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Author: Susan Reid

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REVIEW ESSAY

**ON NOT MENTIONING THE WAR:
VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *NIGHT AND DAY* AND
D. H. LAWRENCE'S WARTIME WRITING**

SUSAN REID

Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day* (The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Virginia Woolf), ed. Michael H. Whitworth. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. cxiii + 745. £85.00 (hardcover). ISBN 978 0 5218 7895 1

In September 1919, Lawrence drafted a Foreword to his then unpublished *Women in Love* (1920), explaining that “it is a novel which took its final shape in the midst of the period of war, though it does not concern the war itself. I should wish the time to remain unfixed, so that the bitterness of the war may be taken for granted in the characters” (WL 485). A month later, in October 1919, Virginia Woolf published her second novel, *Night and Day*, also written during the War and making no mention of it. Katherine Mansfield privately criticised her friend for this omission in a letter to John Middleton Murry, complaining that “The war has never been, that is what its message is” (qtd. lxiv). Mansfield’s review (published by Murry in the *Athenaeum*) refers more cryptically, by way of a comparison of the book with a docked ship, to its “strange ... aloofness, her air of quiet perfection, her lack of any sign that she has made a perilous voyage, the absence of any scars” (qtd. lxiii) – which we might interpret as an implied absence of war wounds. Mansfield’s review, as Michael Whitworth notes in his Introduction to the new Cambridge Edition of *Night and Day*, “most influentially set the terms for subsequent critical discussion” (lxiii), but is her criticism fair? Leonard Woolf, reading a draft of

his wife's novel, was struck by its "melancholy" (liv), a word used seventeen times in its published version.¹ To what extent is her novel's melancholic, even elegiac, atmosphere, like the "bitterness" conveyed by Lawrence in *Women in Love*, a symptom of the First World War?

On reflection, these two novels share other fundamental features. Like *Women in Love*, *Night and Day* has much to say about love, through a series of intersecting love triangles which challenge the nineteenth-century marriage plot. Both are also preoccupied by the role of the artist in the modern world; Lawrence dealing with a plethora of "Painters, musicians, writers—hangers-on, models, advanced young people" (WL 60), while Woolf is concerned primarily with writers. Her heroine, Katharine Hilbery, however, has "no aptitude for literature. She did not like phrases ... She was, on the contrary, inclined to be silent; she shrank from expressing herself in talk, let alone writing" (38). Her counterpart in *Women in Love*, Rupert Birkin, though garrulous has a similar disregard for language, repeatedly questioning whether words "matter" and emphasising that life "must happen beyond the sound of words" (WL 250). This anti-literary stance may seem counter-intuitive for a writer of any period, but the War may well be relevant here. Birkin's early statement that "Humanity is a dead letter" (WL 59) reflects Lawrence's deepening despair with the old world that led to the War, while Katharine is driven to escape the literally "dead letter" of her grandfather, the belated Romantic poet Richard Alardyce.

The Hilbery home is a shrine to their ancestor's memory, where Katharine spends much of her days assisting her mother's chaotic attempts to write a biography of the dead poet that seems destined never to be finished. She leaves the house at every opportunity (often at night) and becomes engaged to William Rodney in the hope of leaving permanently. Rodney is an aspiring writer, and so is her other suitor Ralph Denham, who eventually prevails. One wonders, then, whether this constitutes a happy ending for the non-literary Katharine. Moreover, the lovers' final scene takes place

outside the flat of Mary Datchet, a woman with whom Katharine has shared an erotically charged silence while Mary “fingered the fur on the skirt” of Katharine’s dress (293). *Women in Love* ends more literally on a question of whether conventional marriage is “enough”, as Birkin argues with Ursula (and himself) about his unresolved desire for “a man friend, as eternal as you and I are eternal” (WL 481).

Katharine’s prosaic nature and the ostensibly realist style of *Night and Day* can be construed as a backlash against romance and literary Romanticism. The cover of the Cambridge Edition summarises *Night and Day* as “A romantic comedy in which the central characters have a distinctly unromantic disposition”. Akin to Birkin in *Women in Love*, Katharine resists conventional marriage and prefers “star-like impersonality” (40), as both novels write towards a modernist style that remains rooted in realism but eschews the conventions of romance and Romanticism.² *Women in Love*, which goes further in that direction, cemented Lawrence’s place in the canon of literary modernism, while *Night and Day* plays a similar role in Woolf’s oeuvre as *Sons and Lovers* (1913) in Lawrence’s, by exploring the boundaries of realist fiction in ways that anticipate her subsequent novels *Jacob’s Room* (1922) and *Mrs Dalloway* (1925).

With *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf achieved her canonical status as a modernist writer of the city, but London was already a major character in *Night and Day*, representing a dream of a bygone era before the nightmare of the War. However, in her later novel, London becomes integral to Septimus Smith’s war-induced hallucinations, mirroring a breakdown that Lawrence’s *Kangaroo* (1922) perceived within the entire city: “In the winter of 1915–1916 the spirit of the old London collapsed, in some way, perished, perished from being a heart of the world, and became a vortex of broken passions, lusts, hopes, fears, and horrors” (K 216). The trauma of the War took time for writers to process, as evidenced by the war books boom of the late 1920s, and though *Women in Love*

was an early exemplar, Lawrence's writing of the following decade, like Woolf's, was a repeated reworking of that trauma.³

Whitworth's working assumption is that *Night and Day* "is set somewhere in the period 1909 to 1912", but his informative explanatory notes on the text of the Cambridge Edition also take account of "the histories of places and people" up to the date of publication (541). Among many interesting contexts, he excavates some that reveal the impact of the War. For instance, he notes how the novel's first of many references to street lamps – "The street lamps were being lit" – evokes the now-famous phrase "The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our life-time", but points out that this was not widely known before 1925 (583 n.81:31). More important here are the war-time regulations under the Defence of the Realm Act that required the extinguishment of lights and evidence that "The difference to the appearance of the city struck V[irginia] W[oolf] strongly". This background adds poignancy to the novel's title in that the contrast between night and day would have been much more marked in wartime London. Additionally, several important scenes in the novel, which take place on the night-time streets of the city, would have been impossible, including the denouement in which the lovelorn Ralph Denham, who has stood vigil under a lamp-post outside Katharine's house, is finally united with his beloved:

How they came to find themselves walking down a street with many lamps, corners radiant with light, and a steady succession of motor-omnibuses plying both ways along it, they could neither of them tell ... But standing on the pavement alone, this exaltation left them; they were glad to be alone together. Ralph stood still for a moment to light his pipe beneath a lamp.

She looked at his face isolated in the little circle of light. (532)

This rare moment of connection prefigures the famous Woolfian epiphany evoked in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) as "little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark".⁴

The ‘Time Passes’ section of that novel, which deals with the War and the war death of Andrew Ramsay, also refers to the extinguishment of lamps: “So with the lamps all put out, the moon sunk, and a thin rain drumming on the roof, a downpouring of immense darkness began”.⁵

Lawrence’s poem ‘Street Lamps’ – drafted c. 1909–11 and revised for publication in *Look! We Have Come Through!* in 1917 (described by Holly Laird in her essay in this number of *JDHLS*) – also registers the nostalgia of pre-war London nights. His poem opens with a lyrical description of the lamps as “Gold, with an innermost speck / Of silver, singing afloat / Beneath the night”, then moves to a comparison of night and day, in which day is defeated: “No sun will ever rise / Again on the wonted skies / In the midst of the spheres” (*IPoems* 207). The natural imagery of light as “balls of thistle-down” and “seeds” that “wander” and “wend” over the town thus incorporates the melancholy of decay and purposelessness, which builds to a sense that “the end is begun”. The poem culminates with metaphors of darkness and death that suggest the menace of War:

Darkness, and depth of sleep,
 Nothing to know or to weep
 Where the seed sinks in
 To the earth of the under-night
 Where all is silent, quite
 Still, and the darknesses steep
 Out all the sin. (*IPoems* 208)

The comfort of street lamps and ominous passage into darkness, here and as suggested in Woolf’s *Night and Day*, may owe something to H. G. Wells’s pre-War novel *Tono-Bungay* (1909), which famously concludes with a destroyer passing down the Thames while “Light after light goes down. England and the Kingdom, Britain and the Empire, the old prides and the old devotions, glide abeam, astern, sink down upon the horizon, pass—

pass. The river passes—London passes, England passes”.⁶ It is curious in this respect that Mansfield compared *Night and Day* to a ship, although that may be a gesture to the setting of Woolf’s first novel *The Voyage Out* (1915), which also evokes a Wellsian tone in its opening description of the Thames: “The river, which had a certain amount of troubled yellow light in it, ran with great force; bulky barges floated down swiftly escorted by tugs; police boats shot past everything; the wind went with the current”.⁷ Woolf was a grudging admirer of Wells, despite her oft-quoted comments in ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’ (1924), and there is even a place called Bungay in *Night and Day*. (As Whitworth notes this is in fact a town in Suffolk which is curiously unrelated to Woolf’s plot [593 n.105:18]). Lawrence was enthusiastic about *Tono-Bungay* when it was serialised in the *English Review* in 1909 (*IL* 119), and Wells’s novel may have influenced his depiction of London in other of his wartime poems, such as the two ‘Embankment at Night, Before the War’ poems, published in *New Poems* (1918).

The composer, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Woolf’s cousin by marriage, was directly inspired by Wells’s description of the destroyer’s passage down the Thames as “movement[s] in the London symphony” to compose his own soundscape from what he called “the noise and scurry” of pre-War London.⁸ He called this his *London Symphony*, premiered in 1914. A powerful elegy to the prewar city, its original uncut version conveys apprehensions of darkness and impending destruction, and its coda is a slow, ominous fade into silence. Woolf knew her cousin’s work, but there is unlikely to be direct influence here – or in Lawrence’s writing.⁹ However, there are remarkable parallels with the thematic use of silence that critics have already noted in both *Night and Day* and *Women in Love*. I will simply underline the recurrence of “silent” and/or “silence” 186 times in 538 pages of *Night and Day* and on almost every page of *Women in Love*, which Peter Preston identifies as a trope related to the War.¹⁰ While silence came to signify death in Lawrence’s collection of war poems, *Bay* (1920),¹¹

the city's stillness, like its street lamps, was also extinguished by "the awful noise and the excitement" of Zeppelin raids (K 216).

The Cambridge Edition of *Night and Day* was published in the final centenary year of the War and in time for the centenary of the novel's first publication. This fifth volume in a planned series of twelve also coincided with the completion of the 40-volume Cambridge Edition of the Works of D. H. Lawrence (the subject of a review essay in this number of *JDHLS*). The Cambridge Woolf will comprise her ten novels, the collected short fiction and *A Room of One's Own*. This is a fraction of her total output that includes six volumes of essays, six volumes of letters, five volumes of diaries, *The Life of Roger Fry* and book-length essay *Three Guineas* (all available in other editions). Yet the series editors are to be congratulated on this overdue project, and Michael Whitworth for his timely and meticulous contribution to Woolf scholarship.

¹ Based on a search of the Kindle edition of Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day* (A Public Domain Book).

² For an analysis of the relationship between realism and romance in literary modernism see Chris Baldick, *The Modern Movement, Volume 10: 1910-1940* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), 212-9.

³ See Andrew Frayn's illuminating comparison of Lawrence and Woolf in Chapter 3 of *Writing Disenchantment: British First World War Prose, 1914-30* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2014), 119-62.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, ed. Stella McNichol (London: Penguin, 1992), 176.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁶ H. G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay*, *English Review*, vol. 1.4, 790.

⁷ Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, ed. Lorna Sage (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 8.

⁸ Wells, *Tono-Bungay*, 288; Anthony Arblaster, "'A London Symphony' and 'Tono-Bungay'", *Tempo* 163, 21-5. See also Susan Reid, *D. H. Lawrence, Music and Modernism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 153-5.

⁹ Woolf attended performances of Vaughan Williams's pre-War work and also had some gramophone recordings, but questioned whether he "is a great composer? If so, why does he sound so dull?": Emma Sutton,

Virginia Woolf and Classical Music: Politics, Aesthetics, Form (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013), 113, 11, 116. Woolf thus echoes the opinion of Phillip Heseltine (Peter Warlock), composer and friend of Lawrence, who likened Vaughan Williams's *Pastoral Symphony* to "a cow looking over a gate".

¹⁰ Based on a search of the Kindle edition of Woolf, *Night and Day*; Peter Preston, "'Beyond the sound of words": Speech and Silence in *Women in Love*', in *Working with Lawrence: Texts, Places, Contexts* (Nottingham: CCCP, 2011), 58–71. See also Reid, *D. H. Lawrence, Music and Modernism*, 159–62; and Patricia Ondek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1991).

¹¹ See for example Reid, *D. H. Lawrence, Music and Modernism*, 160–2.