

Consciousness of “The Mark on the Wall”

A Translation of Virginia Woolf’s *The Mark on the Wall*



(By George Charles Beresford)

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Introduction

Translating is one of my favourite pastimes and because I wish to do a Master's degree in Translation Studies, it was a simple enough choice for me to do a translation thesis. During one of my searches for a text, I came across Virginia Woolf. I had heard of her, knew who she was, but had never actually read anything by her before. When I did, I was impressed by the subtle complexity of her style, and her life as a person in general. I decided I wanted to use her, and specifically her short story "The Mark on the Wall," for my thesis. In my reflection, below, I will mostly focus on the style and historical and cultural context of the story, so as to point out the translation problems and the analysis of the text itself.

Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf was born in London in 1882 under the name Adeline Virginia Stephen. She had a difficult life: she was sexually abused by her older half-brother and at only thirteen years old the death of her mother caused her second mental breakdown and first suicide attempt. After her father passed away in 1904 she moved to Bloomsbury with several of her siblings. That is where the "Bloomsbury Group" formed, a group of intellectuals consisting of economist John Maynard Keynes and novelist E.M. Forster, among other important names. They gathered together frequently to discuss a range of topics, from their dislike of capitalism to their approval of following inner senses. Woolf, who was part of this group, was influenced by them in several manners. The Bloomsbury Group was open about sexuality, to name an example, and thus contributed to Woolf's views of gender relations (Greenblatt et al. 2: 2080). One member of the group was painter Duncan Grant, who was the lover of both men and women, including Woolf's brother Adrian. Woolf, too, was bisexual and it was during her marriage to Leonard Woolf that she had a relationship with her fellow writer Vita Sackville-West.

Woolf wrote many novels, short stories, essays, biographies and reviews. The first of these was *The Voyage Out*, published in 1915. In 1919 this novel was followed by her next publication, namely *Night and Day*. This was not received very well by the public or the critics, because instead of the modernistic style of her first book, *Night and Day* was a piece of traditional realism. However, in that same year the short stories “The Mark on the Wall” and “Kew Gardens” were also published. They contained modernist and experimental influences, but “seemed to lead nowhere” (Forster 16). It was her next book, *Jacob’s Room*, in which she succeeded in applying her new technique of writing poetry as a novel, thereby moving away from the literary norm. She fell back to realism when she wrote *The Years*, to no great success. For her very last novel, *Between the Acts*, she once more used the method she understood best. She has, however, been criticised for being unable to write memorable characters. According to E. M. Forster: “She dreams, designs, jokes, invokes, observes details, but she does not tell a story or weave a plot and – can she create characters?” (19). The characters are not the most important part of her works, though. Instead, the reader should concentrate on her unique style, the interior monologues she weaves together.

Woolf was immensely concerned with the position of women in society, which became a more important subject in her later works, especially in the essay *A Room of One’s Own*. Feminism was an important theme in many of her writings, though not always presented as prominently. Her goal was equality between men and women both in real life and in literature, yet this was never accomplished. There are critics who wonder if she truly was a feminist; this will be elaborated upon later.

She is still significant today. In 2002 she was featured in a film, played by Nicole Kidman: *The Hours*, based on *Mrs. Dalloway*. Her name was used in the 1962 Broadway play *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and its film adaptation in 1966, but unlike in *The Hours*,

which informs the viewer about her life, the play instead refers to her iconic cultural importance.

Woolf committed suicide in March 1941, terrified of World War II and fearing that she would become a burden to her husband due to her ongoing mental problems (Greenblatt et al. 2: 2081). She placed stones in her pockets and drowned herself (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, par. 29), thus ending her life as dramatically as she lived it.

“The Mark on the Wall”

“The Mark on the Wall” is one of the stories from *Monday or Tuesday*, a collection of short stories. This particular piece is mostly introspective and has been called “a manifesto of modernism” (Leech 136). It starts off with the main character – most likely Woolf herself – remembering when she first saw the mark on the wall. This is when a series of seemingly unrelated musings begins, starting with “that old fancy” of red knights. She considers several possible identities of the mark, starting with a hole produced by a nail – this leads to thoughts about being torn away from people. Once she decides it cannot be a nail she contemplates the “inaccuracy of thought” (Greenblatt et al. 2: 2082) and ignorance, possessions and the loss of them, ending with how fast life disappears and what might be waiting for us afterwards. This is then followed by another possibility of what the mark might be: a small rose leaf. From Shakespeare, whom she does not interest her, she wants to continue on to pleasant thoughts and ends up pondering about the images people create of themselves. She suggests that reality is not necessarily real and ends with the positions of men and women.

Next, she sees the mark on the wall as something which is projecting from it. This reminds her of the South Downs and the mystery of their true origin. She contemplates what knowledge truly is and why it is so imperative. Nature and fantasies about trees make her forget about reality and civilisation, yet near the end lead her right back to them. This is the

climax: she panics, does not remember what happened. The other character – most likely a male, perhaps Woolf's husband – speaks up and interrupts her reflections. He mentions the war, then asks why there is a snail on the wall, abruptly cutting off her contemplations and leaving the reader with an unsatisfactory feeling when she ends the story with: "Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail" (Greenblatt et al. 2: 2087). The reader expects more introspection, yet it simply ends with an observation which appears almost unlikely, because a snail is not similar to the other views she had of the mark.

Feminism

As said above, feminism was considered an important aspect of Virginia Woolf's stories. Indeed, it was an important part of her life. "The Mark on the Wall" was written in 1919 and is set in that time period. During that time, feminism and emancipation were fought for more strongly than today, because women were suffered more difficulties in those days: they were denied education, could not own their own property and were expected to care for their husbands and children with complete disregard to themselves. Woolf wrote novels and essays on the topic and wished to create a different literature, namely one which included a female point of view.

Feminism can be found in "The Mark on the Wall" in the suggestions of the positions of men and women, for example in the recurring mention of Whitaker's Table of Precedency. This table (or "list," as Woolf refers to it) is first mentioned when her main character muses about the standards for men and women. The list is taken from Whitaker's Almanack and portrays the hierarchy for official events. The King or Queen is at the top, followed by princes, archbishops, etcetera. Woolf claims that "the masculine point of view" establishes this table and she continually expresses her hope that it will disappear.

There are several other allusions to how Woolf views men and women, or believes they are viewed. For instance: “What now takes the place of those things I wonder, those real standard things? Men perhaps, should you be a woman” (2084). The “perhaps” gives the allusion that she does not agree with this idea entirely. However, it is known that she believed the world was man-made and women should not have to solve the problems men created (Forster 15). This might be how men take the place of those standard things: they made the world what it is today, though she does not agree with their methods.

The most obvious reference to the difference between men and women is the ending. After a long, contemplative story, in which reality and fantasy intermix, the male character interrupts her thoughts. He reveals that the mark on the wall was a snail, thereby causing an abrupt ending to the story. The truth has been revealed, reality has intervened. “[T]he masculine point of view [...] governs [the women’s] lives” (2084), as she says herself. The woman does not get up to see if the mark truly was a snail, instead, she merely accepts the man’s perception and promptly ends the story and her entire train of thought. The reader is left with a dissatisfied feeling, as though the true ending is missing, which might prove that Woolf herself was unsatisfied with the state of affairs.

Woolf’s portrayal of the female main character makes the reader believe that she sees women as imaginative. She questions reality – both the reality opposed to fantasy and the reality in which women are not seen as being as important as men. The male character oppresses the woman by forcing her to see reality and live according to his rules. This last part is emphasised by him saying he does not understand why they should have a snail on the wall, even though this snail or mark was the cause of the female’s thinking.

On the other hand, there are people like J. B. Batchelor, who do not believe Woolf was a feminist after all. According to Batchelor Woolf emphasises femininity, not feminism (171). She is merely concerned about her womanhood and transfers this into her writing, but she

does not believe women should rival men. Batchelor claims that Woolf saw a different role for women, namely to renew the sense of life in men (172). Whether this is true or not, it might explain why nature and life are so important in this piece of writing.

Stream of Consciousness

Woolf uses stream of consciousness in “The Mark on the Wall.” This is “[a] method of narration which depicts events through this flow in the mind of a character” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, “stream of consciousness”) and will be explained below with the help of examples. It differs from free indirect discourse in that the entire story is written from the first person’s perspective and it takes place in the present. It is an interior monologue of thought, not a rendition of someone else’s mind.

In “The Mark on the Wall” the reader is first presented with a mark, then through a long stream of thoughts and visions, with different interpretations of the mark leading to different ideas, it ends with the character not remembering what she was thinking about. This stream of consciousness is achieved in several manners: long versus short sentences, the present participle, repetition of words and events, and her use of punctuation. These all add to the complexity of the sentence structure and therefore to the difficulty of translating, which is why they are important to mention here (Nord 151).

The long and short sentences appear in the text often. With help of punctuation, and in some instances without it, Woolf has produced several sentences which were long enough to cause difficulties while translating. An example is the following:

I cannot be sure, but it seems to cast a perceptible shadow, suggesting that if I ran my finger down that strip of the wall it would, at a certain point, mount and descend a small tumulus, a smooth tumulus like those barrows on the South Downs which are, they say, either tombs or camps. (2084-2085)

This has been translated as:

Ik weet het niet helemaal zeker, maar het lijkt een zichtbare schaduw van zich af te werpen, wat doet vermoeden dat als ik met mijn vinger over de muur zou wrijven, die op een bepaald moment een heuveltje zou opgaan en weer afdalen, een glad heuveltje zoals de terpen op de South Downs die, zo zeggen ze, grafkamers of kampementen zijn.

Sentences such as these cause problems due to the fact that, in non-literary Dutch, they are usually cut into parts for comprehension. However, Woolf's style is more important than the plot, mostly because there is no true plot. The sentences are part of a functional unity, used for stylistic purposes (Nord 148). It is impossible to retain the stream of consciousness by shortening the long sentences, because thoughts are rarely formulated to perfectly suit an audience. The reader is looking in on Woolf's mind and they will have to work to understand it.

These long sentences are balanced by very short sentences and phrases. "But after life" (2083) is an example of this. This is ungrammatical because it is a fragment, not a sentence, but in thought grammar matters less than in writing or speaking. Woolf also combines short units to form a longer sentence, as in this example: "But for that mark, I'm not sure about it; I don't believe it was made by a nail after all; it's too big, too round, for that" (2082). Leech uses these examples in *Language in Literature: Style and Foregrounding* (147). He focuses on the variation in sentence length and the effect this has on the reader. Fragments, or sequences of fragments, tend to occur at the beginning of paragraphs. They introduce a new thought or vision, a sudden jump from one to the other. Some of the longer sentences contain jumps as well; however, they are less unexpected because the reader can see exactly how Woolf came to these thoughts.

The present participle is another method to create stream of consciousness. It is often used in order to produce the longer sentences. This caused what Nord calls linguistic problems born from the differences between two languages (147), because it is not as common in Dutch as in English. In order to solve this, it is possible to add a subordinating conjunction. On page 2084 the following sentence appears:

[...] those are the depths they will explore, those the phantoms they will pursue, leaving the description of reality more and more out of their stories, taking a knowledge of it for granted [...].

The first present participle, “leaving the description,” has been translated by inserting “terwijl” in the translation: “[...] terwijl ze de beschrijving van de realiteit meer en meer uit hun verhalen laten.” However, that is not the only difference: I also added a subject (“ze”) where there was none in the source text, because it would be ungrammatical otherwise. The last part of the sentence continues on from the former and the entire translation has become:

[...] dat zijn de diepten die ze zullen verkennen, de geesten die ze zullen achtervolgen, terwijl ze de beschrijving van de realiteit meer en meer uit hun verhalen laten, een kennis ervan als vanzelfsprekend beschouwen [...].

Another conjunction is “wat” or “die,” as in the following example: “[...] en ik dacht aan de ruitersstoet van rode ridders die tegen de zwarte rots omhoog reden.” This is a translation of “[...] and I thought of the cavalcade of red knights riding up the side of the black rock.” (2082). It is possible to turn such sentences into the passive form, but this could obscure the references and the meaning of the images.

The last two ways in which Woolf shapes her stream of consciousness are repetition and punctuation. Repetition is accomplished by the recurrence of certain objects and thoughts and by the recurrence of words. One object which is repeated throughout the story is the mark on the wall. It forms the centre of the story, the central object. Every thought is born from and

returns to that one mark. Whitaker and his Table of Precedency and the theme of nature are repeated throughout the story as well, to show the difference between man-made reality, which can and should change over time, and true reality, which will always remain the same, even after humankind is gone. Woolf also often repeats a word or phrase to emphasise a point or to connect ideas. An example is the following sentence: “It comes from a tree; and trees grow, and we don't know how they grow” (2086). Here repetition is used to get from wood to growth in nature. This sentence sounds almost childlike, which may be because it is used as a link to the next metaphor.

Punctuation is mostly used to break off thoughts, connect them or let them slowly trail off. Woolf uses dashes and ellipses to achieve this. The dashes are used for cutting off thoughts and continuing to the next one, though also to form a conclusion or to elaborate on another part of the sentence. They appear in the text frequently, as do the ellipses. These are used when she slowly trails off, as though she is pondering deeply. Dashes are not used in stories as regularly as here, which is why it is important to mention them, but the ellipses stand out more: she uses four dots, even though (or perhaps because) the convention is three. Since they are part of the style and of the story itself, the same punctuation has been transferred to the translation.

View of Reality

As argued by Claire Sprague in *Virginia Woolf, A Collection of Critical Essays*, Woolf wanted to say what was not said (1). Sprague believes Woolf chose a “sense of duality” instead of a stream of consciousness, in this case the duality of fact and vision (Sprague 8) and mind and body. She brings two themes together, namely the fact that there is a mark on the wall and the visions this mark evokes in her, with different interpretations of the mark leading to different ideas. The reason that Sprague does not class “The Mark on the Wall” as

an example of stream of consciousness is because she is careful in guiding the character's thoughts, finding connections which are too convenient (7). On the other hand, the mark is the guide. Whenever it is recognised as something else, the character's thoughts move elsewhere as well; therefore, it does not appear to be too convenient. The character merely has varied realisations when seeing the mark.

Woolf takes reality and plays with it, nearly undermining nature itself when she vents her frustrations about Whitaker's List of Precedency. She uses imagery and metaphors to show the similarities and differences between fact and vision. She compares trees to life, human thoughts to fish swimming through the water, and tablecloths to reality. The first image that appears does not seem to fit in with the ones that follow:

I looked up through the smoke of my cigarette and my eye lodged for a moment upon the burning coals, and that old fancy of the crimson flag flapping from the castle tower came into my mind, and I thought of the cavalcade of red knights riding up the side of the black rock. (2082)

This fantasy is called up by the burning coals. The crimson flag might be the fire, the red knights the flames which consume the "black rock" or coals. Immediately afterwards she claims to be relieved that the mark interrupted this idea, because it came from her childhood. She might believe that, because she is an adult now, she should not have such visions. Despite the mark conjuring up other ideas and calling for more imagination, the images that follow are most certainly not childlike, suggesting that the mark is highly significant.

Throughout the story there are different definitions of the mark, from nails to rose leaves, until at the very end of the story the true identity of the mark is made known: it is a snail. This puts an abrupt stop to all the ideas she had had when she did not know the reality yet, which confirms that reality oppresses fantasy. Fact wins over vision, the body wins over the mind. However, does it really? Throughout the story Woolf has denied reality on more

than one occasion and although her imagination has been brought to an end for now, there is nothing to suggest it will not continue in the future. Images and metaphors form the framework of the story; in fact, they are the story. This is important to bear in mind for the translation, because the images and the theme are part of the reason why this text is difficult to read and understand (Nord 151). Imagery is rarely simple to transfer to another language, but it is even harder when it is so important to the story. In some texts, images and metaphors may be altered severely or, under certain conditions, left out entirely. In this story, however, the metaphors are meant to be as they are, comparing nature to civilisation, providing logical connections between the notions. They cannot be translated literally, though it is important to stay relatively close to the original: if the metaphors were translated too freely, the entire story would change.

As said before, nature dominates a large part of the imagery. A clear example of this is the long metaphor near the end, about trees and their lives. This metaphor contains nearly half the page and consists of very long sentences, many of them formed by short fragments. However, the biggest problem are the images themselves. Woolf paints a beautiful picture, but part of this is lost in translation. An example is the following sentence: “The cows swish their tails beneath them on hot afternoons; they paint rivers so green that when a moorhen dives one expects to see its feathers all green when it comes up again” (2086). I have chosen to translate this as: “Op hete middagen zwieren de koeien onder hen met hun staart; ze schilderen de rivieren zo groen dat wanneer een waterhoen duikt je verwacht dat zijn veren helemaal groen zullen zijn wanneer hij weer omhoog komt.” The sentence structure has to be changed here, which means the images do not appear in the same order as in the source text. The sentences in the target text are also longer, but it seemed important not to alter the image too much, though some of the poetic structure has been sacrificed. Another example:

I like to think of it, too, on winter's nights standing in the empty field with all leaves close-furled, nothing tender exposed to the iron bullets of the moon, a naked mast upon an earth that goes tumbling, tumbling, all night long. (2086)

The translation has become:

Ik denk er ook graag aan op winteravonden, als hij in een leeg veld staat met alle bladeren dichtgevouwen, niets breekbaars blootgesteld aan de ijzeren kogels van de maan, een onbedekte mast op een aarde die de hele nacht rondtolt en rondtolt.

Here the image has been slightly altered: Woolf thinks of the trees standing in fields on winter's nights, while in the translation she thinks of them on those nights. The reason this has been changed is to retain the rhythm of the sentence. There appears to be a certain rhythm in the source text when Woolf uses fragments, just as there is a rhythm in nature and in life, in the trees and the seasons. This functional unity of rhythm needs to remain in the translation.

Earlier in the text Woolf mentions civilisation instead of nature, when she talks about tablecloths and Sundays in London:

How shocking, and yet how wonderful it was to discover that these real things, Sunday luncheons, Sunday walks, country houses, and tablecloths were not entirely real, were indeed half phantoms, and the damnation which visited the disbeliever in them was only a sense of illegitimate freedom. (2084)

In other words: these man-made materials and events were not reality. The reality are the trees and the entirety of nature, the South Downs and their mystery, which seems almost impossible to solve because man does not know nature well enough to truly understand it. The South Downs appear after this paragraph and end with a list of objects which were found there. Woolf continually alternates between nature and civilisation: paragraphs beginning with nature often end materialistically, while the paragraphs starting with materialism and mankind end with nature. This provides a dovetail-effect: human civilisation intermingles with nature,

until it becomes nearly impossible to spot the difference. Even the mark on the wall fits this pattern: from a hole made by a nail she contemplates the possibility of it being a rose leaf, a bump on the wall, an old nail, a crack in the wood, until she realises it is in fact a snail. Perhaps reality is not controlled by man after all, but nature and its circle of life. Humans are part of nature, they do not stand above it, and Woolf does not want the reader to forget this.

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, “The Mark on the Wall” is a fascinating piece with many different aspects to it. It has been analysed often, yet nobody has come to an apparent conclusion. Leech analysed “The Mark on the Wall” on basis of stream-of-consciousness writing, while Sprague argues that it is unlikely she used this method. Forster called her a feminist, while Batchelor denies this fact vehemently. All of this makes it even more interesting to read the story and see who was closer to the truth, or if perhaps all these truths can exist together.

Het Teken op de Muur¹

Het zal half januari van dit jaar geweest zijn dat ik voor het eerst opkeek en het teken op de muur zag. Om een datum te kunnen vaststellen is het van belang zich te herinneren wat er te zien was. Dus nu denk ik aan de haard; het onbeweeglijke laagje geel licht op de bladzijde van mijn boek; de drie chrysanten in de ronde glazen schaal op de schoorsteenmantel. Ja, het moet winter geweest zijn en we waren net klaar met onze thee,² want ik herinner me dat ik een sigaret aan het roken was toen ik opkeek en het teken op de muur voor het eerst zag. Ik keek op door de rook van mijn sigaret en mijn blik bleef even hangen op de gloeiende kolen en het oude beeld van de karmozijnrode vlag wapperend van de kasteeltoren kwam bij me op, en ik dacht aan de ruitersstoet van rode ridders die tegen de zwarte rots omhoog reden. Enigszins tot mijn opluchting onderbrak de aanblik van het teken dat beeld, want het is een oude verbeelding, een automatische verbeelding, die ik misschien als kind al had gevormd. Het teken was een klein rond teken, zwart tegen de witte muur, zo'n vijftien tot twintig centimeter boven de schoorsteenmantel.

Hoe gretig verzamelen zich onze gedachten rond een nieuw object, tillen het een klein stukje op, zoals mieren een grassprietje koortsachtig dragen en het dan achterlaten.... Als dat teken door een spijker was gemaakt kan het niet voor een foto zijn geweest, moet het voor een

¹ The title, "The Mark on the Wall," sounds strong in English, especially because a mark can have several meanings. My first choices were "vlek" and "veeg", but these did not cover all aspects of the word, since their meaning is mostly focused on dirt marks. Therefore, I chose "teken." This also gives it a double meaning, because the mark seems to be a sign to her, which makes her reflect on her life and the past.

² Seeing how they sat down and had cigarettes afterwards, there seems to be the suggestion of them having had something to eat. However, people of higher status – like Virginia Woolf herself – usually mean they had finger food, unlike people of lower status, who do mean an entire meal by this word. In the Netherlands people often automatically add snacks when they drink tea, so the translation of "thee" is sufficient here to provide the meaning.

miniatuur zijn geweest – de miniatuur van een dame met witgepoederde krullen, gepoederde wangen, en lippen als rode anjers. Maar dat klopt niet, natuurlijk³, want de mensen die dit huis vóór ons hadden zouden foto's op zo'n manier hebben gekozen – een oude foto voor een oude kamer. Dat was het soort mensen dat ze waren – zeer interessante mensen, en ik denk vaak aan ze, op dit soort rare momenten, want ik zal hen nooit meer terugzien, nooit weten wat er vervolgens gebeurde. Ze wilden uit dit huis weg omdat ze hun meubilair wilden veranderen, vertelde hij, en hij was bezig te zeggen dat naar zijn mening achter kunst ideeën moesten zitten, toen we uit elkaar gerukt werden, zoals je wordt weggerukt⁴ van de oude dame die op het punt staat thee in te schenken en de jonge man die op het punt staat de tennisbal te slaan in de achtertuin van de voorstedelijke villa net op het moment dat je in de trein voorbij raast.

Maar wat betreft dat teken, ik weet het niet zeker; ik geloof toch niet dat hij door een spijker is gemaakt; daar is hij te groot, te rond voor. Ik zou kunnen opstaan, maar als ik zou opstaan en ernaar zou kijken, tien tegen één dat ik er niet zeker van zou kunnen zijn, want zodra iets achter de rug is, weet niemand ooit meer hoe het is gebeurd. Oh, lieve hemel, het mysterie van het leven! De onnauwkeurigheid van het denken! De onwetendheid van de mensheid! Om te laten zien hoe bitter weinig controle we hebben over onze bezittingen – wat een toevallige aangelegenheid is dit leven na al die beschaving van ons – zal ik een paar zaken de revue laten passeren die in mijn leven verloren raakten, te beginnen met, want dat lijkt altijd de meest mysterieuze van de verliezen – welke kat zou knagen, welke rat zou knabbelen – drie lichtblauwe blikken met boekbindgereedschap. Daarna waren er de vogelkooien, de

³ The source text says “A fraud of course.” This could be read the miniature being a fraud, a fake, but the rest of the sentence says that the people before them would have chosen pictures to suit the room – and the miniature would not. The miniature is not the fraud; her thought is.

⁴ “Torn from” is a slightly different wording than “torn asunder” earlier on the sentence. I wanted to retain that difference, while also retaining the same sort of meaning.

ijzeren hoepels, de stalen schaatsen, de Queen Anne-kolenbak, de bagatelletafel, het handdraaiorgel, allemaal weg, en ook nog juwelen. Opalen en smaragden, ze liggen tussen de wortels van rapen. Wat is het toch een sobere, beperkte zaak! Het is een wonder dat ik ook nog kleren aanheb, dat ik op dit moment omringd ben door degelijke meubels. Nou, als je het leven dan ergens mee wilt vergelijken, moet je het vergelijken met dat je met tachtig kilometer per uur door de ondergrondse wordt geblazen, om aan de andere kant zonder ook nog maar één haarspeld in het haar te landen! Compleet naakt naar buiten geschoten aan de voeten van God! Om en om tuimelend in de wei vol narcissen als bruine papieren pakketjes die door een koker in het postkantoor omlaag worden gegooid! Terwijl het haar naar achteren waait als de staart van een racepaard. Ja, dat lijkt de snelheid van het leven wel uit te drukken, het eeuwige verval en herstel; allemaal zo terloops, allemaal zo toevallig...

Maar na het leven. Het langzaam omlaag trekken van de sterke groene stengels zodat de bloemkelken, als deze zich kantelen, je overstelpen met paars en rood licht. Waarom, tenslotte, zou je daar niet geboren worden zoals je hier geboren wordt, hulpeloos, sprakeloos, niet in staat je ogen te accommoderen, tastend aan de wortels van het gras, aan de tenen van de Reuzen? Het vaststellen⁵ wat bomen zijn, en wat mannen en vrouwen, of dat zulke dingen wel bestaan, daar zul je zo'n vijftig jaar niet toe in staat zijn. Er zal niets zijn behalve ruimtes van licht en donker, doorkruist door dikke stengels, en wat hogerop misschien vlekken gevormd als rozen van een onduidelijke kleur – dof roze en blauw – die, terwijl de tijd doortikt, scherper wordt, ik weet niet wat wordt....

⁵ The source text uses “say,” which is more ambiguous than the Dutch “zeggen.” The context speaks of starting over, learning everything anew; even the eyes need to adjust. Therefore, “vaststellen” captures the meaning of this sentence better than “zeggen” does.

En toch is dat teken op de muur helemaal geen gat. Het kan zelfs ontstaan zijn door een ronde zwarte substantie, een klein rozenblaadje bijvoorbeeld, overgebleven van de zomer, en ik, geen erg alerte huishoudster – kijk bijvoorbeeld naar het stof op de schoorsteenmantel, het stof dat, zoals ze zeggen, Troje drie keer opnieuw heeft begraven, alleen potscherven weigeren absoluut vernietiging, wat niet moeilijk te geloven is.

De boom aan de andere kant van het raam tikt zachtjes tegen de ruit... Ik wil stilletjes denken, kalm, uitgebreid, nooit onderbroken worden, nooit op hoeven te staan uit mijn stoel, om gemakkelijk van het ene naar het andere te glijden, zonder enig besef van vijandigheid, zonder obstakels. Ik wil dieper en dieper wegzinken, weg van de oppervlakte, met zijn harde afzonderlijke feiten. Laat me, om mezelf in balans te houden, het eerste idee vastgrijpen dat voorbijkomt... Shakespeare... Vooruit, waarom ook niet.⁶ Een man die zichzelf stevig in een armstoel neerzette en in de haard keek, zo – Een stortvloed aan ideeën viel onafgebroken vanuit een erg hoge Hemel door zijn gedachten omlaag. Hij leunde met zijn voorhoofd op zijn hand en mensen, die door de open deur naar binnen keken – want dit is een tafereel dat plaatsvindt op een zomeravond – Maar wat is dit saai zeg, deze historische fictie! Het interesseert me eigenlijk totaal niet. Ik zou willen dat ik een aangename gedachtegang zou kunnen bedenken, eentje die me indirect siert, want dat zijn de prettigste gedachten, en ze komen zelfs erg vaak voor in de hoofden van de meest bescheiden grijze muizen, die oprecht geloven dat ze er een hekel aan hebben om complimenten te krijgen. Het zijn geen gedachten die jezelf direct ophemelen, dat is het mooie ervan. Het zijn gedachten als deze:

“En toen kwam ik de kamer in. Ze waren over botanie aan het praten. Ik zei dat ik een bloem had zien groeien op een hoop stuifvaarde op het terrein van een oud huis in Kingsway.

⁶ The irony of the sentence is important here, the way she speaks of Shakespeare as though he was nothing special. This translation captures this better than a literal translation would.

Het zaad, zo zei ik, moet zijn gezaaid tijdens het bewind van Karel de Eerste. Welke bloemen groeiden er tijdens het bewind van Karel de Eerste?” vroeg ik (maar ik herinner me het antwoord niet). Misschien grote bloemen met paarse pluimen erop. En zo gaat het verder. De hele tijd ben ik het personage van mezelf in mijn eigen hoofd aan het opleuken, liefdevol, ongemerkt, maar ik ga het niet openlijk bewonderen,⁷ want als ik dat zou doen zou ik mezelf laten struikelen,⁸ en ik strek uit zelfbescherming meteen mijn hand uit voor een boek. Het is zeer merkwaardig hoe instinctief je het beeld van jezelf beschermt voor blinde verering of enige andere verdraaiing die het belachelijk zou kunnen maken, of te afwijkend van het origineel om nog geloofd te worden. Of is het helemaal niet zo merkwaardig? Het is een kwestie van groot belang. Stel je voor dat de spiegel breekt, het beeld verdwijnt, en het romantisch personage omringd door het diepe groen van het bos is er niet meer, maar slechts het omhulsel van een persoon dat door andere mensen wordt gezien – wat een bedompte, oppervlakkige, saaie, opmerkelijke wereld wordt het dan! Een wereld om niet in te leven. Terwijl we tegenover elkaar staan in autobussen en ondergrondse spoorwegen kijken we in de spiegel; dat verklaart de vaagheid, de schittering van glazigheid, in onze ogen. En in de toekomst zullen de schrijvers zich het belang van deze reflecties meer en meer realiseren, want natuurlijk is er niet één reflectie maar een vrijwel oneindig aantal; dat zijn de diepten die ze zullen verkennen, de geesten die ze zullen achtervolgen, terwijl ze de beschrijving van de realiteit meer en meer uit hun verhalen laten, een kennis ervan als vanzelfsprekend beschouwen, zoals de Grieken dat deden en Shakespeare misschien ook – maar deze

⁷ The source text uses “not openly adoring it,” which is a description of how she dresses up her image. I changed this to a subordinate clause in order to retain the general meaning, yet make it grammatically Dutch as well. If I had translated this literally, it would have been artificial.

⁸ “Catch out” means “betrappen.” However, I went for a more figurative translation, because further on in the sentence she stretches out her hand for a book – which I interpreted as the need to hold on to something. “Betrappen” does not include the double meaning the English phrase has; therefore I chose “laten struikelen,” which can be used as a synonym.

generalisaties zijn erg nutteloos. De militaire klank van het woord is genoeg. Het roept voorpagina-artikelen op, kabinetministers – echt een hele groep aan zaken die je, als kind zijnde, als de zaak zelf zag,⁹ de normale zaak, de echte zaak, waarvan je niet kon afwijken zonder het risico van naamloze verdoeming. Op de een of andere manier roepen generalisaties de zondagen in Londen op, de middagwandelingen op zondag, de lunch op zondag, en ook manieren om over de doden te spreken, over kleren en gewoontes, zoals de gewoonte om tot een bepaald tijdstip allemaal samen in één kamer te zitten, ondanks dat niemand er van hield. Er waren overal regels voor. De regel voor tafelkleden in die specifieke periode was dat ze gemaakt moesten zijn van tapijstof met kleine gele vakjes, zoals te zien is op foto's van de vloerkleden in de gangen van de Koninklijke paleizen. Andere tafelkleden waren geen echte tafelkleden. Hoe schokkend, en hoe wonderbaarlijk ook, was het om te ontdekken dat deze echte zaken, zondagslunch, zondagswandelingen, landhuizen en tafelkleden, niet helemaal echt waren, in feite halve fantomen waren, en de verdoeming van de ongelovige was slechts een gevoel van onrechtmatige vrijheid. Wat neemt nu de plaats in van deze zaken, vraag ik me af, deze echte normale zaken? Misschien mannen, als je een vrouw bent; het mannelijke standpunt dat onze levens bestuurt, dat de norm zet, dat Whitaker's Protocollaire Rangorde¹⁰ vaststelt, dat, naar ik aanneem, sinds de oorlog een halve fantoom is geworden voor vele mannen en vrouwen, dat snel, zo hoop ik, met de fantomen de prullenbak in gelachen zal worden, samen met de mahonie dressoirs en de Landseer prenten, Goden en Duivels, Hel

⁹ “[W]hich as a child one thought the thing itself” seemed problematic, but according to Michelle Levy (Benzel and Hoberman 141) she meant that she thought “the thing itself” was “leading articles” and “cabinet ministers.” In Dutch people would not use “denken” in this context, but “zien.”

¹⁰ The Netherlands does not appear to have a “List of Precedency.” This made it difficult to find a translation for this phrase, though I eventually found “Lijst van Préséance.” However, I soon realised this phrase was only used in Belgium. In the Netherlands the simpler “protocollaire rangorde” is more common. I retained the capital letters; they are not commonly used in English either, which means she might have had a reason for using them.

enzovoorts, om ons allemaal achter te laten met een bedwelmend gevoel van onrechtmatige vrijheid – als vrijheid wel bestaat....

Vanuit sommige hoeken lijkt dat teken op de muur eigenlijk uit de muur te steken. Het is ook niet helemaal rond. Ik weet het niet helemaal zeker, maar het lijkt een zichtbare schaduw van zich af te werpen, wat doet vermoeden dat als ik met mijn vinger over de muur zou wrijven, die op een bepaald moment een heuveltje zou opgaan en weer afdalen, een glad heuveltje zoals de terpen op de South Downs die, zo zeggen ze, grafkamers of kampementen zijn. Van die twee opties heb ik liever dat ze grafkamers zijn, omdat ik net als de meeste Engelse mensen naar melancholie verlang, en het normaal vind om aan het einde van een wandeling te denken aan de botten die onder het turf uitgestrekt liggen.... Er moet toch een boek over zijn. Eén of andere oudheidkundige moet die botten hebben opgegraven en ze een naam gegeven hebben.... Ik vraag me af wat voor mannen oudheidkundigen zijn? Voornamelijk gepensioneerde kolonels, denk ik, die hier groepen bejaarde arbeiders naar de top leiden, waar ze kluitaarde en klompen stenen onderzoeken, en in briefwisseling raken met de naburige geestelijken, wat ze, als ze die brieven¹¹ openen bij het ontbijt, een gevoel van betekenis geeft, en de vergelijking van pijlpunten maakt het noodzakelijk door het hele land naar de provinciesteden te reizen, wat een prettige noodzaak is voor zowel hen als voor hun bejaarde vrouwen, die pruimenjam willen maken of de studeerkamer op willen ruimen, en alle redenen hebben om de grote vraag van het kamp of de grafkamer in eeuwige spanning te houden, terwijl de kolonel zelf zich aangenaam filosofisch voelt terwijl hij het bewijs verzamelt voor beide kanten van de vraag. Het is waar dat hij uiteindelijk neigt naar het geloven in het kampement; en, als hij wordt bestrijdt, stelt hij een pamflet op dat hij van plan

¹¹ In English it is possible to open your correspondence, in Dutch it is not. “[A]ls ze die openen” was a possibility, but that would raise the questions of what they opened. Adding “brieven” to it made it clearer what was meant, which is especially necessary considering the length of the sentence.

is voor te lezen bij de driemaandelijke bijeenkomst van het lokale gezelschap wanneer hij wordt geveeld door een beroerte, en zijn laatste bewuste gedachten gaan niet over zijn vrouw of kind, maar over het kampement en de pijlpunt daar, die nu in een vitrine in het lokale museum ligt, samen met de voet van een Chinese moordnares, een handjevol Elizabethaanse spijkers, veel stenen Tudor pijpen, een stuk Romeins aardewerk, en het wijnglas waar Nelson uit dronk – ik weet eigenlijk niet wat dit bewijst.¹²

Nee, nee, niets is bewezen, niets is bekend. En als ik nu op zou staan en erachter zou komen dat het teken op de muur eigenlijk – wat zullen we zeggen? – de kop van een gigantische oude spijker is, die er tweehonderd jaar geleden in is geslagen, en die nu, dankzij de geduldige wrijving van vele generaties van dienstmeisjes, zijn hoofd boven de laag verf uit heeft gestoken, en zijn eerste blik van het moderne leven opneemt in het schouwspel van een met vuur belichte kamer met witte muren, wat zou ik dan bereiken? Kennis? Stof voor verdere hypotheses? Ik kan net zo goed denken als ik stilzit als wanneer ik sta. En wat is kennis? Wat zijn onze geleerde mannen, behalve de afstammelingen van heksen en kluizenaars die in grotten en bossen hurkten om kruiden te brouwen, spitsmuizen te ondervragen en de taal van de sterren op te schrijven? En hoe minder we hen eren terwijl ons bijgeloof afneemt en ons respect voor schoonheid en een gezonde geest toeneemt.... Ja, dat zou een heel prettige wereld zijn.¹³ Een stille, uitgestrekte wereld, met de bloemen heel rood en blauw in de open velden. Een wereld zonder professoren of specialisten of huishoudsters met de profielen van politieagenten, een wereld waarin het mogelijk is je van je gedachten af

¹² In the source text, “proving I really don’t know what” is not a separate sentence. However, in Dutch it is not possible to copy this grammatically, therefore I changed the order of the words (“proving” is at the back now) and turned it into an actual sentence. She could have said this as an afterthought.

¹³ “Yes, one could imagine a very pleasant world,” says the source text. This is a colloquial phrase and the translation I chose is closer to the way this is said in the Netherlands than a more literal translation would be.

te snijden zoals een vis door het water snijdt met zijn vin, daarbij rakelings langs de stengels van de waterlelies gaat, die los boven de nesten van witte zee-eitjes hangen... Wat is het vredig daar beneden, geworteld in het centrum van de wereld en omhoog starend door de grijze wateren, met hun plotselinge schitteringen van licht, en hun reflecties – als Whitaker's Almanak er niet was – als die Protocollaire Rangorde er niet was!

Ik moet overeind komen¹⁴ en zelf zien wat dat teken op de muur nou echt is – een spijker, een rozenblaadje, een scheur in het hout?

Hier is de natuur weer eens bezig met haar oude spelletje van zelfbehoud. Deze gedachtegang, zo bemerkt ze, dreigt slechts een energieverspilling te zijn, zelfs een soort botsing met de realiteit, want wie zal ooit een vinger uitsteken tegen Whitaker's Protocollaire Rangorde? De Aartsbisschop van Canterbury wordt opgevolgd door de Lord Kanselier; de Lord Kanselier wordt opgevolgd door de Aartsbisschop van York. Volgens de filosofie van Whitaker volgt iedereen iemand anders op; en het geweldige is om te weten wie na wie volgt. Whitaker weet het, en laat dat je troosten, zo adviseert de Natuur, in plaats van er kwaad om te worden; en als je niet getroost kunt worden, als je dit uur van harmonie zo nodig moet verstoren, denk dan aan het teken op de muur.

Ik begrijp het spel van de Natuur – haar oproep om actie te ondernemen om zo alle gedachten te onderbreken die je dreigen op te winden of te bedroeven. Ik denk dat daar onze lichte minachting voor mannen van de daad vandaan komt – mannen die, naar we aannemen, niet nadenken. Toch schuilt er geen kwaad in om een punt te zetten achter onaangename gedachten door naar het teken op de muur te kijken.

¹⁴ “Jump up” is much stronger, but “opspringen” or “overeind springen” are usually used for surprise or fear, which is not the case here. “Opstaan,” on the other hand, would be too weak.

Inderdaad, nu ik mijn blik erop gericht heb, voel ik dat ik een stuk drijfhout¹⁵ vastgegrepen heb; ik voel een tevreden besef van realiteit die de twee Aartsbisschoppen en de Lord Kanselier meteen naar de schaduwen van de achtergrond stuurt. Hier is iets duidelijk, iets echts. Dus, wanneer iemand¹⁶ ontwaakt uit een middernachtelijke horrordroom, doet deze persoon¹⁷ haastig het licht aan en gaat stil liggen, en vereert de ladekast, vereert de soliditeit, vereert de realiteit, de onpersoonlijke wereld die het bewijs is van een ander bestaan dan het onze. Dat is waar iedereen zeker van wil zijn.... Hout is iets prettigs om over na te denken. Het komt van bomen; en bomen groeien, en we weten niet hoe ze groeien. Ze groeien jaren en jaren, zonder enige aandacht aan ons te schenken, in weiden, in bossen, en bij de rivieroever – allemaal zaken waar graag over wordt nagedacht. Op hete middagen zwieren de koeien onder hen met hun staart; ze schilderen de rivieren zo groen dat wanneer een waterhoen duikt je verwacht dat zijn veren helemaal groen zullen zijn wanneer hij weer omhoog komt. Ik denk graag aan de vissen die tegen de stroom in schommelen als vlaggen die wapperen in de wind; en aan waterkevers die langzaam modderhopen bouwen op de rivierbedding. Ik denk graag aan de boom zelf: eerst de dichte droge sensatie van hout zijn; dan het schuren door de storm; dan het langzame, heerlijke sijpelen van het sap. Ik denk er ook graag aan op winteravonden, als hij in een leeg veld staat met alle bladeren dichtgevouwen, niets breekbaars blootgesteld

¹⁵ A “plank in the sea” could be translated as “een plank in de zee,” but in Dutch, people are more likely to simply say “drijfhout.” It is immediately clear what is meant without adding that it comes from the sea.

¹⁶ In this particular case, “iemand” catches the general aspect and is neutral at the same time. Turning the sentence into the passive was also an option, but this ruined the flow of the words. Fluency is also the reason why I left out the last repetition of “worshipping.” In Dutch I needed more words than the source text did, and it made the sentence difficult to follow.

¹⁷ This is a continuation of “iemand” earlier on in the sentence. Without a phrase like this, it would still be hard to read. I chose this particular phrase because it is neutral and not too short, which a simple “deze” or “die” would be; those words would not fit in with the rest of the text.

aan de ijzeren kogels van de maan, een onbedekte mast op een aarde die de hele nacht rondtolt en rondtolt. Het zingen van de vogels moet in juni erg hard en vreemd klinken; en hoe koud moeten de voeten van insecten er wel niet op voelen, terwijl ze moeizaam voortgang maken langs de schorsplooien, of zich in de zon leggen op het dunne groene bladerdek, en recht vooruit kijken met geruite rode ogen... Eén voor één breken de vezels af onder de immens koude druk van de aarde, dan komt de laatste storm en, als hij valt, drijven de hoogste takken zich weer diep in de grond. Zelfs dan is het leven nog niet voorbij; er zijn nog miljoenen geduldige, oplettende levens voor een boom, overal in de wereld, in badkamers, op schepen, op de stoep, woonkamers, waar mannen en vrouwen zitten na de thee om sigaretten te roken. Die boom zit vol vredige gedachten, blijde gedachten. Ik zou ze allemaal apart willen nemen maar er zit iets in de weg... Waar was ik? Waar ging dit eigenlijk allemaal over? Een boom? Een rivier? De Downs? Whitaker's Almanak? De weiden van narcissen? Ik kan me niets herinneren. Alles beweegt, valt, ontglipt, verdwijnt... Er is vast een aardverschuiving. Iemand hangt over me heen en zegt:

“Ik ga weg, een krant kopen.”¹⁸

“O?”

“Al heeft het geen nut om nog kranten te kopen... Er gebeurt nooit iets. Vervloek deze oorlog; vervloek deze verdomde¹⁹ oorlog! ... Maar toch snap ik niet waarom we een slak op onze muur zouden moeten hebben.”

¹⁸ “Ik ga een krant kopen” sounds quite weak compared to the source text. This is still not very strong, but the speaker in the source text emphasises he is going out, only adding “to buy a newspaper” afterwards. That is another reason why I chose this translation.

Ah, het teken op de muur! Het was een slak.

¹⁹ “God damn this war!” is difficult to translate because in Dutch it comes down to the same as the sentence before. We use “God damn” in a different way, not as a verb. Therefore I changed it to this, to catch the cursing in it as well as the frustration. I added repetition which was not there before, because it fits her style.

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The Mark on the Wall

PERHAPS IT WAS the middle of January in the present year that I first looked up and saw the mark on the wall. In order to fix a date it is necessary to remember what one saw. So now I think of the fire; the steady film of yellow light upon the page of my book; the three chrysanthemums in the round glass bowl on the mantelpiece. Yes, it must have been the winter time, and we had just finished our tea, for I remember that I was smoking a cigarette when I looked up and saw the mark on the wall for the first time. I looked up through the smoke of my cigarette and my eye lodged for a moment upon the burning coals, and that old fancy of the crimson flag flapping from the castle tower came into my mind, and I thought of the cavalcade of red knights riding up the side of the black rock. Rather to my relief the sight of the mark interrupted the fancy, for it is an old fancy, an automatic fancy, made as a child perhaps. The mark was a small round mark, black upon the white wall, about six or seven inches above the mantelpiece.

How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straw so feverishly, and then leave it.... If that mark was made by a nail, it can't have been for a picture, it must have been for a miniature – the miniature of a lady with white powdered curls, powder-dusted cheeks, and lips like red carnations. A fraud of course, for the people who had this house before us would have chosen pictures in that way – an old picture for an old room. That is the sort of people they were – very interesting people, and I think of them so often, in such queer places, because one will never see them again, never know what happened next. They wanted to leave this house because they wanted to change their style of furniture, so he said, and he was in process of saying that in his opinion art should have ideas behind it when we were torn asunder, as one is torn from the old lady about to pour out tea

and the young man about to hit the tennis ball in the back garden of the suburban villa as one rushes past in the train.

But for that mark, I'm not sure about it; I don't believe it was made by a nail after all; it's too big, too round, for that. I might get up, but if I got up and looked at it, ten to one I shouldn't be able to say for certain; because once a thing's done, no one ever knows how it happened. Oh! dear me, the mystery of life; the inaccuracy of thought! The ignorance of humanity! To show how very little control of our possessions we have – what an accidental affair this living is after all our civilization – let me just count over a few of the things lost in one lifetime, beginning, for that seems always the most mysterious of losses – what cat would gnaw, what rat would nibble – three pale blue canisters of book-binding tools? Then there were the bird cages, the iron hoops, the steel skates, the Queen Anne coal-scuttle, the bagatelle board, the hand organ all gone, and jewels, too. Opals and emeralds, they lie about the roots of turnips. What a scraping paring affair it is to be sure! The wonder is that I've any clothes on my back, that I sit surrounded by solid furniture at this moment. Why, if one wants to compare life to anything, one must liken it to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour landing at the other end without a single hairpin in one's hair! Shot out at the feet of God entirely naked! Tumbling head over heels in the asphodel meadows like brown paper parcels pitched down a shoot in the post office! With one's hair flying back like the tail of a race-horse. Yes, that seems to express the rapidity of life, the perpetual waste and repair; all so casual, all so haphazard....

But after life. The slow pulling down of thick green stalks so that the cup of the flower, as it turns over, deluges one with purple and red light. Why, after all, should one not be born there as one is born here, helpless, speechless, unable to focus one's eyesight, groping

at the roots of the grass, at the toes of the Giants? As for saying which are trees, and which are men and women, or whether there are such things, that one won't be in a condition to do for fifty years or so. There will be nothing but spaces of light and dark, intersected by thick stalks, and rather higher up perhaps, rose-shaped blots of an indistinct colour – dim pinks and blues – which will, as time goes on, become more definite, become I don't know what....

And yet that mark on the wall is not a hole at all. It may even be caused by some round black substance, such as a small rose leaf, left over from the summer, and I, not being a very vigilant housekeeper - look at the dust on the mantelpiece, for example, the dust which, so they say, buried Troy three times over, only fragments of pots utterly refusing annihilation, as one can believe.

The tree outside the window taps very gently on the pane.... I want to think quietly, calmly, spaciouly, never to be interrupted, never to have to rise from my chair, to slip easily from one thing to another, without any sense of hostility, or obstacle. I want to sink deeper and deeper, away from the surface, with its hard separate facts. To steady myself, let me catch hold of the first idea that passes.... Shakespeare.... Well, he will do as well as another. A man who sat himself solidly in an arm-chair, and looked into the fire, so – A shower of ideas fell perpetually from some very high Heaven down through his mind. He leant his forehead on his hand, and people, looking in through the open door, for this scene is supposed to take place on a summer's evening But how dull this is, this historical fiction! It doesn't interest me at all. I wish I could hit upon a pleasant track of thought, a track indirectly reflecting credit upon myself, for those are the pleasantest thoughts, and very frequent even in the minds of modest mouse-coloured people, who believe genuinely that they dislike to hear their own praises. They are not thoughts directly praising oneself; that is the beauty of them; they are thoughts

like this:

"And then I came into the room. They were discussing botany. I said how I'd seen a flower growing on a dust heap on the site of an old house in Kingsway. The seed, I said, must have been sown in the reign of Charles the First. What flowers grew in the reign of Charles the First?" I asked (but I don't remember the answer). Tall flowers with purple tassels to them perhaps. And so it goes on. All the time I'm dressing up the figure of myself in my own mind, lovingly, stealthily, not openly adoring it, for if I did that, I should catch myself out, and stretch my hand at once for a book in self-protection. Indeed, it is curious how instinctively one protects the image of oneself from idolatry or any other handling that could make it ridiculous, or too unlike the original to be believed in any longer. Or is it not so very curious after all? It is a matter of great importance. Suppose the looking glass smashes, the image disappears, and the romantic figure with the green of forest depths all about it is there no longer, but only that shell of a person which is seen by other people - what an airless, shallow, bald, prominent world it becomes! A world not to be lived in. As we face each other in omnibuses and underground railways we are looking into the mirror; that accounts for the vagueness, the gleam of glassiness, in our eyes. And the novelists in future will realize more and more the importance of these reflections, for of course there is not one reflection but an almost infinite number; those are the depths they will explore, those the phantoms they will pursue, leaving the description of reality more and more out of their stories, taking a knowledge of it for granted, as the Greeks did and Shakespeare perhaps - but these generalisations are very worthless. The military sound of the word is enough. It recalls leading articles, cabinet ministers - a whole class of things indeed which as a child one thought the thing itself, the standard thing, the real thing, from which one could not depart save at the risk of nameless damnation. Generalisations bring back somehow Sunday in

London, Sunday afternoon walks, Sunday luncheons, and also ways of speaking of the dead, clothes, and habits like the habit of sitting all together in one room until a certain hour, although nobody liked it. There was a rule for everything. The rule for tablecloths at that particular period was that they should be made of tapestry with little yellow compartments marked upon them, such as you may see in photographs of the carpets in the corridors of the royal palaces. Tablecloths of a different kind were not real tablecloths. How shocking, and yet how wonderful it was to discover that these real things, Sunday luncheons, Sunday walks, country houses, and tablecloths were not entirely real, were indeed half phantoms, and the damnation which visited the disbeliever in them was only a sense of illegitimate freedom. What now takes the place of those things I wonder, those real standard things? Men perhaps, should you be a woman; the masculine point of view which governs our lives, which sets the standard, which establishes Whitaker's Table of Precedency, which has become, I suppose, since the war half a phantom to many men and women, which soon, one may hope, will be laughed into the dustbin where the phantoms go, the mahogany sideboards and the Landseer prints, Gods and Devils, Hell and so forth, leaving us all with an intoxicating sense of illegitimate freedom – if freedom exists....

In certain lights that mark on the wall seems actually to project from the wall. Nor is it entirely circular. I cannot be sure, but it seems to cast a perceptible shadow, suggesting that if I ran my finger down that strip of the wall it would, at a certain point, mount and descend a small tumulus, a smooth tumulus like those barrows on the South Downs which are, they say, either tombs or camps. Of the two I should prefer them to be tombs, desiring melancholy like most English people, and finding it natural at the end of a walk to think of the bones stretched beneath the turf.... There must be some book about it. Some antiquary must have dug up those bones and given them a name.... What sort of a man is an antiquary, I wonder? Retired

Colonels for the most part, I daresay, leading parties of aged labourers to the top here, examining clods of earth and stone, and getting into correspondence with the neighbouring clergy, which, being opened at breakfast time, gives them a feeling of importance, and the comparison of arrow-heads necessitates cross-country journeys to the county towns, an agreeable necessity both to them and to their elderly wives, who wish to make plum jam or to clean out the study, and have every reason for keeping that great question of the camp or the tomb in perpetual suspension, while the Colonel himself feels agreeably philosophic in accumulating evidence on both sides of the question. It is true that he does finally incline to believe in the camp; and, being opposed, indites a pamphlet which he is about to read at the quarterly meeting of the local society when a stroke lays him low, and his last conscious thoughts are not of wife or child, but of the camp and that arrowhead there, which is now in the case at the local museum, together with the foot of a Chinese murderess, a handful of Elizabethan nails, a great many Tudor clay pipes, a piece of Roman pottery, and the wine-glass that Nelson drank out of – proving I really don't know what.

No, no, nothing is proved, nothing is known. And if I were to get up at this very moment and ascertain that the mark on the wall is really - what shall we say? - the head of a gigantic old nail, driven in two hundred years ago, which has now, owing to the patient attrition of many generations of housemaids, revealed its head above the coat of paint, and is taking its first view of modern life in the sight of a white-walled fire-lit room, what should I gain? Knowledge? Matter for further speculation? I can think sitting still as well as standing up. And what is knowledge? What are our learned men save the descendants of witches and hermits who crouched in caves and in woods brewing herbs, interrogating shrew-mice and writing down the language of the stars? And the less we honour them as our superstitions dwindle and our respect for beauty and health of mind increases.... Yes, one could imagine a

very pleasant world. A quiet, spacious world, with the flowers so red and blue in the open fields. A world without professors or specialists or house-keepers with the profiles of policemen, a world which one could slice with one's thought as a fish slices the water with his fin, grazing the stems of the water-lilies, hanging suspended over nests of white sea eggs.... How peaceful it is down here, rooted in the centre of the world and gazing up through the grey waters, with their sudden gleams of light, and their reflections - if it were not for Whitaker's Almanack - if it were not for the Table of Precedency!

I must jump up and see for myself what that mark on the wall really is - a nail, a rose-leaf, a crack in the wood?

Here is nature once more at her old game of self-preservation. This train of thought, she perceives, is threatening mere waste of energy, even some collision with reality, for who will ever be able to lift a finger against Whitaker's Table of Precedency? The Archbishop of Canterbury is followed by the Lord High Chancellor; the Lord High Chancellor is followed by the Archbishop of York. Everybody follows somebody, such is the philosophy of Whitaker; and the great thing is to know who follows whom. Whitaker knows, and let that, so Nature counsels, comfort you, instead of enraging you; and if you can't be comforted, if you must shatter this hour of peace, think of the mark on the wall.

I understand Nature's game – her prompting to take action as a way of ending any thought that threatens to excite or to pain. Hence, I suppose, comes our slight contempt for men of action – men, we assume, who don't think. Still, there's no harm in putting a full stop to one's disagreeable thoughts by looking at a mark on the wall.

Indeed, now that I have fixed my eyes upon it, I feel that I have grasped a plank in the sea; I feel a satisfying sense of reality which at once turns the two Archbishops and the Lord High Chancellor to the shadows of shades. Here is something definite, something real. Thus, waking from a midnight dream of horror, one hastily turns on the light and lies quiescent, worshipping the chest of drawers, worshipping solidity, worshipping reality, worshipping the impersonal world which is a proof of some existence other than ours. That is what one wants to be sure of.... Wood is a pleasant thing to think about. It comes from a tree; and trees grow, and we don't know how they grow. For years and years they grow, without paying any attention to us, in meadows, in forests, and by the side of rivers – all things one likes to think about. The cows swish their tails beneath them on hot afternoons; they paint rivers so green that when a moorhen dives one expects to see its feathers all green when it comes up again. I like to think of the fish balanced against the stream like flags blown out; and of water-beetles slowly raising domes of mud upon the bed of the river. I like to think of the tree itself: first the close dry sensation of being wood; then the grinding of the storm; then the slow, delicious ooze of sap. I like to think of it, too, on winter's nights standing in the empty field with all leaves close-furled, nothing tender exposed to the iron bullets of the moon, a naked mast upon an earth that goes tumbling, tumbling, all night long. The song of birds must sound very loud and strange in June; and how cold the feet of insects must feel upon it, as they make laborious progresses up the creases of the bark, or sun themselves upon the thin green awning of the leaves, and look straight in front of them with diamond-cut red eyes.... One by one the fibres snap beneath the immense cold pressure of the earth, then the last storm comes and, falling, the highest branches drive deep into the ground again. Even so, life isn't done with; there are a million patient, watchful lives still for a tree, all over the world, in bedrooms, in ships, on the pavement, living rooms, where men and women sit after tea, smoking cigarettes. It is full of peaceful thoughts, happy thoughts, this tree. I should like to take each one separately but

something is getting in the way.... Where was I? What has it all been about? A tree? A river?
The Downs? Whitaker's Almanack? The fields of asphodel? I can't remember a thing.
Everything's moving, falling, slipping, vanishing.... There is a vast upheaval of matter.
Someone is standing over me and saying

"I'm going out to buy a newspaper."

"Yes?"

"Though it's no good buying newspapers.... Nothing ever happens. Curse this war;
God damn this war!... All the same, I don't see why we should have a snail on our wall."

Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail.