The Politics of Comic Modes in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*

MELBA CUDDY-KEANE is associate professor of English at the University of Toronto, Scarborough Campus. She has published articles on Joyce Cary in Contemporary Literature, *the* Journal of Modern Literature, *and* Studies in the Novel. *Forthcoming publications include "Virginia Woolf: Narcissus Released" in the collaborative volume* Narcissus Observed. *She is currently writing on Virginia Woolf's literary theory. She was the recipient of the Scarborough College Teaching Award in 1987. As a librettist, she has written texts for solo song, vocal ensemble, choir, and opera.*

ALTHOUGH VIRGINIA Woolf first achieved recognition as a novelist of the "private sphere," recent criticism has increasingly acknowledged the radical social vision that informs all her work. In part, the change has arisen through a growing understanding, particularly among feminist critics, of the way the personal *is* the political; furthermore, we are rapidly becoming alert to the political implications of genre. When Leonard Woolf described his wife as "the least political animal that has lived since Aristotle invented the definition" (27), he was clearly thinking of politics in conventional terms.[1] To have suggested that Virginia was not concerned with the dynamics of power relations in society would have been naive, and Leonard himself was quick to add that "she was the last person who could ignore the political menaces under which we all lived" (27). Throughout her career, Virginia Woolf's revolutions in narrative form demonstrate a continuing protest against hierarchical power structures; in her last novel, *Between the Acts*, politics and genre are fully integrated in her use of comic modes to subvert and overthrow prevailing assumptions about the role of leaders and the nature of groups.

In Western patriarchal society, probably the most ingrained political assumption is that a group is by definition both leader-centered and belief-centered, for the leader usually represents shared beliefs that impart a sense of homogeneity and group identity. The predominance of such centered constructs is reflected in one of the most influential studies of group dynamics from the interwar period, Sigmund Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego.* While challenging the theories of the French social psychologist Gustave Le Bon on the grounds of incompleteness, Freud nevertheless shares Le Bon's fundamental assumption of the importance, in social organizations, of a chief. The distinctive contribution Freud makes to the theory is his analysis of the connection between individual psychology and patriarchal social structures. He agrees with Le Bon's claim that a group manifests a "thirst for obedience" but, in Freud's view, this desire is not a primary instinct but a "reaction-formation"; the members of a

group overcome their initial feelings of envy if they can imagine themselves all to be loved (or persecuted) equally by one superior being, the leader. The leader thus serves as a communal projection of the "ego ideal," fulfilling the role of the "dreaded primal father" (59).

Initially, Freud emphasized the positive role of the leader in uniting a group through a bond of common identity, but the destructive aspects of this bond became increasingly evident as he proceeded to examine the uneasy relation between communal ties and aggressive instincts. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud presents the disturbing problem that, since "brotherly love," or loyalty to a group, requires the repression of aggressive instincts, these instincts are then liable to erupt in dangerous and violent ways. Indeed, Freud goes so far as to state that communal bonds are strongest when members of a group have "other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness" (51).

Woolf's diary indicates that she read both these works while writing *Between the Acts*,[2] and her note for Saturday, 9 December 1939, reveals the turmoil into which she was thrown:

> Freud is upsetting: reducing one to whirlpool; & I daresay truly. If we're all instinct, the unconscious, whats all this about civilisation, the whole man, freedom &c? His savagery against God good. The falseness of loving one's neighbours. The conscience as censor. Hate . . . But I'm too mixed. (5: 250)

The implications of Freud's theories were frightening, and by 1939, his words had become darkly prophetic of the rise of German nationalism under Hitler. Here were strong bonds of group identity under the authoritarian domination of the primal father; here was a manifestation of aggressive instincts directed toward the outsider. In this context, it is surely possible that, in the leaderless and fragmented community of *Between the Acts*, Woolf was offering a direct challenge to the powerful, leader-centered group postulated by Freud.

Most critics have understandably interpreted this novel as a portrait of social collapse. Yet Woolf may have been sketching out a new model of society. Instead of exposing the defects of a leaderless society, the narrative may be advocating a decentering of authority; instead of proposing dissolution as a metaphor of loss, the narrative may be suggesting that fragmentation permits a new and fluid sense of community. The alternative readings emerge clearly once we perceive a shift in genre away from the traditional political assumptions enshrined in the epic to the premises established, or perhaps reestablished, by Woolf's subversive comedy.[3]

Freud himself connects the leader-centered group with the epic genre in his description of the epic hero as a substitute for the primal father: "Just as the father had been the boy's first ideal, so in the hero who aspires to the father's place the poet now created the first ego ideal" (*Group Psychology* 68). But another author with whom Woolf was well acquainted, the classical scholar Jane Harrison, points out that the epic is not the first model of social structure to consider, since there is an earlier, antithetical genre. Harrison's *Ancient Art and Ritual* deals primarily with the origins of drama in communal rituals, a theme clearly relevant to *Between the Acts*; but what is even more relevant is Harrison's distinction between an Ur-art that focused purely on community and a subsequent art that was leader-centered:

> In the old ritual dance the individual was nothing, the choral band, the group, everything, and in this it did but reflect primitive tribal life. Now in the heroic *saga* the individual is everything, the mass of the people, the tribe, or the group, are but a shadowy background which throws up the brilliant, clear-cut personality into a more vivid light. The epic poet is all taken up with what he called *klea andron*, "glorious deeds of men," of individual heroes. . . . (159)

Like Freud, Harrison associates the epic with a leader-centered construct, but her primary interest is in the earlier genre and the different kind of communal bond that it embodies. This bond is found not in a common loyalty to a person or an ideal but rather in the performance of an integrative action. The center of this performance is the "hearth," not "the leader's tent or ship"; the circumference is the whole community: "There is no division at first between actors and spectators; all are actors, all are doing the thing done, dancing the dance danced" (126). This "vague excited dance," beginning

merely in "the domain of simple psychological motor discharge" (70), has nevertheless its own distinctive unifying force—the utterance of collective emotion. In the transition from ritual to art, this band of dancers and singers evolves into the chorus of the Greek drama. For Harrison, the "strange" and "incommunicable" beauty of the chorus is a sign of its origin in the earlier ritual dance, which survives to "haunt" the drama.

In setting up an antithesis between the individualized focus of the heroic or epic saga and the collective choric voice, Harrison appears to be at variance with the theory later proposed by E. M. W. Tillyard in *The Epic Strain in the English Novel*: "What most makes the epic kind is a communal or choric quality." But the context of Tillyard's definition makes it clear that his concept of community, like Freud's, assumes a leader- and belief-centered group. As Tillyard points out, the epic writer functions as "the mouthpiece of the many" and undertakes a "mission to speak for a multitude." To do so, the writer must give the impression of being very "much their better; there must be something heroic about him." Furthermore, and perhaps most tellingly, Tillyard claims that "he must be centered in the normal; he must measure the crooked by the straight" (15–16). The epic can therefore speak only for a community that adheres to a fixed "system of beliefs" (17); Tillyard even states that the epic can exist only in times of "positive faith"; James Joyce's *Ulysses*, he concludes, is not an epic since "such negative feelings as the sense of exile or of failure to fit in" cannot be "the substance of epic" (195).

The choric quality that Tillyard identifies with the epic is thus quite different from the choric voice. Tillyard's choric quality is found in a leader-centered group that adheres to a fixed system of beliefs and requires the exclusion of deviants. In contrast, although Harrison does not speak specifically of the ritual dance as decentered and pluralistic, she describes the choral band—in which there is no separation of actor from spectator or of spokesperson from group—as an "undifferentiated" form. And what defines this ritual group is the fluid bond of giving utterance to collective emotion, not the stricter unity of adhering to a common belief, a unity that Harrison sees as arising only later, out of the repetition of the dance. It is precisely this collective emotion that Harrison finds missing in the art of her own time, and she concludes by urging a return to the communal art in which *all* are "doing the thing done."

It is impossible to say whether Woolf was influenced by Harrison or whether Woolf and Harrison held similar views owing to common influences, but it is striking how closely Woolf's last novel approximates the communal art that Harrison longed to see. For the communal chorus is, I propose, one of the allusive meanings of the title *Between the Acts*.[4] In Greek drama, the songs or chants of the chorus interrupt the action; in fact, the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s entry for chorus—which Woolf might well have read—describes the Greek chorus as appearing "between the 'acts.'" Miss La Trobe's intermittent chorus likewise appears between the acts in the play within the novel. And these pauses in the pageant provide both the center and the circumference of the action, for when the curtain rises at the end of the novel, all the previous narrative falls between the acts, and every voice becomes part of the chorus.

The narrative act of transforming all voices into chorus is unavoidably political; it subverts the habitual dominance of the leader figure and introduces a new concept of community in which the insider-outsider dichotomy is erased and the bond of common identity is rewritten as a unifying participation in common action. Ultimately, even the voice of the leader is subsumed within the choric voice, and the new genre becomes a fully inclusive form.

Because Woolf's choric voice signifies the integration of society, *Between the Acts* lies primarily within the comic genre. And in Greek drama, while the chorus appears in both tragedy and comedy, it is the communal genre of comedy that provides the chorus with its true identity. Following Aristotle, Harrison traces the origins of tragedy to the *leaders* of the dithyramb, the spring dance, but the chorus, she argues, derived from the earlier stage of purely communal dance. Collective rather than individualist, the chorus would therefore appear to be antithetical to the tragic movement. Noting that in tragedy the chorus represents the society from which the tragic hero is progressively isolated, Northrop Frye describes the chorus as "the embryonic germ of comedy in tragedy" (218).

In creating a distinctive choric voice, *Between the Acts* both returns to the ancient choral band and creates a new comic mode. The new collective voice emerges through a subtle manipulation and transformation of three comic modes—satiric, amiable, and liminal. Woolf inhibits her satiric impulse by modifying the satire with elements of amiable comedy and expands the amiable comedy with elements of liminality to create a subversive and revisionary mode, the art of the whole community.

While each of these comic modes reflects the uniting movement that typifies comedy, the images of community that emerge differ in the degree of their inclusiveness and hence in the degree of their opposition to the epic. The satiric mode comes closest to the political implications of the leader-centered genre, by uniting some individuals at the cost of excluding others. In *The Comic Spirit of Eighteenth-Century Novels*, Susan Auty defines satire in Roman comedy as the criticism directed by the establishment against the "oddball," or eccentric personality: "The private individual comes to be in most comic works a symptom of the public disorder" (7). In such works, the uniting movement is clear: society draws together around the prevailing norm in order to expel the elements that threaten social stability. In many modern works, the *terms* in which the satire operates are reversed. The satire is directed against the prevailing demand for conformity, which appears ridiculous from the "eccentric" vantage point of a commitment to individual liberty. The dynamics of the satire are nevertheless the same: a collective perspective emerges that establishes the norm, and the antithetical element is expelled.

We can easily see how Woolf inhibits the satiric impulse in her last novel if we compare her treatment of leadership in *Between the Acts* and in *Mrs. Dalloway*. In the earlier novel, Woolf's comedy is primarily satiric, with one of the comic butts being a patriarchal figure who is a recognized leader in his society. Sir William Bradshaw is the medical doctor who serves as psychiatrist to Septimus Smith, a young man suffering shell shock from the war. Septimus is an eccentric individual, caught up in his hallucinatory visions; Sir William represents authority and the accepted social norm.

The satire is evident in the disparity between Sir William's reputation for sympathy and understanding and the detached clinical notes he writes on a little pink card, which are about as sensitive as the notorious railway timetable from which his last name is derived. The satire becomes progressively darker throughout the consultation, which concludes with Sir William's cutting off Septimus's first real attempt at communication because each patient is granted precisely three-quarters of an hour. The norms Sir William represents become increasingly objectionable: worship of wealth, position, and power; unhesitating, unalterable judgments of others; suppression of any individual eccentricity—even if it happens to be acute pain—for the smooth running of the social system. But there is another view, a larger view, in which Sir William and all his admirers are aberrant. While the opposing norm is not directly stated, it is conveyed through the narrative's ironic tone, which by implication endorses the opposite of what it satirically praises. Fittingly given through negative definition, this perspective entails an absence: the refusal to sum someone up in a few phrases, the refusal to believe in the infallible wisdom of a doctor or indeed in any enshrined authority. Other than acknowledging the sanctity and otherness of Septimus's soul, the novel provides no specific answers to his problem.

The narrative perspective is thus broader and more inclusive than the existing social norm. Since there is no one view that we are asked to adopt, the context in which we laugh at Sir William is more tolerant and pluralistic than the context he represents. But the laughter itself is bitter, and it serves to expel this character and what he represents from the new social vision. The notion of primal father is subverted, but the community re-forms partly through sharing in the release of aggression directed toward the satirically diminished leader.

The way satire achieves its object is thus by reducing the "enemy" to a formula, encapsulating him (or her) within a closed structure. Woolf was uneasy about such simplification, as a diary note from 1935 suggests:

> *Ideas that struck me*
> That the more complex a vision the less it lends itself to satire: the more it understands the less it is able to sum up & make linear. For example: Sh[akespea]re &

> Dostoevsky neither of them satirise. The age of understanding: the age of destroying—& so on.
> (4: 309)

Not surprisingly, therefore, in the more complex vision of *Between the Acts*, Woolf abandons pure satire, with its rejection of the object of ridicule, and adopts a qualified satire that embraces even the threatening element within the new inclusive community.[5]

The difference can be easily seen by comparing the portrait of Sir William with that of the Reverend G. W. Streatfield, the minister who climbs on a soapbox to offer his summation of the village pageant in *Between the Acts*. Sir William and Streatfield, like many other figures in Woolf's criticisms of society, are both figures of patriarchal authority who seek to subject the rest of the world to their limited views. The name given to the minister in an early draft of the novel, the Reverend T. H. Serageant (*Pointz Hall* 58), indicates his potential as a comic butt. Yet while there are undoubtably satiric elements in this portrait, now the satire, like Streatfield's name, is mixed and ambiguous.

The minister's penchant for tobacco, for example, offers a rich mine for satire, and inevitably this foible serves to emphasize his common and fallible nature and to deflate the high role he has assumed. The hand he raises to silence the crowd at the beginning of his speech has a yellow-stained finger; later, in his crumbling attempts to find a way of drawing to a close, he succumbs totally to a comic fondling of his pipe lighter. Scorn could easily be evoked, but Woolf handles the scene in an unexpected way:

> As if a rook had hopped unseen to a prominent bald branch, he touched his collar and hemmed his preliminary croak. One fact mitigated the horror; his forefinger, raised in the customary manner, was stained with tobacco juice. He wasn't such a bad fellow; the Rev. G. W. Streatfield; a piece of traditional church furniture; a corner cupboard; or the top beam of a gate, fashioned by generations of village carpenters after some lost-in-the-mists-of-antiquity model. (222)

The sign of his weakness, instead of condemning him as unfit for his role, actually redeems him. As a spiritual leader, he is merely a historical anachronism, but as an ordinary and fallible mortal, he is part of the enduring human community.

A similar deflection of satiric thrust mitigates the criticism aimed at his interpretation of the play. Certainly we are prepared for a disparaging look at his "summing up": "What an intolerable constriction, contraction, and reduction to simplified absurdity he was to be sure! Of all incongruous sights a clergyman in the livery of his servitude to the summing up was the most grotesque and entire" (221). And later another character thinks how the playwright had been "excruciated by the Rector's interpretation" (237). But as Streatfield stumbles with painstaking care and modesty through his interpretation, we are struck by correspondences among what he says, what other characters have been thinking, and what is expressed by the strangely choric narrative voice. What then seems ridiculous is not his interpretation but the form in which it is given—the form of the lecture, with its implied hierarchy of the imparter of wisdom over the receivers, of the leader over the followers. Such distinctions are challenged when the narrative voice mocks the assumption that university degrees are infallible signs of superior understanding: "If he didn't know [the meaning of the pageant], calling himself Reverend, also M.A., who after all could?" (223). And there is similar ridicule in the description of the audience members' surrendering themselves to passive listening: "They folded their hands in the traditional manner as if they were seated in church" (223). Yet even this situation is redeemed when connected to the whole. As final and absolute truth, the minister's sermon is ridiculous. But by mounting the soapbox and standing on the spot where previously stood the similarly grand and comic figure of Queen Elizabeth I—that "majestic figure of the Elizabethan age personified by Mrs Clark, licensed to sell tobacco" (112)—the minister identifies himself as part of the unfolding drama and part of the ongoing human struggle. As yet another of our constant but imperfect attempts to achieve understanding, Streatfield's interpretation is redeemed into the general whole.

By so modifying or inhibiting her satire, Woolf enters the realm of amiable comedy, in which the ridiculous aspects of humanity appear in an en-

dearing and positive light. Unlike satire, amiable comedy is not corrective in intent but restorative, and since its comic perspective extends to embrace the source of laughter, amiable comedy is a more inclusive form; in the words of Susan Auty, "the range of acceptable human behaviour" is "extended" to include the comic aberrations (8). Instead of consolidating a social norm by contrasting it with what lies outside, amiable comedy draws the outsider within the social circle and, in so doing, comes closer to Harrison's communal art.

By mixing satire and amiable comedy in her portrait of the Reverend Streatfield, Woolf diffuses the threat of the patriarchal figure and reduces the narrative aggression toward him. As long as we adopt the perspective in which leaders are enemies, we attribute importance to what they represent. Once we shift to the comic perspective in which any assumption of power is absurd, leaders cease to be powerful figures. One is reminded of Jane Austen's gentle refusal to write a historical romance: she could not possibly do so without laughing. In Woolf's portrayal of Streatfield, the fundamental assumption of the epic—that a supposedly superior being can act as spokesperson for humanity—is similarly subverted by laughter. Yet because the laughter reclaims its object within the human continuum, the collectivity of the vision is greater than that of the group unified by its antagonism to the enemy.

The political implications of Woolf's amiable comedy emerge even more clearly in her portrait of another potential leader figure, the playwright Miss La Trobe. As the creator of the pageant in *Between the Acts*, La Trobe is in a position to control the universe of the play, as a leader might exercise political control in society. That Woolf connected patriarchal dominance in society and authorial dominance in the text is admirably demonstrated in *A Room of One's Own*, where one of the many transformations of the hortative Oxbridge beadle is the hypothetical novelist "Mr. A." In contrast to Woolf herself, who presents only "opinion" for her readers to challenge, Mr. A's vigorously unrelenting and didactic voice casts on his text a sterile shadow "shaped something like the letter 'I' " (150). Yet Woolf does not suggest that the so-called masculine qualities are in themselves destructive; the problems of oppression and sterility exist because the "male virtues" have been enshrined in a context of exclusion and privilege. The thrust of her argument is toward overcoming gender stereotypes and replacing them with a model of human wholeness. The question then, for *Between the Acts*, is whether La Trobe is a satiric portrait of patriarchal authority or an amiable comic figure in whom the "masculine" elements are balanced and recast.

In one passage, La Trobe undoubtably resembles a commander at war: she appears "pacing to and fro between the leaning birch trees" with "the look of a commander pacing his deck," and the play is her metaphorical battle: "shading her eyes in the attitude proper to an Admiral on his quarter-deck, she decided to risk the engagement out of doors" (77). "Bossy" is La Trobe's nickname and the players form under her in "little troops." The image of the commander suggests an unflattering connection with "Serageant," Streatfield's original name, and with Budge, the policeman in the Victorian act of the play. The negative implications of such authority and power are voiced by another character, Isa, who understands how leadership entails separation from community and who rejects "the frantic cries of the leaders who in that they seek to lead desert us" (183). La Trobe is almost such a negative authority figure, but other factors counteract her domineering role. Suffering agonies because the success of her play is at least in part dependent on the response of the spectators, she tells them, "A tyrant, remember, is half a slave" (218–19). And she stays hidden behind a tree, disappearing into a "megaphontic, anonymous, loud-speaking" voice (218), even refusing to appear for the audience's thanks. Furthermore, by allowing the element of chance to enter her composition, La Trobe even relinquishes control over her art. In fact, the greatest charge that can be brought against her is not that she embodies the evils of leadership but rather that, as a leader, she fails to unify her followers. But such a judgment is possible only if we maintain the old homogeneous, concentric view of unity. That we do not, I believe, stems from the fact that La Trobe is not a satiric portrait judged against the norm of traditional notions of successful leadership but is instead an amiable comic figure who functions to extend and redefine those very assumptions.

La Trobe herself considers her play a "failure"; but then her dedication to process rather than to control becomes her way of overcoming defeat. Like Hank Morgan—Mark Twain's Connecticut Yankee—or Joyce Cary's Gulley Jimson, La Trobe is both victimized and redeemed by an insatiable imagination. The narrative's bemused, amused, choric voice remarks dryly that she "had a passion for getting things up" (72), and even in the midst of preparations for this pageant, she is already on the scent of a new plot, "[f]or another play always lay behind the play she had just written" (78). But it is in creating, not in her creation, that her true victory lies. Her moment of glory—her triumph of giving her "gift" to her audience—dissipates quickly, like the "cloud that melted into the other clouds on the horizon" (244); almost immediately, however, her imaginative landscape is suffused with an image of rejuvenation. A flock of starlings attacks the tree behind which she had hidden, turning it into "a rhapsody, a quivering cacophony, a whizz and vibrant rapture, branches, leaves, birds syllabling discordantly life, life, life, without measure, without stop devouring the tree" (244–45). The cry of the birds, "life, life, life," is the counterpart and answer to La Trobe's earlier despairing cry, "death, death, death," and it leads to new life in her imaginative world by stimulating her next play. Her vision begins to form: "something [rises] to the surface" (246). Later, in the village pub, the activity of the starlings brings the play to its birth: "there was the high ground at midnight; there the rock; and two scarcely perceptible figures. Suddenly the tree was pelted with starlings. She set down her glass. She heard the first words" (248).

In this way, La Trobe inhabits the realm of amiable comedy, for we are led not just to forgive oddity but to embrace it. Her comic exuberance turns out to be a redemptive dedication to process, and her play can be judged a success if we think not of what she has taught the community but of how she has stimulated them to think. As opposed to a failed leader, La Trobe thus represents a positive alternative to leadership: a background rather than a foreground figure, a prompter and catalyst rather than a director and guide. But this does not mean that she provides a new center for the community. The village is in no way intimidated or impressed by her, and it mocks her eccentric, unfeminine, un-English appearance. After the pageant, she is ostracized not because she is bossy but because she is lesbian. On one level, Miss La Trobe remains an outsider, a position that recalls the end of *Three Guineas*, where Woolf urges women to continue as outsiders in opposition to society's competitive hierarchy. Yet by interacting with the community, La Trobe becomes part of the community. An isolated figure at the end, she nevertheless seeks shelter in the local pub, and although her entrance interrupts the village gossip about her, she finds comfort in being surrounded by the sound of voices. La Trobe does not escape the fate of appearing ridiculous, but she is contained within the novel's social vision and, at the same time, redeemed by her eccentricity. By having only momentary power, La Trobe is saved from the negative effects of power; by following her own impulses, she is saved from the stultifying effects of group conformity.

La Trobe is thus neither expelled as a threat—as is Sir William Bradshaw—nor simply reabsorbed into the group—as is the Reverend Streatfield. The incorporation of an outsider into society without changing her nature as an outsider redefines inclusiveness. The notion of what constitutes a social group is separated from the concept of homogeneity. While Tillyard may be correct in stating that "such negative feelings as the sense of exile or of failure to fit in" cannot be the "substance of epic," they can be the substance of comedy, and they can even function in redemptive ways. But to apprehend the social dynamics of heterogeneity is to disestablish traditional assumptions. In *Between the Acts*, the conventional desirability of close ties of shared identity is challenged by Woolf's sense of the vital spaces and silences in human communication—gaps that may fragment but that also bestow individual freedom. Society's obsession with measuring achievement in terms of power and position is undercut by the freely offered gift of the anonymous outsider. And, finally, the readers' and audience's expectation of definitive meaning is overturned by the novelist and playwright's rejection of closure and the substitution of a continuous engagement in process.

In reversing fundamental assumptions, Woolf

moves beyond amiable comedy to create a subversive form. This third comic mode most closely resembles the ancient Greek *kōmos*, from which comedy as a genre is thought to derive—the early festive revels in which the normal social order was disregarded and overthrown as the community indulged in a holiday of license. Like the choral band, the *kōmos* is a communal form, although it is even more decentered in being fragmented, discontinuous, and disordered. In this aspect, *Between the Acts* resembles the "festive" comedy described by C. L. Barber in his study of Shakespeare and seems to justify Judy Little's description of it as a "liminal" form. However, the comic pattern that Barber defines implies that a restoration of order follows the rejuvenating release. The release —like that of the English May Day festival—is "understood to be a temporary license, a 'misrule' which implie[s] rule" (10). Even Judy Little, who uses "liminality" to embody the idea of a "permanently inverted world," a halting of ritual at the liminal phase, interprets such halting in *Between the Acts* as Woolf's criticism of a society that lacks the ability to proceed to regeneration. Therefore, while I suggest that Woolf's comedy contains liminal elements, I have chosen not to define it finally as liminal; since a limen, or threshold, by implication leads to a further space, liminality inevitably connotes a transitional period and an eventual return to order.[6] Woolf's comedy, I believe, celebrates an irreversible dismantling of order and actually advocates a permanent instability.[7]

By establishing a topsy-turvy world, Woolf's comedy differs from stabilizing forms of comedy, since it challenges our basic assumptions about reality. Malcolm Bradbury explains this difference when he contrasts the kind of comedy we find in Henry Fielding (a supreme example of amiable comedy), which "tends in the end to stabilize the familiar social reality," with subversive comedy like that of Laurence Sterne, which presents "the working out of a different comic typology" (35). The new typology in Sterne, as in Woolf, is not a typology of closure; in Bradbury's terms, it is a "comedy of ciphers." Its thrust is not toward answers but toward questions, and that, I believe, is why it is a more inclusive form. Amiable comedy extends the range of acceptable human behavior but still adheres to the idea of a norm; destabilizing comedy, by blocking the establishment of any norm, offers a vision of society that accommodates fragmentation, paradox, ambiguity, and contradiction.

In this respect, Woolf's subversiveness goes beyond undermining Freud's notion of a group unified through shared identification with a primal-father figure. Her comedy ultimately undermines all definitions of a group as a centered, unified identity and rewrites the concept of community as a fragmented, questioning, contradictory, but fully collective voice. At the beginning of this essay, I suggested that the title *Between the Acts* implies that everything in the novel is chorus. Miss La Trobe's pageant includes an actual chorus; anonymous voices in the audience extend the chorus into the world outside the play. The resulting participatory community marks a new political vision through a return to an ancient genre—the preheroic art envisioned by Jane Harrison: "There is no division . . . between actors and spectators; all are actors, all are doing the thing done, dancing the dance danced."

Miss La Trobe's chorus appears first of all in the prologue of the pageant, before the scene set in the Elizabethan era. Dressed in "shirts made of sacking," these village players seem to represent the medieval age, making Mrs. Swithin think of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims. But La Trobe's pilgrims behave in a manner more akin to the chorus of Greek comedy: presented as a nonindividualized group, they accompany the various acts of the play with continuing song and dance, weaving in and out of the trees that mark the background of the natural stage. Yet La Trobe's chorus has none of the exuberance and bawdiness that characterize the chorus of Aristophanes, nor does it speak directly to the audience. As a backdrop to the pageant, it seems to have a minor role indeed; the wind even blows away many of its words, so that the audience is only able to catch fragments of the song. Initially, this chorus seems hardly strong enough to be a liberating force that overturns order.

But La Trobe's chorus grows in significance during the pageant, even though its actions are essentially unchanging. It reappears throughout the scenes of the play (which depict, I might note, the history of English comedy), drawing the au-

dience's attention in the interval before the eighteenth century, in a pause in the nineteenth century, and finally, joined by all the other actors, in the finale of the twentieth century. Since the chorus thus reflects repetition and recurrence in opposition to change, its role expands beyond that of medieval pilgrims to embody what is permanent and enduring in all historical periods—the life of the common people in touch with the soil.[8] "*Digging and delving*," the villagers sing, "*for the earth is always the same, summer and winter and spring; and spring and winter again . . .*" (148). In contrast, the characters who play out their individualized roles in each century are manifestations of current fashion in both society and literature—manifestations, that is, of what is passing and transitory. Seen in the larger perspective, these characters—who in traditional drama would be considered central or major—appear to have comically inflated roles; what seems humorous is the inordinate importance they attach to their particular dilemmas, which, instead of being treated as distinctive moments of choice, are reduced to comic clichés. The one redeeming aspect of their lives is their potential continuity with the larger life implied by the chorus: the different eras transcend triviality once they are seen as repetitions, in different guises, of enduring human situations. But in this reading, the hierarchical distinction between "major" and "minor" characters is undone, and the "minor" figures of the chorus become the touchstones of reality. The dramatic form inverts itself. What was background shifts to foreground; what was foreground appears merely as surface agitation.

This shift in perspective prompts a rereading of the role the chorus plays in the pageant. A conventional interpretation of its role begins with the "normal" assumptions that communication is contingent on words being understood and that fragmentation is evidence of disintegration. The lost and fragmented words of the chorus would then epitomize the failure of La Trobe's pageant, and the unsuccessful pageant would be Woolf's disillusioned metaphor for the failure of art and the failure of society. But in an inverted reading, the words of the chorus overturn traditional assumptions about language, and the chorus takes a significant role in revolutionizing our understanding of the social group.

If the voice in *Between the Acts* is that of the chorus, the language is that of music. The idea of music as a counterlanguage—a theme in Woolf's fiction as early as *The Voyage Out*—relates to her conception of the way music avoids semantic closure.[9] For Woolf, music has a greater unifying power than discursive prose, since music is capable of containing and sustaining personal associations while still being something the listeners share. In an early essay, "Impressions at Bayreuth," she wrote, "Perhaps music owes something of its astonishing power over us to this lack of definite articulation; its statements have all the majesty of a generalization, and yet contain our private emotions" (21). In *Between the Acts*, the audience thinks, "Music makes us see the hidden, join the broken" (143). And the moment of true unity—when each person fully participates in a shared experience—is created by the spell of the gramophone: "Compelled from the ends of the horizon; recalled from the edge of appalling crevasses; they crashed; solved; united" (221).

If we approach the words of the chorus as music, the gaps in semantic meaning signify not disintegration but a disruption of closure that offers music's positive lack of "definite articulation." Since many words cannot be heard, suggestion predominates over specific reference, and sound over signification. Like music, language becomes rich in its "burden of suggestion" ("Impressions" 21), drawing on each listener's private experience of a common inheritance: "*and the Queen and the Watch tower fall . . . for Agamemnon has ridden away . . . Clytemnestra is nothing but . . .*" (164; ellipses in the original). The anonymous voices become a collective voice possessing music's unifying power.

In addition, the language of music permits the integration of human with natural sound. Instead of focusing on the wind's disruption of verbal meaning, a revisionary perspective hears a new music created by the interpenetration of the human song with the sounds (or silences) of nature. Such a perspective leads to a further decentering: not only is the individual voice repositioned as a part of the collective voice, but anthropocentric vision is replaced by an integrated vision of humanity and nature.

Music also offers a different approach to inter-

preting the audience in Woolf's novel. The essay on Bayreuth foreshadows Woolf's interest in intermissions and the way they are filled by the audience's choric commentary on the opera: "During the intervals between the acts, . . . [the audience members] seem oppressed with a desire to disburden themselves somehow of the impression which they have received" (18–19). In *Between the Acts*, the idea of interval as chorus is further suggested by the paralleling of the anonymous, fragmented singing of the pilgrims and the anonymous, fragmented voice of the audience.

But as with the literal chorus of the pageant, a crucial question is how to interpret the fragmentation of the audience's speech. With the audience, what we hear is limited to isolated sentences and phrases that suddenly pop out from the ambient sound, and the contrasts of meaning only accentuate the discontinuity. Again, one possibility is to read such fragmentation as prefiguring the disintegration of society, especially since the fragments appear comically ludicrous owing to the rapid juxtaposition of incompatible phrases. Comments about the play ("Dressing up. That's the great thing, dressing up"), about the threat of war ("And my daughter, just back from Rome, she says the common people, in the cafés, hate Dictators"), about current gossip ("And Queen Mary and the Duke of Windsor on the south coast?") are jumbled together; probing questions ("D'you think people change? Their clothes, of course . . . But I meant ourselves . . .") are mixed with trivial ("D'you believe dogs can't have puppies?") (143–44). La Trobe's aim is to unify these scattered voices, and their unfocused chatter threatens her success: "Every moment the audience slipped the noose; split up into scraps and fragments" (145). Yet these scattered comments also contain the novel's most promising glimpses of hope. In the final audience "chorus," we hear: "What we need is a centre. Something to bring us together . . ." and "Or was that, perhaps, what she meant? . . . that if we don't jump to conclusions, if you think, and I think, perhaps one day, thinking differently, we shall think the same?" and the unfinished "Are machines the devil, or do they introduce a discord . . . , by means of which we reach the final . . ." (231–35). There are, it is true, glimpses here of resolution and homogeneity, but it is equally important that such resolution is only implied, and not through statement but through questioning.[10] In this passage, we do not so much retrieve meaning from fragmentation as discover how fragmentation is meaningful. What I'm suggesting is that for Woolf conventional meaning, because it attempts to *impose* unity, becomes exclusive and partial; only meaning that, like music, lacks definite articulation is fully inclusive and therefore truly unifying.

Woolf's acceptance of difference and discord is closely related to her sense of the multiplicity of reality—perhaps the most constant theme in her writing. In the essay "Craftsmanship," for example, broadcast shortly before her first mention of planning *Between the Acts*, she writes, "the truth [words] try to catch is many-sided, and they convey it by being themselves many-sided, flashing this way, then that" (131). And in her essay on Coleridge, written while she was working on *Between the Acts*, she indicates the necessarily fragmentary nature of any attempt to articulate "truth": "the only way of getting at the truth [is] to have it broken into many splinters by many mirrors and so select" ("Man" 72). Both these passages echo a description of Henri Matisse by Roger Fry (whose biography Woolf was writing concurrently with *Between the Acts*):[11]

> By the magic of an intensely coherent style our familiar every day world . . . has been broken to pieces as though reflected in a broken mirror and then put together again into a far more coherent unity in which all the visual values are mysteriously changed—in which plastic forms can be read as pattern and apparently flat patterns are read as diversely inclined planes. (21)

In a way that parallels my own reading of Woolf, Fry links Matisse's presentation of visual multiplicity with a change in aesthetic values that requires a different approach to form.

The final act of the pageant presents an image that literally embodies these descriptions of many-sided truth: "broken into many splinters," "flashing this way and that," actually "reflected in a broken mirror." In the depiction of the "present time," the stage fills with villagers each holding up a mirror or some other reflective object. By this

wonderful bit of theatrics, the audience appears on the stage, in what must look like a moving cubist painting.[12] The preceding music, according to the anonymous audience voice, has "shiver[ed] into splinters the old vision" (214); now "the looking glasses darted, flashed, exposed" (215). Then in a further collage of broken pieces, all the actors from all the eras appear together, along with the chorus, "each declaim[ing] some phrase or fragment from their parts" (215).

This scene is usually regarded as a final image of collapse. But in an alternative interpretation, this image embodies a "far more coherent unity," corresponding to Matisse's use of multiple planes in his paintings and anticipating what was to be hailed as a revolutionary new form in the work of the American composer John Cage.[13] For although Cage is usually accepted as the "leader" in aleatoric music, La Trobe's last act opens with a Cagean "ten mins. of present time" almost twenty years before Cage's *4' 33"*.[14] In both works, ambient sounds become part of the composition, and the members of the audience become performers: script and score provide the frame but do not dictate the content. Thus both Cage and La Trobe abandon two of the most ingrained conventions of traditional performance: the separation of stage from audience and the control of the artist over the work. The resulting "chaos" is not apocalyptic but revisionary, and in a fully political sense. The new relation between artist and audience subverts the traditional hierarchical lines of power, replacing them with an undifferentiated and participatory communal form.

For in La Trobe's work, the separation between the chorus in the pageant and the choric audience is ultimately dissolved. In the final merging of voices there is no longer any distinction of performance from life, of the intervals between the acts from the acts; all voices are part of one choric voice, all action is equally central. But the interplay of voices implies a nonconventional answer to one of the final questions posed by the audience: "And if we're left asking questions, isn't it a failure, as a play?" (233). Only *if* the audience is left asking questions is it fully engaged in the acts of both creation and performance and fully part of the enduring human existence that the pageant has depicted. The lack of conclusion provides the basis for comic victory. Without the dominance of one authoritative interpretation, meaning is liberated to include all creators of meaning, and the comedy of inversion works toward a final inclusiveness.

I am not suggesting that *Between the Acts* offers a utopian vision, especially since in this last novel, more than in any of her others, Woolf acknowledges the inevitable presence of violence. But she does propose a direction for revolutionary change by replacing the voice of the leader with the voice of the community. Paradoxically, this collective voice, since it is communal without being coercive, is more individualist than the voice of the spokesperson. And while the group defined by the collective voice is less tangible than the group focused on a leader, it is more inclusive. It is not an identity but a process, an activity in which all are engaged, and its language, like the new music of the twentieth century, makes free use of unresolved dissonance and is open to the use of all sounds. The pluralistic community so glimpsed, fragile though it may be, at least offers an alternative to the authoritarian domination of the primal father and the dangerous eruptions of suppressed aggression directed toward the outsider.

By rewriting community as chorus, the subversive comedy of *Between the Acts* thus implies a permanent overturning of the existing order. Instead of using fragmentation to represent disintegration, it employs fragmentation as a new way of seeing. In this way it has affinities with the subversive forms of absurdist and ironic comedy, which similarly function to deconstruct a prevailing world. Yet unlike absurdist comedy, Woolf's comedy conveys not random meaninglessness but a validation of individual eccentricity and difference, and unlike ironic comedy, it focuses not on irreconcilability but on inclusiveness. If we require a term to describe such comedy—and given Woolf's sense of the reductiveness of semantic closure, I'm not sure that we do—we might choose *ludic comedy*, thereby evoking the notion of play in and for itself, without the implication of a transitional phase. But whatever the terminology, the reading I propose is one that sees Woolf's comedy as revisionary as well as subversive in that its "polyphonic indeterminacy" (Ehrenzweig 106) offers not merely an attack on patriarchal politics but a

new apprehension of the nature of community. This handling of genre is thoroughly political in substituting, for the definition of politics as the exercising of power, a model of community as the dynamic inhabiting of mutual space.[15]

Notes

[1]As the following discussion will I hope make clear, there could have been little question of Virginia's participating in a politics characterized as follows: "Aristotle in his first book of Politiques affirmes as a foundation of the whole politicall science, that some men by nature are made worthy to command, others only to serve" (Thomas Hobbes, *Government and Society* [1651] 3.13.46, qtd. under the heading *The Politics* in the *OED*). The extent to which Leonard was an Aristotelian political animal is perhaps suggested by his subsequent comment about himself: "I do not enjoy committees and I am not a good committee man unless I am chairman or secretary" (218).

[2]Woolf first mentions ideas for this novel on 6 August 1937; her final version was finished on 26 February 1941 (5: 105, 356). Woolf notes on 17 December 1939 that she "read Freud on Groups" (5: 252). See also the entries for 2, 8, and 9 December 1939 and for 9 February 1940 (5: 248, 249, 250, 264).

[3]"There is no reason to think that the form of the epic or of the poetic play suits a woman any more than the [man's] sentence suits her" (V. Woolf, *Room* 116).

[4]The significance of the Greek chorus in Woolf's fiction has not been unnoticed. Avrom Fleishman notes "Woolf's plan [in *Mrs. Dalloway*] for a continuing chorus of observers among the incidental characters, an idea developed in connection with her reading of the *Choephoroi* of Aeschylus" (139). Jane Marcus comments, "In *The Years* Woolf attempts to write a modern Greek drama with the chorus merging into individual heroes and heroines; she dissolves the individual and the authorial voice in a collective voice, as if in an oratorio or opera whose mythic theme is the ritual death and rebirth of the year."

[5]I agree with Alex Zwerdling's view that, in her later works, Woolf's satiric impulse becomes "inhibited." However, I differ in seeing this inhibition as organically related to her political vision.

[6]In similar fashion, I have considered but rejected the term *liminoid*, which Victor Turner uses for a form that resembles but is not identical to the liminal (32). His description of the liminoid as frequently subversive (41) and as "plural, fragmentary, and experimental in character" (54) echoes the characteristics of *Between the Acts*. But when he identifies the liminoid with certain features of postindustrial society, especially the emphasis on individual innovation as opposed to anonymous collective creation, he moves in a different direction, I believe, from that of Woolf's comedy. The difference between the liminoid and Woolf's collective form may result from the fact that the industrial revolution did not have the same effects on women's thinking as on men's.

[7]In a work that I encountered since writing this essay, Lucio Ruotolo argues that the interruptions in Woolf's texts establish an aesthetics of flux that serves as a positive disruption of closure. Although Ruotolo does not specifically discuss Woolf's use of comedy and the chorus, he does deal with the undercutting of leadership in *Between the Acts*. He and I are in essential agreement about both the effect of disruption and its political implications. For Ruotolo, the pauses and fragmentations function to "break derived sequences of art and politics" and thus serve as a critique of "those hierarchical assumptions that underlie most Western theories of governance" (231).

[8]Here is another instance where Zwerdling and I perceive the same "score" but perform it differently. We both see the chorus as an antithesis to historical decay, but his assumption that cultural homogeneity is the social ideal leads him to conclude that the fragmentation of the pageant is wholly pessimistic.

[9]The connection between music and Woolf's new language has been noted by Nora Eisenberg.

[10]Although Fleishman finds that in *Mrs. Dalloway* "the multiple points of view make up an underlying structure of experience—if not a group mind or unity of consciousness" (81), he does not pursue that interpretation in his discussion of *Between the Acts*. Commenting on the words "What we need is a centre. Something to bring us all together," he remarks, "but in our time a 'centre' is likely to mean an activity hall rather than a cultural ideal" (213). My view is: exactly, but omit the "but." And when he continues, "Moreover, the communal wisdom . . . can at best arrive at the proper questions, not the answers to them" (213), I would remove the negative implications of his statement to suggest that it is precisely in such open questioning that the hope of community lies. As in my disagreement with Zwerdling, it is not our observations that differ but our attitudes toward them. One of the many fascinations of this topic is the way it reveals how our assumptions about the nature of unity influence our interpretations.

[11]The connection with both "The Man at the Gate" and *Henri Matisse* has been noted by Allen McLaurin (55).

[12]"Cubist fragmentation dangerously approaches psychotic art. But while the splinters of psychotic art remain isolated, Cubist fragmentation is resolved by a 'depth coherence' belonging to a deeper level of experience" (Ehrenzweig, caption to pl. 25).

[13]Sally Sears notes the similarity between the last section of the pageant and Cage's music. But although she attributes some "positive force" to silence, her conclusion that the pageant fails to communicate is still influenced by logocentric expectations.

[14]Although the specter of the aesthetic leader continues to haunt our thinking, the notion of originator is increasingly challenged by theories of collaborative and intertextual creation. Presumably the revolution I analyze here is part of a larger deconstructionist choric voice, which the voice of literary criticism eventually joins.

[15]Brenda Silver provides an excellent analysis of the pageant in *Between the Acts* in terms of the collaborative relationship between playwright and audience in Elizabethan theater, and her approach to the communal self is in many ways complementary to my essay; however, Silver sees fragmentation as disrupting unity instead of facilitating it, and because she does not consider the ideological implications of genre, she does not perceive the political implications of Woolf's cultural community.

Works Cited

Auty, Susan. *The Comic Spirit of Eighteenth-Century Novels.* Port Washington: Kennikat, 1975.

Barber, C. L. *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy.* Cleveland: World, 1963.

Bradbury, Malcolm. "Fielding, Sterne, and the Comic Modes of Fiction." *Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel.* London: Oxford UP, 1973. 31–40.

Ehrenzweig, Anton. *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination.* London: Weidenfeld, 1967.

Eisenberg, Nora. "Virginia Woolf's Last Words on Words: *Between the Acts* and 'Anon.' " *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf.* Ed. Jane Marcus. London: Macmillan, 1981. 253–66.

Fleishman, Avrom. *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Reading.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1975.

Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents.* Trans. Joan Riviere. Rev. and ed. James Strachey. 1930. London: Hogarth, 1963.

———. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego.* Trans. James Strachey. 1922. London: Hogarth, 1975.

Fry, Roger. *Henri Matisse.* 1930. London: Zwemmer, 1935.

Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism.* Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957.

Harrison, Jane. *Ancient Art and Ritual.* 1913. Westport: Greenwood, 1969.

Little, Judy. *Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark, and Feminism.* Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1983.

Marcus, Jane. "Some Sources for *Between the Acts.*" *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* 6 (1977): n. pag.

McLaurin, Allen. *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1973.

Ruotolo, Lucio P. *The Interrupted Moment: A View of Virginia Woolf's Novels.* Stanford: Stanford UP, 1986.

Sears, Sally. "Theater of War: Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts.*" *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant.* Ed. Jane Marcus. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1983. 212–35.

Silver, Brenda. "Virginia Woolf and the Concept of Community: The Elizabethan Playhouse." *Women's Studies* 4 (1977): 291–98.

Tillyard, E. M. W. *The Epic Strain in the English Novel.* 1958. London: Chatto, 1963.

Turner, Victor. "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology." *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play.* New York: Performing Arts Journal, 1982.

Woolf, Leonard. *Downhill All the Way: An Autobiography of the Years 1919–1939.* London: Hogarth, 1968.

Woolf, Virginia. *Between the Acts.* London: Hogarth, 1941.

———. "Craftsmanship." *Listener* 5 May 1937: 868–69. Rpt. in *The Death of the Moth.* London: Hogarth, 1942. 126–32.

———. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf.* Ed. Anne Olivier Bell. 5 vols. London: Hogarth, 1977–84.

———. "Impressions at Bayreuth." *Times* [London] 21 Aug. 1909: 9. Rpt. in *Books and Portraits.* Ed. Mary Lyon. London: Hogarth, 1977. 18–22.

———. "The Man at the Gate." *The Death of the Moth.* London: Hogarth, 1942. 69–73.

———. *Mrs. Dalloway.* 1925. London: Hogarth, 1963.

———. *Pointz Hall.* Ed. Mitchell A. Leaska. New York: University, 1983.

———. *A Room of One's Own.* 1929. London: Hogarth, 1959.

———. *Three Guineas.* London: Hogarth, 1938.

Zwerdling, Alex. *Virginia Woolf and the Real World.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1986.