What nonetheless makes it significant to a theory of witnessing is that it works by a series of transnational comparisons (analogies, translations and transpositions) that are held together and generate assent by the subject position of the witness: “this, which I witness now can only be understood by comparison to that, which I witnessed then”. Moreover, it offers a notion of entangled histories, held together by the memory and conceptual operations of the witness, which anticipates and helpfully illuminates recent transnational approaches to memory studies and witness accounts.

Transnational witnessing

For some time now, postcolonial and transnational perspectives have been brought to bear on the cultural and literary study of witness accounts, especially narratives that have traditionally been thought of as the unique testimony of particular ethnic or cultural groups. A case in point would be Michael Rothberg’s proposal for a new

direction in cultural memory studies in his book *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009). Here the term “multidirectional memory” is introduced to counteract what he sees as a destructive “competition” of memories, designating a transnational mode of reading attentive to the global connections that may emerge among the testimonies of different minority and subaltern groups, with the potential to create new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice out of the specificities, echoes, and overlaps of different historical experiences (Rothberg 5). More generally, the approach Rothberg recommends is indicative of a renewed interest in comparative and relational thinking across the humanities in recent years; an understanding of comparison inflected by entanglement and spatial modes of analysis based on interrelations, networks and circulation, which has come to appear not only as the more methodologically sound but as the only ethically viable approach. In the field of historical studies, “*entangled histories*”, “*histoire croisée*”, “*geteilte*” or “*verwobene Geschichte*” have become key concepts, reflecting an interest in processes of mutual influencing across borders as well as in the global refractions of what was once seen as historically and geopolitically discrete events (Kocka 2003).

Of course such alternative forms of comparison are not something new; a mode of thinking that begins with postcolonialism and the spatial turn. Michael Rothberg points to Hannah Arendt’s methodology in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) as an early instance of multidirectional memory to the extent that it places the European situation in a global context and employs a form of comparison based on the Benjaminean constellation to break out of the frames of a teleological narrative and identify connections that might otherwise go unnoticed. This view of Arendt is reflected in other academic fields, for instance in globally oriented studies of European totalitarianism and genocide, where Arendt’s attempt to locate the rise

of European totalitarianism within a global geography inclusive of colonial Africa and Asia is thought of as prefiguring contemporary transnational research into the mutually constitutive relationship between Europe and its colonies (Grosse 2006; King and Stone 2007: 70).

I have mentioned Arendt's example here because the reception of her work in recent examples of transnational criticism points up very clearly some of the difficulties involved in ethically viable forms of comparative thinking, and in the notion of entangled history, especially when that thinking is made in the context of extreme events, and takes the form of an urgent attempt — by the witness to these events — to identify their antecedents and origins. While Arendt's argument concerning the connections between imperialism and totalitarianism is commended by many for its Benjamin-inspired constellations and its break with teleological historiography, it has also been criticised, by Michael Rothberg among others, for its moments of reversion into a frame of thought where Europe appears as the telos of a progressivist narrative and totalitarianism as a form of regression within the European space (Rothberg 2009: 33–65). Rothberg's criticism is interesting because it raises questions about the cognitive, heuristic, and ethical value of comparison within a diachronic framework; in narratives searching for causes and historical lines of connection. The difficulties involved in cross-temporal comparison may account for the synchronic, horizontal slant of current approaches to comparison; the network model that attends primarily to cross-spatial coordinates and whose claims with regard to historical connection and causality emphasise the fractured and the tentative.¹

Arendt was writing with great urgency in an attempt to account for extreme events, to think in a sustained manner about what she perceived as a descent into

¹ Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman make a similar point in their introduction to a *NLH* Special Issue on comparison (Felski and Friedman 2009).

barbarianism. The following discussion will not be occupied with her work, but with that of a writer whom one may be allowed to think of as one of her precursors. Leonard Woolf's writing in the 1930s is marked by a similar urgency and contains thoughts on the connections between imperialism and totalitarianism that anticipate Arendt's. Where Arendt turns to the archives (notably Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*) for her conceptions of colonialism, however, Woolf writes on the basis of his recollections as a servant and observer of colonial power, inspired by a genuine commitment to "reading histories of oppression in tandem rather than in isolation" (Ho 716); a comparative project, I argue, that is effectively enabled by his complex and contingent position as a witness.

"To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was'", writes Benjamin in "Theses on the Philosophy of History": "It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (Benjamin 255). In Benjamin's critical method the memory that "flashes up" functions as the dialectical image that disrupts the continuum of history, a monad "in which is crystallized all the tensions of the past, present, future together, at a standstill [*Stillstellung*]" (Benjamin 262-263). Woolf's historical project in the 1930s is less about disruption than about connections. When he seizes on memory at a time of crisis it is to establish chains of evidence, to dispel doubt, to furnish the reader with the facts necessary to adjudicate. Firstly, Woolf's fiction sets up global connections among histories of oppression by means of a range of comparative operations that enable his subsequent thinking on imperialism and international justice. Next, his 1930s historiography of totalitarianism develops the insights attained through the fiction, yoking together European anti-Semitism and imperialism in an entangled narrative that anticipates Hannah Arendt's analysis by two decades, and yet, like hers, founders in moments of contradiction and slippage. Despite the points of

similarity with Arendt, however, there are differences; things to learn about the work of the witness which I hope this turn to the archives will bring out.

Anti-Semitism and Colonialism: *The Village in the Jungle* and “Three Jews”

In July 1917, Virginia and Leonard Woolf announced the start of The Hogarth Press with *Two Stories* by Virginia and Leonard Woolf, illustrated with four woodcuts by Dora Carrington. Virginia’s story was “The Mark on the Wall”; Leonard’s story the much less technically sophisticated “Three Jews”, an ironic take on the figure of “the alien” in a national context of anti-foreign sentiment. Virginia’s biographer Hermione Lee calls “Three Jews” “a signpost pointing down a road [Leonard] would not take — as a fiction writer, a Jewish writer” (Lee 1999, 359). The story follows closely upon two novels written on his return from colonial service in Ceylon (1904–1911): *The Wise Virgins* (1915), which also examines what Janice Ho calls “the racially ambiguous status of Jews in the early twentieth century” (717) and *The Village in the Jungle* (1913), which draws upon anti-Semitic discourse to figure the colonial Other in the remote villages of Ceylon. One may wonder at Woolf’s decision to launch The Hogarth Press with a story about three Jews and at his preoccupation with the nature of Jewish identity on his return from Ceylon. On the other hand, it is not surprising that the colonial experience should sharpen his perceptions of what has been called “the transnational workings of raciology” (Gilroy 2000: 20). Writing *The Village in the Jungle* allowed Woolf to analyse and understand the oppressive consequences of imperialism and global capitalism for a community of people and especially for the most marginalised members of that community, the veddas and tamils. This was achieved by a novel whose narrative form enables close observation and imaginative sympathy with the victim. It also occurs by means of a transposition of discourses, where the indigenous population

is figured through European anti-Semitic discourse and the outcast protagonist depicted by means of the image of the suffering Jew and the scapegoat. What ensues from these operations is a transnational narrative that influenced Woolf's thinking on imperialism and international justice during the 1920s and on the events that led towards European totalitarianism in the 30s.

Set in the Hambantota district, the area that Woolf administered as an Assistant Government Agent during the last three years of his time in the country, the novel centres on life in a small village community of peasant-cultivators. The storyline shows how the chief protagonists, the hunter and cultivator Silindu and his family, fall victim to the plotting of the village headman Babehami and the debt-collector Fernando, whose positions in the colonial order allow them to manipulate the economic and bureaucratic machinery for their own ends. Silindu and his two daughters, Hinnihami and Punchi Menika, are scorned by the village population as Tamils and *veddas*, minority populations that were traditionally treated as inferior — a position, the novel shows, that was rendered even more precarious under imperialism. While in tribal society the rights of the individual and his influence upon the powerful were safeguarded by public opinion, imperialism intervenes into this balance, producing an oppressive order that breeds persecution and scapegoating. Life in the village is ruled by a system of credit, debt, and exploitation instituted and sanctioned by colonial authority. The local headmen have been given the right to issue taxes and licences for cultivation of crops — the so-called *chena* permits — along with gun licences for hunting and other vital documents. Through the intrigue surrounding these permits, the reader comes to understand the *chena* economy with its oppressive cycle of poverty, debt and exploitation, which benefits the middlemen, the headmen and moneylenders. As the novel explains:

The life of the village and of every man in it depended on the cultivation of *chenas*. A *chena* is merely a piece of jungle . . . The villagers owned no jungle themselves; it belonged to the Crown, and no one might fell a tree or clear a *chena* in it without a permit from the Government. It was through these permits that the headman had his hold upon the villagers. (27)

With the reaping of the *chenas* came the settlement of debts. With their little greasy notebooks full of unintelligible letters and figures, [the moneylenders] descended upon the *chenas*; and after calculations, wranglings and abuse, which lasted for hour after hour, the accounts were settled, and the strangers left the village. . . . In the end the villagers carried but little grain from his *chena* to his hut. (26)

The novel is not written in the form of testimony by an individual eyewitness. Instead, an unnamed narrative voice occupies perspectives from within and outside the colonised community. Douglass Kerr describes the omniscient narrative as Woolf's "compensatory fantasy" – compensating for the limited perspective and comprehension of the colonial administrator (Kerr 270). I choose to see the choice of narration as central to the novel's imaginative and analytical thinking. The omniscient narrative serves to put the reader in the position of adjudicator, placing the facts before her, while generating assent through the veracity and detail associated with the eyewitness account. Here the narrative draws on Woolf's extensive knowledge of the region, amassed through experience and observation in his capacity as administrator, adjudicator and magistrate, and on his studies of the languages and customs of the different ethnic and religious groups. The novel

incorporates indigenous beliefs, customs and tales, as well as oral forms and modes of address that imitate the local Sinhalese idiom (Gooneratne 2004; Goonetilleke 2007). Woolf's fluency in the Tamil and Sinhalese languages far exceeded the requirements of colonial administration, and he took great pride in his extensive knowledge of local history and culture. In the novel, transliterated Sinhalese words and other local linguistic features indicate a stance of embeddedness and interiority. Almost every sentence contains a Sinhalese word; local terms for plants, crops, implements and methods of cultivation, animals, diseases, time, space and distance, family relationships, religious beliefs, social roles and functions — all are rendered in the local language. New words are explained in approximate terms in footnotes and become part of the novel's vocabulary. The footnotes evoke the authority and veracity of ethnographic writing; the mediation of the informed observer. The result is a form of linguistic density, a thick representation, which constructs a world as far as possible from within.

The narrative technique also allows Woolf to stage his own role as sympathetic yet complicit observer. The plot against Silindu results in two court cases and one pre-trial examination during which the magistrate takes down Silindu's confession of murder. What is really on trial, as it turns out, is colonialism. The narrative consciousness occupies different minds, puts before the reader the perspectives of the judge – the role Woolf had himself taken in numerous court cases – and the accused. Moving between different perspectives, the omniscient narration exposes the limits and failures of colonialism through the failures of its legal system, and articulates the truth that slips away from the language and proceedings of the law. The elaborate set-up of Western law is described in detail: the lay-out of the room, the actors with their different roles and the carefully scripted, ritualised proceedings – all of which are intended to secure an

orderly and fair trial. But the charge is a fabrication, the evidence given incomplete and partly untrue. Throughout, communication is obstructed by mistranslation and misunderstanding. The accused do not understand the charges brought against them, and the judge, the white Hamadoru with his “impassive face” and “cat’s eyes” frightens them (119). Not much is said of the judge, except in glimpses caught by Babun and Silindu. At one point during the trial against Babun, however, with the narrative focalised via the judge, his doubt in the legal system is beginning to become apparent: “There was a curious look of pain in [Babun’s] face. The judge watched him in silence for some minutes, then he told the interpreter to call Silindu” (124). Called as a witness for the defense, Silindu fails to understand his role. He does not know what it means to testify in court. The judge’s attempts at cross-examination produce only more confusion rather than the evidence that would clear Babun of suspicion. Finally, the case is over and the judge reads out his verdict

in a casual indifferent voice, as if in some way it had nothing to do with him: ‘There is almost certainly something behind this case which has not come out. There is, I feel, some ill-feeling between complainant and accused. The complainant impressed me most unfavourably. But, the facts have to be considered . . .’ (126)

The ‘facts’, then, lead to what the judge himself knows is a miscarriage of justice, the false imprisonment of Babun. It also leads to the next act in Silindu’s tragedy. With Babun in prison, Silindu feels left with only one option to save his daughters from the plotting of Fernando and the headman: he kills his two enemies, then proceeds to confess his crime. Once more he is brought before the white Hamadoru, but this time in a pre-trial examination where his statement is taken down.

Observing “the hopelessness and suffering in Silindu’s face” (143), the magistrate speaks to him in Sinhalese and manages to gain his trust. Finally a meaningful conversation occurs in which the truth comes out – how Silindu and Babun had been trapped in debt and their livelihood taken away from them by their enemies. At last the judge comes to full recognition of the abuse and misappropriation of which they are victims and how this hinges on the colonial system, a connection the judge articulates for the benefit of the reader. The fact of the murder remains, however, and Silindu is sentenced to death by hanging in a higher court. Through this story the reader learns how the violent imposition of an irrelevant, misplaced and often malfunctioning bureaucratic machinery along with the workings of a blind global economy affect the village, destroying its economic foundation but equally important the most fundamental of its social mechanisms; the rule of public opinion as a safeguard against persecution and scapegoating. The result is victimisation, the tragedy of the doubly oppressed, and finally extinction, as the village is abandoned and left to the jungle.

As Dominic Davies has pointed out, the introduction of the *chena* system, with its conceptions of property alien to rural Ceylonese societies, was a direct consequence of Ceylon’s development into a plantation economy governed by the networks of colonial capitalism and global trade. Woolf’s novel uncovers the ramifications of these global imperial structures at the level of the local community and the individual life by depicting the life situation at the margins of an unevenly developed governmental apparatus, subject to a systemic corruption that exploits the poorest and most peripheral (Davies 2015). The conditions represented in the novel recall Lord Cromer’s description of British rule in Egypt as “a hybrid form of government to which no name can be given and for which there is no precedent”

(cited in Arendt 1976: 213).² For Arendt, Cromer's term captures "the peculiar state form that imperialism inaugurated, specifically the double-sided nature of local rule: its combination of contingent and absolute power — of 'despotism and arbitrariness' — that reflected neither popular will nor the interests of the metropole entirely" (Lee 2008, 71). Applied to Woolf's *Village*, the trope signifies the ruinous presence of the out-of-synch and the out-of-place in a narrative where images of modernity and empire coexist with a pre-modern world ruled by superstition, fatalism, and tradition, and where modern utilitarian rationality and capitalist economy function as ineffectual and violent impositions that rip apart the fabric of village life, its cultural institutions, and the rule of public opinion — all of which served as safeguards for the individual and the minority against mistreatment by the majority. The hybrid society for Woolf is far from the productive "Third Space" Homi Bhabha identifies by the concept (Bhabha 38), but nor is it bound up with a hierarchical and idealised "purity" of cultures. It is closely linked to Woolf's ideas of how in any society power, economics and ideas evolve in relation to each other, determining the social relations of the members of the community to one another and to the community as a whole. *The Village in the Jungle* describes a social order that has been violently disrupted by the imposition of elements that are radically out of place and out of synch, producing in its stead a hybrid condition beyond law, beyond government, where the exploiter is given free reign and where persecution and scapegoating are the order of the day. The trope recurs in Woolf's later writing as a conceptual and heuristic tool, not always explicitly named but indexed through examples of anachronism and mismatch. Reasoning by comparison and analogy, Woolf employs it to conceptualise the historical changes he witnesses during the 1930s.

² Lord Cromer was the British Consul General of Egypt in the years 1883–1907.

I have argued that Woolf's close observations and detailed knowledge of local cultural and economic conditions allowed him to present his analysis of structures of oppression in *The Village* and to inscribe it with the veracity and authority of the witness account. Did it matter that the witness in this case was a Jew? Yes, in part, because that subject position gave Woolf access to a conceptual and representational apparatus that enabled him to frame his observations in a transnational perspective that connects the European and the Asian contexts, discovering analogies among histories of oppression and racism. As Janice Ho has shown in a recent article, Woolf's representation of and solidarity with the colonial other are inseparably bound up with his Jewishness, the awareness of being part of a minority population in Britain that was systematically discriminated against. On the one hand, Woolf draws on familiar representational practices in European anti-Semitism, such as racial stereotypes of the hypersexual and degenerate Jewish body, in the narrative depictions of the indigenous population (Ho 715). On the other hand, he deploys the trope of the unjustly persecuted and suffering Jew in his depiction of Silindu, whose double victimisation, at the hands of his fellow villagers and through the machinery of colonial law, allows Woolf to interrogate the logic of scapegoating as it plays itself out in a community where communal law and public opinion have been suspended. The discursive transposition Ho describes does not involve or assume a one-to-one relationship between entities, but constitutes a form of relational, comparative thinking between languages and cultures. In the novel's textual politics, recognising and representing the other as "the Jew" is not a form of erasure of difference; it serves as a form of comparison that establishes analogies and global connections between histories of racial oppression, "between domestic discrimination and foreign domination" (Ho 719), opening up the possibility of reading one story in light of another within a perspective of solidarity and justice.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, Woolf's preoccupation with Jewishness, anti-Semitism and the position of the alien continued and evolved on his return from colonial service. In the semi-autobiographical *The Wise Virgins*, the young Jewish protagonist constructs an essentialist identity for himself based on a racial logic that seems, as observed by Janice Ho, to be largely produced by internalisation of anti-Semitic stereotypes, setting "Jewish corporeality" against "Christian ethereality" (Ho 715–16).) "Three Jews", by contrast, takes a more distant and ironic view. The story was written during World War One, at a time when the idea of the foreigner as enemy merged with the idea of the German and the Jew (Schröder 314), rendering the already ambiguous status of Jews in early twentieth-century Britain increasingly precarious. The story stages questions of Jewishness, foreignness, and assimilation through three first person narratives that turn on the essence of Jewish identity. Given the increasing secularization of Jews in Britain, the story asks, what remains to bind them together? The immediate answer appears to lie in externals: grotesquely exaggerated physical traits, habits of dress, patterns of speech — all in a satiric rendition that speaks to anti-Semitic stereotypes and Jewish self-hatred alike. Though the three narrators are differently placed on the spectrum of assimilation, they immediately recognise each other as foreign. The second Jew, himself a catalogue of these external markers, and still a religious sceptic, tells the story of the third Jew to demonstrate the continued existence of the "old spirit", which he claims resides in the Jew's Job-like acceptance of suffering. In an ironic twist of the story, however — clear to the reader if not to any of the narrators — it emerges that this Jewishness that is supposedly "like a rock" is changeable; pragmatically and cynically revised to be exchanged for a class-based (hence British) identity. "Three Jews" is clearly written by someone who is doubly alien; a story about being a stranger to the British

majority population but also to any notion of a shared “Jewishness,” whether grounded in ethnicity and race or in the historically shared endurance of suffering. More than a matter of identity politics, the suffering Jew in the short story; the alien with a fractured and tenuous relation to the nation, figures a position that Woolf was to return to in other contexts, as when he came to write about anti-Semitism in light of Nazi race-hygiene in 1935. Then it was the Jew as a figure beyond nation and delusions of race and blood that occupied him: “The Jew is an appropriate scapegoat because they have long ago abandoned tribal and racial delusions,” he writes in “A Note on Anti-Semitism” (Woolf 1935: 195).

Hermione Lee is right in saying that “Three Jews” marked the end of the road for the Jewish writer of fiction, though not the end for Woolf as a Jewish writer. Through his work in the 1920s and ‘30s, Woolf continued to make use of the transposition of discourses and the comparative thinking he had learned as a Jewish witness of European colonialism. As I have argued, *The Village in the Jungle* is remarkable as an early attempt to think in transnational terms, pointing out analogous contradictions in the project of modernity without reducing singularity and difference. What is of particular interest to me in the present enquiry, however, are the connections between the comparative operations set in motion by the colonial experience and another form of comparison: the cross-temporal and cross-spatial analogies that inform Woolf’s thinking on totalitarianism — in the form of nationalism, xenophobia, racial persecution and absolute power — in the late 1930s. My point is that for Woolf (as for Arendt) extreme situations — the encounter with colonialism and the emergence of totalitarianism — create an urgent need for sense making; for the bold and comprehensive narrative that identifies causalities and points to a way out of the crisis. Significantly, these are “grand” narratives that are produced through radical juxtapositions; a comparative

methodology that aims for the general and complete rather than the tentative and fractured, and that comes with considerable risks.

Imperialism and Totalitarianism: *Quack, Quack* (1935) and *Barbarians at the Gate* (1939)

An escalating sense of crisis is evident in Woolf's writing from the 1930s, not least in the genres he attempted: a "tract" and a "jeremiad." In 1939 he even wrote a *Lehrstück* — *The Hotel* — about the political machinations leading towards war, an experiment that indicates the felt urgency of his historiographical and didactic project. *Quack, Quack* and *Barbarians at the Gate* may be understood as two steps in this project, and as different examples of comparison as analytic and didactic method. *Quack, Quack* represents the most problematic form of comparison, where the slips critics identify in Arendt's narrative become most evident. The problematic aspect is evident already in the title: this is a tract against what Woolf terms quackery; the return in Western culture of unreason, superstition, the claim to inspired or absolute truth by the priest or king. In this narrative totalitarianism becomes a form of regression within the European space, figured through colonial discourse (Frazer) and his memories from Ceylon mediated through a colonial imaginary. Woolf is particularly interested in the origins of the modern psychology and technology of obedience: how modern mass culture and mass media function in the cultural process of regression by producing a hybrid culture of technological modernity combined with what he calls "the flag-waving, incantation, medicine-man frame of mind" (35). In order to account for this hybrid condition, he employs a montage of photographs of Hitler and Mussolini juxtaposed with effigies of Polynesian war-gods corresponding with Frazer's descriptions in *The Golden*

Bough of inspired leaders (priests or kings) in Polynesia. The point of the comparison is to show up the connections between the “political magic” of the fascist grand spectacle and the magical inspiration of the war-god. The psychology and technology of obedience are the same:

Listen to a speech by one of the Nazi leaders on the wireless or look at a photograph of Mussolini or Hitler addressing a meeting of their followers, and you will observe that inspiration in Rome or Berlin is the same as in Polynesia. The significant point is the psychological effect which the facial appearance is meant to produce. They are faces not of individual human beings but of the generalized emotions of the savage. Somehow or other the fascist leaders have contrived to get their emotions into the same mould.

(Woolf 1935: 47)

As another example of the modern hybrid condition, Woolf recalls a broadcast of the Nuremberg rally in September 1934, when for two or three hours, he listened to the transmission of the parade “in which 52,000 labour volunteers goose-stepped before Herr Hitler”. The “loud thud of human boots upon the earth”, accompanied by “the perpetual beating of a drum,”

carried me back to the everlasting tap of the tom-tom in a jungle village of Ceylon. . . . But the most remarkable thing was the voice of the announcer, its tones explained everything and showed that there was no question of mere interest or entertainment. It was the voice of a man . . . participating in a religious ceremony, a ritual dance of his tribe in the primeval jungle before his God incarnate in the person of his Chief. (Woolf 1935: 48–49)

What Woolf is recollecting here is the sound of bodies that have ceased to be human, metonymically reduced to the instruments of their ruler. From the age of mechanical reproduction he is transported back to the tom-tom of the jungle village. Strikingly, however, this is a primeval village, not the one he saw as he “tried vicariously to live their lives” (Woolf 1964: 47); not the hybrid culture of imperialism or the remnants of a tribal democracy he had observed and grasped through the lens of fiction. The place to which his memory has transposed him is that of a colonial imaginary, the spectacles of the “barely human”, the jungle, the rites, and the witchdoctor. The modern technology of obedience has carried him back to his own fear and incomprehension, to the ‘I’ of the letters, to the trauma of alienation and abjection unfolding itself all over again.

As I have indicated, however, Woolf’s 1930s writing also constructs a narrative that in many respects anticipates that of Arendt in identifying the origins of European totalitarian regimes in European racialism and imperialism. The prominent text in this historiography, *Barbarians at the Gate* (1939), styles itself as a jeremiad, “the lament for a lost civilization, the denunciation of barbarism” (Woolf 1939b, 9-10), in the manner of the Old Testament prototype. For the ancient Greeks, the barbarous, or barbarian, was literally one who babbled, who did not speak the language of civilised humanity. Woolf’s usage of the term is Marxist, as in Rosa Luxembour’s *Junius Brochure* (1915), which was the first to raise the concern that barbarism was a real possibility. “This world war leads to a reversion to barbarism. The triumph of imperialism leads to the destruction of culture,” writes Luxembour in 1915: “Thus we stand today . . . before the awful proposition: depopulation, desolation, degeneration, a vast cemetery (cited in Spencer 2006, 529). When Arendt made her attempt to think in a sustained way about barbarism in

Origins, the term was used to signify the same constellation of elements: world war, imperialism, and nationalism (Spencer 2006, 531-32). In his usage, however, Woolf, combines Marxist with Freudian ideas, making “barbarian” signify part social structure, part individual and group psychology. The barbarian, in this narrative, is not the other at the gates; it is the other within. “The control or sublimation of instincts is always an essential part of civilization”, writes Woolf, with reference to *Civilization and its Discontents*:

The immediate satisfaction of the simple and primitive instincts is characteristic of those forms of society which are the antithesis of civilization and which we may call barbarism. The barbarian is, therefore . . . always within. In times of storm and stress his appeal is particularly strong (Woolf 1939b, 83).

In Woolf’s Marxist paradigm, “barbarian” designates the master–slave society: the society that defines some as less than human and that is ruled on principles of blind obedience, fear, and persecution. Constructing a narrative of European culture as always already inhabited by the barbarian, he urges the reader to recall historical examples of societies that have rested upon and included within themselves large populations of “uncivilized beings”, “savage animals — and yet men”: the nineteenth-century urban hordes, the medieval serfs, and so on (Woolf 1939b: 85). Further, he presents samplings from the cultural archive to unsettle binaries and make his point — a historiography of montage and the constellation that involves reading Alfred Tennyson’s Victorian war poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade” against Pericles’s epitaph for the Athenians killed in battle, as a case of the psychology and language of slavery.

For Woolf, both types of barbarism — psychological and social — were given free rein, indeed a new lease of life, with European imperialism. Recounting the history of violence, like the atrocities of Denshawai and Congo,³ perpetrated by states and individuals in the name of imperialism, he reads jingoism and imperialism in Freudian terms as a failure to sublimate primitive instincts; as the psychology of persecution founded upon hatred and the inferiority complex. At the same time, he takes pains to construct a narrative establishing causalities that largely concur with the Marxist view: that economic imperialism, and the nationalist and social Darwinist sentiments associated with it, caused World War I and the further descent into barbarian behaviour it represented. From this point on, however, Woolf's historiography departs from, or in his own terms attempts to correct, the dominant Marxist one. Where the official Marxist narrative of the rise of fascism reads it as a stage in the class war, Woolf urges that we supplement the Marxist insistence on economic causes with an understanding of the socio-political mechanisms that permitted the change in Germany from a civilised to a brutalised society. What he wants to understand are the conditions that allowed Hitler to take power and that transformed Germany from a civilized into a barbarian nation. He does that by analogising different kinds of violent incursion into a social order. Strikingly, in this argument, the colony — his recollections of Ceylon as well as the analysis of the hybrid community he presents in *The Village in the Jungle* — appears as a heuristic device: a small-scale model that allows him to demonstrate the effects of such a violent incursion.

³ For many European contemporaries, the names Denshawai and Congo conjured all the worst horrors of colonialism. The first refers to a violent confrontation in 1906 between residents of the Egyptian village and British military officers, to which the British responded with harsh exemplary measures. Following a summary trial, unusually cruel sentences of public hanging, flogging, and hard labour were inflicted, leading to a public outcry at home. The well-documented atrocities committed under Belgian rule in the Congo Free State were often referred to by European contemporaries as the “Congo Horrors.”

In order to understand the “delusions of the civilized” that has caused the rise of fascism, Woolf proposes to take a brief look at the anatomy of a “primitive” society. A principle of civilised community, he points out, is that the happiness of the individual and of all are mutually dependent. In this sense, tribal society is democratic; it may be founded upon superstition and magic, but the rights of the individual and his influence upon power are safeguarded by tribal public opinion. Imperialism intervened into this balance in indigenous society, destroying tribal opinion by imposition of European standards of value, producing a society of contradictions ruled by relations of masters and slaves. The hybrid world Woolf depicts in *Village* and again in *Barbarians* represents a stage in this destruction of society:

I have myself watched this phase of individual and social psychology, and the dislocation of communal life accompanying it, in remote villages scattered through the jungles of Ceylon; no one who has observed it carefully could doubt that ideas, unconnected with power and economics, can have a profound effect upon the structure and working of a simple society. (Woolf 1939b: 114)

For Woolf the use of brute force towards Germany by the allies, evidenced in the Versailles Treaty and post-war policies, should be understood as analogous to their violent incursions into subject countries, and as key to the change in Germany from a civilised to a hybrid and brutalised society. Similarly, he argues, the seizure of power by Hitler and the Nazis was initially “just like” the violent incursion of a European state into African or Asian territory; “a transaction in direct communal power” (Woolf 1939b: 119). The hybrid condition that ensues is evidenced, for

instance, in the German economic system, which “today is no longer capitalist but a hybrid economic system: capitalism and state socialism blended to serve non-economic objects in a master–slave society” (Woolf 1939b: 137).

One may object to the empirical gaps and lacunae in Woolf’s argument both here and elsewhere. What is more interesting than the ins and outs of the narrative is the extent to which it realises a transnational project of cross-temporal and cross-spatial comparison. As I have shown, the progressively extreme events of the 1930s instigated an urgent sense-making project, a search for origins and antecedents, and an almost compulsive narrative activity in which comparison was the prominent cognitive and heuristic methodology. Comparison took different forms:

photographic montage aiming to break out of established frames of thought, as well as normative, progressivist narratives in which the narrative telos is the society that realizes the ideals of Athens and of Marx. With the Freudian interpretive paradigm two temporalities are introduced: regression and reversion to savagery on the one hand; repetition and the compulsion to repeat on the other. What leads to the complications and moments of slippage in Woolf’s narratives is in part that the colony appears as a heuristic device in both temporal frames. In the comparative operations of *Barbarians*, if not in the idiosyncratic montage of *Quack, Quack*, there can be little doubt that the comparison with the colony arises from a genuine wish to see one situation, one history of violent intervention and repression, in light of another. Different from Arendt’s boomerang thesis, Woolf’s story is not so much about the de-civilising effects of the colonial enterprise as about the inherent barbarism of Western culture; the failure of repression and the compulsion to repeat that causes the hybrid master–slave societies of imperialism and Nazi Germany alike. In that respect it is an act of memory that locates the rise of “totalitarianism”

within a global geography that recalls the mutually constitutive relationship between Europe and its colonies.

My turn to the archive in this essay was motivated by a wish to learn more about the work of the witness and to bring a historical perspective to bear on current critical approaches to comparison as a fundamental cognitive practice with ethical as well as heuristic implications. In transnational and global paradigms of thought, the desire to release comparison from hierarchical and teleological (progressivist) frames has led to the current dominance of the network or other horizontal and lateral models, with their often tentative and fractured connections between coordinates. As we have seen, however, there are times when the fragmented and localised *petit récit* is not enough. Arendt and Woolf's grand narratives were both composed with the urgency of the witness to extreme events, and both have things to teach us about the intellectual and ethical potential as well as the risks of cross-temporal comparison. What is unique in Woolf's case, I believe, is the experiential grounding of the narrative he was able to compose as he watched the rise in nationalism, xenophobia, racial persecution and absolute power in 1930s' Europe. The comparative project he realises in *Barbarians at the Gate* is enabled by his complex and contingent position as a witness to colonial oppression, and, significantly, by his processing of this experience through the medium of fiction. The dialogic space of the novel, with its accommodation of voices and perspectives, its transliteration, translation and transposition of languages, allowed him to arrive at a fuller understanding of the trope of the hybrid and to reflect on his own subject position within different hierarchies. It set in motion a reflexive and relational thinking that turns on analogy and comparison, on similarity and difference; a cognitive and ethical practice that forms the basis for future interventions in matters

of power, ethnicity and race, and especially for his figuration of totalitarianism and its colonial origins.

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