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From Alienation to Fictionality: Writing Depersonalization as High Modernism Turns

Late

This article argues for the significance of modernist fiction to the history of depersonalization, a psychiatric concept that describes the feeling of estrangement or detachment from one's own thoughts, feelings, sensations, body, or actions. It also suggests that reading modernism with a focus on depersonalized experience helps to distinguish "high" from "late" modernism, and to nuance existing critical understandings of the latter term. It begins by looking to the personal journal and psychoanalytic studies of Edith Jacobson, making the case that Jacobson's work exemplifies a persistent tendency to relate and conflate depersonalization with a more familiar term in literary studies, alienation. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* is then found to anticipate and extend Jacobson's work by exploring the degree to which depersonalization derives from alienation, and considering aesthetic experience as a way of negotiating both. Next, through readings of Woolf's *Between the Acts* and Samuel Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*, the article argues that late modernist engagements with depersonalization turn away from questions of alienation and instead foreground those of fictionality. These readings challenge established critical views of late modernism that emphasize its (outward) turn from epistemological questions of the mind, or associate it with post-war linguistic negativism. Ultimately a focus on depersonalization produces a formally self-conscious late modernism that explores a narrow space between fictionality and reality, as well as the sense in which the self is fictional.

On the 24 October 1935, the psychoanalyst Edith Jacobson was confined in a Nazi prison on account of activity within the anti-fascist group *Neu Beginnen*. Though, as she would later note,¹ the situation of political prisoners in Germany at this moment was not so dire as it would shortly become, it was undoubtedly still a terrifying one. Indeed, in her prison notebook, the sudden shock of confinement is described as producing an intense experience of depersonalization:

All feels unreal, everything sounds distant, and one's own language is foreign. An increase in the feeling of depersonalisation is associated with severe fear. I touch face, body, limbs, experience them as foreign (the feeling is completely shifted to the touching hand), while the touched body zone is almost insensitive. (Jacobson qtd. in Kessler 1161)

Depersonalization, the feeling of estrangement or detachment from one's own thoughts, feelings, sensations, body, or actions (American Psychiatric Association), was

a well-established psychological concept by the time of Jacobson's imprisonment. The concept derived from another personal journal, that of Swiss poet and scholar Henri-Frédéric Amiel,² but Amiel's coinage quickly found its way into psychiatric discourse, through the now-little-known psychiatrist Ludovic Dugas. And, as psychoanalysis emerged as a prominent mode of discussing human subjectivity in the early twentieth century, depersonalization was related to intrapsychic, Freudian models of mind by figures such as Clarence Oberndorf.³

Jacobson is likely to have been thinking of the works of analysts like Oberndorf as she journaled her depersonalized experience in 1935, and she would draw on their theories when she came to publish her own theory of depersonalization decades later in 1959. Her work on depersonalization, though, departs from that of earlier analysts in framing it as a collective response to a specific historical situation. She specifies that it was instances of interrogation that brought about depersonalization in the prisoners. To successfully navigate a "battle of wits" with prosecutors in interrogation sessions, Jacobson suggests, prisoners tended to "deliberately. . . get into a cold state of detachment" that "certainly came rather close to depersonalization" ("Depersonalization" 586). However, after the conclusion of the sessions, the legacy of this strategy was felt, as a cultivated, pseudo-depersonalization gave way to uncontrolled and unpleasant depersonalization proper:

Prisoners would wake up at night with feelings that their limbs or their face did not belong to them. They would anxiously touch the estranged body parts, trying to recover the feeling of intactness of their body self. During the day they would be suddenly overcome by frightening experiences of psychic self-estrangement; with feelings of being outside their self and of watching themselves think, talk, or act, as though they were another person, and the like. (587)

Emphasizing intrapsychic tension, early twentieth-century psychoanalysis tended to position depersonalization within what Orna Guralnik and Daphne Simeon term the “hermetically sealed classical self” (404). Jacobson’s article takes a step away from this approach in foregrounding the social processes that induce experiences of depersonalization.

In this article, I read a series of modernist texts alongside the mid-twentieth-century psychological discourse on depersonalization to which Jacobson contributes.⁴ Doing so reveals the important place of literary modernism in the history of depersonalization discourse, and reframes the relationship between “high” and “late” modernism. Modernism occupies an awkward space in the (somewhat under wrought)⁵ literary history of depersonalization. Clearly, experiences of depersonalization were registered in nineteenth-century fiction, as curious, novel and sad cases began to emerge in psychological literature.⁶ And, moving towards the contemporary moment, in which depersonalization has become an established diagnostic term and Depersonalization Derealization Disorder a recognized psychiatric condition, literary writers and artists narrativize and diagnose the experience with reasonable frequency. How, though, does one position depersonalization within the modernist period and in relation to literary modernist texts? Well, to consider depersonalization within the period is by no means anachronistic. As we have seen, the term was prominent in early to mid-century psychoanalysis, and it was also being introduced in popular periodicals such as the *Review of Reviews* (“What is Depersonalisation?”). However, though depersonalized experience is detectable in a range of modernist texts, the term rarely surfaces in the texts themselves or in the critical literature on modernism.

This may be explained by the degree to which depersonalization is associated with a more prominent term in modernist studies, alienation. Modernist studies has often treated literary accounts of depersonalization through the lens of alienation,⁷ and psychological writers often cover alienation through the language of depersonalization. To exemplify the latter point, we might return to Jacobson's article. If alienation is understood in terms of an individual's sense of disconnection from their environment, culture or social place, the depersonalized experience of Jacobson's prisoners clearly works alongside a sense of alienation from their newfound social identities as "criminals." Their episodes of depersonalization are eventually counteracted by addressing their sense of alienation—through the building of a discrete community of political prisoners:

They would introduce a firm, ethical code of behavior, and especially encourage reading, intellectual work and any type of sublimation. Among the many rules, those stood out which aimed to promote bodily cleanliness and neatness, to curb oral greed, to insist on sharing of food and other privileges, to develop kind mutual relations. (Jacobson, "Depersonalization" 592)

How does this social code safeguard against negative depersonalized experience?

These political prisoners, Jacobson reasons, had lived as respectable citizens for most of their lives; their heightened depersonalization derived from an ambivalent response to suddenly being degraded as criminal. Depersonalization, as she puts it, "appears to be the pathological result of a conflict within the ego, between the part that has accepted and the part that attempts to undo identification with a degraded object image" (591). Operating as an ethical collective helped to ward off the part of the ego that identified with criminal status, building a bridge between their pre-existent selves and current social activity.

Attending to literary modernism's engagement with depersonalized experience shows the degree to which literary writers anticipated Jacobson's mid-century social approach to depersonalization. In the first part of this article, I will look to a central figure of high modernism, Virginia Woolf.⁸ Reading *Mrs Dalloway's* (1925) narratives of depersonalization alongside nineteenth-century realist and naturalist representations, I will suggest that the case studies of high modernism draw a connection between experiences of depersonalization and the type of alienation that Jacobson describes.

Depersonalization and alienation, however, do not need to be connected. Alienation tends to be understood as a state of disconnection between private self and social or economic action. Thus, in the Marxist formulation, the alienated worker experiences "his own activity as something which is alien and does not belong to him" (Marx). Depersonalization is much more episodic than this, often being experienced as a momentary response to a particular set of psychophysiological conditions. For this reason, German-British psychiatrist Wilhelm Mayer-Gross (1935) influentially suggested that "we can put depersonalization as a preformed functional response such as the epileptic fit" (119). And, while episodes of depersonalized experience frequently occur for people who feel alienated, you can certainly feel alienated without experiencing severe depersonalization, or have frequent episodes of depersonalization without feeling particularly disconnected from your environment, culture or identity.

Late modernist approaches to depersonalization are distinguished by their attempt to consider depersonalized experience apart from alienation. Such a departure manifests in Woolf's later novel, *Between the Acts* (1941). Here, case studies of alienated minds and depersonalized experience are interrupted by a concern with

fictionality. We are made conscious of the possibility that characters' experiences of depersonalization are being authored by other characters. And a moment of collective depersonalization is brought about by characters getting caught between the fiction of the pageant around which the novel is structured, and their own "real" lives. This is more fully developed in the late modernism of Samuel Beckett, particularly *The Unnamable* (1953) and *Texts for Nothing* (1959). These works retain a modernist concern with alienation but are more expressly interested in the boundaries and overlaps between self-conscious fictionality and depersonalization. They are distinguished by a capacity to give voice (often simultaneously) to human subjects who feel unreal, and self-consciously fictional subjects who cannot escape the possibility that they might exist in the flesh.

Ultimately, then, the article draws a distinction between high and late modernism in terms of scope and aims. High modernism focuses on the degree to which depersonalized experience emerges out of alienation. Late modernism places more emphasis on the aesthetic power that resides between fictionality and depersonalization. Such a contrast might be seen to frame high modernism as a very ambitious socio-cultural project and late modernism as a narrower, formalist one. But late modernist fiction's self-conscious formalism holds an important place in helping us to understand depersonalized experience and the modern sense of self. In recent years, literary studies has seen a renewed interest in the quasi-immersive nature of fiction.⁹ In Patricia Waugh's (2016) formulation, prose fiction prompts its reader to take "on the feeling of the real even as it announces, in various ways, its fictionality" (36). There is a comparison to be drawn between this account of literary experience and the prevalent phenomenological account of depersonalization. Whilst the subject of literary

experience gets a feeling of reality from what they know to be a storyworld, the subject of depersonalization gets a feeling of unreality from what they recognize as their lived experience. Self-conscious about its own status as fiction, late modernism asks what depersonalization's feelings of unreality might tell us about fiction's feelings of reality, and vice versa. High modernism anticipated mid-century psychology's drive to consider the connection between depersonalized experience and social alienation; late modernism points towards a more recent understanding of depersonalization that is based around the fictionality of the self.

Modernist Alienation and the Nineteenth-Century Case Study

In the later part of the nineteenth century, cases of depersonalization began to be fictionalized by anglophone writers. A starting point for this is the work of Mary Augusta Ward, who translated Amiel's *Journal Intime* into English and professed to have adapted Amiel into the fictional form of Edward Langham, in her wildly popular novel *Robert Elsmere* (1888). Ward is the first of a series of nineteenth-century writers to associate depersonalized experience with troubled and often villainous individuals. Echoing Amiel, Langham characterizes himself as "spectre among the active" who has lost his capacity to feel (Ward 217), and his experience is pathologized as "one of those many morbid growths of which our nineteenth century psychology is full" (218). He is also cast as a caddish aesthete who leads on female protagonist Rose, tasting the experience of romantic love in a Paterian mode, before withdrawing into obscurity to leave her crestfallen. Such characterization is replicated and extended in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1892) and to a greater extent, George Moore's *Celibates* (1895). In addition to their Amielian depersonalized experience, the characters

foregrounded in these works (Dorian Gray; John Norton; Mildred Lawson) are bound by a tendency to form relationships only to retreat from them abruptly, leaving appreciable emotional damage in their wake.

High modernist writers rarely vilify the subjects of depersonalized experience in the manner of the writers of the fin de siècle, but they do take on the interest in connecting depersonalization with alienation and aestheticism. To differing extents, Edward Langham, Dorian Gray, John Norton and Mildred Lawson are alienated from their society's expectations regarding gender and sexuality; their stories explore how this alienation is navigated through a turn to aesthetics. In this way, they anticipate the modernist cases of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith. Mildred Lawson of *Celibates*, for example, feels a sense of estrangement from the path of normative womanhood that she is expected to follow, setting out to pursue the artistic avenues that are open to her. With this aesthetic exploration leaving her just as cold as the prospect of a homely marriage and motherhood, she turns to a series of fleeting romances only to retreat from the men with whom she has interacted, putting it to herself that "life, even as art, had been refused to her," and doubting that she could love "as other women loved" (Moore 104). As the story concludes, she attributes the ruination of her "love stories" to an immutable and inflexible self: "not a great unconscious self, in other words an instinct, but an extremely conscious, irritable, mean, and unworthy self. She knew it all, she was not deceived. She could no more cheat herself than she could change herself" (111).

This overarching narrative of a stable, alienated self is in step with a more episodic narrative of depersonalized experience. On hearing of the impending death of

one of her love interests, Ralph Hoskin, Mildred reacts: “He was dying, and for her, yet she felt nothing. Not only were her eyes dry, but her heart was too” (47). In pursuit of authentic grieving, she goes to a park where she once walked with Ralph:

That day the park was submerged in blue mist, and shadows fell from the island into the lake, still as death; and the birds, moving through the little light that lingered on the water, seemed like shadows, strange and woe-begone. It was too strange for tears. . . . How sad it all was. But she did feel sorry for him, she really was sorry, though she wasn’t overcome with grief. (92)

The world feels strange and unreal to Mildred, as do her own feelings. This sense of unreality and alienation becomes more pronounced at the story’s conclusion as Mildred’s adventures come to an end and she is coerced into a loveless marriage to Alfred Stanby. Here, she throws off her gown and tries to weep in the manner of a sentimental heroine, but finds herself ashamed of her grief: “For she was quite conscious of its seeming artificiality. Yet it was all quite real to her, only not quite as real as she would have had it be” (110). In Moore’s story, episodes of depersonalization are woven into a larger narrative of alienation; they are momentary manifestations of a self estranged from the gendered roles that are available to her.

In her portrayal of Clarissa Dalloway, Woolf works with many of the elements that cohere in the texts of Ward, Wilde and Moore. Brought together in Clarissa are a sense of estrangement from social place, depersonalized experience, and a preoccupation with the aesthetic. However, within the high modernist text, these elements cohere in a different way. Some of the most famous passages from *Mrs Dalloway* cover the alienation of the eponymous protagonist from her social being as an upper-middle class wife and mother. As she walks through London, Clarissa reflects on how she does things “not simply, not for themselves; but to make people think this or that,” and on her potential lives outside of “this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa

any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway” (Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 9). Such a sense of alienation frames her response to the lack of an invitation to Lady Bruton’s luncheon—an episode of depersonalized experience in which she is taken “out of her body and brain” (26). But the connection between Clarissa’s conscious and sustained sense of alienation, and her depersonalized experience is more complex than was the case with Mildred Lawson. Where Mildred’s depersonalization seemed to embody her “inflexible” self’s detachment from her social role, Clarissa’s depersonalization reaches towards Jacobson’s account of social degradation. It is admittedly peculiar to compare the lack of invitation to a luncheon with confinement in a Nazi prison. But Clarissa, like the prisoners, clearly feels that her self-image is under duress. This manifests through a narrative of aging. Not being invited to the luncheon (especially given that her husband has been) foregrounds her degraded social value as an older woman in the early twentieth century. She becomes aware that “year by year” her share of life is being “sliced” and famously feels herself “shrivelled, aged, breastless” (26). She may construct an autonomous self that is estranged from her social place but her depersonalization—psychically retreating from her own body and brain—reads as a way of defending against a potentially hurtful blow to her social being. It allows her to feel it “as a plant on the river-bed feels the shock of a passing oar and shivers” (25-26). Woolf’s high modernist character study follows Moore’s in relating depersonalized experience to the gendered alienation of the authentic self. But it also anticipates Jacobson in framing depersonalization as a defensive response to a social shock.

Where Jacobson’s study looks to social connection and ritual as a way of negotiating alienation and depersonalization, Woolf’s high modernism looks to an aestheticization of everyday life. Again, here, Clarissa’s characterization might be seen

as a development of the subjects of depersonalization that populate nineteenth-century fiction. She is certainly not a Paterian aesthete in the manner of Edward Langham or Dorian Gray, and she does not follow Mildred Lawson into artistic study. What she shows, though, is a capacity to negotiate her social shock through a careful and expansive attentiveness to her own activity. After the blow of hearing about Lady Bruton's luncheon, she returns from her psychic withdrawal to mend her dress for the party she is hosting that night:

Quiet descended on her, calm, content, as her needle, drawing the silk smoothly to its gentle pause, collected the green folds together and attached them, very lightly, to the belt. So on a summer's day waves collect, overbalance, and fall; collect and fall. . . . And the body alone listens to the passing bee; the wave breaking, the dog barking, far away barking and barking. (33-4)

Attention to her needle work seems to connect Clarissa's sense of self with the social being that is preparing to host her party. And she is able to imaginatively relate her experience to the world outside of her everyday existence,¹⁰ marking a break from the sense of depersonalized withdrawal that originally accompanied her social shock.

Mrs Dalloway, though, offers reason to be cautious of overstating the therapeutic merits of this aestheticization of everyday life. How far, one wonders, is Clarissa's practice removed from the flimsy and damaging advice Dr. Holmes offers Septimus Warren Smith later in the novel? After introducing Septimus as a shellshocked war veteran undergoing a psychological breakdown, Woolf offers something of a case summary. Septimus is identified as an aspiring poet who leaves Stroud for London to work, study and write, before volunteering for service at the outbreak of the First World War. He serves in the army with distinction, drawing the attention of his officer, Evans, with whom he shares a close bond. However, "when Evans was killed. . . Septimus, far from showing any emotion. . . congratulated himself on feeling very little" (73). Post-war,

such non-feeling transforms into a generalized incapacity to feel which in turn develops into an intense disgust with humanity and the world. It is at this point that Holmes is called for, his recommendation being that Septimus follow his lead by throwing himself into “outside interests” (78). After all, the doctor’s own “excellent health” derives from his capacity to “switch off from his patients on to old furniture” (78). Holmes’s advice helps turn what we might now recognize as episodes of depersonalization and depression into the psychotic, suicidal state in which we find Septimus at the novel’s outset.¹¹ Close attention to the everyday world of sewing and old furniture may calm the nerves of Clarissa and Holmes, but Woolf’s high modernist text asks us to comprehend its limits as a way of negotiating the aftermath of modern warfare.

Septimus’s case is an important one in the literary history of depersonalization. His relationship with feeling clearly engages with nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century understandings of depersonalization. In an early article on depersonalization, Dugas framed the condition as one of feeling: “Because the self is that part of the person that vibrates and feels and not what merely acts or thinks, apathy can be truly considered as the loss of the person” (461). And Mayer-Gross suggests that “a lack of feeling” comes into consciousness in all of the cases of depersonalization that he has seen (107). Septimus instantiates the observation made by both psychiatrists that the subject of depersonalized experience generally senses and interprets the world accurately but feels an existential and emotional distance from it. As his wife, Rezia is brought to tears: “Far away he heard her sobbing; he heard it accurately, he noticed it distinctly; he compared it to a piston thumping. But he felt nothing” (Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 77). Woolf also anticipates the ideas of Jacobson through her writing of Septimus. In its tendency to reward subjects for suppressing their capacity to feel, the

war environment is for Septimus what the interrogation room is for Jacobson's political prisoners. The war, like the interrogation, facilitates the conscious adaption of a cold state of detachment which, through depersonalization, afflicts subjects after these events have ceased. But Woolf goes beyond the specific context of war to consider the link between Septimus's experience and the cultural expectations that come with English masculinity. It is telling that Rezia reads Septimus's unfeeling manner as a quirk of his nationality: "The English are so silent. . . . The English are so serious," she says to herself (75). In his early years, it is emphasized, Septimus was an emotive figure, driven by "vanity, ambition, idealism, [and] passion" (72). As well as his war experience, the steer of English culture is seen to alienate this emotional intuition and drive him towards a habitual cold detachment. Woolf's high modernism then rehearses many key aspects of the psychiatric understanding of depersonalization that would emerge later in the century. It does so by evaluating the role of alienation in the emergence of depersonalized experience, as well as the degree to which depersonalized experience might be negotiated through the aestheticization of everyday life.

Late Modernism: Beyond Alienation

Woolf's *Between the Acts* illustrates the transition from high- to late-modernist engagement with depersonalization. Another daybook, it explores some similar terrain to *Mrs Dalloway*, focusing on a selection of characters who are marginalized or alienated from English culture. Key figures in the novel include the widowed Lucy Swithin, nicknamed "old flimsy," who speaks of the "small part" she has played in life when she might have "played...Cleopatra" (Woolf, *Between the Acts* 137). And the queer figure of William Dodge who recalls: "At school they held me under a bucket of dirty

water. . . when I looked up the world was dirty. . . so I married; but my child's not my child. . . I'm a half man. . . a flickering, mind-divided little snake in the grass" (67). There are also moments in which Woolf explores the alienated consciousness in the manner of *Mrs Dalloway*. At length, we encounter the perspective of Isabella, "Isa," Oliver as she looks at herself in the mirror the morning after experiencing an adulterous desire for the "gentleman farmer," Rupert Haines:

Inside the glass, in her eyes, she saw what she had felt overnight for the ravaged, the silent, the romantic gentleman farmer. "In love," was in her eyes. But outside, on the washstand, on the dressing-table, among the silver boxes and toothbrushes was the other love; love for her husband, the stockbroker—"the father of my children," she added, slipping into the cliché conveniently provided by fiction. (14)

As in *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf attends to the gap between the private desires and social being of her protagonist. Isa documents her inner world in a journal "bound like an account book" to hide it from her husband, and she never comes "out of a shop. . . with the clothes she admired," so she ends up looking "what she was: Sir Richard's daughter" (14-15). The line from Clarissa's alienation to Isa's is easily traced.

However, Woolf's later text is distinguished by the degree to which Isa is entangled in fictionality. In the quotation above, she draws on the resources of fiction to affirm the reality of her feeling for her husband, a motif that defines her characterization in the novel. When this husband, Giles, enters the action, she reflects:

"He is my husband". . . "The father of my children." It worked, that old cliché; she felt pride; and affection; then pride again in herself, whom he had chosen. It was a shock to find, after the morning's look in the glass, and the arrow of desire shot through her last night by the gentleman farmer, how much she felt when he came in, not a dapper city gent, but a cricketer, of love; and of hate. (44)

The novelistic cliché gives charge to a relationship that seems to be teetering on the edge of unreality. Later in the novel, Woolf's language gets even stronger as Isa mutters

the same phrase and feels her body working to derive a sense of reality from her experience: “the flesh poured over her, the hot, nerve wired, now lit up, now dark as the grave physical body” (187). The instability of Isa’s capacity to derive feeling from this aspect of life recalls Mildred Lawson’s wavering relations with her own feelings. Woolf, though, attends sustainedly to the way in which fictional tropes are deployed to maintain a sense of authentic feeling and hold off depersonalization.

This practice grows more complex in the final moments of the novel as Isa starts to think about herself as a fictional character: “‘The father of my children, whom I love and hate.’ Love and hate—how they tore her asunder! Surely it was time someone invented a new plot, or that the author came out from the bushes” (194). It is tempting to align Isa’s reflections with the depersonalized subject. Those who experience depersonalization typically describe feeling like they are participants in novels, plays or movies. Woolf, though, is doing something more specific than rehearsing an aspect of depersonalized experience. The author being placed “in the bushes” immediately brings to mind Miss La Trobe, the author-producer of the pageant around which Woolf’s novel is structured. La Trobe stands behind bushes and trees throughout the pageant, directing the traffic of the performance without being consistently visible to the audience. This opens up several possibilities. Isa having just viewed the pageant, La Trobe’s image may simply be a readily available representation of an author. But there is also the reading that Miss La Trobe is, in the reality of the novel, the author of Isa’s experience. As various critics have noted,¹² these final moments of the novel appear to be La Trobe’s “second play,” the first words of which she begins to “hear” immediately before the novel’s final scene as she sits in the pub contemplating the failure of her first play, the pageant (191). Ultimately, Woolf does not give a clear sense of how these final

moments are to be read. She does not present the words in quotation marks to indicate that La Trobe is “hearing” them, and the “second play” might be seen to begin at the end of the novel’s final sentence when Isa and Giles find themselves alone: “Then the curtain rose. They spoke” (197). She is, then, leaving open a question of whether we are dealing with a character’s wavering sense of the reality of her lived experience, or an author’s wavering faith in her ability to draw an authentic plot and character. Woolf’s exploration of depersonalized experience is bound up with an exploration of the capacity of fiction to feel real.

The indeterminacy of this moment speaks to the novel’s wider concern with transitions between fictional and “real” worlds. The title of the novel itself gestures towards a space between two types of act—that which is performed in fiction or drama, and that which is performed in everyday life. And the events of the novel foreground this space in a variety of ways. As the pageant is described, attention frequently shifts between the fictional events and the social beings of the actors and audience—between the fiction of the pageant and the “real” fictional world that is under representation. This in-between space is also explored as the second act of the pageant ends, inducing what one might understand as a collective experience of depersonalization for those involved in the pageant: “Yet somehow they felt—how could one put it—a little not quite here or there. As if the play had jerked the ball out of the cup; as if what I call myself was still floating unattached, and didn’t settle. Not quite themselves, they felt” (134). Woolf constructs the self as a ball that generally nestles within the social being but can periodically drift into other things, a play in this instance. Brought into focus is a moment in which the self has been evacuated from the fictional space (the play having paused) without yet returning to its usual nestling place.

Depersonalization, in this instance, emerges when one is caught between the fictional and everyday act. Alienation remains a central concern in Woolf's exploration of depersonalization. But where her high-modernist work fixates on the depersonalized experience of alienated individuals, Woolf's late modernism rethinks depersonalization in relating it to the processes of fiction.

Various readers of Woolf have distinguished *Between the Acts* from her high modernist work on account of its tendency to de-emphasize the internal worlds of its characters. As Rebecah Pulsifer puts it, the novel "diverges from modernism's fascination with the territory of private thoughts" (109). Reading *Between the Acts* with a focus on depersonalization helps to qualify this. If Woolf's early work is focused on a high modernist question of the degree to which private thought can be captured in fiction, her late modernism explores fictionality's impingement on the private self.

A Little Not Quite Here or There

Woolf's notion of the self as a ball in a ball-and-cup game is literalized and abstracted by Samuel Beckett in *The Unnamable*. Near the beginning of the novel, after positioning himself in a dimly lit fictional space, populated by Beckett's earlier protagonists, the novel's narrator compares himself to the game: "I feel my back straight, my neck stiff and free of twist and up on top of it the head, like the ball of the cup-and-ball in its cup at the end of the stick" (*Three Novels* 298). Soon, though, the cup is removed, and the narrator becomes "a big talking ball" (299). The variation on Woolf's image is clear. Where Woolf's participants possessed ball-like selves that popped out of their (stick-like) socio-physical beings, Beckett's narrator is reduced to a ball. Where Woolf's

participants were momentarily caught between the fiction of the pageant and a “real” social space, Beckett’s narrator seems anchored to the fictional.

This heightened emphasis on fictionality may be deemed to distance Beckett’s work from the psychiatric discourse on depersonalization. Certainly, the language of Beckett’s narrator recalls the sense of self-estrangement that is characteristic of depersonalized experience: “I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me” (285). But perhaps there is a danger of mistaking an experiment in fiction for an exploration of psychological experience. Such a possibility has challenged readers of Beckett’s fiction for many decades. As Eric P. Levy notes, critics are frequently troubled in “determining the appropriate frame of reference in which to understand the introspection of the Beckettian narrator. Is this self-consciousness primarily that of the artist trying to grasp his own creative act or is it that of a person withdrawing from the world of others either through insanity or sheer impotence (1)”? Levy frames these two readerly responses as conflicting, but we ultimately have to account for both. The Beckettian narrator simultaneously reflects on both fictionality and self-estrangement.

Looking to Beckett’s personal correspondence helps to connect his experiments in fiction with personal feelings of self-estrangement. In a 1934 letter to Morris Sinclair (originally written in German), he evokes depersonalization as he apologetically explains his failure to write to Sinclair’s father, Boss:

No sooner do I take up my pen to compose something in English than I get the feeling of being “de-personified”,¹³ if one may use such a marvellous expression. Therefore, everything that I might have written at that time would lie furthest away from my intention, the effect of which would be, so to say, momentarily paralysed. Thus it is hardly worth doing. It is a strange feeling to step back instinctively, well away from oneself, and observe oneself as through a keyhole. Strange, yes, and altogether unsuitable for letter writing. (Beckett, *Letters 1929-40* 205)

As well as anticipating the reflections of his later protagonists, Beckett's estrangement from the language he produces resounds with clinical accounts of depersonalization. Jacqueline Haft for example, reports the account of a patient, "Ms. T," who "complained of listening to her voice as if it were coming from someone else. She wondered who was talking when she spoke and where she was if it was not she who was speaking" (880). For Ms. T., as for Beckett, an incapacity to believe in the authenticity of the words one generates reflects a broader sense of being "well away from oneself."

Beckett's "de-personified" experience might be drawn into a modernist narrative of alienation. The fact that writing in English, specifically, brings out Beckett's "strange" feelings, might give rise to the view that it is this particular linguistic system that stifles the articulation of an authentic voice. Alternatively, Alan Graham has read the letter in view of Beckett's position as an anglophone Irish protestant living through a moment in which the newly founded Irish free-state was intensifying the institutionalization of Irish as the nation's primary language. In this reading, Beckett's incapacity to believe in his English voice reflects a contemporaneous Irish Protestant minority that were being estranged from what had hitherto been "an unconditional mother tongue" (Graham 172). It may be read as alienation *by* English; it may be read as alienation *from* English; in either case, Beckett's "de-personification" is entangled with alienation.

The late modernism of Beckett's post-war fiction, however, is defined by an attempt to depart from these narratives of alienation. Though these concerns may permeate the texts, Beckett ultimately reaches beyond narratives in which linguistic structures stifle self-expression, or political changes cut individuals off from the world in which they were formed. More central in these works is a concern with the

connection between fictionality and depersonalization. Beckett explores the boundary between the feelings of *reality* that persist for his self-consciously fictional subjects and the feelings of *unreality* that characterize depersonalized experience. This process is first explored in *The Unnamable*, where the narrator talks freely of the unreality of his fictional world but cannot quite let go of its possible reality: “I’m a big talking ball, talking about things that do not exist, or that exist perhaps, impossible to know, beside the point” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 299). But the exploration gets more precise in Beckett’s next major piece of fiction, *Texts for Nothing*, a less well read and appreciated work of 13 loosely connected prose fragments. At the beginning of Text 1, the narrator locates himself concretely, on top of a hill lying in a trough made by sheep-tracks and “scooped deep by the rains” (Beckett, *Texts for Nothing* 3). But we are soon prompted to be cautious about identifying the voice that confronts us with this material image:

I say to the body, Up with you now, and I can feel it struggling, like an old hack foundered in the street, struggling no more, struggling again, till it gives up. I say to the head, Leave it alone, stay quiet, it stops breathing, then pants on worse than ever. I am far from that wrangle, I shouldn’t bother with it. . . I should turn away from it all, away from the body, away from the head, let them work it out between them, let them cease, I can’t, it’s I would have to cease. (3)

Statements such as this open up two possibilities. One might read this as the testimony of a depersonalized subject—a subject who feels a sense of detachment from their own body and mind, yet has (to use a phrase from the psychiatric definition) “intact reality testing” (American Psychiatric Association). They know they are not *really* floating somewhere outside of their body; they just feel that way. At the same time, the narrator might be read as a self-consciously fictional construct: one who wants to speak without misleadingly giving the impression they have a physical existence, yet realizes the impossibility of this.

Texts for Nothing's extended exploration of the overlaps between these two possibilities continues in Text 8, as the narrator begins to frame his peculiar experience as a kind of punishment:

But whom can I have offended so grievously, to be punished in this inexplicable way, all is inexplicable, space and time, false and inexplicable, suffering and tears, and even the old convulsive cry, It's not me, it can't be me. But am I in pain, whether it's me or not, frankly now, is there pain? Now is here and here there is no frankness, all I say will be false and to begin with not said by me, here I'm a mere ventriloquist's dummy, I feel nothing, say nothing, he holds me in his arms and moves my lips with a string. (Beckett, *Texts for Nothing* 34)

At the beginning of the passage the narrator holds himself as a discrete entity trapped in a painful space at the behest of a malevolent force. Depersonalization then begins to emerge as he doubts the reality and authenticity of his own experience. At this point, a narrative of fictionality is produced as the narrator becomes a dummy, with words being put into his mouth by an authorial "he."

The relationship between the speaker and this mysterious "he" points to a connection between Beckett's late modernism and a psycho-philosophical understanding of the self as fictional or illusory. Here one might look to Harry Stack Sullivan's mid-century notion of a "quasi-entity" that he terms the "personification of the self"—"what you are talking about when you talk about yourself as 'I'" (*Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry* 167). In this line of thinking we are saddled with the "inescapable illusion that there is a perduring, unique, simple, existent self, called variously 'me' or 'I,' and in some strange fashion, the patient's, or the subject person's, private property" (Sullivan, "The Illusion of Personal Individuality" 329). In some instances, the speaker in *Texts for Nothing*, is framed as something akin to Sullivan's "personification of the self," a fictional construction of a subject person that is, regrettably, spoken of in the first person. The narrator wishes this shadowy "he" would "dignify me with the third person,

like his other figments, not he, he'll be satisfied with nothing less than me, for his me" (*Texts for Nothing* 17-18). The existent self being narrated is framed as a figment that is falsely and fleetingly endowed with the status of the real.

This notion that the self is illusory has been crucial to recent attempts to explain depersonalized experience. Philip Gerrans (2019), for instance, understands the self as "a predictive model made by the mind to explain the modulation of affect as the organism progresses through the world" (402). Depersonalization, in his account, emerges when the organism's interactions with the world confound the predictive model. Crucially, here, the sense of self is dependent on the continuity of affective interactions between the organism and their environments. If the world starts to feel different in an unpredictable way, the subject loses the illusion that their self is a concrete entity. Gerrans concludes:

The course of our life is marked by affective fluctuations as we appraise and reappraise the world and our place in it. When those fluctuations occur in a predictable way the sense of presence reinforces the sense of a continuing self. When they are unpredicted or absent our sense of presence is comprised [sic] or disappears. We call this loss of a sense of self or self-awareness but perhaps what is lost is the illusion of self, constantly generated by the persistence of subjective presence. (416)

Works like *Texts for Nothing* are striking for the way in which they give voice to this "illusion of self"—a figure that is repeatedly lost and found, taken in and cast off by the subject: "When he had me, when he was me, he couldn't get rid of me quick enough, I didn't exist" (18). In some moments, the "he" believes himself aligned with his sense of self; in others it is deemed illusory, fictional or non-existent. In Beckett's 1934 letter to Sinclair, he associated depersonalized experience with a feeling of alienation from the English language. His later work continues to foreground estrangement from language

but does so to consider overlaps between self-conscious fictionality and depersonalized experience, and ultimately the sense in which the self is fictional.

Conclusion: High-Late-Post-Modernism

In this article, I have framed the relationship between high and late modernist fiction in terms of approaches taken to depersonalization. Where the high modernist concern with depersonalization attends to its link with alienation, late modernism negotiates the experience through a foregrounding of fictionality. What one might question, here, is whether the late modernism that I am describing is really so different to the postmodernism with which Beckett in particular has frequently been identified. After all, critics have commonly defined postmodernist fiction in terms of its tendency to stage its own fictionality. In *Postmodern Fiction* (1987), Brian McHale influentially identifies *The Unnamable*'s postmodernism through its emphasis on "the unbreachable barrier between the fictional world of the Unnamable and the real world which Samuel Beckett shares with us, his readers" (13). The late modernism that Woolf develops in *Between the Acts* and Beckett extends in his post-war writing rejects this idea of a hard border between fiction and reality. Rather, through the writing of depersonalization, late modernism constructs a narrow space in which fiction and reality coalesce.

A focus on depersonalization also complicates existing understandings of late modernism. It brings into question the longstanding critical view that late modernism represents a turn away, or outward¹⁴ from high-modernist concerns with consciousness and the mind. In his seminal work on late modernism, Tyrus Miller (1999) characterises Beckett's late modernism in terms of a loss of "interest in the mind and its vicissitudes as such" (178). He goes on: "Beckett declines problems of consciousness into matters

of suffering and solace, domination and servitude” (179). My reading of late modernism emphasizes its continued epistemological interest in questions of the mind and consciousness. Certainly, the later Woolf and Beckett stray from the “finely developed techniques for representing consciousness” (185) that high modernism had established. Their foregrounding of fictionality interferes with the sense that the texts are getting across the conscious experience of discrete, alienated individuals—recording, in Woolf’s famous words, “the atoms as they fall upon the mind” (*Common Reader* 150). However, in writing depersonalization, late modernism asks particular questions of feeling and knowing: How can everyday consciousness feel unreal? How can a fictional world give us, in the words of *Texts for Nothing*, “a refreshing whiff of life on earth” (27)? In what sense is the sense of self fictional?

Equally, the readings of this article work to nuance the critical characterization of late modernism as an articulation of a crisis of language that emerges at the approach of the Second World War and intensifies in its aftermath. Shane Weller, for example, connects the “late modernist styles of Beckett, Blanchot, Celan, Bernhard and Sebald” in terms of a “linguistic negativism” that reflects “the incessant struggle to speak” in the age of the Holocaust and countless other atrocities. Clearly, the late modernism discussed in this article was shaped by the Second World War and a proximate sense of estrangement from language. However, I would be wary of giving these elements too prominent a place in a picture of late modernism. The late modernist texts I have considered here certainly scrutinize language, but such scrutiny derives from a more persistent and foundational concern with the capacity to rely on the authenticity and reality of one’s own feeling. Such a concern might have been enlivened by the Second World War, but it transcends this context. Reading late modernism within a literary

history of depersonalization distinguishes the concern as one that runs through high modernism and goes back at least as far as the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle*. In their turn to questions of fictionality, late modernist texts find new forms with which to negotiate modern fiction's persistent anxiety about authentic feeling.

The analyses of this article, then, point towards a late modernist fiction that is grounded in questions of form. This develops the formalist understandings of late modernism that have emerged in the last decade. Doug Battersby (2022) has recently argued for a late modernism that foregrounds the limitations and ethical troubles that surround modernist narrative techniques such as free-indirect discourse and interior monologue. These "signature techniques of modernist fiction," Battersby argues, afford "the sense of having direct access to a (fictional) person's innermost desires" (9). But late modernism is pre-occupied by doubts over how far the "thoughts and feelings of others can be known," and ethically concerned that such an attempt to know is a form of "erotic gratification that actively impedes compassion" (9). Attending to late modernist narratives of depersonalization helps to push this understanding further. The late modernism that this article has revealed does not just question whether a person's innermost thoughts and feelings can or should be put into fiction; it also takes up the notion that these inner worlds are themselves tinged with fictionality.

Such a notion goes beyond formalism, beyond questions of writerly innovation. It speaks to the late twentieth century's concern with identity and the role of discourse in shaping the self.¹⁵ The late modernist connection of depersonalization and the fictionality of self, for instance, resonates with Frantz Fanon's famous account of his psychological response to being racially denigrated: "I transported myself on that

particular day far, very far, from my self, and gave myself up as an object” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 92). Reflecting on this incident, Fanon recognises the degree to which the self that he derives from bodily experience is enmeshed with an “epidermal racial schema” (92) that “the white man” has “woven [...] out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories” (91). The moment of depersonalization leads Fanon to look at himself from without in the manner of white culture: “I cast an objective gaze over myself, discovered my blackness, my ethnic features; deafened by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders, and above all, yes, above all, the grinning *Y a bon Banania*” (92). This article began with the account of depersonalization put forward by Jacobson in which the experience functions as a pathological response to “a degraded object image” (591). The depersonalization of Jacobson’s prisoners derived from their response to being marked as “criminal” by the Nazi regime; through sublimation and collectivity they were seen to negotiate this and ward off their “criminal” selves. In a sense, Fanon is describing a similar experience here—one in which a degraded object image confronts one’s sense of self. The late modernist sensibility of Fanon, though, develops Jacobson’s work through the recognition of the fictive power and persistence of the “degraded object image”—the recognition that stories from without are woven into the fabric of selfhood.

Ultimately, the turn from high to late modernism represents a significant moment in the history of depersonalization. High modernist writers followed their nineteenth-century forebearers in framing depersonalization as a symptom of a generalized sense of disconnection between private self and social being. From Ward’s Edward Langham to Woolf’s Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith, early fictions of depersonalization tend to employ a “case-study” style to frame a clash between

individual peculiarity and socio-cultural activity. This holds when one turns to later representations of depersonalized experience—by writers such as Philip Roth, Don DeLillo, and Tsitsi Dangarembga.¹⁶ This is not a negative. The approach of these texts helps us to think imaginatively and empathetically about the socio-cultural conditions of depersonalization, and its impact on people's lives. The self-consciousness of late modernism, though, develops the high modernist approach in important ways. By de-emphasising the link between depersonalization and the alienated individual, late modernist texts provide spaces in which to interrogate and relate self-conscious fictionality, depersonalized experience and the modern sense of self.

¹ She discusses this in "Observations on the Psychological Effect of Imprisonment on Female Political Prisoners" (1949).

² In an 1880 passage of his *Journal Intime*, Amiel wrote: "all is strange to me; I am, as it were, outside my own body and individuality; I am *depersonalised*, detached, cut adrift" (275; emphasis in original). The novelist Mary Augusta Ward translated Amiel's original French coinage, *dépersonnalisé*, into "depersonalized," now the accepted English term.

³ See, for example, Oberndorf's "Depersonalization in Relation to Erotization of Thought" (1934).

⁴ My concern in the article is not with direct cultural influence. Certainly, modernist writers such as Beckett and Woolf drew influence from psychology and psychoanalysis, and in turn influenced the study of the mind. But I have no evidence to suggest that these writers interacted directly with, or informed the psychiatric discourse on depersonalization, specifically. By and large, I suggest that modernist writers and psychologists were, in parallel, developing comparable ways of narrativizing a common psychological experience.

⁵ Over the years, depersonalization has occasionally been covered in relation to canonical modernist writers. Barbara Schapiro, for example, devotes some pages to the concept in *D.H. Lawrence and the Paradoxes of Psychic Life* (1999). More recently, Simeon and Abugel (2023) devote a chapter of their introduction to depersonalization to literary and spiritual representations of the phenomenon, taking in writers such as Albert Camus, Aldous Huxley and Virginia Woolf. And Francis's *Unreal City* (2022) has recently considered depersonalization in relation to creative writing, using T.S. Eliot's notion of impersonality as a starting point.

⁶ For more on this, see Powell.

⁷ See, for example, González.

⁸ There are others who could serve as exemplars of the high modernist approach to depersonalized experience. D.H. Lawrence or James Joyce would be considered in an extended study. This article focuses on Woolf as the comparison of her earlier and later works elucidates the shift from high to late modernist approaches to depersonalization.

⁹ See, for example, Wilson.

¹⁰ Simeon and Abugel cover Woolf's interest in this sense of connectedness in their reading of Woolf's *Moments of Being* (1972). They draw an opposition between Woolf's first-hand aestheticized accounts of a state of oneness with the world and the clinical experience of depersonalization.

¹¹ See Graux or Perona-Garcelán et. al., for consideration of the relationship between experiences of depersonalization, hallucinations and psychosis.

¹² See, for example, Abel (129) and See (649-50).

¹³ “Verpersonifiziert” in the original German (202). As Beckett wrote this letter, he was undergoing psychotherapy with Wilfred Bion; it is possible he had encountered the concept of depersonalization through his treatment, though the letter does not give this suggestion.

¹⁴ See Davis for a more recent consideration of late modernism’s “outward turn.”

¹⁵ See Guralnik and Simeon for a recent attempt to connect depersonalization with “postmodern” questions of identity, interpellation and discourse.

¹⁶ See DeLillo’s focus on Jack Gladney in *White Noise* (1985), Dangarembga’s on Tambudzai in *Nervous Conditions* (1988), or Roth’s on ‘Philip Roth’ in *Operation Shylock* (1993).

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