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THE ADMIRABLE HUGH: FORCE AND VIOLENCE IN WOOLF'S ETHICS

James T. Bowen

In his book *Žižek in the Clinic*, the psychotherapist Eliot Rosenstock describes the use of chess pieces as a tool for exploring the client's relationship with power dynamics. He outlines the following:

There are five chess pieces set up in a pentagram:

The pawn

The knight

The rook (explained as: "this is the castle, 'the rook.'")

The queen

The king

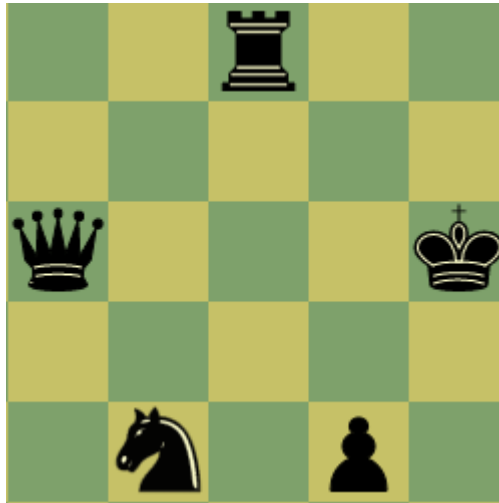


Figure 1: The Chess Model
(Created using <https://nextchessmove.com>)

The client then imagines a conversation between the pieces, based on the assumptions that "the pawn symbolizes a subject under the influence of authority. The knight is both subjugated and has authority. The rook is a piece representing foundational structure. The queen is a female (possibly maternal) authority and the king is a male (possibly paternal) authority."¹

This essay will argue that, applying the chess model to *Mrs. Dalloway*, we might read Hugh Whitbread as the novel's "rook" figure, functioning, in Rosenstock's words, as "foundational" to a latent heteronormative, sometimes violently repressive, system of patriarchal authority that underpins the novel. Closely attending to the lexical and syntactic peculiarities of Hugh's presentation, we will explore his markedly noumenal, inescapably embodied and objective, presence within the generally phenomenal concerns of *Mrs. Dalloway*. The repeated emphasis on his physical stature and outward behavior shapes our perception of him as an unusually and disturbingly active ethical agent in the otherwise largely inward-looking society Woolf depicts. Ultimately, I contend that, for all he is mocked, Whitbread offers an insight into the oppressive bourgeois domestic ideologies Woolf rebelled against, and more particularly their sinister potential to enforce feminine compliance and subservience.

With this in mind, consider the following model:

Septimus—the pawn
 Peter Walsh—the knight
 Hugh Whitbread—the rook
 Clarissa Dalloway—the queen
 Richard Dalloway—the king

In the main, this arrangement will be is a familiar one, based as it is on Alex Zwerdling's suggestion that Woolf set out to criticize the governing class whose "ideal is stoicism, even if the price they pay is petrification" in the face of global trauma.² The inclusion of Hugh Whitbread within the schema, however, a character often dismissed or critically neglected, merits a fuller explanation. Zwerdling himself spends little time on Hugh, but is nevertheless quick to point out his exemplifying a broader "need to dominate" born of the "habit of power."³ It is this conception of social power as habituated that we turn to first, in exploring the curious lack of intersubjectivity involved in the presentation of Whitbread, who for the most part lacks the inner monologue common to other major characters, despite his recurrence across the novel.

His first appearance is significant as much for its placement as its content. He is, after all, the first person Clarissa encounters, barring her way and interrupting her private thoughts while at the same time granting the reader further insight into the social world she inhabits. He appears thusly: "on entering the Park, the silence; the mist; the hum; the slow-swimming happy ducks; the pouched birds waddling; and

who should be coming along with his back against the Government buildings, most appropriately, carrying a dispatch box stamped with the Royal Arms, who but Hugh Whitbread; her old friend Hugh—the admirable Hugh!”⁴ The adjectival framing here is striking, emphasizing Whitbread’s authoritative presence. Before we know who he is, Woolf gives us a clear sense of *what* Hugh Whitbread is and what he stands for in the notion that he is “most *appropriately*” (an adverb applied uniquely to him) framed by the seat of state power. The grammatical slippage here is doubly telling, as it is not entirely clear whether the appropriateness in Clarissa’s mind is directly related to his appearing where he does, or that he is carrying one of the iconic red dispatch boxes, presumably containing state documents for the sovereign, that continue to play a role in government service. Both his presence and function, then, are framed as necessary facts of existence, as though he is as much a part of the landscape Clarissa moves through as the architecture of London. Like the government buildings then, as rook figure he stands for both physical and epistemic power at a “foundational” level, something we see further in Clarissa’s oddly stilted syntax. The division between “old friend” and “admirable” seems unusually harsh, gesturing toward the recurrent and familiar question of the division between public and private selves that preoccupies Woolf across her work, only in this case through interaction with an external force, as opposed to the private reflections that underpin the narrative. Naturally, the first response is to relate to an individual whom one knows in terms of personal history, hence “old friend.” The exclamatory abruptness of “the admirable Hugh,” however, is striking. Grammatically, the em dash acts as a much harder break than the slew of semicolons that precedes it, suggesting a subtextual discomfort creeping into the narration. In lexical terms, “admirable,” a term almost uniformly connected with him across the novel, is hardly the most intimate term of endearment, and one rarely used by Woolf in any setting, reminding us of the distance that seems to exist between Hugh and those that surround him. Many years later, toward the end of a diary entry in November 1940, Woolf briefly references an “admirable naval man,” and we might suggest there is an echo here of Whitbread’s remote respectability.⁵ Notably, despite his recurrent presence, we never gain the insight into his consciousness, besides his brief and largely inconsequential “[rumination]” while “dallying in front of a shop window” that he “did not go deeply” (MD 92), which we access in the Dalloways, Peter Walsh, Sally Seton, and even the similarly minor figure of Miss Kilman. That his only moment of self-reflection, indeed, emerges from the sight of his own reflection confirms his commitment to the superficial and the external,

particularly when one compares his “gratitude” to the haberdashers Rigby and Lowndes with the “pointed; dart-like; definite” selfhood constructed by Clarissa in her own encounter with her reflection earlier in the novel (33). In her draft of the novel, Woolf depicts Hugh as knowing something about Freud, a “little information about Dr. Freud” having “leaked into him.”⁶ Yet Woolf elides this knowledge in the published text, further emphasizing his role as an unreflective force set against the more anxiously contemplative presences that make up the rest of the novel. Just as he is dismissed as “blind” to the world around him by the other major characters (*MD* 169), it seems we as readers are left as blind to his authentic interiority as he appears to be.

Appropriately for our “castle” figure, he remains more a physical presence than a source of intersubjective connection throughout the text. The description of his “well-covered” stature, for instance, might just as well be a psychological analysis as a physical description. Similarly, his communication of his wife’s otherwise unspecified ailment by “intimating” (*MD* 5), even to a supposedly old friend, draws our attention more directly to his presence than to his subjectivity. Although this silence around his wife has traditionally been taken as a broader social satire of reticence around feminine physicality, particularly in terms of menopause, the focus on his visual appearance over dialogic content could be said to have a broader formal significance.⁷ In a roughly contemporary diary entry, written during the composition of what had just been christened *The Common Reader*, Woolf claimed that “characters are to be merely views: personality is to be avoided at all costs. I’m sure my Conrad adventure taught me this.”⁸ We might question the integrity of this divide between views and personality more generally, but in the case of Hugh Whitbread it seems a less contentious claim than we might otherwise expect of one of Woolf’s characters. As Peter Walsh recalls, Hugh is dismissed by Sally Seton as the “perfect specimen of the English public school type,” and that “no country but England could have produced him” (*MD* 66). Apparently, he is read as typical as much by the fellow inhabitants of the textual world as by us as consumers of it. Implicitly, given the elision of his interiority, (and indeed the lack of detail around the nature of his governmental role) he seems to accept and conform to his stereotypical role regardless of its being forced on him by others.

This apparent obsession with his presence extends to the reception of his physical form. Indeed, his appearance seems a particularly clear example of Woolf’s supposed Conradian inheritance, inasmuch as his weight is used to visually code his ethical status in the same manner that we find in Conrad’s later novels. Mi Jeong Lee equates

the moral status of the anarchists in *The Secret Agent* with their visual appearances, focusing particularly on the obesity of the eponymous agent, Mr. Verloc, and the "ticket-of-leave apostle" Michaelis. As Lee puts it, "Obesity is not only a code for inactivity, however, but also culturally understood as a literal disease both directly resulting from and causing more inactivity," and we might suggest something similar occurs in *Mrs. Dalloway*.⁹ Just as, for Doris Kilman, "it is the flesh" (MD 115) that she returns to in her moral reflections, the constant and variously generous references to Hugh's weight further contribute to our sense of his uncomfortably significant physical presence within the textual world. Returning to his introductory passage, his appearance alongside "pouched waddling birds" seems far from incidental, tacitly associating him from the outset with the visual atypicality of his excess weight. Space forbids a more thorough intertextual examination of the relationship between the two novels, though it is perhaps worth noting the unsuccessful 1922 stage adaptation of *The Secret Agent* of which Woolf would likely have been aware. Nonetheless, visibly overweight characters are unusual in Woolf's novels, and a similar visual coding seems to be at work here, particularly in terms of the values assigned to employment. Notably, Hugh's labor is constantly dismissed or diminished by others, well encapsulated by Peter Walsh's pithy remark that "he blacked the King's boots or counted bottles at Windsor" (169). As absurd as this claim is, the image is nevertheless a revealing one, suggestive of a broader system of assigning moral value to labor. In demeaning his work in service of the ultimate symbol of established order, namely the monarchy, Peter attempts to reduce him to a figure of comedy, albeit somewhat uncomfortably given his own lack of success. His dismissal of the court with the Oriental image of the "pernicious hubble-bubble," after all, suggests that conceptually he remains "a thousand miles across the sea" despite his geographical movement (154). Implicitly, however, the stability of the decidedly Occidental Whitbread remains untroubled. Just as Peter may come to depend on Whitbread for employment, if Clarissa has her way, the very terms by which he attempts to denigrate this servant of the imperial state are saturated in the language of the system Hugh Whitbread represents. One of the more definitive criticisms of him in the novel, notably, is Sally Seton's dismissal of his pretensions of grandeur as out of keeping with a family of "coal merchants [and] respectable tradespeople" (65), demonstrating the prevalence of the social snobbery Hugh Whitbread represents at the same time as denigrating it. Putting to one side the somewhat hypocritical class-based antipathy inherent in this statement being offered by the future wife of a wealthy industrialist, we might

consider its resonance as a symbol. In the association with the resource that founded the industrialized imperial state beginning its decline as the novel opens, Hugh is further implicated as an ethical agent within established systems of authority.

So too does Hugh Whitbread appear to offer an insight into Woolf's ethics more generally, combining her depiction of social relations with a more direct criticism of familiar male presences. As we see through her correspondence, his function in relation to Woolf's personal notions of ethical value is unambiguous. In a letter to Philip Morrel following the novel's publication, she straightforwardly claims that she "[meant] Hugh Whitbread to be hated," as indeed Morrel did.¹⁰ To offer such a direct ethical imperative regarding one of her characters presents us with unusually clear insight into the textual expression of her relationship with masculine authority and its reception by her peers. Notably, in fact, Morrel seems to have expressed equal disdain for Richard Dalloway, who in Woolf's original drafts performs much of the same satirical absurdity that Hugh Whitbread alone offers in the finished novel. Just as Whitbread's superficial knowledge of the modern phenomena of his age, such as Freud, Stravinsky and so on is omitted from the published text, however, so too is Richard rendered less obviously archetypal, with an early set of cancellations giving a particularly clear insight into Woolf's vexed representation of him: "He was a good specimen of a type of youth whom comes with whom he very good kind of young certain type" (*The Hours*, 38)¹¹ By comparison with the cipher of the "public school man" (*The Hours*, 87; cf. *MD*, 66) that Hugh remains across the initial and final versions of the text,¹² Richard Dalloway's change from a comical figure "preserved in his simplicity" (*The Hours*, 175) to the "dependable" (*MD*, 96) and active textual presence in the finished novel is all the more marked, thus further emphasizing Hugh's distinctive role in the text.¹³ The supposed biographical basis for the hatred of Hugh Whitbread, in any case, is well-worn critical ground, and often the only comments made on his textual function, following Hermione Lee's suggestion that he is a "caricature" of Walter Lamb,¹⁴ or Christina Froula's subsequent connection of his violence with the sexual improprieties of George Duckworth,¹⁵ later taken up by Anne Fernald in her edition for Cambridge University Press (*MD* 189–90). Demonstrably, it seems, there is a personal basis to Woolf's ethical imperative to "hate" the figure of Whitbread. More important for our purposes, however, is how this hatred, irrespective of its origin, functions in terms of the textual thought-world and its social relations.

Woolf's stated aim to "criticise the social system, & to show it at work, at its most intense" is now familiar, not least because of Zwerdling, but how often do we recall the qualification that follows it, that "here I may be posing"?¹⁶ Woolf expresses this ambivalence, as much as her more familiar social critique, within the novel through the comic yet inescapably sinister presence of Hugh Whitbread. That his elevated position "afloat on the cream of English society" affords him the right of arbitration, to "look critically, magisterially, at socks and shoes" (*MD* 92–93) exemplifies Woolf's insistent deflation of his supposed authority well, reducing him to the fussy, mannered province of social decorum. Akin to the "stately plump" Buck Mulligan of that other great modernist city novel, we seem to be invited to see his authority as consistently undercut. Nonetheless, it remains authority of a kind. As Barbara Johnson once suggested, "if ethics is defined in relation to the potentially violent excesses of the subject's power, then that power is in reality being presupposed and reinforced in the very attempt to undercut it."¹⁷ The constant satire that surrounds him, far from reducing him, reinforces his conservative authority as much as it does his outward absurdity. Early in the novel, for instance, we are told that even Clarissa feels "a little skimpy, schoolgirlish" around him, seemingly born in part from being "conscious of her hat" (6). Similarly, as we saw earlier, Miss Brush "[resents]" her reply that her brother is "doing very well in South Africa,' when, for half a dozen years, he had been doing badly in Portsmouth" (93). Although both the episode involving Clarissa's appearance and Miss Brush's brother are, no doubt, comic in the relatively incidental concerns they foreground, we are nevertheless reminded of the discomfort, and indeed control, imposed by his presence. For all his absurdity, his ability to enforce socially acceptable behavior through his treatment of women is nonetheless a recurrent and unsettling force throughout the text. In the sense of ethics as a system of social values, we might suggest that Hugh Whitbread acts as a disturbing ethical center for the society of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

It is when he is presented as a directly engaged ethical agent, however, that Hugh Whitbread is at his most disturbing. Taking ethics in Spinoza's sense, in terms of "living harmoniously and [being] of assistance to one another" as parts of a state in service of Reason, we see Whitbread take on an altogether more disturbing role.¹⁸ His assault of Sally Seton, significantly, is presented as promoting his own view of social harmony. Recollections of this event are recurrent throughout the party, but it is phrased with particularly striking effect in Clarissa's description of the accusation, of "kissing her in the smoking room to punish her for saying that women should have votes" (*MD* 162). Verb

forms of “punish” are exceptionally rare across Woolf’s works, occurring only three times elsewhere in the novels.¹⁹ In none of these other cases, crucially, is it so directly associated with one character acting on another. Here, by contrast, it demonstrates Hugh’s sexually aggressive enforcement of social normativity, akin to his earlier “[stamping] out immorality” (*MD* 92), with a kind of causal logic that Woolf generally leaves implicit. Where in *Night and Day* and *Orlando* the punisher is either unspecified or divine, its embodiment here in the form of Hugh Whitbread is uniquely unsettling. We do not, for instance, see a directly comparable action as evidence for the frequently referenced “tyranny” of Mr. Ramsay, another troubling figure of male authority. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, by contrast, it is these very actions and their consequences that are so disturbing, as the punishment inflicted by Whitbread is both unchallenged, abetted by Clarissa, and apparently successful. For all her proto-bohemian youthful progressiveness, after all, Sally Seton seems to resign herself to the bourgeois heteronormativity she once opposed, with her “five enormous boys” (*MD* 153) (note, incidentally, the relation of masculinity and size here) and wealthy husband in Manchester. Just William Bradshaw and “Divine Proportion” drive Septimus to literal destruction, Hugh Whitbread acts as a parallel ethical arbiter within the Dalloways’ social sphere, capable of enforcing a restrictive domestic ideology. Most disturbing of all about Hugh, then, is that for all that he is mocked and denigrated, his ability to “punish” remains effective. Thus, as an ethical agent, he is “foundational,” returning to Rosenstock’s term, inasmuch as his enforcement of social norms seems deceptively significant in fashioning the relations of the now-adult characters the novel follows. In “correcting” Sally Seton’s youthful indiscretion, he forcibly reasserts the conservative values Woolf set out to critique.

In summary, then, Hugh Whitbread acts as a deceptively significant ethical force in *Mrs. Dalloway*, both as an authoritative presence and as an agent of violent oppression. Throughout, Woolf fashions him as an agent of what Lacan called “the sublime virtues of social pressure,” in other words the Confronting presence of the Real that exists beneath signification, acting as an unsettling counterpoint to the thought-worlds of Clarissa and her transcendental theory of human value, and to Septimus’s increasing departure into the realms of linguistic fantasy.²⁰ The inescapably embodied Hugh Whitbread, by contrast, acts instead as a very physical reminder of a more restrictive social system, usually not so openly discussed in Woolf’s narratives, underpinned by the violent enforcement of ethical norms. In the constant attempts to draw attention to Whitbread’s absurdities, this system seems paradoxically strengthened, as the mockery by which those around Whitbread

attempt to diminish him foregrounds little but its own ineffectiveness in disturbing the stability of his conservative social ethics. Although he may often be dismissed by characters within the novel itself, as we have seen, doing so ourselves only reproduces the same patriarchal narratives by which his power is sustained.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Eliot Rosenstock, *Žižek in the Clinic* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2019), 31.
- 2 Alex Zwerdling, "Mrs. Dalloway and the Social System," *PMLA* 92, no. 1 (1977): 71, doi:10.2307/461415.
- 3 Zwerdling, "Mrs Dalloway and the Social System," 74–75.
- 4 Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. Anne E. Fernald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 5. All subsequent references to the novel in the main text will be drawn from this edition.
- 5 *The Diaries of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell, vol. 5 (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1985), 244.
- 6 Virginia Woolf, *The Hours: The British Museum Manuscript of Mrs. Dalloway*, ed. Helen Wussow (New York: Pace University Press, 2010), 156.
- 7 See, for example, Sara Crangle, "Out of the Archive: Woolfian Domestic Economies," *Modernism/Modernity* 23, no. 1 (2016): 160–62, doi:10.1353/mod.2016.0000.
- 8 *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume 2, 1920–1924*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1980), 265.
- 9 Mi Jeong Lee, "The Ugly Politics of (Im)Passivity, or Why Conrad's Anarchists Are Fat," *Journal of Modern Literature* 44, no. 3 (2021): 5, doi:10.2979/jmodelite.44.3.01.
- 10 "1569: To Phillip Morrel," in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Volume 3, 1923–1928*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 195.
- 11 Woolf, *The Hours*, 38.
- 12 Woolf, *The Hours*, 87; cf. Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 66.
- 13 Woolf, *The Hours*, 175; Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 96.
- 14 Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1996), 247.
- 15 Christine Froula, *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 121.
- 16 *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume 2*, 248.
- 17 Barbara Johnson, "Using People: Kant with Winnicott," in *The Barbara Johnson Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 262.
- 18 Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (London: Penguin, 1996), 136.
- 19 Cf. *Night and Day*, ed. Michael Whitworth (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018), 22, 39; *Orlando*, ed. Suzanne Raitt and Ian Blyth (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018), 133.
- 20 Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, trans. Jacques-Alain Miller (London: Routledge, 2008), 29.