BETWEEN THE ACTS

17 July 1941

128. David Cecil, review, *Spectator*

18 July 1941, 64

Lord David Cecil (b. 1902). Professor of English at Oxford University 1948–70. He first met Virginia Woolf in the early 1920s.

It is with curiosity as well as delight that we have learnt to approach a new book by this great writer. For Mrs Woolf never repeated herself. The different phases of her work represent a logical process of development. Like other serious authors, she was concerned to convey what she felt to be the essential truth about life. But, sternly faithful to her own extremely individual outlook, she did not find that any of the systems, moral and philosophic, by which mankind has tried to impose an order on experience, corresponded with her view of reality. She therefore went back to the beginning and sought to record the actual process of living, to paint the unordered sequence of impressions which floated across her consciousness. Her picture had its pattern, however. For to her contemplative eye two aspects of existence loomed out as predominantly significant, and round them everything else fell into order and proportion. The first was life's beauty. Her sensibility to this was both strong and varied. In the most diverse aspects of experience, from a pageant to a picnic, an English slum to an Italian garden, she could detect any element that gave aesthetic pleasure. The very intensity of her response to it made her also aware that beauty is fleeting. The second dominating feature in her picture of life is its mutability. It is not only that the hair grows white, the daffodil withers. Under the

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inexorable finger of time man's thoughts and affections also dissolve into oblivion. Earthly existence, which seems so solid, reveals itself to her searching gaze to be as unsubstantial as a fleece of cloud.

This vision of life forms the subject of all her important works until *To the Lighthouse*. Whether she speaks of a single life or a family's, it is to the same refrain: 'Life is exquisite and life is ephemeral.' The mingled ecstasy and sadness implicit in such a view give these earlier books a unique poignancy. But her intelligence was too profound to be content with it. For it leaves existence a bewildering paradox. How can we feel such ecstasy of the spirit if there is no spiritual significance in the universe? Her later books brood on the problem. In *The Waves* she simply poses it. She brings her characters to the verge of death, and then 'What comes next?' she asks. *The Years* goes a step farther and hints very tentatively at the possible existence of some eternal spiritual principle transcending mortality. *Between the Acts* is a fresh comment on the same problem. Its theme, a day at a country house during which an historical pageant is performed, recalls both *Mrs Dalloway* and *Orlando*. The day is envisaged both as a moment in the lives of the characters and also, by means of the device of the pageant, as a moment in English history. In either aspect it seems to express a further stage in her effort to reconcile life's permanent significance with its apparent mutability. The gist of her thought is something like Wordsworth's when bidding farewell to the River Duddon. There is an eternal principle behind life; but it is of its nature to manifest itself in change. The waters of the river flow by, but it is always the same river. Miss La Trobe, the author of the pageant, who seems to symbolise the artist in relation to reality, despairs for a moment at the short life of her work. But soon her mind begins to conceive a new drama. This eternal rebirth is the expression of the vitality of the spirit of the universe.

However, it must be confessed that Mrs Woolf does not make her meaning altogether clear. And it is further darkened by the fact that her picture is drawn in two conventions, which do not blend. The setting of the story is realistic; most of the characters speak as real people speak. But in order to achieve the expressive intensity of poetry she shifts now and again into the non-realistic convention of *The Waves*. One character, Isabel, talks to herself in a sort of loose verse. This confusion of convention leaves the reader confused. Perhaps had she lived to revise the book, Mrs Woolf would have brought it into clear pattern and harmony. As it is, it must be counted as in part a failure.

But Mrs Woolf's failures are more precious than most writers'

successes. The predominant impression left by *Between the Acts* is of the extraordinary distinction of her talent. Her scope may be narrower than that of many fellow-authors; but, unlike theirs, it is of the very first quality. What she says no one has said before, and she says it perfectly. This gives her work, almost alone among contemporary literature, the authority and permanence of classic art. It is with gratitude and reverence we bid her farewell as she goes to join the company of Emily Brontë and Jane Austen.

129. From an unsigned review, *Times Literary Supplement*

19 July 1941, 346

That mark on the wall, the small round mark just above the mantelpiece—is it a nail, a rose-leaf, a crack in the wood? One could get up and look, but even then could one be sure? Meanwhile images of uncertainty multiply and dissolve in a twilight privacy of mind. To what remote reaches of fancy, what precarious heights of speculation—the Greeks, Shakespeare, the human past, the laws of Nature—a mark on a wall may take us! Such was Virginia Woolf s habit of association. Like all her devices of style, it sprang from a peculiar constancy of vision. Other novelists of an equal constancy have sought, as she did, to communicate the incommunicable, but in so doing they have rarely been content with the evidence of the senses alone. For that is ordinarily a way of poetry, not of prose. It happened to be Virginia Woolf's way. Hers was the poet's or the mystic's apprehension of the unity of the visible universe, in which every perception of sense brought with it the intuition of truth. For her the hard, separate facts of existence were on the surface only; beneath, the tide of sensation flowed in unceasing mystery. Above all else, it was what she saw, the visual images she conjured from the here and now of experience, that held mystery for her. In a garden a woman plucks a

flower, remembers a face, drops her flower ('What single, separate leaf could she press? None.'), and goes on:

> 'Where do I wander?' she mused. 'Down what draughty tunnels? Where the eyeless wind blows? And there grows nothing for the eye. No rose. To issue where? In some harvestless dim field where no evening lets fall her mantle; nor sun rises. All's equal there. Unblowing, ungrowing are the roses there. Change is not; nor the mutable and lovable; nor greetings nor partings; nor furtive finding and feelings, where hand seeks hand and eye shelters from the eye.'

After The Waves

The passage comes from *Between the Acts*, Virginia Woolf's last novel, a rarefied touching and imperfect book. One had wondered in some sadness of mind what it would be like. What would or could she have chosen to do? It was not merely that Virginia Woolf was a gay and daring experimentalist, who had tried one fastidious form or style of prose narrative after another and in the end had stepped almost beyond the bounds of communication. The doubt was rather whether she could resume from the point where she had left off in *The Waves*. In the piercing consummated vision of that strange and lovely book sensibility is stretched taut and is naked to the nerve; thought has been purged away, the veil of illusion lifted, the whole of life is in the image of an unfolding leaf, the pattern on a plate, the memory of a crimson tassel with gold threads. *The Years*, which came after, was much praised, but it was only the shadow of earlier books, a pale and mechanical copy. Imagination, after the ordeal of sense and spirit of *The Waves*, seemed drained and indeed vulnerable; from the striving for order and discipline came what seemed almost a pastiche of Virginia Woolf. It was with an eager warmth of hope and curiosity that one looked forward to her next book.

Between the Acts is not among Virginia Woolf's best work, though it has spells of loveliness and flashes of poetry that in style are hers alone. It is written round the performance of a village pageant, with the personal interest focused upon a small group of spectators, and fragments of the pageant are rendered in verse of studied simplicity. Her exquisite sensibilities, caught for a moment in individual cadences of language, do not fail of their effect; a butterfly's flight, a leaning birch tree, a weathered old stone barn yield their pleasure at sight. And there is a description of a lily pond that holds something of enchantment:

[Quotes pp. 54–5 'There had always been lilies' to 'off they flashed.']

There is less, however, of this evocation of tangible beauty than in almost any of her novels. Still like a swallow skimming the grass she now seems absorbed in the rhythm of her flight. It is an unvaried rhythm. Waves of light and shadow move up and down, a blade of grass is tipped with fire from the sun, but there are few chance discoveries to stay flight; the wonder of creation is in movement not in the arrested moment of discovery. It is a singular reversal of Virginia Woolf's habitual imaginative practice, though the conclusion of the matter is unaltered. On the one side of experience is perpetuity, continuity, timeless and changeless order; on the other the bright evanescent bubble of human mutability.

This, as always in Virginia Woolf's work, is the antinomy which she resolved in part by a certain austerity of personal emotion. Her aloofness, no doubt, owed something to the classic mould of her thought, something to the cultivation of mind and the graces of manner on which she evidently set so much store, something also to what she may have considered the obligations of breeding, but at the same time it must surely have been a defensive necessity. Only once, in the firmest and perhaps the loveliest of her books, *To the Lighthouse*, did she seem able to surmount necessity. In this last work, as in all the others, the impersonal quality of her emotion is very pronounced, all the more pronounced indeed because the human material of her narrative is here reduced to fragile and unsubstantial shape. Nowhere does Virginia Woolf explore the depths of character in this novel. Isa and Giles Oliver, Lucy Swithin, old Bartholomew Oliver, Mrs Manresa, Mrs Sands the cook–they are figures in a private pageant between the acts of a local pageant of English history. In both instances the pageantry all but ignores the accidents of personality.

[Plot summary omitted]

...One characteristic quality of Virginia Woolf's way of thought has made itself strongly felt. Her social sympathies were narrowly, almost ostentatiously, restricted. She knew her own kind, it seems, and no other, and only as an act of indulgence did her imaginative curiosity extend further. It was not so much her emphasis on 'class', her division of mankind in the country, whatever the towns of England might be like, into 'the gentry and the servants', her discovery that Mrs Manresa

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could ogle the butler Candish 'as if he were a real man, not a stuffed man'—it was not so much this that betrayed the novelist in her as the eclecticism of taste and manners derived from it. The great gulf, as she saw it, was between the cultivated and the uncultivated. Since hers was a cultivation that excluded much else she shrank instinctively from forms of goodness and beauty other than those she had absorbed into her private vision. The limitation is obvious in *Between the Acts*.

Under-Current

Nevertheless, it is a rare and sometimes haunting book, with a deceptively light under-current of sorrow. Something left over from the high, pure song and poignant harmonies of *The Waves* can be heard in the muted accompaniment to her single and brief motive, repeated with only the slightest of variations, of the transitory finite. To it is added a new note. The pageant takes place on an afternoon in June 1939. Beyond the words and the miming looms an enveloping dark shape. At the end—and here, presumably, if rational implication were needed, is the rational implication of it all—the producer's voice, blaring and anonymous through a megaphone, breaks the rhythm and forgets the rhyme, while a mopping and mowing chorus armed with mirrors of every description hold them up to the audience. 'Orts, scraps and fragments that we are', the blaring voice affirms—'look at ourselves, ladies and gentlemen!' But Miss La Trobe, who may have been Russian and was certainly not quite a lady, knew well enough that she was the slave of her audience. Reluctantly, it may be, Virginia Woolf knew that too, and in this shimmering, tenuous and inconclusive last novel of hers she may have had to submit what was most constant and most secret in her vision to the claims of intelligibility.

130. Frank Swinnerton, review, *Observer*

20 July 1941, 3

If a novelist has lived actively and seen and suffered the physical cruelties of man, the whole fabric of his work will be toughened. If, on the contrary, withdrawn from rough and tumble, he has suffered in mind and spirit only, the fabric, delicate indeed, and sometimes extremely beautiful, will seem bloodless. Few novelists, having dared adventure in youth, have then reflected subtly and profoundly upon human affairs. One of those to do so was Joseph Conrad. Mrs Virginia Woolf, like Henry James, was condemned by temperament as well as by circumstance to great labour of ingenuity because she had almost no practical experience of life. She was like somebody bedridden in a house in the country, hearing and explaining every sound, speculating as to meanings and possibilities, dreaming a little, occasionally quite piercingly uncovering a mood or attitude, but incapable of more than subtle guesswork about her own species.

She had compensations, of course. She could write beautifully, and she could suggest with much more than common skill the interweavings of mood and memory. She 'caught' likenesses with whimsical sympathy. And although her intellect was not powerful it had grace and distinction. These qualities are apparent in *Between the Acts* as they were in *Orlando*, with which this last book has certain affinities. Again she is concerned, as in *Orlando*, with the passage of time and the repetitions of character; and by the use of a pageant play which summarises old moral and social attitudes and their equivalents in successive periods of time she shows the unchanging nature of men and women. She goes farther: she asks whether it is to remain changeless, and how unity and understanding are ever to be achieved within the limits of human consciousness. It is a curious and interesting theme, decorated with ingenuities and subtleties and beauties; and it remains abstract only because the author, with all her gifts, could never test intuition by any but literary and conversational contacts with reality.

131. Edwin Muir, review, *Listener*

24 July 1941, 139

The appearance of Virginia Woolf's last novel makes one realise with renewed force, almost objectively, what a loss her death is to English literature. *Between the Acts*, though comparatively short, is both one of her most ambitious and most perfect novels. It reminds one indirectly of several of its predecessors, *Mrs Dalloway*, *Orlando*, and *The Waves*, in particular, for in it she weaves into one pattern the themes with which she dealt separately in them.

The means by which she achieves this result are quite simple; she describes a summer day, and stages in it a pageant of English history, thus packing ages of change, separation and vicissitude into a few hours. In all her novels she is preoccupied by the fact of separation, and therefore by memory, which gives us our keenest apprehension of separation—the separation from ourselves; confronting us across a gulf with what we were and what we are. Beyond this recognition she had a sense, sometimes faint, sometimes vivid, of a union of some kind behind the separation, a union among the living, and between the present and the past, the living and the dead. This recognition, a mystical moment, appeared only when the present became quite motionless, no longer a floating bridge between the past and the future, but pure present from end to end, a simultaneous intensification and expansion of the instant of living. She was concerned with it not merely as a mystery but as a fact of experience; the novels which mark her progress as an artist, *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, deal more and more essentially with the finest, the most elusive and profound kind of experience, trying to catch it in the flying moment, its perpetual vanishing place. The perpetual moment is infinitely rich, infinitely worth preserving, but is gone at once. Separation is self-evident; the union of all things, past and present, can be seized only by a rare act of the imagination. The sense of separation in *The Waves* is almost unbearable. In this last novel it is expressed even more strongly, but along with it an evocation of the moment of

realisation, when all things know that, in spite of themselves and Time, they are bound together.

In its treatment of these two aspects of life *Between the Acts* surpasses all Virginia Woolf 's other novels, and is perhaps the most complete expression of her world of imagination. Memory has inevitably a large place in it; memory which, as in her other novels, opens like a gulf beneath the ordinary surface of life, displaying a strange and disconcerting landscape. The memory is not confined to the actual lives of the people who remember; but goes far back. Old Mrs S within, early in the summer morning, recollects older things:

[Quotes p. 13 'She had been waked' to 'we descend.']

The rhododendron forests of Piccadilly recur throughout the book, along with images of the dead perpetuating their memory through time: 'the old families who had all intermarried, and lay in their deaths intertwisted, like the ivy roots, beneath the churchyard wall'. Parallel to the dead, forming a strand in the complete pattern, are the herds of domestic animals and their keepers, who might easily have lived among the past generations, and belong to them as much as to the living. Bond, the cowman 'contemplated the young people hanging roses from one rafter to another. He thought very little of anybody, simples or gentry. Leaning, silent, sardonic, against the door he was like a withered willow, bent over a stream, all its leaves shed, and in his eyes the whimsical flow of the waters.' This exquisite image suggests the timeless life of the farm servant, and prepares us for the chorus of peasants who serve as a static background to the various scenes in the pageant. Finally there is the audience, made up of the neighbouring gentry, who live as much in the present as anyone can live, that is, never quite there.

The changing past, the unchanging or more slowly changing life of the herds and the peasants, and the present itself—the sum total of past change and the involuntary cause of change to come: these make up the strands of the pattern. The audience, the contemporary characters, are at odds with one another, despondently or complacently lost, except for old Mrs Swithin with her faith in a reality beyond the reality of the moment. The pageant unrolls before them, a Chaucerian scene, an Elizabethan scene, a Restoration scene, a Victorian scene. Finally comes the Present Day, representing 'Civilisation (the wall) in ruins; rebuilt (witness man with hod) by human efforts; witness also woman handing bricks'. The audience applaud this flattering idea of themselves; but

then the players appear holding up all sorts of mirrors 'hand glasses, tin cans, scraps of scullery glass, harness room glass, and heavily embossed silver mirrors'. The members of the audience are caught and split to pieces in this chaos of mirrors; they do not know where to look; they want to run away. A voice out of a bush addresses a long denunciation to them, ending: 'Look at ourselves, ladies and gentlemen! Then at the wall; and ask how's this wall, the great wall, which we call, perhaps miscall, civilisation, to be built by (here the mirrors flicked and flashed) orts, scraps and fragments like ourselves.' But after this castigation the voice asks them to attend; a record of music is played on the gramophone, and the orts, scraps and fragments are for a moment resolved into a unity. It is as if the pageant had flared up into a different reality; as if experience had suffered a violent displacement, nightmarelike at first, and then pleasurable beyond expression. The scene is an extraordinary piece of imagination, though whether quite successful is doubtful. The nightmare part is very fine, and in its bare directness unlike anything else by its author; the resolution of the nightmare is not so effective as it should be, is slightly unconvincing, more because of the way in which it is said than because of what it says. Perhaps if Mrs Woolf had lived to make the final revision of the book this might have been avoided; perhaps all that was needed was a slight alteration in the wording which only she could have made. But as it stands this scene embodies more intensely than any other scene in her novels the essential quality of her imagination.

Apart from *The Years*, a reversion to her early style, her prose has shown an increasing economy ever since she wrote *Mrs Dalloway*. She has never written better prose than the prose in this last book, with its flashing, almost imperious curtness, its exact colouring, and its rapid, unhesitating movement. One is tempted to go on quoting from it impression after impression perfectly rendered. The characters stand out with unusual solidity and clearness in the exquisitely radiant atmosphere which fills this as almost all her books; a light unlike any other light. What we remember chiefly in her other novels is that strange light; but from this one we shall remember with equal distinctness the characters and the working out of the situation, the symbolic form in which a woman of genius saw the human state.

132. Hudson Strode, from a review, *New York Times*

5 October 1941, Section 6, 1, 30

Hudson Strode (b. 1893). Travel writer and Professor of English at the University of Alabama.

As in most of her novels, the cream of *Between the Acts* lies between the lines–in the haunting overtones. And the best of the show–the part one really cares about–happens between the acts and immediately before the pageant begins and just after it is over. So the play is not really the thing at all. It is merely the focal point, the hub of the wheel, the peg on which to hang the bright ribbons and dark cords of the author's supersensitive perceptions and illuminated knowledge. It is in her imagery, in her felicitous gift for metaphor, for cadence, for exciting association, in her 'powers of absorption, and distillation' that her special genius lies. She culls exotic flowers in the half-light of her private mysticism along with common earthgrown varieties and distills them into new essences. Her most interesting characters move in an *ambiente* of intuition. With half a glance they regard their fellowmortals and know their hidden failures. They care less for the tangible, the wrought stone, than for fleeting thought or quick desire.

In ten novels Mrs. Woolf lifted veil after veil to reveal what she perceived as the secret meaning of life. When one finishes a book of hers it is not characters he remembers but their spiritual emanations, which are in reality manifestations or facets of Virginia Woolf 's supervision. Her peculiar interest was not in surfaces but in mysterious motivations and subterfuges that do not meet the eye. And no other English novelist has ever written more dazzling passages of poetry undefiled than Virginia Woolf. Like the great poets–Shakespeare, Donne, Shelley, Blake–Mrs. Woolf could say the unsayable, and it is there in her books for those who have ears attuned to unheard

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melodies, even if they can never recommunicate it in any language except Mrs. Woolf's own precisely.

At once a woman of profound erudition and intuitive intelligence, she is also the most poignantly sensitive of English novelists. Yet there was a leaven of zest and humour in her make-up, and her wit was akin to that slyly malicious kind that ran in the veins of Prince Hamlet. Steeped in the classical tradition, she was an audacious experimentalist. She looked upon existence as a maze of paradoxes, but she was continually uplifted and renewed by the transient beauty of the world. One passage from *Between the Acts* seems to epitomize the attitude of mind, the prose style, the whole art of Virginia Woolf:

> Here came the sun, an illimitable rapture of joy, embracing every flower, every leaf. Then in compassion it withdrew, covering its face, as if it forebore to look on human suffering.

133. Malcolm Cowley, review, *New Republic* (New York)

6 October 1941, 440

Malcolm Cowley (b. 1898). Associate Editor of the *New Republic* 1929–44.

American travellers in England before this war often felt that they were strolling—no, were being wheeled in comfortable chairs—past the neat showcases of a museum. These trains that always ran on time were obviously toy trains, built and kept in order by some retired millionaire. These fields were covered with excelsior dyed green; no grass was ever so free from weeds. These earthen dykes that surrounded the fields—and kept them from being worked by machinery—were preserved as a

relic of Saxon times; and the wild flowers that grew on the dykes were planted there by the same pious hands that had thatched the cottages and painted a soft mist over the horizon. Even the people sometimes looked like wax figures dressed in authentic costumes and labelled Mine Host or Farmer Hobbs or The Costermonger. And the general supervision of this country was by a political subcommittee of the Society for the Preservation of British Antiquities; one pictured them as kindly men who met on the steps of the British Museum with their umbrellas raised to protect them from the gentle rain. The oldest of them would say, 'We must break no glass,' and the next-to-oldest, 'We must shatter no illusions,' while even the pigeons would be cooing, 'Peace in our time.'

This England under glass, this England where people of breeding were sometimes not quite sure whether they were themselves or their family portraits, is the subject of Virginia Woolf's last novel. The local scene is Points Hall, outside an English village; the time is a summer's day in 1939. The plot—well, *Between the Acts* has no plot, strictly speaking, but the action is concerned with a pageant given for the benefit of the local church. This pageant deals with the history of England from the earliest times. It is brilliantly written, and while it lasts it holds the audience together, after a fashion. When it ends, the spectators and the actors disperse to their homes, their daily papers and their daily quarrels; for each of them, 'the curtain rises.' A summer day has passed and much has been revealed, but nothing has been changed.

It has often been pointed out that Mrs Woolf's method has little to do with that of the ordinary novel. There is no conflict in her books, no sense of drama or dialectic; there is no progress through difficulties toward marriage or a deathbed. There is not even a story, in the usual sense of the word. Mrs Woolf in her heart did not believe in stories; she thought of herself as living in a world where nothing ever happened; or at least nothing that mattered, nothing that was real. The reality was outside the world, in the human heart. And her literary method, based on this philosophy, was not to deal explicitly with a situation, but rather to present the shadows it cast in the individual consciousness. When the last shadows had moved across the screen, and when the attentive reader had caught a glimpse of something motionless behind them—'this peace, this rest, this eternity'—Mrs Woolf had nothing more to say. Her story had ended without having begun.

This method—as I think William Troy was the first to observe—is that of lyric poetry rather than fiction. And *Between the Acts* is the most

lyrical of all her books, not only in feeling but also in style. The historical pageant is written chiefly in verse; the characters in their private meditations are always breaking into verse; and even the narrative passages have an emotional intensity and a disciplined freedom in the use of words that one does not associate with prose. Moreover, Mrs Woolf uses almost as many symbols as Yeats does in his later work. The first scene in the book is a meeting to discuss a new cesspool for the village—nobody could overlook her meaning here—and the pageant is being held to buy a new lighting system for the church. It is enacted by the villagers themselves, as if to indicate the continuity of English life; Queen Elizabeth after all must have looked like Mrs Clark the tobacconist. The village idiot wanders across the scene, playing no one but himself. In the last tableau, entitled 'The Present Time—Ourselves', the characters bring mirrors on the stage and hold them up to the audience, while a voice howls from a megaphone that they are nothing but 'scraps, orts and fragments.'

The coming war is scarcely mentioned. Once a dozen airplanes fly overhead in military formation; twice the heroine finds herself thinking—she doesn't know why—about a newspaper story she had just read of a girl raped by soldiers. Yet the spirit of war broods over the novel, and one feels at every moment that bombs will soon be crashing through the museum cases. Factories will rise on the site of the wrecked cottages; the green lawns will be an airfield; the 'scraps, orts and fragments' will be swept away.

Virginia Woolf herself would soon become a war casualty, though not in the simple manner that was suggested by the first accounts of her suicide. A phrase in the coroner's report led to an exchange of letters in the *Sunday Times;* a bishop's wife was superior, and Leonard Woolf wrote a frank and dignified answer. It seems that Mrs Woolf had suffered a mental breakdown during the First World War and, after her recovery, had been haunted by the fear of relapsing into madness. This fear was especially vivid during the period of tension that always followed the completion of a novel. In other words, it was the mental strain of writing *Between the Acts* and not the physical strain of living under bombardment that caused her death. But the book itself is her comment on the war, or rather her elegy for the society the war was destroying, and so we are back at our starting point. When the bombs crashed through the glass that covered England, she was one of the people—and they were not the weaklings or the cowards—who were too finely organized for life in the wind and the rain.

Her books, too, are not written for this new age. If one rereads several of them in succession, as I did recently, one is more likely to be impressed by their narrow range of characters and emotions than by their cool wit and their warm imagination. The outside world has made itself real to us as it never was to the people in her novels. But it would be wrong to treat the judgment of our moment in time as if it were that of history. The days will come again when people have leisure to appreciate her picture of the inner world and her sense of the living past. The spirit if not the body of Georgian England survives in her novels.

134. Louis Kronenberger, review, *Nation* (New York)

11 October 1941, 344–5

Long before she died, Virginia Woolf had, I think, said all it was in her to say as a novelist. If this last of her novels is also by all odds her weakest, it yet represents only another step in her steady creative decline. It is of course true that the book had not been finally revised, and even more worth remembering that it must have been written by an ill and tragically overwrought woman; but for all that, the heart of the trouble lies elsewhere. For from the time of *Orlando* onward Virginia Woolf had relaxed her interests, had slipped more and more out of life, farther and farther away from the main stream of literature, indulging that side of her which, no matter how exquisite it was, contributed to her breakdown as a novelist without raising her high enough as a poet. *Orlando* and *The Waves* and in spots *The Years* have special qualities enough, but no substantial ones. Virginia Woolf had begun by bringing to the novel something more rewarding than the patterned 'realism' with which it was clogged. *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* are highbred and delicate books, but not too highbred and delicate to have their

own sharp kind of reality. But with her later novels Mrs Woolf, rejecting realism, threw the baby out with the bath water and rejected reality as well. The separate image got in the way of the central vision; the poet of words and moods and almost naked sensibilities recoiled from flesh and blood; psychological truth was discarded for philosophic symbols. The sense of time, for example—something which dominates most great creative writing—laid hold of Virginia Woolf so strongly as to obliterate almost everything else. But she did not cope with it as a Tolstoy did, or even a Proust: she felt it *too* poetically, as something not dramatic but elegiac, not full of mystery but only full of pathos; and she ended by sentimentalizing it horribly.

In all this, however, there was more than the triumph of the poet over the novelist, or the dreamer over the observer; more disastrously, there was the intrusion of something even more thin-blooded, something purely literary. From having been nourished by culture, Virginia Woolf was at last emaciated by it. Culture joined to brilliant perceptions made her a delightful critic, but creatively it displaced an interest in life itself. She came to be preoccupied by words and phrases, by literary tags and echoes and the bright harness of tradition and the byplay of the cultivated—one might almost say the over-cultivated—mind. Her work, even though it remained imaginative, was no longer spring-fed.

By the time Mrs Woolf wrote *Between the Acts* culture had quite won out. We feel at times that she fought against having it win, that embers of fine creative feeling still feebly glowed; but there was no helping it. The book, unless one obtusely chooses to see it as a deliberate *jeu d'esprit*, is merely from start to finish an evasion of the problems it raises. It introduces us to people, some of them with frustrated and fractured lives, and, instead of exploring them, makes us sit with them while they watch a pageant. The pageant reels off solemn travesties of Elizabethan, Restoration, and Victorian drama, which are given in full; and the pasteboard dramas completely overshadow the flesh-and-blood ones. Even an ironic intention of showing that the real people are as dead and done for as the stage puppets cannot justify Mrs Woolf 's dabbling in human beings while expending great space and effort on her Sir Spaniel Lilylivers and mid-Victorian Eleanors. The book ends with two of the real people about to confront each other: it should, of course, have begun there.

In smaller ways, too, one feels how slack the book has gone; even its imagery becomes, at times, a fault or a foolishness. 'She had been

waked by the birds. How they sang! attacking the dawn like so many choir boys attacking an iced cake.' Here Mrs Woolf, having long ago abandoned the real for the poetic, has come to abandon the poetic for the weakly fanciful. Had she lived, no doubt she would have pruned *Between the Acts* of such infelicities, and tightened it, and perhaps cut a little deeper into her characters. But the book would not have been substantially any different. The retreat from life had gone too far, the very immersion of self in a pool of pictures and phrases had become too deep, the talent which had once been shining and concentrated as a piece of gold had been broken up into a coppery heap of small change. If through it all there remained a touch of high distinction, it may remind us how Virginia Woolf in her prime, writing *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* and the two *Common Readers*, was one of the few splendid literary figures of our age.

135. B.G.Brooks, review article, *Nineteenth Century*

December 1941, 334–40

Virginia Woolf was characteristic of her age, at least in its best aspects. Behind the superficially Wellsian, or even Tono-Bungayish, exterior of the early nineteen-hundreds, there was coming into being a body of sincere, questing, mocking, intelligent and integrated workers in all spheres of artistic endeavour. Against the apparent trend of their time, as they would have been against the apparent trend of any time, they bore within themselves the seeds of the new age. The War of 1914–18 and its successors were to throw the world of ordinary folk, not several generations back culturally, and artistically, for that would imply a folk culture of sorts, but simply on to the bare and burnt surface of the mental slag heap. For two succeeding decades these few men and women were to stand almost alone, enshrining what was left of the fragile perfections of their period.

With Proust, Yeats and Joyce among her fellow dead, and Miss Gertrude Stein and Mr T.S.Eliot among the yet living, Virginia Woolf devoted herself to a disinterested research into the fundamentals of her art, much as the painters and musicians, her contemporaries, did of theirs. She, too, kept her immediate 'material', sensual or conceptual, constantly in mind, and shut out all that vague mass of cheap idealism and subjective emotionalism which masqueraded under the loose name of philosophy. Nevertheless she differed from most in that the satisfaction of her audience in the wider sense, that of the novelist, remained her steady aim throughout. And though she was probably about the hardest thing it would have to tackle, she did in fact, and partly from the very limitations of her subject-matter, manage to build up some sort of causeway across which to approach the average intelligence of her day.

This search for fundamentals early established itself in her case through contact with post-impressionist propaganda. As one reads *Roger Fry*, one can see how the ideas which the then revolutionary art critic was evolving from the classics, and which he was finding in a state of vigorous renewal in the despised French group whom he introduced to England in 1907, were flung on to the fertile soil of her mind. 'Why,' he demanded, 'was there no English novelist who took his art seriously? Why were they all engrossed in childish problems of photographic representation?' And we find him praising a writer (Marguerite Audoux in *Marie Claire*) who had 'contrived to express the emotions of a peasant at the sight of a wolf without using a single adjective'. Later we are told that 'Writers lacked conscience; they lacked objectivity, they did not treat words as painters treat paint.' 'Novelists should be more sparing of violent action—it increases the element of mere chance which one knows the author can turn either way he likes—whereas if you remain within the ordinary course of civilised life the situation, whatever it is, develops with some appearance at least of logical inevitability.' And he says significantly of Balzac, that he 'made a kind of texture...out of the purely external conditions of life'. The general aesthetic theory behind Virginia Woolf's novels can be summed up in his statement about the function of content. 'It is merely directive of form.... All the essential aesthetic quality has to do with pure form.' Twice she records what were presumably kindly warnings, once against 'poetisation', and once against forcing the overtones. The story of Virginia Woolf is largely the story of her struggles to solve on her own terms the problems here presented.

It is surprising how much, not only of her own development, but of subsequent drift of the English novel, is to be found in her very early

work, *The Voyage Out*. The book is far too packed, too heavily written, and the content of a type that offered no scope for her par-ticular technical experiments. There is much dramatic incident. The dying of the heroine at the moment when the author has completed her analysis under crisis and has frankly nothing further to say of her for the time being is even theatrically melodramatic. There is a very successful sociological study of the woman of the period seeking to navigate her ignoram bark with such imaginative charts as Ibsen, Shaw, Emily Brontë and Meredith could offer, and discovering the divergencies between their guidance and what her instincts told her was really profound experience. There are the intellectuals, Hirst and Hewet, unpleasant but fascinating—honest, clever, abrupt and tortured. Strangely convincing in spite of their odd incomprehensibility, they put Mr Wells to shame, and were to offer models to Mr Aldous Huxley. There is the excursion up the unexplored South American river which, on its emotional side, feels towards D.H.Lawrence, and, on what one may call its novelistic side, to Miss Ann Bridge's *Four Part Setting*. There are, finally, exasperatingly brilliant tricks of construction, as when, after an intensely emotional passage, much as a poet might throw out a confusion of unconventional images, Virginia Woolf pitchforks masses of queer people from the recesses of the hotel to dance in the limelight a grotesque Dickensian ballet. But these things were to be discarded. She, like Hewet, wanted to write 'a novel about silence, the things people don't say'. Like Rachel, she had the sensation that 'one did not know where one was going, or what one wanted…; but one thing led to another and by degrees something formed itself out of nothing, and so one reached at last this calm… and things formed themselves into a pattern…and in that pattern lay satisfaction and meaning.' And this search for the pattern was her life's work, while the reader, in novel after novel, 'was content to sit silently watching the pattern build itself up, looking at what he hardly saw'.

It is even possible to trace elements from which individual novels developed. For instance, when one of her characters 'considered the rusty inkstand, the pen, the ash-tray, and the old French neswpaper' and found that 'these small and worthless objects seemed to her to represent human lives', she is of course thinking in terms of the famous *Natures Mortes* of Cézanne, or Braque, or Picasso. But she is also seeing life as Virginia Woolf saw it when she wrote *Jacob's Room*, about which the strangest thing is that it is actually the 'room' which matters. The central figure, like the Percival of *The Waves*, is shown in blank. We

never enter his mind. We never feel from him any special call of interest. But his 'room', the space around him, is packed with things of all sorts, physical and psychological entities. It is the closeness of the packing that makes the empty volume of space so clear cut and so significantly shaped that we are prepared to concede that we have known Jacob Flenning[1] sufficiently to regret his death. In this novel Virginia Woolf uses one of those strange unifying devices which serve to bring out the inner pattern of her material. With Mrs Dalloway, it is the pocket-knife which Peter Walsh is constantly fingering in his pocket, or the recurring sound of Big Ben which, in a more mechanical sense, more completely dominates the movement of *The Years*. With *Between the Acts* it is the chimes of talk which follow unchanged from the opening phrase about the weather, or an obsessing image like that of the wasps in the peach, which, established by one character as a sense impression, recurs in the unconscious symbolism of another with tenfold force. The most obviously patterned of the novels is *The Waves*, whose sections are divided by elaborate prose poems which associate the movements and rhythms of the sea at different times of the day with the changes in the lives of the characters. *Jacob's Room* uses the psychological convention of allowing one person, say in England, to echo the words of another, say in Athens. The words then form a bridge across which, in this early work, they swing backwards and forwards, at times with a bewildering gymnastic which was not to be re-created later. In *Mrs Dalloway*, and still more in *To the Lighthouse*, this device recurs, but in the latter more particularly, the contacts of the characters provide credible psychological links which compel a more ready acceptance.

The style that pervades each novel depends very much on the special technical problems which she happened to be handling, and though I suppose there are countless passages which an admirer could identify immediately, it seems only fair to say that she has a far wider range of 'brushwork' than any of her contemporaries. How conscious her efforts were may be judged from many an indication in *The Common Reader*, especially her discussion of the use of prose in *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*. Simple play of sound appears from the first pages of *The Voyage Out*. 'The ship was making her way steadily through small waves which slapped her, and then fizzled like effervescing water, leaving a little border of bubbles and foam on either side.' One can well imagine how she amused herself recording brief notes of that sort and using them at

[1] But not sufficiently well to know his name, perhaps, which is Flanders.

all points of her career. *Jacob's Room* and *Mrs Dalloway* are full of them, short, picturesque and deliberately poetical, a sophisticated poetry as of South Kensington, which made one feel at the time of their publication that the author was a minor and unintentional Proust. The 'gong' piece in *To the Lighthouse* shows the further use of rhythm and echo, and might be contrasted, to illustrate her growing power, with the similar passage in *The Voyage Out*, which is mere description.[1] Here is the more mature one, made to read aloud as most of her work starting from *Mrs Dalloway* is, if it is to be given its full effect. After Mrs Ramsay's fear that the Boeuf en Daube might overboil:

> the great clangour of the gong announced solemnly, authoritatively, that all those scattered about, in attics, in bedrooms, on little perches of their own, reading, writing, putting the last smooth to their hair, or fastening dresses, must leave all that, and the little odds and ends on their washing-tables and dressing-tables, and the novels on the bed-tables, and the diaries which were so private, and assemble in the dining-room for dinner.

Into this poetic use of words, however, other elements enter. The great discovery of *Jacob's Room* was that the novelist could in fact completely efface herself, and simply present her material through the sensations and reactions of her characters. The convention whereby she could use her own language and attribute to her puppets, uncondemned, something of her own sensitivity to impressions, persisted. But it was obvious that free association of ideas must become more and more her basis if she pursued this path. Actually she did use it, but quite simply, in *Mrs Dalloway*. Blocks of writing that vary from ten to thirty pages reveal, in a form rather closer to the soliloquy of the traditional novel than the psychologist would admit of, the flow of conciousness through the being of Clarissa, Peter, Richard or Septimus Smith. The occasional quality as of Addison or Lamb which isolated passages assume from the nature of the mind from which they emanate—the sketch of Hugh Wakefield,[2] with its delicately mannered satire is an instance—led some readers to feel, wrongly, that Virginia Woolf was not a novelist, but an essayist who wrote novels. These massive blocks are interspersed with quick movements involving staccato jerks, which extend among the minor characters. The effect on the style is to give a mock conversational and colloquial tone, not to the actual words themselves,

[1] p. 135.
[2] Whitbread.

a point in which she differed markedly from Joyce, but to the rhythm and lilt of the sentences. What is notable in some of these books is that the people themselves are frequently most ordinary. Their recorded talk is banal. The whole value is in the art, as Roger Fry wished. And here, Virginia Woolf shows something of the skill of Henry James, who managed, in such a novel as *In the Cage*, to hang on to a gossamer thread of completely pointless small talk the most marvellous and exciting reactions and emotions.

To the Lighthouse adds further complexities of both style and subject-matter. Here one has the feeling that there is some attempt to rival the modernist musicians. Like Debussy, or Ravel, or Stravinsky, she takes some trivial theme of the sophisticated present, and gives it a mock splendour by parading it in the pomp and ceremony of Victorian or Edwardian event, all the time with an undercurrent of irony, and yet retaining a delightful sense of the fragile poetry of the whole, from the very contact of the human element. Such a moment is the dinner given in honour of William Bankes with the superb entry of the Boeuf en Daube, the contrasting and flickering pettiness of the talk about the French and their vegetables, the magical episode of the lighting of the candles, and that quiet dignified exit of Mrs Ramsay, which is also to be, only she does not know it, her exit from life. We can trace the literary sources of all this in the admiration for De Quincey expressed in *The Common Reader*: 'The emotion is never stated; it is suggested and brought slowly by repeated images before us until it stays, in all its complexity, complete.'

By comparison, this is by far the most complex of her novels. Apart from these stylistic studies, the prose poems which fill the middle section, *Time Passes*—and like those of Mallarmé, grotesque, fantastic or romantic, pervaded with a delicate mingling of irony and melancholy—there are at least three conflicting themes. First we have the mystery of the reality of Mrs Ramsay of which one becomes, oddly enough, more aware when she is dead than during her life, then the psychological study of the son James, whose lighthouse 'fixation', after distorting his youth, disappears at the moment of fulfilment, and finally the very profoundly wrought experience of Lily Briscoe, the painter, in which, as in other portraits of creative artists, one can detect the personal echo. The complexity of these themes, and the fact that she gives her characters in this novel such a wide awareness of the world and the emotions evolving around them, mean that the sentences tend to become very long. Their chatty rhythms are strained to the uttermost,

Majumdar, Robin (Editor); McLauren, Aden (Editor). Virginia Woolf.
London, GBR: Routledge, 1997. p 457.
http://site.ebrary.com/lib/princeton/Doc?id=10058122&ppg=474

with interjected phrases of memory, description or observation, and are liable at any moment to swing out into a semiparagraph of Ruskinian splendour, before recoiling and closing up into the 'tone of good talk' with which they had started.

Behind Virginia Woolf's methods lies a very definite philosophical outlook. This is characteristically modern in that it is empirical, it imposes itself from her artistic experiences, and is not the result of *a priori* thinking. Here we have the difference between her work and Proust's. Both live and feel that they live at the moment of the aesthetic experience, the moment when something in the flux of things suddenly shifts into position, and puts the whole of being into focus, before it uncoils and winds on its way. In both there is an element of waiting for this moment, a sort of passivity. So, in *To the Lighthouse*:

> To be silent; to be alone. All the being and doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others. Although she continued to knit, and sat upright, it was thus that she felt herself; and this self having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures.

The same conception is set with a finer sense of dramatic contrast in the symbolism of the two pictures in *Between the Acts*.

> In real life they had never met, the long lady and the man holding his horse by the rein. The lady was a picture; the man was an ancestor. He had a name.... He was a talk producer, that ancestor. But the lady was a picture. In her yellow robe, leaning with a pillar to support her, a silver arrow in her hand, and a feather in her hair, she led the eye up, down, from the curve to the straight, through glades of greenery and shades of silver, dun and rose into silence. The room was empty. Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell, singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still distilled essence of emptiness, silence.

But there is no attempt, as with Proust, to impose on, or draw out from, this experience the patterns of the traditional thought of her race, perhaps because her race had none, in the sense that the French have. One feels behind Proust the formal clashings of Classical Tragedy, the fiercely logical construction which welds into a grandiose unity the fantastic grotesqueries of Balzac, the overriding principles established by the penetrating moral comment of La Rochefoucauld. Here, the pattern is more evanescent: the author is–Lily Briscoe, whose brush descended, flickering, on the white canvas. 'And so pausing and

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London, GBR: Routledge, 1997. p 458.
http://site.ebrary.com/lib/princeton/Doc?id=10058122&ppg=475

flickering she attained a dancing rhythmical movement, as if the pauses were one part of the rhythm and the strokes another, and all were related.' This alternation of 'pauses and strokes' which pervades nearly all the novels was challenged once only, in *The Waves*, where Virginia Woolf seems to be trying to work with strokes only. Here the purely narrative part of the story moves from mouth to mouth of the characters as it progresses, so that one has to accept a convention of complete awareness on their part at every stage, and complete power of artistic expression synchronising with that awareness. One realises how difficult it is to do for the novel what Shakespeare does for the drama. In fact, to use a phrase from *The Voyage Out*, each of the characters 'made some sentence' and then passed on. The realistic meandering associational style developed to its most flexible in *To the Lighthouse* is dropped. The people here, even when children, speak as immortal spirits might, expressing adultly even their child reactions, where, of course, the convention is most bewildering. The style has become hard, metallic, unfeeling. One is reminded of Rhoda's comment:

> With intermittent shocks, sudden as the springs of a tiger, life emerges heaving its dark crest from the sea. It is to this we are attached, it is to this we are bound, as bodies to wild horses. And yet we have invented devices for filling up the crevices and disguising these fissures.

Virginia Woolf, in this strangest and most difficult of all her books, has cut out all the fillings, and behind the staccato utterances of the widely varied characters, types not hitherto included in her work, one can detect that passion for establishing the essential pattern which will make life tangible. In this case, it is pointed by the comment of the literary man, Bernard, who considers his friends much as the imagined novelists do in Mr Huxley's *Point Counter-Point* and M.André Gide's *Faux-Monnayeurs*. Thus, like them, she maintains by this artifice the modern convention that the novelist must eliminate herself, yet builds herself into the novel.

It is possible to think of the latest and last of her novels as a falling away from her individual outlook, a concession to the wider public. I do not feel that this is the case. *Between the Acts* purports to be the story of a day in a country house within whose grounds a local pageant is being performed. The mere selection of the topic has the genius of Chaucer behind it. It is simple, it is true to period, and it enables the author to bring together an unusual range of personages and interests in a perfectly natural way, and to free them from the restraints of

convention sufficiently to give her creative power full play. I have indicated the fundamental philosophical idea. The play, which with dramatic accuracy is a modern attempt along the lines of *The Rock*, reveals the past as felt by the post-war poet and intellectual (there is an astounding surrealist scene where the actors show the modern world to itself through broken mirrors), but the performance is mellowed by the naively beautiful and sublimely unconscious folk spirit in which the village worthies interpret it. The style is very simple, a recoil from the elaborate colloquialism-cum-preciosity of the middle period, and the formal isolation of the sentences in *The Waves*. But it is easily comprehensible, and as delicate and effective as anything she ever used. The truth is that her literary intentions had been sufficiently established for the public, her own public, to appreciate her fuller meanings on relatively slight indications. Her earlier books had established her peculiar sensibility as part of the life of the modern intelligence. She therefore was able in this book to attack with a classical and deft simplicity the more general reader. The 'overtones', at least, no longer swamp the main tune. There is some truth with the critic who said that she perhaps wanted to write one understandable book before she ended. But the whole truth needs to imply that the book was a triumph, not a concession: and that behind the ease and lightness of touch of which all must be aware, there is the same brilliance in exploration, the same intellectual integrity, as in the others, together with an added breadth of character interest, and a queer implication from the title and the conclusion that all life as the novel normally presents it is only a waiting space between the acts of our real life, which is lived in solitude. And on this note Virginia Woolf died.