

All Bets are Off: Woolf, Benjamin, and the Problem of the Future in *Jacob's Room*

SCOTT McCACKEN
KEELE UNIVERSITY

1. Let me make a bet with you, the reader. I bet that, despite being distinctly unqualified for the task, I can place Woolf among the philosophers. You have an excellent chance of winning. Few would consider me a Woolfian and no one would think of me as a philosopher. Yet to be faithful to my topic, which is the uncertainty of the future, I am more than happy to risk all in the faint hope that my speculations offer a generous return, even while I fear losing everything and being summarily thrown out of not one but two establishments, that of literature and that of philosophy, for ever.
2. At this point I accept that you do not know what my argument will be, so you don't have much to go on; but if you are minded to pick up the challenge you might want to start by looking at my form. Have I, for example, every written an article on Woolf before? No. Your chances are looking good. Have I written on philosophy? Hardly. The outcome seems a certainty, but let's face it that wouldn't be very interesting. So I'll admit that there are a few (scandalously few some might say) scattered references to Woolf in my book on modernist fiction and I have also co-authored a book on the other subject of this piece, Walter Benjamin, a critic and theorist whose ideas philosophy takes seriously.¹ It might be worth a punt. So before I begin...
3. Ladies and Gentleman, place your bets!
4. It is no secret to anyone even slightly acquainted with their work, that Woolf and Benjamin shared an interest in the temporalities of modernity. To explore how the future might be said to constitute a problem in their writings, I am going to read Woolf's early novel (early at least in the

¹ S. McCracken, *Masculinities, Modernist Fiction, and the Urban Public Sphere*; P. Buse et al., *Benjamin's Arcades: An Unguided Tour*.

sequence of her more experimental fiction) *Jacob's Room* (1922) alongside Benjamin's scattered writings on gambling – many of which were unpublished in his lifetime. These include: "Notes on a Theory of Gambling", written at the end of the 1920s,² and Convolute O from *The Arcades Project*, which is devoted to "Prostitution, Gambling".³ Because of the nature of *The Arcades Project*, which is constructed as a collage of citations, Convolute O draws on numerous texts on gambling, including Anatole France, *Le Jardin d'épicure*, Paul Lafargue on the gambling mentality of the bourgeoisie, and Edmund Bergler on the psychology of the gambler. I shall also draw implicitly on certain other texts by Benjamin, also relevant to his theory of gambling: the sections of *One-Way Street* (1928) devoted to divination and the essay on "Surrealism" (1929), as well as, because they are always relevant, the late theses "On the Concept of History".⁴

5. One of my premises is that for both Woolf and Benjamin their understanding of time is conditioned by the experience of defeat. Each had suffered personally and politically from the defeat of a generation the First World War had inflicted on all sides. For those born in the last two decades of the nineteenth century (Woolf in 1882 and Benjamin in 1892) there were no victors in 1918; and for both writers, even as the First World War receded, the rise of Fascism threatened no escape from a cycle of inevitable war and further catastrophe. At first glance, the experience of defeat would appear to be historical rather than a philosophical question; and indeed historians such as Eric Hobsbawm, Perry Anderson, Reinhart Koselleck, and Wolfgang Schivelbusch have all argued that the best, most thought-through and considered histories are written from the perspective of defeat;⁵ but it can also be seen as a philosophical question. In recent years, philosophers such as Alain Badiou and theorists such as Slavoj Žižek have written about the present as a historical moment of defeat which calls for particular modes of thought.⁶ Needless to say they are not talking here about electoral rises and falls, but the comprehensive defeat of all alternatives to unfettered capitalism that dates for some from the fall of the Berlin Wall, and perhaps from even earlier than that.

6. For historians, philosophers, and critics, notions of temporality are key to an understanding of the experience of defeat. How one thinks about the time of defeat determines one's attitude to it. Whether, for example, defeat becomes part of a narrative of inevitability, or is written as a return to the norm, or whether it is understood as a "low place"⁷ from which we will rise, different narratives of defeat each write their own configurations of time. To read the texts of Woolf and Benjamin as texts of defeat is not

2 W. Benjamin, "Notes on a Theory of Gambling," 297-8.

3 W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project; Das Passagen-Werk*.

4 W. Benjamin, "One-Way Street"; "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia"; "On the Concept of History".

5 P. Anderson, "Confronting Defeat"; R. Koselleck, "Transformations of Experience and Methodological Change: A Historical-Anthropological Essay"; W. Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning and Recovery*.

6 A. Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*; S. Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*.

7 Interestingly, the German word for defeat, "Niederlage", means precisely that.

then to read them as texts of defeatism, neither author writes as victim (although both have been mislabelled as such), but to ask how the experience of defeat, an experience against which the ideology of the victor is often deployed with overwhelming force, might be rethought and reclaimed. Each looks for modes that can be used to turn the mentality of defeat into something else. For both writers, this meant confronting the way in which the experience of defeat constrains our openness to what is to come. Both sought for forms of writing that might re-open the future as possibility.

7. This is not to say, of course, that they were unconcerned with the past, rather that they recognised that any consideration of the past will always also be a consideration of what is to come. *Jacob's Room*, after all, is a novel about the past — Jacob's past and in a wider, allegorical, sense that of a whole generation; but the reason Jacob's past is a problem is that he has no future. If it is Jacob as absence, as a hole in time as well as space, that the novel tries to represent, this absence has consequences for the future. In this respect, rescuing Jacob from the scattered fragments that are left over from his life is not just a question of appropriate memorialisation. *Jacob's Room* is not just an elegy and in important respects its form is anti-elegiac. The problem of the future in the novel means that Jacob himself can only ever be part of the story.

8. Benjamin too in *The Arcades Project* was looking for moments of pre-figuration, in which the hidden seeds of the future might be recognised. He finds them in the most everyday of objects and circumstances, where the dull sheath of normality hides extraordinary moments of revelation. And he has a concept which encompasses the ability to recognise the temporal possibilities of the now, *Geitesgegenwart*, which is usually translated into English as “presence of mind” and into French as “la présence d'esprit”. Neither of these translations really convey the concept, although *l'esprit*, which includes the spiritual as well as the intellectual, is closer to *Geist* than “mind”. A better translation into English might be “mindfulness of the present”, which better covers the sense of heightened awareness Benjamin means. And even that definition doesn't cover the extent to which, as Miriam Hansen points out, Benjamin is describing what he elsewhere calls a state of “innervation”,⁸ which is bodily as well as intellectual:

the rare gift of proper gambling pursued — and misused — by individuals in a hermetically isolated manner and for private gain, becomes a model of mimetic innervation for a collective that seems to have all but lost, literally, its senses; which lacks that bodily presence of mind that could yet turn the threatening future into a fulfilled “now”.⁹

9. The act of placing a bet creates a new bodily consciousness of temporality which heightens the gambler's sense of the possibilities of both the present and the future. The essence of Benjamin's thinking on gambling

8 W. Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” 217-18.

9 M. Bratu Hansen, “Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema,” 10.

can be found in the unpublished fragment, “Notes on a Theory of Gambling”:

the genuine gambler places his most important bets – which are usually his most successful ones, too – at the last possible moment. He could be said to be inspired by a certain characteristic sound made by the roulette ball just before it falls on a specific number. But one could also argue that it is only at the last moment, when everything is pressing toward a conclusion, at the critical moment of danger (of missing his chance), that a gambler discovers the trick of finding his way around the table, of reading the table [...] gambling generates by way of experiment the lightening-quick process of stimulation at the moment of danger, the marginal case in which presence of mind [*Geistesgegenwart*] becomes divination, that is to say, one of the highest, rarest moments in life.¹⁰

10. The moment before the bet is laid, and the closer to the laying of the bet the better, is one of the moments when the possibilities of the future inherent in the present come to consciousness: the gambler. Gambling is one of the everyday processes in Benjamin’s work that creates a particular, extraordinary, consciousness that is also a particular consciousness of time. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin quotes from Anatole France’s *Le Jardin d’Epicure*, where he tells the tale of a genie who

gives a boy a ball of thread, and tells him: “This is the thread of your life. Take it. When you find time heavy on your hands, pull it out; your days will pass quick or slow, according as you unwind the ball rapidly or little by little. So long as you leave the thread alone you will stay stationary at the same hour of your existence.” The boy took the thread; first he pulled at it to become a man, then to marry the girl he loved, then to see his children grow up, to win offices and profit and honour, to abridge anxieties, to escape the griefs and infirmities that come with the years, and finally, alas! to cut short a peevish old age. He had lived just four months and six days since the date of the genie’s visit. Well, what is gambling, I should like to know, but the art of producing in a second what Destiny ordinarily effects only in the course of many hours or even many years, the art of collecting into a single instant the emotions dispersed throughout the slow-moving existence of ordinary men, the secret of living a whole lifetime in a few minutes – in a word the genie’s ball of thread? Gambling is the hand-to-hand encounter with Fate... the stake is money – in other words, immediate, infinite possibilities [...]!¹¹

11. Benjamin acknowledges the capacity of the bet to transform time, but for him the temporality of gambling is all about the moment before the bet. Losing, Benjamin claims, produces “a certain feeling of lightness, not to say relief. Conversely, the experience of having won weighs on the gambler’s mind” (297). In both cases with the outcome of the bet the heightened consciousness brought about by the temporality of gambling is lost (hence, we might add, the need to do it again – although Benjamin is in no way bound by our century’s discourses of addiction).

12. Benjamin takes his material for a theory of gambling from French and German texts. How might we relate his understanding of time to anglo-phone modernist prose? We are aware of course of the centrality of gambling to a text by one of Woolf’s contemporaries, James Joyce’s

10 W. Benjamin, “Notes on a Theory of Gambling,” 297-8.

11 W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 498.

Ulysses, published in complete form in the same year as *Jacob's Room*. The Gold Cup at Ascot figures prominently in the single day, 16 June 1904, in which we get to know Leopold Bloom. The historically accurate name of the winner, "Throwaway", is predicted in a series of portents and signs: for example in the throwaway leaflet given to Bloom that announces the coming of Messiah, which he crumples up and throws away into the Liffey,¹² and in his words to Bantam Lyons, who wants to read the racing page of Bloom's newspaper. Bloom's words as he hands it over, "I was just going to throw it away", give Lyons the pretext for picking the winner.

—I want to see about that French horse that's running today, Bantam Lyons said. Where the bugger is it?

He rustled the pleated pages, jerking his chin on his high collar. Barber's itch. Tight collar he'll lose his hair. Better leave him the paper and get shut of him.

—You can keep it, Mr Bloom said.

—Ascot. Gold cup. Wait, Bantam Lyons muttered. Half a mo. Maximum the second.

—I was just going to throw it away, Mr Bloom said.

Bantam Lyons raised his eyes suddenly and leered weakly.

—What's that? his sharp voice said.

—I say you can keep it, Mr Bloom answered. I was going to throw it away that moment.

Bantam Lyons doubted an instant, leering: then thrust the outspread sheets back on Mr Bloom's arms.

—I'll risk it, he said. Here, thanks.

He sped off towards Conway's corner.

13. Bloom himself doesn't bet,¹³ but he exists in the midst of an impoverished and peripheral city where everyone is looking for a chance. Although not a gambler, in the formal sense at least, he cannot escape gambling. His words to Lyons are later taken as a sign that he has bet on Throwaway and won and his refusal to buy drinks with his assumed winnings fuels an already existing anti-semitism in the Cyclops episode. Gambling and speculation were part of the temporality of the modernist city. But did gambling interest Virginia Woolf, who might have seen betting as an example of the vulgarity she found elsewhere in *Ulysses*?

14. Perhaps it did because *Jacob's Room* includes one possible bet, three actual bets and a wager. Each of these deserve attention, but it is also worth posing the question, to which I will return, of how far the the text

12 J. Joyce, *Ulysses*, 124-5.

13 Although there are strong hints that he was involved in and may have gained financially from a fraudulent lottery: The Royal and Privileged Hungarian Lottery.

writes the war itself as kind of gamble, where the time before its declaration creates a temporality analogous to the experience of time the gambler undergoes before laying a bet – an analogy recognised by Benjamin when he remarks in Convolute O: “It is not by accident that people bet on the results of elections, on the outbreak of war”.¹⁴ Just as everything seems possible before a bet, so before the declaration of war certainty gives way to uncertainty; and the closer one gets to the declaration, the more all the possibilities of the future open up. The end of a war like the outcome of a bet has the opposite affect. It closes down the future. As in gambling, both winning and losing a war are disappointing experiences. Winning can even be, paradoxically, a kind of defeat – not just because the outcome is now certain but also because, as for the generation that experienced the conflict of 1914-18, the losses outweigh any sense of triumph. But if war is the big gamble in *Jacob's Room*, it pays to examine first the smaller games of chance.

15. The first mention of a bet in the novel is the possible cause of “gestures of arms, movements of bodies [that] could be seen shaping something” in a Cambridge common room: “Was it an argument? A bet on the boat races? Was it nothing of the sort?”.¹⁵ We never find out. The future is left open. All three confirmed bets in *Jacob's Room* are made by Charlotte Wilding at the house party in Cornwall. The first is made with “the young man with thick spectacles and a fiery moustache” (76) that he won’t eat begonias. Begonias are an edible flower, so we can reconstruct the argument and the bet even though it is not recorded. We first hear of it in retrospect, when its outcome is in dispute:

“We put it to you, Mrs Durrant,” said a young man with thick spectacles and a fiery moustache. “I say the conditions were fulfilled. She owes me a sovereign.”

“Not, *before* the fish – *with* it, Mrs. Durrant,” said Charlotte Wilding.

“That was the bet; with the fish,” said Clara seriously. “Begonias, mother. To eat them with his fish.”

“Oh dear,” said Mrs. Durrant.

“Charlotte won’t pay you,” said Timothy.

“How dare you...” said Charlotte.

“That privilege will be mine,” said the courtly Mr. Wortley, producing a silver case primed with sovereigns and slipping one coin on to the table. (58)

16. Charlotte, as true gambler, battles to keep the bet and therefore the future open, deferring the outcome until the last possible moment. Timothy Durrant’s prediction: “Charlotte won’t pay you”, is slapped down. Charlotte’s riposte, “How dare you...”, might be completed, “How dare you

14 W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 513.

15 V. Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, 56-7. From here on page numbers in text.

say what I will do. How dare you complete my future". The courtly Mr Wortley is the real spoiler here, bringing the dispute to an end, but at same time, with the power of his wealth, closing down the future the bet has opened; which is probably why Charlotte is keen to make another bet with Mr Erskine, who may or may not also be the "young man with thick spectacles and the fiery moustache" with whom she first played. After dinner, as they stand under the stars:

[...] Mr. Erskine joined them.

"There's no such thing as silence,' he said positively. "I can hear twenty different sounds on a night like this without counting your voices."

Make a bet of it? said Charlotte.

Done, said Mr. Erskine. "One, the sea; two, the wind; three, a dog; four ..." (79)

17. And there it is left. We never know if he gets to twenty. We never know who wins the bet. For the reader at least the future is again open.

18. Charlotte's final bet, perhaps with the young man, perhaps with herself, is that Jacob will come and join them in the rehearsals for a play. Again it is a bet that we only hear about retrospectively, but this time she thinks she has won:

Elsbeth Siddons hovered behind them with something silver on her arm.

"We want," she said ... "I've come ..." she paused.

"Poor Jacob," said Mrs Durrant, quietly as if she had known him all his life. "They're going to make you act in their play."

"How I love you!" said Elsbeth, kneeling beside Mrs Durrant's chair.

"Give me the wool," said Mrs Durrant.

"He's come — he's come!" cried Charlotte Wilding. "I've won my bet!"
(81)

19. In English, the word "play" can refer both to gambling and to a drama; and, as readers of Jane Austen know, a play at a house party in which the actors include young men and women may do the opposite of closing down the future.¹⁶ In reluctantly (if Mrs Durrant's perception is to be credited) accepting a role, Jacob puts himself into a new and uncertain field of play. Yet, as it turns out, even his participation in the performance turns out not to have been certain. The narrative cuts to his departure without mentioning whether the play has taken place or not and it is only later in the novel that Julia Elliot asks him, "Were you there when they acted Mr. Wortley's play?" only to answer her own question:

¹⁶ I am thinking of course of *Mansfield Park*, where a play performed during the absence of the master of the house, Sir Thomas Bertram, allows desire to come out into the open.

"Oh, no, of course not - at the last moment, did you hear - you had to go to join your mother, I remember, at Harrogate - At the last moment, as I was saying, just as everything was ready, the clothes finished and everything - " (119)

20. "At the last moment", the optimum moment Benjamin tells us for the gambler to place his bet, Jacob withdrew from field of (the) play. Is the bet considered but not placed also a form of speculation? Or is it a withdrawal from the future — a refusal to play one's part in what is to come? Is Jacob a gambler or not? I will return to this question at the end.

21. First I want to consider Woolf's representation of the temporality of the bet. In *Jacob's Room* the retrospective view of Jacob's life means that all bets are in the past — all bets are, in effect, off. This should mean that that probability has become certainty, but instead the opposite happens. In *Jacob's Room* as in *Ulysses*, the recording of a past bet reveals its uncertain hold on the future. It may not have taken place at all, like the bet on the boat races. If it did take place, like the bet on whether the young man "with thick glasses and the fiery moustache" will eat a begonia, its exact conditions remain in dispute: before the fish or with the fish? The outcome may not be remembered, or may not really matter (we do not really care whether Mr Erskine can name twenty sounds on a summer night, but we enjoy the fact that he tries). An apparent win, such as Charlotte's prediction of Jacob's participation in the play, may turn out to be premature.

22. The only other wager¹⁷ in the novel is that of Jacob's lover, Florinda, with herself, that she will read a page of Shelley before eating a chocolate cream:

For when Florinda got home that night she first washed her head; then ate chocolate creams; then opened Shelley. True, she was horribly bored. What on earth was it ABOUT? She had to wager with herself that she would turn the page before she ate another. In fact she slept. (105-6)

23. Florinda's stake on her own resolution to read another page of Shelley is not redeemed, but it is enough to make her a gambler. The novel's most maligned character - maligned for her supposed lack of a "mind" by the narrator, then by Jacob (107), and then perhaps by the unwary reader — exists in a world of pleasure, sensation, and prejudice. For Jacob, she creates an "insoluble" problem: the problem of desire.¹⁸ But Florinda is also an "insoluble problem" because she represents an uncertain future. As is shown by a brief incident in Soho, Jacob appears to be unable to understand speculation:

17 In English the word "wager" has more serious connotations than the everyday "bet". Some of its archaic meaning as a "solemn pledge or undertaking" still adheres to it. One might talk portentously of a "wager with death". Its use in relation to Florinda is then ironic, but we shall see, the narrative voice in *Jacob's Room* is far from reliable.

18 See the last section of Chapter VI, which begins "The problem is insoluble. The body is harnessed to the brain." and ends: "But when she looked at him, dumbly, half-guessing, half-understanding, apologizing perhaps, anyhow saying as he had said, It's none of my fault,' straight and beautiful in body, her face like a shell within its cap, then he knew that cloisters and classics are no use whatever. The problem is insoluble." (110-11).

it was a wet November night. The lamps of Soho made large greasy spots of light upon the pavement. The by-streets were dark enough to shelter man or woman leaning against the doorways. One detached herself as Jacob and Florinda approached.

“She’s dropped her glove,” said Florinda.

Jacob, pressing forward, gave it her.

Effusively she thanked him; retraced her steps; dropped her glove again. But why? For whom? (109)

24. Jacob’s lack of understanding of the woman’s speculations, which in a street in Soho are almost certainly commercial, positions him outside the world of chance. Florinda in contrast is very much of that world and as the novel reaches its conclusion, her lack of “mind” starts to compare badly with Jacob’s incomprehension of the laws of probability. “Chance” clusters around him even while he deflects it. “[W]hat *chance*”, we are asked, that Mrs Papworth, who cleans for Richard Bonamy will “faithfully report” (138) an argument between him and Jacob. “He don’t give Bonamy a *chance*”, she thinks. Fanny Elmer hangs “about the neighbourhood of the Foundling Hospital merely for the *chance* of seeing Jacob walk down the street, take out his latch-key, and open the door” (166). The Italian carriages in which Jacob travels “get damnably hot with the afternoon sun on them, and the *chances* are that before the engine has pulled to the top of the gorge the clanking chain will have broken” (185). Clara Durrant “owing (so the character-mongers said) largely to her mother’s influence, never yet had the *chance* to do anything off her own bat” (214).¹⁹

25. Almost all information in the novel is subject to probability. A steamer crossing the horizon is: “*probably* bound for Cardiff” (68). A “a little rosy woman” at the Durrant’s party “is *probably* a governess” (58). “*Probably*”, says Jacob to Timothy Durrant, “we are the only people in the world who know what the Greeks meant” (102). What mothers (specifically Jacob’s mother, Betty Flanders) can’t write in letters to their sons is: “*probably* this - Don’t go with bad women, do be a good boy; wear your thick shirts; and come back, come back, come back to me” (122). When trying to understand the city crowd: “should you turn aside into one of those little bays on Waterloo Bridge to think the matter over, it will *probably* seem to you all a muddle - all a mystery” (154). Jacob’s travel money will “*probably*” give out (186). “Stretched on the top of the mountain, quite alone, Jacob enjoyed himself immensely. *Probably* he had never been so happy in the whole of his life” (198).²⁰

26. The word “perhaps” is used over a hundred times in the text.²¹ The phrase “no doubt” on the other hand, used over fifty times, always raises the possibility of doubt rather than putting it to rest. Any manifestation of

19 My italics.

20 My italics.

21 I am grateful to Judith Allen for pointing out to me that “perhaps” is one of the most commonly used words in Woolf’s writing.

certainty is treated with scepticism. The certainties of Jacob's life in particular are treated ironically, as a sign of ignorance, naivety or wishful thinking. In King's College Chapel: "What sculptured faces, what *certainty*, authority controlled by piety, although great boots march under the gowns." (38). Walking by the river after lunch with the Plumers, Jacob "draws into him at every step as he walks by the river such steady *certainty*, such reassurance from all sides" (45). Of Cambridge undergraduates it is asked: "Were they reading? *Certainly* there was a sense of concentration in the air." (54). In London: "Nothing could appear more *certain* from the steps of St. Paul's than that each person is miraculously provided with coat, skirt, and boots; an income; an object." (87). In the digression about letters in Chapter 8: "something whispers, Is this all? Can I never know, share, be *certain*?" (126). A rhetorical question, as the answer can only be no. Just as, despite the assurance, we can never be sure that an umbrella deposited at the entrance to the British Library "will *certainly* be found" (147).²²

27. Why, it has to be asked, if the novel is just about Jacob's memorialisation, is it written in such a speculative mode? And why is Jacob not part of that mode? To answer that question, we have to return to the the experience of defeat with which I began. In his book, *In Defence of Lost Causes*, Slavoj Žižek writes of a paradox:

is not a revolutionary orientation towards the future the very opposite of melancholic attachment to the past? What if, however, the future one should be faithful to is *the future of the past itself*, in other words, the emancipatory potential that was not realized due to the failure of past attempts and for that reason continues to haunt us.²³

28. For Žižek the correct tense with which to engage with defeat is the future anterior, "the future of the past itself", but *Jacob's Room* seems to inaugurate a new, perhaps more radical tense, which we might call the speculative anterior. In order to recapture the possibilities inherent in the past, the text returns to last possible moment before things are decided, the moment before the bet is placed. When, to return to Benjamin's analogy of the roulette table, all winning numbers are available, when a future was still possible. When we experience "by way of experiment the lightening-quick process of stimulation at the moment of danger, the marginal case in which presence of mind [*Geistesgegenwart*] becomes divination, that is to say, one of the highest, rarest moments in life".²⁴

29. But do the war and Jacob's death mean that all bets have been lost? That depends on our reading of the novel. As the opposition between probability and certainty in the novel shows, while there is a pattern of chance that clusters around Jacob, he seems strangely immune from it. What characterises Jacob is not probability, but a grim adherence to certainty: the

22 My italics.

23 S. Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, 393-4.

24 W. Benjamin, "Notes on a Theory of Gambling," 298.

determination that takes him as a small boy on the beach “further and further away until he held” the figure of the death - “a skull, perhaps a cow’s skull” - “in his arms” (7). Indeed there are very few representations of the death-drive in literature as compelling as this one, with its uncertain movement “further and further away” that nonetheless and inevitably leads directly to the death’s head.

30. If we consider the war, the understated actual subject of the novel, in this light, Jacob’s march towards war has all the hallmarks of the novel’s other “certainties”: the certainties of Cambridge, of the classics, of masculine, bourgeois entitlement. Uncertainty is province of those whom in another novel we might call the peripheral characters, but who because Jacob is an *absent* centre, themselves become central. Probability is the realm of the distracted, disloyal, pleasure-seeking Florinda, of Clara Durant, of Richard Bonamy, to whom Jacob doesn’t give a chance, of Fanny Elmer, who hopes for a chance, of Betty Flanders who thinks her chance has gone, of the anonymous young woman, dropping her glove in the hope of... what? These characters survive while Jacob does not, and with them survive all the undecided wagers made before the war, all the chances and probabilities from which Jacob kept himself distant. In this speculative reading, the novel operates not as a memorialisation of Jacob, but more as a critique: a critique of his certainty, the confidence which took him to war. A certainty that Richard Bonamy staring at Jacob’s room after the war now finds incredible:

“He left everything just as it was,” Bonamy marvelled. “Nothing arranged. All his letters strewn about for any one to read. What did he expect? Did he think he would come back?” he mused, standing in the middle of Jacob’s room. (246)

31. Jacob leaves behind him a scatter of things - “Such confusion everywhere!” (247) his mother exclaims - but a scatter also of people: people who still have the potential to activate the possibilities inherent in the past, while he does not. Only by returning to the temporality of Woolf’s “the last moment”, of Benjamin’s “the last possible moment” can those possibilities be reactivated. Only then can a mindfulness of the present, when *Geistesgegenwart* becomes divination, re-open the future.

32. Probably the binary in this reading between Jacob as monologic principle and the polyphony of possibilities that survive the war is not as stark as I have made it seem. Probably the apparent comparability of these two responses to defeat, the Woolfian and the Benjaminian, should not blind us to the difficulty or the singularity of the tasks they engage in. Certainly it is no easy matter to find the resources necessary to overcome the experience of defeat, to think one’s way through it, to create an aesthetic that resists the closing down of the future by opening the possibilities inherent in the past. Certainly, I have not done justice to either text nor to the points where they touch and illuminate one another. I think it’s fair to say that my bid to place Woolf among the philosophers has failed. I have lost my bet with you and this means that, as with all gambles, this article must

end in disappointment for both parties, the author and the reader. Although, as loser I will at least be able to “indulge in a certain feeling of lightness, not to say relief”, knowing that “the experience of having won weighs on the gambler’s mind”.²⁵

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²⁵ *Ibid.*, 297.

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