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BETWEEN THE ACTS: A STEP BEYOND THE TRADITIONAL HISTORICAL NOVEL

Abstract

Virginia Woolf's posthumously published novel *Between the Acts* (1941) dramatizes history as the living past through the framed pageant which mainly offers a condensed history of English Literature. *Between the Acts* historicizes history by resisting the attractions of the traditional historical novel genre. It grasps history as an ideological process that produces and includes the forces of capitalism, fascism and patriarchy. Woolf attempts to achieve a unified self by reenacting not only the art of the novelist or dramatist but of the historian as well — both in shaping of a comprehensible record of events and also in the critique of explanatory myths and other popular conceptions of the past. This paper reexamines *Between the Acts* as a late experimental development within the tradition of English historical fiction at a time when writing history convincingly in the established forms was impossible due to the outbreak of a war which was threatening the world.

Key words

Virginia Woolf; Between the Acts; history; writer / historian; English literary past; modern historical novel

History may be servitude,
History may be freedom. See, now they vanish,
The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.

[...]

A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails
On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel,
History is now and England.

'Little Gidding', T. S. Eliot.

In Virginia Woolf's last novel *Between the Acts* (1941), history is a central matter extending from prehistoric times through the various areas of English civilization to the critical year 1939 – the present day. The acts of the play between which the narrative of the novel takes place are analogous to the two acts of the World Wars between which the novel is set. Despite its fragmentary appearance, the novel conforms to unities of time and place: it opens on a June evening at Pointz Hall, the home of Oliver family and ends in the following evening at the same location. The village players perform their annual pageant, written and directed by Miss La Trobe, on the Olivers' terrace on a summer's day. The audience includes the Oliver family, Bart-Giles-Isa Oliver and the aunt-Mrs. Lucy Swithin, and the unexpected visitors – William Dodge and Mrs. Manresa. The pageant concentrates on relatively simple, insignificant situations and persons rather than major events or 'makers' of history; yet, the narrative is marked by the recognition of the emerging plot of history that would soon change the life of everyone.

An early note in Woolf's *Diary*, written in April 1938, suggests that she was planning to write a novel which could accommodate different texts and ideas: "Poyntzet Hall: a centre: all lit. discussed in connection with real little incongruous living humour; & anything that comes into my head; but 'I' rejected: 'We' substituted: to whom at the end there shall be an invocation?" and she continues: "'We' [...] composed of many different things [...] we all life, all art, all waifs & strays – a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole – the present state of my mind? (1977: 135). *Poyntzet Hall*, later *Between the Acts*, was written against the backdrop of the rise of the fascist threat and the outbreak of the Second World War. The condensed history in *Between the Acts* is for a "remote village in the very heart of England" (1984: 22) where time seems to have stood still, and for which the guidebook written over a century before hardly requires revision. The village is characterized by a sense of historical continuity rather than change: the Swithins "were there before the Conquest" (1984: 39). If you were to look down on the countryside from the plane "you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house; and by the plough, when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic wars" (1984: 7). This setting suggests nostalgia for a rural and feudal kind of community for which the village suggests an essentially stable and traditional place that is apparently resistant to the forces of the present time.

Woolf's writing is structured by a serious consciousness and interest of the historical past and by a quest for a belief in history as pattern and continuity. Always seen as an abyss, the Great War was the defining moment in Woolf's writing: the line that separated the past from the present. Woolf had often shown her annoyance with the particular history as the lives of great men, of heroes and hero-warship. As Julia Briggs comments: "the new history that Woolf planned to write would decentre or even deconstruct the male histories of identity, authority authorship, histories of the biographies of great men, the histories coloured by Carlylean hero-warship that had led to the rise of the great fascist dictators" and "men whose personal fantasies of destruction and revenge now threatened the

future of civilization itself” (Briggs 2007: 85). Apparently, preoccupation with the historical moment is one of the characteristics of Woolf’s writing, although she tends to relegate politics and current events to what Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) calls the “admirable fabric of the masculine intelligence” (164). In *The Years* (1937), for instance, the war is treated as a great moment of liberation, an end to the impropriety of Victorian and post-Victorian England. In the following book, *Three Guineas* (1938), while mentioning the world’s political history, Woolf states that “it seems as if there were no progress in the human race, but only repetition” (120). Till then, she has already shown a concern with war in the dead hero of *Jacob’s Room* (1922) and the shell-shocked Septimus Smith of *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Except for *Orlando* (1928) which traces the history of literature and women writers, the central problems in Woolf’s historical perspective are that of violence and war – particularly in terms of their affect on the individual’s life and psychology. Interestingly, however, these issues are left untouched in *Between the Acts*. Woolf, in this novel, separates past and present in the narrative with sharp lines in the pageant by the help of the four acts symbolically. Moreover, she does not let historical past merge with the present moment through consciousness.

Juxtaposed by the sense of discontinuity created by the fragmented pageant, the continuity of literary and cultural history demonstrates itself in the pageant in its use of dozens of quotations from English literature, and in the house, Pointz Hall which has resisted time. The reason why Woolf used literary allusions in and between the acts of the pageant seems basically to create continuity symbolically in a fragmented outline of cultural history. As Christopher Ames puts it: “it is part of this preoccupation with reexamining literary tradition, both Woolf and Joyce created” what he calls “canon narratives”: “fictional texts that present chronological readings or surveys of literary history overlaid upon another narrative” (1991: 390). Another symbol of continuance of cultural heritage, the house, Pointz Hall has evolved in history, “over a hundred and twenty years the Olivers had been there” (Woolf 1984: 9), built before the Reformation, a chapel which later became a store. Mrs. Swithin’s realization is that so much of the beauty of the view from Pointz Hall derives from one’s awareness that “it’ll be there . . . when [they]’re not” (53). Miss La Trobe’s play is an attempt to recite literature, however the poetic allusions ironically become ‘bits and fragments’ floating in the characters’s minds.

Georg Lukàcs commented on Scott’s historical novels as: “certain crises in the personal destinies of number of human beings coincide and interweave within the determining context of an historical crisis” (1982: 41). This is almost true for Woolf’s characters in *Between the Acts*. Considerably less complex than those in Woolf’s previous novels, none of the characters hold the authoritative vision and voice. All are a component part of a larger unit: they are “orts, scraps and fragments” as Isa says (156). Although, Avrom Fleishman interprets the novel as an expression of Woolf’s “faith in the collective imagination of mankind to create a harmonious consciousness . . . out of its members’ disparate private experience”

(1977: 251), to read *Between the Acts* as an essentially celebratory work affirming unity and continuity will be misleading. Art has been treated as a force for unity and permanence in Woolf's previous fiction, yet this confidence in the power of art to unify and immortalize is almost lost in this novel. Although, the presence of the pageant in the novel has been interpreted as an intentional antithesis to the fragmented present day world. However, in contrast with creating a work of art that confirms the unifying power of the artist, the pageant seems to attempt to define the prevailing sense of fragmentation and isolation in the modern world and its historical basis. As the gramophone repeats its mournful "dispersed are we" (73, 144), the coherent vision of the pageant is dissolved; in the end, it "gurgled *Unity – Dispersity*. It gurgled *Un...dis...And ceased*" (146). It is also interesting that the audience is unchanged after this artistic interruption; the artist's effort to better the present life remains useless.

The vision of contemporary life as essentially discontinuous has already been prepared by each previous section of the pageant, and it finalizes itself in the pageant's concluding sketch, "The Present time. Ourselves" (128). The function of the last section is obviously to connect with the situation of the present-day characters: "But what could [Miss La Trobe] know about ourselves?" asks the crowd, "the Elizabethans yes; the Victorians, perhaps, but ourselves; sitting here on a June day 1939 – it [is] ridiculous" (130). Near the end of the pageant, the outcast artist Miss La Trobe attempts to "douche" her audience "with present-time reality" by leaving the stage empty for ten minutes. Yet she quickly admits that something was going wrong: "reality too strong" she "mutters" (130) echoing Eliot's recognition in 'Burnt Norton' that "Human kind/ Cannot bear very much reality/ Time past and time future/ What might have been and what has been/ Point to one end, which is always present" (1952: 79). Critics have noted the frequent allusion to Eliot's poems in *Between the Acts*, and especially the echoes of the lines from 'Little Gidding' are everywhere.

Although literature is given a prominent place in the novel, it also reflects an awareness of the difficulties and dangers both in looking back to the literary past and in creating a new work about history at such a crucial point in world history. This awareness forms an important part of the dynamic of the novel:

At last, Miss La Trobe could rise herself from her stooping position. It had been prolonged to avoid attention. The bells had stopped; the audience had gone; also the actors. She could straighten her back. She could open her arms. She could say to the world. You have taken my gift! Glory possessed her – for one moment. But what had she given? A cloud that melted into the other clouds on the horizon. It was in the giving the triumph was. And the triumph faded. Her gift meant nothing. If they had understood her meaning; if they had known their parts; if the pearls had been real and the funds illimitable – it would have been a better gift. Now it had gone to join the others. 'A failure' she groaned. (151)

In the final scene, we see La Trobe, as she sits alone in the pub after the pageant, exhausted, but already planning her next production which will include two figures, on whom “the curtain would rise”, “what would the first words be?” (152): “Words of one syllable sank down into the mud. . . . The mud became fertile. Words rose above the intolerably laden dumb oxen plodding through the mud. Words without meaning – wonderful words” (153). This also shows La Trobe’s crisis as an artist. She was introduced as an “outcast” who has remained a mystery: “Rumour said that she had kept a tea shop at Winchester; that had failed. She had been an actress. That had failed. She had bought a four-roomed cottage and shared it with an actress. They had quarreled. Very little was actually known about her” (46).

As Woolf discusses, the poet in the 1930s “was forced to be a politician” (1966: 176). Besides, at the end of 1936, the year in which the Spanish Civil War broke out, she wrote an article titled ‘Why Art Today Follows Politics’ for the newspaper *The Daily Worker* on why the artist had to adopt a political position, concluding that the status of the artist and of art itself was now under threat. Like the 1930s poets, La Trobe has taken the role of the politician and she addresses the audience through a loudspeaker, an instrument which Woolf associated with Fascist dictators. The use of the gramophones to unite the audience recalls *Three Guineas*, where gramophones are associated with the establishment and its war machine. Moreover, the use of the “megaphonic, anonymous, loud-speaking” voice (143) to make an appeal for social cohesion in the final scene reminds dictatorship. As Jane de Gay writes, “all these examples, then, hint that it is dangerous for artists to seek to create social cohesion at a time when social order and conformity were being championed by totalitarian states on both the right and left” (2007: 199). In the novel, Giles’s behaviour is very close to the fascist threat that Woolf fears in the first days of Italian Fascism for which she writes in *A Room of One’s Own* as: “I began to envisage an age to come of pure, of self-assertive virility, such as [...] the rulers of Italy have already brought into being” (1967: 154). Alison Booth maintains that the novel confronts not only “the threat of foreign domination, but also the incompatible desires to defend the homeland” (1992: 240). Stressing the fact that the enemy is not simply or exclusively the German, she turns her attention to the fascist tendency in Britain: “We must help the young Englishmen to root out from themselves the love of medals and decorations. We must create more honorable activities for those who try to conquer in themselves their fighting instinct, their subconscious Hitlerism. We must compensate the man for the loss of his gun” (Woolf 1961: 211).

Both Woolf and La Trobe are trying to transcend history to achieve a perspective in which the incidents of history are ultimately absorbed into a natural periodization within a pattern of a play. When the actors gather on stage at the play’s conclusion, “each declaiming some phrase or fragment from their part” (135), the resulting chaos does not show a reflection of a fragmented modernity but it is a parody for the lost coherence of history and the loss of an image of historical progression. Werner J. Deiman writes that “what is finally so moving about

Between the Acts is its desperate vision and need to get beyond the crisis of the immediate present, to believe that this present moment is not the end, is not to be understood by itself but is rather another period of transition from the past and leading to something else” (1974: 58). Each of the pageant’s first three acts consists of a mixed combination of elements: prologue, epilogue, song, dance and masque, which frame respective parodies of an Elizabethan romance, a Restoration comedy, and a Victorian melodrama. The fourth act “The Present time. Ourselves” verges on tragedy. The pageants last act is a bitter finale of that history’s logic: as the villagers hold up their mirrors, La Trobe abandons the devices of comedy and asks her audience to “calmly consider ourselves” “liars most of us” (135). She aims to provoke her audience into an awakening of consciousness that can bring about moral and political change:

The play was over, the strangers gone, and they were alone – the family. Still the play hung in the sky of the mind-moving, diminishing, but still there [...] Mrs Swithin [...] said [...] ‘What did it mean? And added ‘The peasants; the kings; the fools and (she swallowed) ourselves?’ They all looked at the play; Isa, Giles and Mr Oliver. Each of course saw something different. (154)

The last sentence of the novel, “Then the curtain rose. They spoke” (159), with the curtain rising on a world whose history has not been written implies the author’s intension to extend the pageant’s pattern into the future, to imagine its unusually missing fifth act, the uncompleted drama of the postwar England. The final scene, the present time, underlines the process of reflexivity by showing the villagers mirror images of themselves. It tends to link between the play and the real life: the pageant to life at Pointz Hall, and vice versa. Characters repeat words from the play and the play echoes characters words, and literary echoes are present in both.

The pageant is both a representative of history and a history of representation in which there exists “a huge complex of paradoxically reflected words and voices” (Bakhtin 1981: 60) that seek to voice a variety of historical incidents both past and present. It also shows the varied literary forms – the forms as Hayden White suggests: comedy, tragedy, romance and satire – through which history is attempted to be given shape and pattern. The novel includes all of these genres, as David Mc Whirter states, “not by belonging to any one of them, but by participating, in Derrida’s sense, in all of them” (1993: 803). In her *Collected Essays*, Woolf stated that a writer liberated from the dominant conventions might well produce a text “in which the clear-cut features of the tragic, the comic, the passionate, and the lyrical would be dissolved beyond the possibility of separate recognition” (1966: 33). About the mixing of genres Mc Whirter proposed that “only by dialogizing fact and fiction, realism and formalism, the tragic emotion of involvement and the comic emotion of detachment, could [Woolf] achieve a vision of history’s determinations and an awareness of imagination’s possibilities” (1993: 807). For instance, the first three acts consist of a mixed combination

of elements –prologue, epilogue, song, dance, and masque- which frame respective parodies of an Elizabethan romance, a Restoration comedy, and a Victorian melodrama. Moreover, amateur actors who forget their lines, equipment failures and an open-air stage which, like Shakespeare’s Globe, disrupts the illusion of the fourth wall leave the audience in doubt about the ontological status of what they are watching: “was it, or was it not a play” (76).

Woolf frequently pronounced her appreciation to Sir Walter Scott’s work, yet she evaluates his work not as a model to be imitated and emulated in the here and now. She pronounced herself clearly on which features of Scott’s fiction made the Waverly model passé. She stated that: “Scott’s characters [...] suffer from a serious disability, it is only when they speak that they are alive, they never think, as for prying into their minds himself, or drawing inferences from their behaviour, Scott never attempted it” (1966: 141). Thus, Woolf blamed Scott for his unawareness of the complexity of human consciousness and psychology which she always remained preoccupied along with the perception of reality. Apparently, as Elizabeth Wesseling in *Writing History as Prophet* proposes for the modernists writers, objective representation of empirical reality gives way to a search for “the ways in which the individual consciousness plays an active and projecting, rather than a passive and reflecting role in forming images about itself and the outer world” (1991: 69). According to Hella Haasse, “when the art of the novel itself underwent a metamorphosis”, when the traditional way of telling a story becomes “inadequate for giving shape to a radically changed perception and experience of reality,” the new literary prose of the 1920s, she maintains, was “preoccupied with the various nuances of the individual consciousness, and with explorations in a present which could offer only relative certainties and was sometimes even thought to be devoid of any sort of certainty whatsoever” (qtd. in Wesseling 1991:10–1). The Waverly model, which was based on the foundation that historical knowledge is quite unproblematic, was not indeed suitable for the modernist philosophical doubt. As Wesseling claims, the traditional historical novel concentrated on “the depiction of external circumstances of life” and used “characters as vehicle for conveying historical information,” yet the modernists felt the need to make a twist and they “subjectivized history” (1991: 75). Besides, different from the nineteenth century example, historical fiction in modernism was presented by the introduction of a ‘historian-like’ character that consciously historicizes and connects the past with the present in a ‘self-reflexive’ narrative. The historian-like character, Miss La Trobe’s pageant, has important implications for Woolf’s representation of history. Although the play offers chronological scenes from English history and literature, the narrative presented is intentionally fragmentary and episodic. In addition, it resists national metanarratives of great victories or leaders and also literary ones based on great writers. Woolf’s fragmentation of the literary past, therefore, resists the kind of authoritative structure needed to produce an identifiable tradition. As Jean de Gay writes: “in the face of the rise of Fascism, where history, tradition and culture itself were being dragged into the service of oppression within the state and imperialism beyond it, the

undermining of conventional understanding of tradition was both liberating and necessary” (2007: 210).

Likewise, the community in the village is truly oppressed by its past, dissatisfied with its present and uncertain of a future shadowed by the impending horror of the Second World War in a time when both personal and communal relations fail with increasing logic of exclusion, violence, and victimization, and by the ideology of fascism. The playwright/historian’s satire in the last act is aimed at provoking the audience into reaching a self-consciousness level: as the villagers hold up the mirrors, La Trobe asks “calmly consider ourselves” (135). It may result in moral and political change, yet, ironically, the society remains unchanged. It only reaches to an understanding that an historicized reading of the pageant results in a vision of history as both limited and limiting. The first sign of fragility in the play comes in the Renaissance playlet, although it ends happily with the union of the young couple, the world it evokes is full of plotting and intrigue. The tension increases in the Restoration playlet in which the repeated motto “where there’s a will there is a way” refers to the mercenary motives of the characters in pursuit of the fortune. Moreover, the pursuit of power and wealth dominates Woolf’s vision of Victorian England in the next act of pageant. Finally, the pageant’s concluding sketch, “The Present time. Ourselves” repeats “scraps, orts and fragments,” which emphasize that contemporary life is essentially discontinuous. *Between the Acts* is no doubt a work of a strongly historical imagination, because it embodies a new understanding of history by defying the demands of the traditional historical novel genre. Apparently, Woolf’s concern is not merely with the past but with the nature of one’s knowledge of the past and the determining power of it to shape the present. Her own attitude towards history in *Between the Acts* is displayed not through the perception of a participant in the historical action, but by placing a self-conscious parodic narrative plane which is situated between the represented past and the existing present. Such a complicated rendering of the retrospective reconstruction of the past definitely belongs to a further stage in the historical novel tradition.

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