Between the Acts *and the Coming of War*

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In none of her other novels is Virginia Woolf as conscious of and responsive to contemporary events as in *Between the Acts.* Conceived early in 1938, finished in February 1941, published only after her death in that year, the book reflects the impact on her of the extraordinary events of the time—the Munich crisis, the declaration of war, the fall of Paris, the preparations for a German invasion, the Battle of Britain, the Blitz—moments in the history of her country and her civilization in which the threat of catastrophic ruin was constant. She was not a reporter and had no wish to record these incidents directly in her work or to write a "topical novel." But as her diary for those years shows, she was constantly responding to the decisive historical events taking place. This intrusion of public life into her private diary was unprecedented in her career, so it comes as no surprise that the sense of crisis also affected her fiction in deep if indirect ways. What she wrote about Henry James's reaction to the coming of the First World War could be said of her response to the second: "It was Belgium, it was France, it was above all England and the English tradition, it was everything that he had ever cared for of civilization, beauty, and art threatened with destruction and arrayed before his imagination in one figure of tragic appeal" ("Henry James," *CE*, I, 267).[1]

Images of calamity dominate the diary entries for the period: "the whole of Europe may be in flames—it's on the cards" (17 May 1938); war will mean "the complete ruin . . . of civilisation in Europe" (17 August 1938); "Now we are in the war. England is being attacked. I got this feeling for the first time completely yesterday; the feeling of pressure, danger, horror. . . . Of course this may be the beginning of invasion" (31 August 1940). And invasion inevitably meant the end for the Woolfs: a prominent Jewish socialist like Leonard would almost certainly be sent to a concentration camp, and they had already decided to take their own lives in the event of England's collapse rather than permit this to happen. Nor was this desperate mood idiosyncratic. As E. M. Forster wrote in 1939, in an essay appropriately called "Post-Munich" that captures the apocalyptic feeling of the

[1] Citations of Virginia Woolf's works refer to the Hogarth Press Uniform Edition (London). Quotations from *Between the Acts* (1969) are identified in the essay only by page number. Those from other works also use the abbreviations noted below:

CE Collected Essays, ed. Leonard Woolf, 4 vols. (1966); *JR Jacob's Room* (1971); *MD Mrs. Dalloway* (1968); *ND Night and Day* (1971); *RF Roger Fry* (1940); *ROO A Room of One's Own* (1967); *TG Three Guineas* (1968); *TL To the Lighthouse* (1967); *VO The Voyage Out* (1971); *W The Waves* (1972); *WD A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Leonard Woolf (1959); *Y The Years*, (1972).

time, "The pillars of the twenty-thousand-year-old house are crumbling, the human experiment totters, other forms of life watch." [2]

Such an obsession with the historical moment was highly uncharacteristic of Virginia Woolf. She seldom read the newspapers and tended to relegate politics and current events to what Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* calls the "admirable fabric of the masculine intelligence" (*TL*, p. 164). There was certainly something in Woolf's sensibility that wanted to ignore contemporary history. Though the hero of *Jacob's Room* and Andrew Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* are both killed in the First World War, her way of referring to these events suggests a reluctance to let them dominate the novel. In *Jacob's Room*, the War is alluded to with an almost contemptuous impatience: "And now Jimmy feeds crows in Flanders" (*JR*, p. 95), while Andrew is disposed of in a parenthesis: "[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous]" (*TL*, p. 207). Historical events were contingent, accidental; Woolf wanted to write about the universal and inevitable in human life. The purest product of this impulse in her work is *The Waves*, a novel in which she planned to "do away with exact place and time" (*WD*, p. 143). But it is notable that *The Waves* was an experiment Woolf never attempted to repeat, and that it was conceived in 1928, when the memory of the last conflict had faded and the fears for the next had not yet begun. By 1936, in an essay called "The Artist and Politics," she describes the novelist as forced in response to the pressure of contemporary events to turn "from the private lives of his characters to their social surroundings and their political opinions" (*CE*, II, 230).

Between the Acts is deeply imbued with this sense of crisis. Far from being a "timeless" work, it is obviously and deliberately timebound. It takes place on the eve of the War, on a day in June 1939. The traditional village pageant, its major event, is juxtaposed against the very untraditional feeling of tension and nervous expectancy in many of its characters. It is strange that F. R. Leavis used the occasion of his review of the novel to criticize Woolf's lack of interest "in the world 'out there.'" [3] In fact the novel refers constantly to events in the external world. As one of the book's more recent critics has seen, there is "an almost obsessive preoccupation with history on virtually every page." [4] There are frequent references to the imminence of war. Giles Oliver is in a state of suppressed rage because of his helplessness before the inevitable catastrophe. He compares Europe to an enraged hedgehog and sees his world "bristling with guns, poised with planes." As he looks at the pastoral landscape before him, he fears that "at any moment guns would rake that land into furrows; planes splinter Bolney Minster into smithereens" (pp. 66–67). The conversation of the audience stresses the same anxiety: "And what about the Jews? The refugees . . . the Jews"

[2] In his *Two Cheers for Democracy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), p. 21.

[3] "After 'To the Lighthouse,'" *Scrutiny*, 10 (1942), 296.

[4] Werner J. Deiman, "History, Pattern, and Continuity in Virginia Woolf," *Contemporary Literature*, 15 (1974), 56.

(p. 145); "It all looks very black." "No one wants it—save those damned Germans" (p. 177); "And what's the channel, come to think of it, if they mean to invade us?" (p. 232).

The tension reflected in these passages affects the private lives of the major characters as well, creating a mood of feverish impatience in some and self-protective withdrawal in others. Lucy Swithin contentedly reads in her Outline of History about a time before human beings even existed in England, when rhododendron forests covered what is now Piccadilly. But Giles and his father are addicted to the newspaper; late on the day of the pageant they are already sharing the early edition: "the morning paper—the paper that obliterated the day before" (p. 252). In the novel, journalism (and the obsession with the present moment it implies) is the enemy of cultural continuity. Even the literary-minded Isa finds that she no longer has the patience to read the volumes in the family library because she is as "book-shy" as her contemporaries: "for her generation the newspaper was a book" (p. 26). The pervasive feeling of contained violence in the personal relationships of the novel—the conflict between Isa and Giles, Giles's instinctive hatred of William Dodge, the perpetual disturbance generated by Mrs. Manresa, etc.—are not directly caused by contemporary public events but are meant to embody similar forces in a microcosmic setting. "War" for Woolf meant the conflict between individuals as well as between nations. What Lukács saw in Scott's historical novels is equally true of Woolf's characters in *Between the Acts:* "certain crises in the personal destinies of a number of human beings coincide and interweave within the determining context of an historical crisis." [5]

History in *Between the Acts* stretches from primeval times through the various eras of English civilization presented in the pageant to the critical year 1939. But between this vast panorama and the present moment there is a smaller historical context evoked in the title of the novel and often of major importance in Woolf's work. As has frequently been pointed out, the book's title refers (among other things) to the two world wars. No public event of her own lifetime affected Woolf as deeply as the Great War. With the exception of *Orlando* and *The Waves,* all of her major works written between 1919 and 1939 allude to it. Her most important treatment of the War's effects is to be found in *Mrs. Dalloway,*[6] but its significance is constantly emphasized elsewhere. In *A Room of One's Own,* August 1914 is seen as the end of an optimistic era and the beginning of a time that brought a new alienated perspective on one's country and its leaders. It was a shock, Woolf says, "to see the faces of our rulers in the light of the shell-fire. So ugly they looked—German, English, French—so stupid." Only the possibility that the War had "destroyed illusion and put truth in its place" (*ROO,* p. 23) could conceivably serve as a justification for the catastrophe that had claimed so many lives.

In Woolf's later treatments of this theme, however, the idea that the First World War had taught people something of permanent value is itself seen as an illusion,

[5] Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel,* trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), p. 41.

[6] See my "*Mrs. Dalloway* and the Social System," *PMLA,* 92 (January 1977), 69–82.

and this fact helps to explain the increasing grimness of her work in the late 1930's. In *The Years* (1937), for example, the War is at first treated as a great moment of liberation in people's lives, an end to the hypocrisy and crippling propriety of Victorian and post-Victorian England. During the air-raid scene in the novel, one of the characters has a vision of the stunted soul striving "to expand; to adventure; to form—new combinations" (*Y*, p. 319). But the promise of freedom is betrayed; the War, it is later said, "didn't come to much" (*Y*, p. 362). By the end of the book the forces that had created it are at work again. Eleanor, the novel's genteel heroine, explodes when she sees a newspaper picture of one of the 1930's dictators, tears it across, flings it on the floor, shouts "damned bully!" And then, seeing the look of astonishment on her niece's face, she explains, "You see . . . it means the end of everything we cared for" (*Y*, pp. 356–57).

The Years can be read as a critique of the idea of progress. The historical period it spans (1880 to the mid-1930's) sees the realization of the goals of its characters: the patriarchal Victorian family has been displaced by more honest and equal relationships; women's suffrage has been won; women are free to take up a profession or lead independent lives; Ireland has become a nation. Yet the sense of restlessness and dissatisfaction is as powerfully present in the younger "liberated" generation as it had been in its elders. And in the final pages of the book, a couple of cockney children who represent the future sing an utterly incomprehensible song that appalls the listening adults: "The rhythm seemed to rock and the unintelligible words ran themselves together almost into a shriek. . . . There was something horrible in the noise they made. It was so shrill, so discordant, and so meaningless" (*Y*, p. 464).

The discords of the present dominate Virginia Woolf's next book, *Three Guineas* (1938), in which the concessive feminism of *A Room of One's Own*, published a decade earlier, becomes a much more uncompromising and bitter commitment. Here too the threat of another war influences Woolf's vision. But more disturbingly, as she examines her own society, she realizes that the sort of person called "Dictator" in foreign countries also exists in England. The creature who "believes that he has the right . . . to dictate to other human beings how they shall live; what they shall do" (*TG*, p. 96) is present everywhere around her and constantly affects people's intimate lives, for "the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected . . . the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other" (*TG*, p. 258).

By the time Woolf came to write *Between the Acts*, the concept of a gradual improvement either in history or in human relationships had been decisively rejected. As she says in *Three Guineas*, "it seems as if there were no progress in the human race, but only repetition" (*TG*, p. 120). To understand how disturbing such an idea must have been to her and to the whole Liberal milieu from which she came, one has only to recall such books as *Howards End* or *A Room of One's Own*. Both end with an ecstatically hopeful vision of the future: " 'The field's cut!' Helen cried excitedly—'the big meadow! We've seen to the very end, and it'll be such a crop of hay as never!' " [7] "For my belief is that if we live another

[7] E. M. Forster, *Howards End* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), p. 393.

century or so . . . then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister . . . will be born" (*ROO*, pp. 171–72). The informing idea of such works is the possibility of progress—the tenuous but tenaciously held belief that human relationships are moving toward greater freedom, opportunity, and fulfilment. By the late 'thirties, this precarious faith seemed bankrupt, and Woolf was beginning to think of history as retrogressive rather than progressive.

This dismaying conclusion deeply affected the intellectual set to which she belonged and shook it to its foundations. Bloomsbury had believed in the gradual triumph of civilization, but as Woolf said in her biography of Roger Fry, after the Great War "it was no longer possible to believe that the world generally was becoming more civilized" (*RF*, p. 213). In the memoirs of several members of the Bloomsbury group, this loss of confidence in the eventual eradication of barbarism is given great weight. Keynes looked back on the optimistic faith of his Cambridge friends before the War with a sense of the flimsiness of their fundamental assumptions: "We were not aware that civilisation was a thin and precarious crust erected by the personality and the will of a very few. . . . And as the years wore on towards 1914, the thinness and superficiality, as well as the falsity, of our view of man's heart became, as it now seems to me, more obvious." [8] And Leonard Woolf treats World War I as the end of "light and hope" and the period from 1933 to 1939 as "the six years in which civilization was finally destroyed." [9] The book he published in 1939 was called *Barbarians at the Gate*. It should be obvious how far all of them had come from the faith of their intellectual forbears, the "intellectual aristocracy" whose work, in Noel Annan's words, was based on the doctrine "that the world could be improved by analysing the needs of society and calculating the possible course of its development." [10] For it seemed increasingly likely that the world could not be improved at all, that it was just as capable of slipping back to its most savage and murderous rituals as of moving forward to the Bloomsbury paradise of peace, freedom, and rationality.

Virginia Woolf too was deeply affected by the thought of a turn from civilized to primitive behavior, but until the late 'thirties, she did not necessarily treat such regression as retrogression. The issue is significant to her from the time of her first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), in which the river journey the English tourists take into the South American hinterland is associated with some of man's deepest experiences—love, sexuality, disease, death. Its echoes of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* are surely not accidental. As the Engish party wends its way into the interior of the country, Woolf says, "They seemed to be driving into the heart of the night" (*VO*, p. 325). That sentence is echoed on the last page of *Between the Acts*. Isa and Giles, it is said, "must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night" (p. 256). But by the time Woolf came to write that book, these images had become charged with sinister implications.

[8] John Maynard Keynes, "My Early Beliefs," in *Two Memoirs* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1949), pp. 99–101.

[9] *Downhill All the Way: An Autobiography of the Years 1919 to 1939* (London: Hogarth Press, 1970), pp. 9, 48.

[10] N. G. Annan, "The Intellectual Aristocracy," in *Studies in Social History: A Tribute to G. M. Trevelyan*, ed. J. H. Plumb (London: Longmans, Green, 1955), p. 250.

The idea of a return from civilization to barbarism is of crucial importance to an understanding of *Between the Acts*. In the book's most shocking passage, Giles finds a snake "choked with a toad in its mouth. The snake was unable to swallow; the toad was unable to die. A spasm made the ribs contract; blood oozed. It was birth the wrong way round—a monstrous inversion" (p. 119). The image suggests not only the return of predatory forces into the garden world of the Olivers' country house, but a perverse assault in which both antagonists are inevitably destroyed—a symbol with obvious relevance to the threat of a second global conflict. Giles is appalled, raises his foot, and stamps the life out of snake and toad. But his instinctive violence makes it clear that he too is a natural killer, a frustrated man of war, and serves to underline the continuity between the animal kingdom and the world of men.

This parallel is constantly drawn in *Between the Acts*, usually (though not always) in order to underline human predatoriness. The images of hedgehog, dog fox, vixen, snake, and toad have already been mentioned; but there are dozens of others. Mrs. Haines is described as destroying her husband's romantic feeling for Isa "as a thrush pecks the wings off a butterfly" (p. 10); in the Restoration playlet of the pageant, characters named Sir Spaniel and Lady Harpy tear each other apart; and in the last scene of the novel, Bartholomew, Giles, and Lucy are reduced in Isa's mind to "the grasshopper, the ant, and the beetle" (p. 253). Mrs. Swithin reads in her Outline of History of a prehistoric age populated by "elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging, slowly writhing, and, she supposed, barking monsters; the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon; from whom presumably, she thought . . . we descend" (p. 13). But the word "presumably" in this passage merely records Mrs. Swithin's civilized hesitation to recognize what is everywhere apparent around her—man's capacity for violence and destruction.

The whole extraordinary last scene of the novel should be read as an imaginary return to a pre-civilized world. The walls of Pointz Hall suddenly seem to become transparent; the house loses its shelter and lies open to sky and field; Isa and Giles revert to "dwellers in caves" as they prepare for the inevitable fight they have put off all day. The connection with the coming war is patent. Giles's behavior is, despite his patriotic feeling for England, very close to the Fascist threat he fears. His aggressive masculinity and Nordic looks remind one of the Master Race; William Dodge sees him as "the muscular, the hirsute, the virile" (p. 127). He is filled with hatred and contempt: for "old fogies who sat and looked at views over coffee and cream" (p. 66); for the homosexual William, whom he thinks of as "a toady; a lickspittle" (p. 75); even for his wife. He is a good indigenous example of an ethos Virginia Woolf had seen in the first days of Italian Fascism and described in *A Room of One's Own:* "I began to envisage an age to come of pure, of self-assertive virility, such as . . . the rulers of Italy have already brought into being" (*ROO*, p. 154).

It was not ever thus. Woolf's novel is rooted not only in her observation of the barbaric present but in an acute longing for an earlier, more civilized phase of English culture. Its setting is not the London of a powerful, sophisticated indus-

trial culture but a "remote village in the very heart of England" (p. 22). Time seems to have stood still in this spot; the guidebook written over a century before scarcely requires revision, for "1833 was true in 1939" (p. 65). The village is a backwater, characterized by a sense of historical continuity rather than change. The delivery boy's surname can be found in Domesday Book; the Swithins "were there before the Conquest" (p. 39); even the swallows have come back for centuries to the ancient barn where the pageant is held. Woolf's choice of this setting suggests a powerful nostalgia for an older English culture—rural rather than industrial, feudal rather than democratic, simple rather than complex, and above all, unified. The village is an essentially stable community, steeped in tradition and seemingly impervious to the destructive forces of the present. All the villagers are known and recognized, even in the disguises they assume when playing their roles in the pageant.

Woolf's first notes for the book stress the idea of community: " 'I' rejected: 'We' substituted . . . we all life, all art, all waifs and strays" (*WD*, p. 289). The capacity to think and feel "we" is essential to her vision. What is being tested is the liberal notion of mankind's fundamental unity. The most persistent point of view in the book, as one critic has observed, "is that of a hypothetical group-consciousness, aware of the crucial thoughts and feelings each member is contributing to the shared experience of the moment." [11] But not everyone in the community is still capable of using the word "we." Mrs. Parker says to Giles:

> *"Surely, Mr. Oliver, we're more civilized?"*
> *"We?" said Giles. "We?" He looked, once, at William. . . . It was a bit of luck—that he could despise him, not himself.* (pp. 132–33)

The "we" Giles finds it impossible to say is the pronoun characteristically used by the chorus of peasants in Miss La Trobe's pageant, always there in the background through all the eras it depicts:

> *Digging and delving* (they sang), *hedging and ditching, we pass. . . . Summer and winter, autumn and spring return . . . All passes but we, all changes . . . but we remain forever the same.* (p. 164)

They are the antithesis to Woolf's sense of historical decay, serving to suggest the continual existence of an *essential* England that might survive even the present moment of internal dividedness and international confrontation. They embody such hope as the novel retains. Woolf found the same quality in Hardy's peasants: "They drink by night and they plough the fields by day. They are eternal. . . . They always have something typical about them, more of the character that marks a race than of the features which belong to an individual. . . . When they disappear, there is no hope for the race" ("The Novels of Thomas Hardy," *CE*, I, 259–60).

[11] Renée Watkins, "Survival in Discontinuity: Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*," *Massachusetts Review*, 10 (1969), 358.

The idealization of this kind of world is of course a version of pastoral. Its connections with the image of a Golden Age (in both literature and history) are manifest in Woolf's essay "On not Knowing Greek," in which she imagines just such a village as the setting for the great Greek tragedies and then finds an English equivalent in a place remarkably similar to the rural retreat of *Between the Acts:*

> some village, in a remote part of the country, near the sea. Even nowadays such villages are to be found in the wilder parts of England, and as we enter them we can scarcely help feeling that here, in this cluster of cottages, cut off from rail or city, are all the elements of a perfect existence. Here is the Rectory; here the Manor house, the farm and the cottages; the church for worship, the club for meeting, the cricket field for play. Here life is simply sorted out into its main elements. Each man and woman has his work; each works for the health or happiness of others. (CE, I, 1–2)

The regular cadences of the passage emphasize Woolf's sense of the stability and order of this world where fellowship prevails and modern hostilities have not yet commenced.

It is presumably to such a place that Ralph Denham, in Woolf's early novel *Night and Day,* wants to escape in order to write his "history of the English village from Saxon days to the present time." But the very task he sets himself is an exercise in nostalgia; Woolf compares Ralph to a man "who has lost his chance of some beautiful inheritance" (*ND,* pp. 236–37). And she herself was intensely conscious of how visionary this image of an English community untouched by the divisive forces of the present was. Her work is constantly marked by the search for (and frustration of) community. Though she idealizes a world in which different classes, sexes, and nations exist in harmony, she is keenly aware of the forces that impede this goal, that fragment society and divide it into opposing camps. She is at once deeply in need of communal harmony and perfectly aware of how easy it is to ignore reality in fabricating it. So, for example, the village in *Between the Acts* is only apparently a homogeneous domain untouched by the forces of modern life. In actuality, we find, it is full of interlopers: Miss La Trobe "wasn't presumably pure English" (p. 72) and is treated like an outsider; the rich Ralph Manresa is a colonial adventurer now "got up to look the very spit and image of the landed gentry" (p. 51); even Giles is only a weekend guest in his own house, spending his weekdays as a stockbroker in London. And the newspapers, with their ominous tidings, easily reach this remote spot, as do the "twelve aeroplanes in perfect formation" that interrupt the rector's words after the pageant: "The word was cut in two. A zoom severed it" (p. 225).

The sense of such places threatened with destruction, of everything Woolf cared for in English culture perhaps coming to an end, affected her deeply as she was finishing the book. In one of her diary entries for January 1941, she asks, "What is the phrase I always remember—or forget. Look your last on all things lovely" (*WD,* p. 362). And as she wanders through the "desolate ruins" of her

old London haunts during the Blitz, she sees the houses "gashed; dismantled; the old red bricks all white powder . . . all that completeness ravished and demolished" (*WD*, p. 363). Such fears for the survival of the country turned many an alienated British writer into an uneasy patriot in the late 'thirties and early 'forties. In 1940, E. M. Forster published a deeply nostalgic village pageant, *England's Pleasant Land*, which also invoked the ideal of community: "The two nations will form one nation, and within this nation both squire and villager will have a share in the soil; England's pleasant land has come into being." [12] In the same year, George Orwell, that "international" socialist, found himself writing, "It is all very well to be 'advanced' and 'enlightened', to snigger at Colonel Blimp and proclaim your emancipation from all traditional loyalties, but a time comes when the sand of the desert is sodden red and what have I done for thee, England, my England?" [13]

Woolf too was a reluctant patriot with a deep if inchoate feeling for her country. A militant nationalism not only went completely against the grain of her character but was considered immoral in Bloomsbury. Her brother-in-law Clive Bell wrote in his book *Civilization* (1928) that "a highly civilized person can never unquestioningly accept the ethics of patriotism." [14] Forster declared in a well-known passage that "if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country." [15] And most of Woolf's early treatments of patriotism similarly suggest the malignancy or absurdity of that sentiment. In *The Voyage Out*, the Dalloways go into ecstasy when they sight a couple of British warships; their talk is "all of valour and death, and the magnificent qualities of British admirals." But the ships themselves are described in a way that prefigures the emphasis on human predatoriness in *Between the Acts:* they are "sinister grey vessels, low in the water, and bald as bone, one closely following the other with the look of eyeless beasts seeking their prey" (*VO*, p. 75). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, a deluded and very young Septimus Smith volunteers for combat in the First World War "to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress" (*MD*, p. 95). And in the same book, the passionate imperialist Lady Bruton is mercilessly satirized: "She had the thought of Empire always at hand . . . so that one could not figure her even in death parted from the earth or roaming territories over which, in some spiritual shape, the Union Jack had ceased to fly. To be not English even among the dead—no, no! Impossible!" (*MD*, p. 198).

Such mindless patriotism is treated as absurd even in *Between the Acts*, for example in the hope voiced by one member of the audience that the pageant would end (like all good pageants) "with a Grand Ensemble. Army; Navy; Union Jack" (p. 209). But there is a different kind of feeling for one's country—a love for its

[12] (London: Hogarth Press, 1940), p. 18.

[13] *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), I, 535.

[14] *Civilization* and *Old Friends* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 83.

[15] "What I Believe," in *Two Cheers for Democracy*, p. 68.

history, its idiosyncratic culture and traditions, a passionate attachment to the land itself—and this the book honors because it was Woolf's own. She gave it voice first in *Orlando* (1928), though like all the other faiths in that book it is treated with light mockery. But particularly in the Elizabethan-Jacobean section, the love for England is very strong, an England crescent rather than decadent, frankly sensual, and steeped in a lost glamor. And there is Woolf's deep feeling for the countryside, symbolized in the poem "The Oak Tree," which Orlando is continuously revising through the centuries.

A similar affirmation of the continuity of English culture, tradition, and of the land itself seems to be at work in *Between the Acts*. The pageant, in its use of dozens of quotations from English literature as well as in its casting of the same villagers to play different parts in different eras, obviously suggests cultural continuity. The relative stability of village life confirms the idea. If there were to be a roll call of names common in the village a century ago, "half the ladies and gentlemen present would have said: '*Adsum;* I'm here, in place of my grandfather or great-grandfather' " (p. 92). And if you were to look down on the countryside from a plane, "you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house; and by the plough, when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic wars" (p. 8).

Yet it is, I think, a great distortion to read *Between the Acts* as an essentially celebratory work affirming unity and continuity, a book that moves like *To the Lighthouse* toward the resolution of conflict. A number of critics have indeed interpreted it in this way, and there are individual passages in the novel that can be used in support of the theory.[16] But the reassuring words are almost all uttered by two characters who do not seem to me to speak for the author—the Rev. Streatfield, and Lucy Swithin. The worthy clergyman concludes that Miss La Trobe's pageant shows us "we are members one of another. Each is part of the whole. . . . We act different parts; but are the same" (p. 224). Of course it is obligatory given his profession that he come to such a spiritually uplifting conclusion. But that his vision is selective and incomplete is suggested by his utter imperviousness to the interruption of his sermon by a formation of war planes overhead. An astute member of the audience, however, points to the disparity: "if one spirit animates the whole, what about the aeroplanes?" (pp. 230–31). And Woolf's introduction of Streatfield in this passage obviously emphasizes his limitations: "What an intolerable constriction, contraction, and reduction to simplified absurdity he was to be sure!" (p. 221).

Lucy Swithin too treats the pageant as an affirmation of human unity. "What a small part I've had to play!" she says to Miss La Trobe in her enthusiasm. "But you've made me feel I could have played . . . Cleopatra!" (p. 179). And she denies the difference between one historical epoch and another: " 'The Victorians,' Mrs. Swithin mused. 'I don't believe,' she said with her odd little smile,

[16] For example, Avrom Fleishman treats the book as an expression of Woolf's "faith in the collective imagination of mankind to create a harmonious consciousness—which we may call a vital culture—out of its members' disparate private experience" (*The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1971], p. 251).

'that there ever were such people. Only you and me and William dressed differently.' " To which William drily replies, "You don't believe in history" (p. 203). To treat these passages as though they had the author's full assent one must ignore the many indications in the novel that Woolf expects us to see Lucy Swithin as warm-hearted but dim-witted. Almost everyone treats her with affectionate condescension. The young people in the village know her as Old Flimsy. Her brother says dismissively that she "belongs to the unifiers" (p. 140), as though that were a familiar category of the misled. He thinks her "imperceptive" and stresses her determined evasion of anything unpleasant: "skimming the surface, she ignored the battle in the mud" (p. 237). And in a highly ironic passage, William and Isa effectively demolish her authority:

> *She was off, they guessed, on a circular tour of the imagination—one-making. Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves—all are one. If discordant, producing harmony—if not to us, to a gigantic ear attached to a gigantic head. And thus—she was smiling benignly—the agony of the particular sheep, cow, or human being is necessary; and so—she was beaming seraphically at the gilt vane in the distance—we reach the conclusion that* all *is harmony, could we hear it. And we shall.* (p. 204)

Such passages not only satirize the particular character, Lucy Swithin, but call into question the whole benevolent view of the world in which she believes, and which Woolf herself once took rather more seriously. It is as if Mrs. Swithin were a character from *To the Lighthouse* or *The Waves* who is wandering about in the wrong book and cannot see that the world has changed profoundly. She is a visionary who fabricates a benevolent providence, who makes consoling fictions out of the cosmic emptiness. We might have been alerted by some of Woolf's previous works to see that when a character affirms such a kindly universal order, he is suppressing something unpleasant. For example, when Septimus Smith, in *Mrs. Dalloway,* is most anxious to forget the terrible memories of the War and the death in it of his friend Evans, he insists that "Heaven was divinely merciful, infinitely benignant" (*MD,* p. 76), a faith that immediately produces a vision of a resurrected Evans: "But no mud was on him; no wounds" (*MD,* p. 78). Such a providential view, like Lucy Swithin's, is here literally designed to ignore "the battle in the mud."

For all her irony about her aunt, Isa Oliver has a touch of the same disease. She is constantly writing poetry but cannot bear to show it to anyone because it could scarcely survive a daylight scrutiny. The lines she writes are a kind of geriatric pastoral, full of echoes from an older poetic dispensation and quite incapable of conveying the reality of her own experience. For example, she daydreams about flight (in both senses of the word) as she thinks about her attraction to Haines: "Where we know not, where we go not, neither know nor care. . . . Flying, rushing through the ambient, incandescent, summer silent . . . air" (p. 21). But while she composes these "elevated" lines she is busy ordering fish on the telephone, and the two worlds refuse to mesh. Rather, they alternate and displace

each other—the poetic word and the prosaic fact. But since the prosaic facts in the novel include a great deal of significance to Woolf, Isa's poetry must be seen simply as an escape from the tensions and abrasions of the real world in which she finds herself. Its aim is clearly ascent, imaginative departure, and in pursuing this goal it simplifies experience in a way once described by Robert Penn Warren in his definition of "pure poetry": "the pure poem tries to be pure by excluding, more or less rigidly, certain elements which might qualify or contradict its original impulse." [17] For Isa, those elements include the real time and place in which she exists, the trivial, the sordid, the earth-bound.

Isa's poetry is only one of a number of attempts in the book to purify or censor observation and the language in which it is expressed. On the very first page, Mrs. Haines insists that her fellow guests should not be discussing so low a subject as the cesspool on a beautiful summer night. But the structure of the novel's first sentence makes it clear that such anti-romantic deflation, the deliberate juxtaposition of beautiful and sordid, is an integral part of Woolf's strategy: "It was a summer's night and they were talking, in the big room with the windows open to the garden, about the cesspool" (p. 7). The technique is an implicit criticism of all the purifiers in the novel—Isa, Lucy Swithin, the Rev. Streatfield, and others. It is based on the assumption that an artist gains strength as Antaeus did, by touching the earth—a myth to which Mrs. Swithin alludes in the book (p. 32). And it connects with Woolf's description of Miss La Trobe's artistic imagination at work: "Words of one syllable sank down into the mud. She drowsed; she nodded. The mud became fertile" (pp. 247–48).

Art had regularly been treated as a force for unity and permanence in Woolf's previous fiction. The classic passage is Lily Briscoe's meditation in *To the Lighthouse* on the parallel between Mrs. Ramsay's work and her own painting: "Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs. Ramsay saying 'Life stand still here'; Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tries to make of the moment something permanent)—this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape" (*TL*, p. 249). But this confidence in the power of art to unify and immortalize is almost entirely lost by the time we come to *Between the Acts*. It is not only the vapidness of Isa's poetry but her lack of belief in it and in herself that tells us something has gone very wrong. In fact, the whole literary tradition has ceased to be meaningful to the characters in the novel. When they try to recall the words of the "to be or not to be" soliloquy, a passage from the "Ode to a Nightingale" is the only thing that comes to mind, and even it is mangled ("the weariness, the torture, and the fret"—p. 68). The poetic tags both in this scene and in the rest of the novel become mere cultural detritus, bits of flotsam and jetsam floating about in the characters' minds like fragments of a sunken vessel. Even the traditionalist Lucy Swithin, though she speaks grandly of "the poets from whom we descend by way of the mind," has no confidence in her hold on the past: "I ignore. I forget" (p. 85).

The novel gives us the sense of a once vital cultural tradition that has lost its

[17] "Pure and Impure Poetry," in *Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 16.

authority and connection with the present. As Bart Oliver stands in his library, he can make no use of what is there: "Books: the treasured life blood of immortal spirits. Poets; the legislators of mankind. . . . A great harvest the mind had reaped; but for all this, compared with his son, he did not care one damn" (p. 138). And in the last act of the pageant, the characters reappear, declaiming a fragment either from their parts or from a literary source; but the effect is of absolute chaos:

> *I am not* (said one) *in my perfect mind* . . . Another, *Reason am I . . . And I? I'm the old top hat. . . . Home is the hunter, home from the hill . . . Home? Where the miner sweats, and the maiden faith is rudely strumpeted. . . . Sweet and low; sweet and low, wind of the western sea . . . Is that a dagger that I see before me?* (pp. 215–16)

And so on. It is as if Western culture had been dissected and then stuck together again in random order to form a freakish organism with no chance of life.[18]

This sense of cultural disintegration has sometimes been used to attack *Between the Acts* itself, and more particularly to question the coherence of the pageant and its relevance to the rest of the book. W. H. Mellers, in an early essay on the novel, asks whether it does not "seem likely that the mysteriously ambiguous 'meaning' of the pageant which the vicar and audience in their stupidity cannot discover is equally illusory to its creator?" [19] And R. L. Chambers insists that the book has two distinct emotional centers, one in the present-day characters, the other in the pageant, and that there is no "inherent and necessary connection between the two." [20] It is easy enough to show that such connections do exist, but in more recent critical attempts to demonstrate the book's coherence, the pageant has I think been mistakenly interpreted as a deliberate antithesis to the fragmented present-day world, a work of art that confirms the synthesizing power of the artist and triumphantly unites the audience.[21] It seems to me to do no such thing. Rather, it is an attempt by Miss La Trobe (and by her creator) to trace the pervasive sense of fragmentation and isolation in the modern world to its historical roots.

The pageant can be seen as providing us not so much with a comprehensive vision of the past as with a pre-history of the present. Like Woolf's previous novel, *The Years*, it goes back in time in order to lay bare the causes of contemporary behavior. It traces English culture through its historical stages to emphasize the gradual but persistent decay of the sense of community. Its shifts in time suggest not the idea of progress but what intellectual historians have

[18] For a fuller discussion of the literary quotations in *Between the Acts*, see Nancy Topping Bazin, *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1973), pp. 210–21.

[19] "Virginia Woolf: The Last Phase," *Kenyon Review*, 4 (1942), 386.

[20] *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1947), p. 50.

[21] For example, Marilyn Zorn writes that "the Pageant acts for the novel as a truly ritualistic experience, as a vehicle for releasing the individual from the burden of his aloneness, his absorption in the ego and time, and his subjection to change" ("The Pageant in *Between the Acts*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 2 [1956], 32).

called "the theory of progressive degeneration."[22] In the earliest (medieval) section, England is personified, first as a child, then as a young girl, and her people are not yet given names. They are in fact the chorus that naturally says "we": *"To the shrine of the Saint . . . to the tomb . . . lovers . . . believers . . . we come.'* They grouped themselves together" (p. 98). Like the Canterbury pilgrims to whom they are compared, what these Englishmen have in common is more significant than what divides them.

This sense of national unity is gradually modified in the succeeding sections of the pageant. In Elizabeth's time it remains strong, and her lines suggest that her subjects (though they are now differentiated into types) still respond to the same things:

> *Then there was heard too*
> *On granite and cobble*
> *From Windsor to Oxford*
> *Loud laughter, low laughter*
> *Of warrior and lover,*
> *The fighter, the singer.*
> (pp. 102–3)

The first sign of the fragility of this sense of community, however, comes in the Renaissance playlet in this section. Although it ends happily with the union of the young couple, the world it evokes is, like that of the Shakespeare romances on which it is based, full of plotting and intrigue. And although in the final scene "dukes, priests, shepherds, pilgrims and serving men took hands and danced," Woolf calls the scene a "medley" (pp. 111–12). The word, with its overtones of conflict and heterogeneous combination, is precisely chosen.

The tension increases in the Restoration playlet, which ends not with a grand reconciliation of the principals but with a dispersal. In the final scene Lady Harpy Harraden is left to mourn her solitude: *"All gone. I'm alone then. Sans niece, sans lover; and sans maid"* (p. 173). The plot of this piece turns entirely on the characters' attempts to get the better of each other. Even the young lovers are presented as cruel and calculating, worthy heirs to the greedy, self-obsessed culture they are about to enter. The title of the playlet, "Where There's a Will There's a Way," refers not only to the mercenary motives of the characters in pursuit of the fortune disposed of in the will, but also to the power of the individual will to carve out a disproportionate share for itself.

This pursuit of power and wealth dominates Woolf's vision of Victorian England in the next act of the pageant. Its symbol is the truncheon that Budge, dressed as a constable, wields over the entire Empire. His rule is coercively moral; and he thinks of Victoria's subjects not as a community but as a network of potential rebels who must be kept under strict surveillance in the slums where they might congregate. All meetings of individuals are now treated as threats to the state:

[22] Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (New York: Octagon Books, 1965), p. 3.

The ruler of an Empire must keep his eye on the cot; spy too in the kitchen; drawing-room; library; wherever one or two, me and you, come together. Purity our watchword; prosperity and respectability. If not, why, let 'em fester in . . . Cripplegate; St. Giles's; Whitechapel; the Minories. Let 'em sweat at the mines; cough at the looms; rightly endure their lot. That's the price of Empire; that's the white man's burden. (pp. 190–91)

And the evangelical lovers in the Victorian playlet are not satisfied merely to assert their own wills; they are looking forward to a life of converting the heathen will into a semblance of their own.

It is inevitable that the pageant's concluding sketch, "Present Time. Ourselves," should stress the utter fragmentation of life in the modern period, in which the medieval sense of a human community has finally been shattered. The jazz rhythms Miss La Trobe uses in the scene seem to "shiver into splinters the old vision; smash to atoms what was whole" (p. 214). And the little mirrors the players focus on the audience are unable to hold more than one person at a time and often not so much: "Now old Bart . . . he was caught. Now Manresa. Here a nose . . . There a skirt . . . Then trousers only . . . Now perhaps a face. . . . And only, too, in parts" (p. 214). This vision of contemporary life as essentially discontinuous, a collection of "scraps, orts and fragments," has been prepared for by every previous section of the pageant, as Miss La Trobe traces the gradual triumph of individualism over communal identity. The theme obviously connects with and illuminates the situation of the present-day characters in the novel whose lives we have been following simultaneously—each trapped in the prison of self, rarely if ever able to feel a sense of vital connection to another human being.

This is not the way the pageant ends, however. The scene is followed by the playing of a magnificent piece of classical music which serves to remind the audience that it was once possible to produce "from chaos and cacophony measure" (p. 220); and then comes the Rev. Streatfield's sermon-interpretation: "Scraps, orts and fragments! Surely, we should unite?" (p. 225). Both seem to suggest a more hopeful vision of the future than we have been led to expect. But though the possibility of a return to community is never denied in the pageant, as the periodic reappearance of the chorus confirms, the forces of dispersal are shown to be steadily in the ascendant and moving with the power of historical inevitability. "We should unite," says the rector. "Can we unite?" asks the pageant. The answer seems to be far from reassuring, for both pageant and novel have shown us the strength of the impulses in human nature and society that work against communal ideals—greed, sexual jealousy, the love of power, the privacy of fantasy and need, all of increasing importance as the code of individualism extends its hegemony.

Furthermore, the hope for a restoration of communal ideals among the members of the audience presupposes that they have understood Miss La Trobe's pageant and the degeneration of their culture which it depicts. But this is very far from true. Although "for one moment she held them together—the dispersing company" (p. 117), her sense of triumph quickly gives way to a deeper feeling

of failure, as the members of the audience slip out of her grasp and back into their own familiar patterns. In reality, the pageant fails to unite the audience, and their comments in the intervals and after the performance only confirm their separateness: "I thought it brilliantly clever . . . O my dear, I thought it utter bosh" (p. 230). And as the gramophone repeats its plaintive "*dispersed are we,*" the coherent vision of the pageant is dissipated in a long passage recording the trivial, unconnected chatter of the departing guests (pp. 230–35). There is no unity of response, no coherence of interpretation, no sense of minds moving toward a common goal. The audience is unchanged.

Stuart Hampshire calls Miss La Trobe an "unmagical, muttering Prospero, who in her art attempts the impossible." [23] Her failure can be attributed to the gulf between herself and her audience. She too is a victim of the cultural fragmentation she records: "She was an outcast. Nature had somehow set her apart from her kind" (p. 247). And her feeling about her public is resentful: "I am the slave of my audience" (p. 247). "O to write a play without an audience—*the* play" (p. 210). This alienation is only another symptom of the artist's increasing insignificance in the world Woolf depicts. Just as it has jettisoned traditional culture, so it has no use for a new literary work. Far from being a powerful force for unity, art has become an evanescent event, at best merely a momentary stay against confusion. The "barbarians at the gate" who threatened England's culture from without had a set of unconscious allies in the philistines within.

The pageant in *Between the Acts,* then, is intended to show us a society and a cultural tradition breaking down into its component parts. To lay the blame on the artist or the audience, however, is misguided. Woolf's way of thinking about the problem is not at all moralistic. Many of her earlier books move toward a climactic moment of unification—the dinner party in *To the Lighthouse,* Clarissa's identification with Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway,* Bernard's final monologue in *The Waves,* etc. But though this has often been noticed (and celebrated), what has frequently been ignored is the power of the opposite tendency in Woolf's work—her sense of the pervasiveness of human isolation. Until the last years of her life, it is probably right to say that this was the subsidiary theme, the minor key over which the major usually triumphed. Yet it has its moments of authority in her work: Katharine in *Night and Day* is suddenly struck by "the infinite loneliness of human beings" (*ND,* p. 299); Mrs. Ramsay looks round at her guests and thinks, "Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate" (*TL,* p. 130); Rhoda in *The Waves* laments "I am alone in a hostile world" (*W,* p. 113).

In *Between the Acts* this subsidiary theme becomes dominant. Its characters are divided against each other. Even when they do not quarrel, they live in different mental and emotional worlds. Bart and his sister Lucy are seen as polar opposites: "What she saw he didn't; what he saw she didn't—and so on, *ad infinitum*" (p. 33). Others are treated similarly—Giles and William are antithetically conceived; Mrs. Swithin's nickname is "Flimsy," Miss La Trobe's "Bossy." The major characters in *Between the Acts* are substantially less complex than

[23] "Virginia Woolf," in *Modern Writers and Other Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), p. 46.

those in Woolf's previous novels. They contain fewer contradictory elements in their own natures because they are treated as component parts of a larger organism. The novel is not really interested in examining character in its complexity—the mysterious "Mrs. Brown" of Woolf's famous early essay on fiction—but in anatomizing society and exploring its internal conflicts. There is no character in the book whose vision emerges as authoritative, in the way that Bernard's does in *The Waves*, for example. Each is a specialist occupying his own bit of space: they are scraps, orts and fragments.

"Once there was no sea," Lucy Swithin recalls reading in her Outline of History; "no sea at all between us and the continent" (p. 38). But since that time, Britain had become the British Isles, separated from other nations by a body of water. This historical fact is given symbolic resonance in Woolf's novel. Indeed, the world it examines has been further broken down into something like an archipelago, with each character marooned on a different island. The image recalls Matthew Arnold's picture of human beings isolated from their fellows by "the unplumbed, salt, estranging sea."[24] Such a sense of human solitude and alienation had always been a powerful undertow beneath Woolf's greatest affirmations. That it had come to dominate her final book is no doubt the product of many forces—the coming of age, the death of friends among others. But one of the most important causes was historical, the fact that the novel was conceived and written in perhaps the darkest moment in her country's history, when the faith in peace and progress, the belief in human brotherhood seemed no better than old delusions. The possibility voiced on the last page that out of the quarrel between Isa and Giles "another life might be born" is only a desperate hope against hope. Perhaps it was the seed of another, a more confident novel to follow *Between the Acts*. If so, it was a work Virginia Woolf never lived to write.

[24] "To Marguerite—Continued," *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Kenneth Allott (London: Longmans, Green, 1965), p. 125.