

## The Significance of Signs

**Ann Game and Andrew Metcalfe**

School of Social Sciences and International Studies  
University of New South Wales  
Sydney NSW 2052  
Australia

[a.metcalfe@unsw.edu.au](mailto:a.metcalfe@unsw.edu.au)

[a.game@unsw.edu.au](mailto:a.game@unsw.edu.au)

### **Biographical Details**

The authors teach and write together in the School of Social Sciences and International Studies, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 2052. They have written four books collaboratively: *Passionate sociology*; *The mystery of everyday life*; *The first year experience*; and *Teachers who change lives*. Additionally, Ann is co-author of *Gender at work* and author of *Undoing the social*, and Andrew is author of *For freedom and dignity*. They are currently working on a reconsideration of the theory of the gift.

## Abstract

### The Significance of Signs

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes makes a distinction between a semiological and a phenomenological approach to the sign. While semiotic theory has usually focused on signs that work through mediation and representation, in this article, we investigate the possibility of a sign that is immediate, experienced as a presence. This is not a sign *of*, or even, the impossibility of a sign *of*; rather, it is a sign that just *is*, without an elsewhere to refer or defer to. This form of sign means nothing and is gratuitous, yet it has significance, or, more accurately, it *is* significance. We investigate these ideas through Buber's account of the religious sign.

## The Significance of Signs

### The *thisness* of the sign

Signs happen to us without respite, living means being addressed ....

What occurs to me says something to me, but what it says to me cannot be revealed by any esoteric information; for it has never been said before nor is it composed of sounds that have ever been said. It can neither be interpreted nor translated, I can have it neither explained nor displayed; it is not a *what* at all, it said into my very life; it is no experience that can be remembered independently of the situation, it remains the address of that moment and cannot be isolated. (Buber 2002, 12-14)

While semiotic theory has usually focused on signs that work through mediation and representation, Buber is interested in a sign that is immediate, experienced as a presence. This is a sign that cannot be abstracted from the living moment in which it occurs. Whereas people commonly use the phrase 'it occurs to me' to mean 'I have just developed a mental concept', the phrase, for Buber, indicates an occurrence. The sign *is* the occurrence. This is not a sign *of*,

or even, as deconstruction might have it, the impossibility of a sign *of* (Derrida 1978, 281); rather, it is a sign that just *is*, without an elsewhere to refer or defer to. This form of sign means nothing; it has no finite content, yet it has significance, or, more accurately, it *is* significance.

Within the semiological tradition, acknowledgement of this contentless sign can be found in Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, which challenges the approach to meaning that characterized his earlier work (1984, 8). This shift bears witness to 'the only sure thing that was in me (however naïve it might be): a desperate resistance to any reductive system.' To avoid the reductive tendencies of semiology, sociology and psychoanalysis, Barthes turns to phenomenology (1984, 20-1), a tradition that respects particularity, contingency and irreducibility, that is, the *thisness* of phenomena. He describes the principle of *thisness* in Buddhist terms, insisting that *thisness* is not based on the identification of meaning but on the ontology of no-thingness or infinitude.

In order to designate reality, Buddhism says *sunya*, the void; but better still: *tatbata*, as Alan Watts has it, the fact of being this, of being thus, of being so; *tat* means *that* in Sanskrit and suggests the gesture of the child pointing his finger at something and saying: *that, there it is, lo!* but says nothing else. (1984, 4-5)

Barthes could be alluding to Buddhist stories of the shock of attending to those ordinary things we usually take for granted. After rain, a Zen Master remarks, the pebbles of the road are so polished and pure that no word can describe them: ‘One can only murmur an “Ah!” of admiration’ (unnamed Zen Master, quoted in Gollancz 1964, 101). ‘The *Ah!* of things’ is the nothingness that characterizes *thisness* or presence.

To think about this principle of meaning in connection with photography, Barthes introduces the distinction between the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* is the culturally coded element in any photograph; the *punctum* is the contingent which breaks the *studium*, disturbs a complacent decoding, wounds. The moment of the *punctum* is the moment when *Ah!* is the only thing that can be said; uncoded and particular, it is the irreducible that cannot be assimilated or represented. It is, Barthes says, ‘the gift, the grace’ (1984, 45). The *studium* and the *punctum* co-exist and rely upon each other, but they involve different ways of meaning: the *studium* is representational; the *punctum* is experienced as presence.

Disdaining the ‘semiological fashion’ of scorn for the real, Barthes describes himself as a realist (1984, 88), insisting that reality is *present* in the photograph’s

*punctum* (1984, 119). This point is exemplified in his description of searching for a photograph that would give him the truth of his mother. Looking through photographs of her after her death, Barthes finds that the pictures that work through likeness only look like other pictures. Then, despondently turning photos, he is unexpectedly overwhelmed by the experience of the Wintergarden photograph (1984, 76), a picture of his mother as a child, a picture that does not look like the mother he was looking for. In this encounter, Barthes experiences the truth of his mother's undefinable difference: the *thisness* of his mother, her particularity, is her no-thingness. This sign is not a re-presentation of a past that was once present, for, with the *punctum*, linear time stands still in a moment of presence that holds within it all time. It is in this moment that the reality of non-finite potential or difference is experienced.

In drawing attention to the *thisness* of the *punctum*, Barthes provides social and cultural theory with a way of thinking about a sign that is characterized by an experience of significance. While he restricts his analysis of the *punctum* to photography, it could be applied whenever there is such an experience. When, for example, Barthes speaks of contingency, grace, irreducibility and nothingness, he could be talking of the *Ab-ness* of pebbles after rain as easily as the epiphany of the Wintergarden *punctum*. In using these terms, furthermore, he gestures to the religious qualities in this sign. Without reason or cause, the

religious sign, like the Wintergarden photograph, breaks through the comfortable codes of profane life, bringing us into the direct numinous encounter of a relation with the other (c.f. Steiner 1991; Derrida and Plissart 1989, 91; Benjamin 1982). In his insistence on the contingency of the *punctum*, Barthes raises the central theological issue of gratuity, the idea that ‘things are as they are but might have been otherwise’ (Williams 2007, 88). The qualities that appear mad or absurd from the perspective of the *studium* reveal the intractable reality of a different order, an order that is given, that just *is* (Barthes 1984, 117-19).

In this article, we will draw out the ethical implications of Barthes’ *punctum* through Buber’s understanding of the ontology, time and space of the sign that ‘happens to us’, the religious sign.

### **The religious sign**

Barthes’ distinction between *studium* and *punctum* echoes Buber’s ontological distinction between ‘I-It’ and ‘I-You’. I-It describes the world of finite subjects and objects; it refers to the mediated realm of representation. I-You (sometimes translated as I-Thou) describes relations of immediate presence, characterised by

the infinitude of nothingness. As Buber puts it, when You is spoken, the speaker has no thing for their object, for You is unbounded: 'The relation to the *Thou* is direct. No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between *I* and *Thou*' (Buber 1958, 11). The presence of the You is the presence of the infinite: the You in an I-You relation is a religious sign.

To illustrate the distinction between I-It and I-You, Buber considers the ontologies of different ways of seeing a tree. When he is in an I-It form of being, a subject in a world of objects, Buber says he can see a tree as picturesque, he can admire its vitality, he can classify it as a species and study it as a type, he can see it as an example of a scientific law or turn it into a number. But, in all of these cases 'the tree remains my object, occupies space and time'. Reified, the tree, like the subject, is locatable in Euclidean space and linear time. This is the representational, coded world of Barthes' *studium*.

*It can, however, also come about ... that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. ...*

To effect this it is not necessary for me to give up any of the ways in which I consider the tree. There is nothing from which I would have to turn my eyes away in order to see, and no knowledge that I would have

to forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and type, law and number, indivisibly united in this event.

Everything belonging to the tree is in this: its form and structure, its colours and chemical composition, its intercourse with the elements and the stars are all present in a single whole. (Buber 1958, 7-8, emphasis added)

When Buber says that he can become ‘bound up in relation’ to the tree, he is referring to the unmediated directness of an I-You relation. Everything relies on the preposition *in*, which can be used in either Euclidean or wholistic terms (see also Heidegger 1962, 70-85). In the former sense, *in* implies containment: there are insides and outsides demarcated by walls. Just as chalk is *in* a box, the tree is *in* the categories that define it. But in the wholistic sense, *in* implies involvement and implication. When we are *in* love, or absorbed *in* our work, we are *in* a relation that does not locate insides or outsides or identities. There is just *this*, without mediating categories.

This experience of absorption is often mistaken for oneness (‘I am at one with the world’), but oneness remains a categorical concept based on exclusions and inclusions in Euclidean space. Implication, by contrast, is infinite: not-

countable, non-definable. The immediacy of the I-You relation is not the identity or unity of a metaphysics of presence; the relation is not characterized by definition but openness and difference. This is the ontology implied by Buber's concept of *meeting*. Meeting must always be a meeting with difference: difference *and* sameness without definition of where these fall, and without identification of who brought the meeting about.

The *Thou* meets me through grace – it is not found by seeking....

The *Thou* meets me. But I step into relation with it. Hence the relation means being chosen and choosing, suffering and action in one....

The primary word *I-Thou* can be spoken only with the whole being.

Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my agency, nor can it ever take place without me. I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*. All real living is meeting. (Buber 1958, 11)

Meeting suspends the trajectory that characterises a logic of origins and destinations. Accordingly, in this relational state, sight is non-linear: there is no see-er and no seen. Sight is not a subject's interrogation of the world, but is, instead, an openness to the world (see Merleau-Ponty 1964, 162-4). Insides and outsides are intertwined in a seeing that cannot be located in Euclidean space.

When I meets You, the whole is present: '[the tree's] intercourse with the elements and the stars are all present in a single whole'. The I-You relation is non-finite, but rather than the arithmetic sense of infinitude as endless deferral, this infinitude is wholly here and now, present in the meeting. As Buber points out, this is not the present of linear time, but, rather, 'the real, filled present, [that] exists only in so far as actual presentness, meeting and relation exist.' (1958, 12). This contingent meeting with difference punctures the causality of I-It, just as Barthes' *punctum* breaks through defenses of the *studium*.

Buber insists that 'signs happen to us without respite', and, yet, he says, for much of the time, we are not present and open to the address. 'Each of us is encased in an armour whose task is to ward off signs.... There are only moments which penetrate it and stir the soul to sensibility' (2002, 12). Buber is pointing to the ontological shift involved in experiences of significance. In moments which penetrate our defensive armour we change form, from the alienation of I-It to an I-You state of participation in the world.

### **A signal falling**

To draw out the implications of this ontological shift, we will take a famous literary example. In *A room of one's own*, Woolf describes a transformative moment of significance (1945, 94-103). She is standing in her London apartment, looking down onto the street. Supposed to be writing about 'Women and Fiction', she has read all the relevant books in the British Museum, but is now stuck. Seeking distraction, she amuses herself by ascribing trajectories to each of the passersby; they seem separate and self-absorbed, not caring a straw about her literary preoccupations. This game is interrupted by a lull in the traffic. For 'a moment', no one passes:

A single leaf detached itself from the plane tree at the end of the street, and in that pause and suspension fell. Somehow it was like a signal falling, a signal pointing to a force in things that one had overlooked. It seemed to point to a river that flowed past, invisibly, round the corner, down the street, and took people and eddied them along. ...

This 'stream' brings together a girl and a young man who converge with a taxi at a point directly beneath her window. The two people get into the cab and it glides off, 'swept on by the current'. Watching the taxi disappear, Woolf realizes that she has been changed by this 'ordinary enough' experience.

The key words that Woolf uses to describe this change are ‘effort’ and ‘ease’:  
“The sight of two people coming down the street and meeting at the corner seems to ease the mind of some strain’. From the perspective of this state, she realizes that she had been separating herself from the people in the street when trying to analyse them: the self-absorbed separation she ascribed to others, in fact, characterised her own state. She goes on to reflect that it takes an effort to remain ‘alien and critical’, whereas there is an ease in being part of life’s flow, thinking *with* rather than *about* people.

Effort and ease are ontological manifestations of different spaces. Effort is the subject-centredness of an I-It state, the self-assertion involved in attempts to classify the world. Woolf says

Perhaps to think, as I had been thinking these two days, of one sex as distinct from the other is an effort. It interferes with the unity of the mind. Now that effort had ceased and that unity had been restored by seeing two people come together and get into a taxi-cab.

In classifying women and men as oppositional, Woolf had cut herself off from the possibility of working within an ontological form that is not identifiable as male or female. To think from the perspective of the identity ‘woman’ is to rely

on the oppositions that she was claiming to dismantle. In this state, a room of one's own is an armour that simultaneously protects and imprisons. The connections that would provide solutions are the other that is kept at a distance.

In her state of ease, Woolf is no longer a subject. It is not only the girl, man and taxi that meet; Woolf and the world meet, I and You, drawn on by a connecting stream that she couldn't see when treating the world as a set of things. There is a different sense of order now: rather than a world of categories and walls, there is an unfolding whole in which insides and outsides reveal their implicatedness. Woolf describes this order of non-identifiable difference as the androgyny that is the prerequisite for creativity:

The androgynous mind is less apt to make these distinctions than the single-sexed mind. ... the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; ... it is naturally creative, incandescent, and undivided.

In this state, a room of one's own is not walled off; it is a sense of unique belonging to the world. *In* a room of one's own Woolf is in and out at once, her centre is everywhere.

This change in space has its counterpart in a change in time. In the moment when ‘nothing came down the street, nobody passed’, Woolf has nothing to classify, project onto or defend against: the emptying in the street is an emptying of her self. The suspension of time’s chronological predictability allows Woolf to let go of her projects, her trajectory. In this present, when time stands still, she is able to meet the morning as it really is, in its unclassifiable intransigent difference. When a leaf falls, it works as a sign because it just happens, without cause. This is, as Barthes said of the *punctum*, a moment of grace. London, not finite but unbounded London, is present.

### **Gratuitous reality**

Both Barthes and Buber speak of the sign as a gift. Buber could be talking about the Wintergarden photograph when he says: ‘The *Thou* meets me through grace – it is not found by seeking’ (1958, 11). For Buber, signs *occur*. They are not what we desire, they occur at the moment of meeting, when there is acceptance of what is given.

Buber uses the language of the gift, but not the usual conceptual language of gift *exchange* (Mauss 1970, Lévi-Strauss 1969, Derrida 1994). An exchange is a

deal in a market, a negotiation between finite subjects, and therefore does not share in the infinitude of *meeting*. While the gift exchange presupposes a sequence of giving, receiving and reciprocating, Buber's gift *relation* involves a giving and receiving that is neither sequential nor locatable. The gift is an experience of grace because it has no identifiable source or destination, involves no effort or intention. Because the gift occurs in the I-You meeting, there is no identifiable giver or receiver, and the gift works because it is no thing, not an object that passes between subjects.

The gift has been so readily reduced to gift exchange because only the latter conforms to the logic of *the studium*. The gift, as *punctum*, is unpredictably gratuitous. Indeed, as etymology implies, gratuity is the essence of the gift, which cannot be explained in terms of causes or good reason. But while, from the perspective of the *studium*, gratuity is associated with chaos and arbitrariness, from the perspective of the gift, it offers the simplicity of fullness. When Barthes meets his mother and Woolf meets the reality of her life, there is gratuity but it is not arbitrary or fragmented: it is what is and must be; it is particular *because* it opens out to a whole.

Let us pause on this idea of particularity. Whereas the *studium* seeks particularity through more refined classification and definition, Barthes' experience of the

*punctum* shows that particularity emerges from the no-thingness of participation in the whole. When, likewise, Buber characterizes the I-You relation as no-thingness, he is not reducing but insisting on difference and particularity, calling attention to a uniqueness that is not to be confused with serial individuality. You are you because of infinitude, because of the undefinable difference you make in a whole, and not because of your identity as a woman or a man or writer. No identity can exhaust the unbounded potential of You.

Whereas the representational mode strives for significance in big statements, in abstractions and totalisations, the *punctum* reveals significance in the detail that is right before you. But as Barthes says, the *punctum* defies representation, there is nothing to say: '[it] suggests the gesture of the child pointing his finger at something and saying: *that, there it is, lo!* but says nothing else.' (1984, 4-5). In representational discourse, this mute quality is taken to indicate that there is really nothing of significance there. This is nothing understood as a lack, but from Barthes' phenomenological perspective, nothingness is what is; it is the real which cannot be represented, or, more accurately, can only be represented when there is presence.

Referring to the non-heroic quality of the sign as the 'scandal of particularity', Dillard gives the example of sincere believers being scandalized by the

ridiculous, improbable details of Christ's incarnation: why was he born in this town, at this time?; how could he walk these particular streets?

Well, the 'scandal of particularity' is the only world that I, in particular, know.... We are all up to our necks in this particular scandal....

This is it, I think, this is it, right now, the present, this empty gas station, here, this western wind, this tang of coffee on the tongue, and I am patting the puppy, I am watching the mountain. And the second I verbalise this awareness in my brain, I cease to see the mountain or feel the puppy. (Dillard 1985, 78-80)

Buber makes a similar point when he insists that the sign occurs in the 'stream of "happening but once"'. Particularity is shocking because it does not protect the anxious subject from the gratuitous nature of reality. As Buber puts it 'Inseparable, incomparable, irreducible, now, happening once only, [reality] gazes upon me with an awesome look.' (1966, 22). The awful realization is that 'this is it', this is life, this is *all* there is: this particular puppy, this coffee, this wind. There is no future or past or elsewhere to redeem what is.

To think through this point, let us return to Woolf's leaf. A leaf falls, *this* leaf. While Woolf must have seen leaves falling everyday, she hadn't been present to them. Indeed, on a re-reading of the book, we found that falling leaves is a refrain throughout, associated with seriality and creative blocks. For example,

The leaves were still falling, but in London now, not Oxbridge; and I must ask you to imagine a room, like many thousands, with a window looking across people's hats and vans and motor cars to other windows, and on the table inside the room a blank sheet of paper (1945, 27)

Woolf had been treating leaves in their generality, but when the signal falls she sees *a* leaf. The armour of her *studium* is broken, but she spends no time describing the details of this leaf that is so important to her because, as Barthes says, there is nothing to say. The leaf, in its particularity, is no-thing.

Woolf says that the leaf points to a force in things, a flow, but her description suggests a more complex logic than 'pointing to'. Pointing normally implies a Euclidean logic of reference, but the leaf that points to 'a river' is part of that river. There is no elsewhere for the leaf to point to: it *is* the connection to which it points. Everywhere is here. Religious signs do not simply refer or

signify; they are, in a sense what they refer to. As Serres puts it: ‘angels ... reveal their message twice: what they produce, and what they are’ (1995, 25).

In Buber’s understanding of the sign, then, the gratuitousness of the particular reveals the universal. The *thisness* of the sign indicates that the universe is in every particular and every particular is the universe; the eternal exists not in the hereafter, but in the *Ab*-ness of the now. When we appreciate that this religious sign, in its nothingness, is an experience of reality, the world of presence inaugurated by the sign can be distinguished from the *metaphysics* of presence. As Eliade puts it, ‘the *sign*, fraught with religious meaning, introduces an absolute element.... The sacred is pre-eminently the *real*’ (1959, 27-8).

## **Significance**

The implication of our argument is that significance arises from gratuitousness, from the revelation of particular differences that are both fortuitous and necessary. Williams describes this gratuity in terms of an experience of something being ‘totally right’ and ‘totally unexpected’ (2005, 104). The leaf had not seemed relevant to the picture of London that Woolf had been developing, and yet she has been spontaneously called out by it. It leads her to where she

hadn't realized she needed to be, to where she really has been as all along, but it does so without cause, purpose or higher purpose.

This sense of necessity, arising in the entwined space of the I-You relation, involves the command of an ethical necessity. In this space, where insides and outsides are implicated in each other, to be responsible is to hear the call. Once she has been addressed, Woolf has no choice but to set aside her personal preoccupations and respond to the world before her. In Buber's phrase, 'the [I-You] relation means being chosen and choosing, suffering and action in one'.

Describing a scene uncannily like that of Woolf's, Murdoch notes this sense of calling:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings ... Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important. (2001, 82)

The religious sign, the *punctum*, wounds; it disarms Murdoch, removes the anxieties and resentments through which she armours herself. Describing this as an occasion of ‘unselfing’, Murdoch argues that only the suspension of subjecthood allows attention to reality. In one sense, the sign unhouses her, but it is in this state of ‘nothingness’ or ‘nakedness’, that she connects with life: ‘virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is’ (2001, 90-1).

In *The sovereignty of good*, Murdoch is particularly concerned with good art, which, she thinks, works in the same way as a religious sign (cf Steiner 1991, Williams 2005). Unsentimentally compassionate and yet utterly realistic, good art reveals the pointless and gratuitous quality of the life of which it is a part. The significance of what we are given in art or life only becomes apparent when, in a state of destitution, we accept the gift:

[H]uman beings cannot bear much reality.... Almost all art is a form of fantasy-consolation.... But the greatest art is ‘impersonal’ because it shows us the world, our world and not another one, with a clarity which startles and delights us simply because we are not used to looking at the real world at all. ...

The pointlessness of art ... is the pointlessness of human life itself... .

Good art reveals what we are usually too selfish and too timid to recognise, the minute and absolutely random detail of the world, and reveals it together with a sense of unity and form....

Rilke says of Cezanne that he did not paint 'I like it', he painted 'There it is.' This is not easy, and requires, in art or morals, a discipline. ... We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else ...

(Murdoch 2001, 62-3, 84, 57-8)

Murdoch gives a more explicitly political example of this ethics in the novel, *An Accidental Man*, telling the story of a protest in a totalitarian regime against the trial of a writer (1971, 229). Everyone hurries by the protestors, until a man hesitates, turns back and shakes hands with the protestors. 'That shaking hands ... it was suddenly as if that place had become the centre of the world'. While he is still standing there, a police car draws up and everyone is arrested, eventually to be sent to labour camps. In that moment of being called, when the passerby is stopped in his tracks, there is a sense that this matters, and yet there is a pointlessness to the response. Speaking of the sense of obligation in ethical 'choices' such as these, Williams says that 'they will put everything at risk without necessarily making any difference to the world's injustices ... the act

does not depend on the outcome, it is simply what has to be done. ' (2003, 12, 10).

Religious signs do not offer consolation then. They do not provide reasons and they do not guarantee outcomes. They do, however, have significance: our profane life is given meaning by everyday moments of revelation, revelation not of another world but of the gift, grace and gratuity of this world. As Buber put it '[reality] gazes upon me with an awesome look'. The awesome look is the sign. *This* matters, *this* involves me, *this* is me, *this* is addressed to me. As Buber said of the tree, it 'has to do with me'. When I am implicated, the world calls me. Everything, in its gratuity, turns to meets me, accepts me:

Sometimes from far away

They sign to me;

A violet smiles from the dim verge of darkness,

A rain drop hangs beckoning on the eaves,

And once, in long wet grass,

A young bird looked at me

(Raine, 2002)

In the meeting of the sign, significance derives from its compelling quality; it requires attention, a response that is not, however, an action derived from subjectivity or desire, nor an imposition by an external order, not a choice. It is a commandment that is not directed to a goal, or even an endlessly deferred goal; it is a compelling quality that is radically purposeless. All that is required is our attention, our realism, which is also our response.

This significance is characterised by awe, a sense of wonder at the presence of difference, a sense of terrible beauty in the revelation of universal order, a sense of gratitude in the acknowledgement of our part and particularity, a sense of good that is unconsoling and good for nothing (Murdoch 2001, 69, 90). The sign calls us out of the alienated Euclidean wasteland of desire, of more, of next. Without promising any thing, it presents the eternity and infinitude that is.

With the falling leaf, Woolf realizes that she cannot any longer write in the compartmental logic of 'women and fiction' and the comparative merits of the sexes. There is something now more urgent that she must write: how to live life, in the stream of life. She says to her audience at Girton College: 'I am asking you to live in the presence of reality, an invigorating life' (1945, 109).

[Reality] would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable – now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now a daffodil in the sun. ... It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech – there it is again in an omnibus in the uproar of Piccadilly.

(1945, 108)

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