

Writing for a “New Plot” in Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*

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I. Introduction

In her diary entry of April 26th, 1938, Virginia Woolf pens a rough outline of her next novel under a tentative title, *Poyntzet Hall*; “a centre: all literature discussed in connection with real little incongruous living humour: and anything that comes into my head; but “I” rejected: “We” substituted: to whom at the end there shall be an invocation?” (WD 279). “I” or “We,” “dispersity” or “unity” in terms used in the text, which will or should be invoked? This question gains particular poignancy in Woolf’s last novel *Between the Acts*, which was written with the growing sense of crisis she felt under the threatening shadow of the impending war.

The title of the novel, set on a June day in 1939, above all, refers to a moment of interlude “between the two wars,” which was about to end with a German invasion of England. Confronted with the doomed repetition of another devastating war—“A single step—in Chechoslovakia—like the Austrian Archduke in 1914—

and again it's 1914" (WD 290), Woolf felt that it meant "the complete ruin not only of civilization in Europe, but of our last lap" (289). With Hitler's fascism, on one hand, and England's patriotic mood, on the other hand, there seemed no way out of the coming war. The prevalent sense of crisis that "our last lap" would be ruined by war silenced any different voice against the spirit of unity overwhelming the country. In this totalitarian mood, the "transitional" moment leads Woolf to reflect on the continuity and discontinuity of history and on unity and dispersity.

While *Between the Acts* is described as more "conscious of and responsive to contemporary events" (Zwerdling 302) than any other of Woolf's novels, the story focuses on Pointz Hall, "a center," and the village pageant. Alex Zwerdling reads the novel as "a version of pastoral" (310), in which Woolf longs for the idealized world of "a remote village in the very heart of England" (22). On the other side of this emphasis on Woolf's idealism is a critical attempt to find signs of her despair over the tragic turn of civilization or of her desire for ending her life. According to Roger Poole, the novel displays "a state of mind in which suicide, far from being 'insane,' becomes a natural, and even understandable, desire" (qtd. in Detloff 404).

Woolf seems to have been preoccupied with endings as portrayed in her diary on 22 June, 1940, when she was trying to finish the novel:

I feel, if this is my last lap, oughtn't I to read Shakespeare? But cant. I feel oughtn't I to finish off P.H.: oughtn't I to finish something by way of an end? The end gives its vividness, even its gaiety & recklessness to the random daily life. This, I thought yesterday, may be my last walk. . . And now dinner to cook. A role. (298)

While thinking of the potential end of her life, Woolf wonders what she should do and, instead of falling into despair, muses on the revivifying effect the sense of ending has on the mundane life. Her thoughts then skip back to a daily role she has to play despite the threat of impending death. Woolf believed in the importance of art and writing which can contribute to the survival of civilization by

transforming people's perceptions of reality: "I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else" rather than "learning to do something that will be useful if war comes" ("Sketch" 73).

Between the Acts, which could be Woolf's "last lap," does not simply present her longing for an idyllic past. I suggest that it is rather Woolf's attempt to resist the seeming inevitability of war and write for a new plot through her reflections on people's individual and collective identities (re)constructed through their performance of daily routines and roles as well as on representations of history examined through the pageant, an annual communal ritual.

II. "The Ghost of Convention" and Imposed Identities

In the novel, the village itself is not intact from the impact of modernization, even though the place seemingly has not changed much with no new house built as the guide book says that "1830 was true in 1939" (52) there. The villagers comprise not only representative families who have been living there for centuries, but new-comers like the Manresas and absentees in control of modern industry: "The building of a car factory and of an aerodrome in the neighbourhood had attracted a number of unattached floating residents" (74-5). Besides, the doomed future overshadows the harmonized pastoral landscape, when the current events are evoked by newspaper or airplanes.

Kristina Busse suggests that these reminders of events in the external world, along with the text's historical situatedness, call for historicized readings. But unlike a traditional historical novel, Busse argues, the novel problematizes conceptions of history with its emphasis on subjectivity and linguistic concerns (90). Sabine Hotho-Jackson argues that Woolf shows a self-reflexive consciousness of history, a "modern" view of history, in conjunction with "a traditional concept of history as story and particularly as English story" (296). As Busse points out, however, a focus on history as narrative may not be simply described as "traditional," as it has

been explored in the postmodern turn to narrative (90). Madelyn Detloff argues that Woolf demonstrates connections “between historiography, nationalism, normative gender and sexuality, and the ideology of war” while presenting the pageant’s ironic performance of British history as disrupting nationalist historical narrative (405).

A strategy of reading signs of change with a sense of ending points to a desire to grasp the meaning of the present through narrative. Frank Kermode outlines the temporal signification of narrative in fiction as the act of projecting ourselves “past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle” (8). Projecting an end or a beginning with a sense of crisis is an attempt to “make sense of the past as of a book or a psalm we have read or recited, and of the present as a book the seals of which we shall see opened” (96). If the novel is seen as Woolf’s attempt to grasp the meaning of the present with a sense of ending, it also calls into question the vision of linear teleological history based on a certain version of narrative that interconnects historical events and periods in a seamless sequence. Instead, it explores the significance of “orts, scraps and fragments” (188), things that disrupt the “structure whole,” or of the outsiders or “boundary figures” (Detloff 422), those marginalized in the nationalist historical discourse.

In the aforementioned diary entry, Woolf adds, “‘We’ . . . composed of many different things . . . we all life, all art, all waifs and strays—a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole” (279). In addition to those from different classes of the community, the pageant gathers together outsiders like William Dodge, “a half-man” (73) or homosexual, and Miss La Trobe, a lesbian outcast, who writes and directs the play, and Albert, the village idiot, who one villager says is not one that “we” like to recognize even if a part of “ourselves.” In this light, the pageant is a sort of festival inclusive of heterogeneous elements, “carnavalesque” (McWhirter 798) in Bakhtinian sense.

The unresolved tension between “I,” an individual consciousness of difference, and “We,” a communal sense of one-ness, however, looms over and interrupts the festive mood of pageant in the novel. It is the characters of the younger generation

that manifest the isolated consciousness of "I," typical of modernist fiction. Isa, whose age is the same with that of the century, continuously murmurs to herself some phrases of poems, detached from other people's conversation; Giles stays aloof from the festival, possessed by his rage about his own impotence as a passive beholder of the war to come: "manacled to a rock he was, and forced passively to behold indescribable horror" (60). Having "no command of metaphor," he envisions Europe under the imminent threat of war as a hedgehog "bristling with guns, poised with planes" (53). With his concern about the threatening war to come, though, he embodies what Woolf defines as fascism at home, with his hostility to William, a homosexual;

[Dodge's] expression, considering the daggers, coming to this conclusion, gave Giles another peg on which to hang his rage as one hangs a coat on a peg, conveniently. A toady; a lickspittle; not a downright plain man of his senses; picking and choosing; dillying and dallying; not a man to have straightforward love for a woman—his head was close to Isa's head—but simply a—At this word, which he could not speak in public, he pursed his lips; (60)

Characterized by patriarchal manhood, "hirsute, handsome, virile" (106), Giles is intolerant of the outcast of society transgressing the given category of sex. Hence, his estranged relation to his wife, Isa, another potential outsider who loathes her conventional roles: "the domestic, the possessive; the maternal" (19).

Woolf indicates that the "ghost of convention" (46), defining what the characters are and imposing fixed identities, "the cliché conveniently provided by fiction" (14), on them, thwarts their desires and possibilities. Giles is suggested to be another victim of patriarchal values; with no choice given, he works as a stockbroker in the city, instead of becoming a farmer as he desired. Isa is no more than Sir Richard's daughter, niece of the two old ladies at Wimbledon and mother of her children. She dare not buy the type of clothes she wants and dislikes the domestic and maternal figure of her body reflected on the mirror;

Thick of waist, large of limb, and, save for her hair, fashionable in the tight modern way, she never looked like Sappho, or one of the beautiful young men whose photographs adorned the weekly papers. She looked what she was: Sir Richard's daughter; and niece of the two old ladies at Wimbledon who were so proud, being O'Neils, of their descent from the Kings of Ireland. (16)

The imposed identity disfigures her body, suppressing her desire to look like Sappho or one of the beautiful young men in weekly papers. This hidden lesbian drive makes Isa feel for William, "a half-man," forming a certain companionship between them as "conspirators, seekers after hidden faces" (114).

Throughout the novel, Woolf implies that there are manifest and latent forms of violence existing in patriarchy. In the beginning scene, Mr. Oliver, a patriarchal figure, dreaming of himself as "a young man helmeted" (17), and retired member of the Indian Civil Service, working for the imperialist cause, surprises his grandson, George, with the paper "cocked into a snout"—an evident phallic symbol—, which in turn contains the story of a girl raped by soldiers at Whitehall. He taunts his widowed sister, Mrs. Swithin, whose plan to set up her own house is deferred every year. The interlude between the two wars brings to the fore this violence in everyday life, easily ignored under the mask of daily routines and old conventions, as interconnected with the bigger forms of violence.

Woolf presents the pitfalls of the interval period through the forceful image of the snake choked with a toad. This image of "birth the wrong way round—a monstrous inversion" (99) reminds us of the word used to express Isa: "Abortive" (15). With a layer of meaning for each character, the image of the snake unable to swallow and the toad unable to die relates to the desire suppressed but not totally eliminated by the outer shell of imposed identities. The creative possibilities of desire become "abortive," and the body with "the ribs contract; blood oozed" (99) suffers from this state of deadlock. The image described as "a monstrous inversion" also brings to the reader's mind Dodge who is set to represent "perversion" in the stone-kicking game Giles plays before stamping on the mass. Before taking "action," Giles performs a simulation of kicking out of himself what could threaten

his manhood built on the heteronormative patriarchal system: "The first kick was Manresa (lust). The second, Dodge (perversion). The third, himself (coward)" (99).

In view of the situation of the century, the image refers to another deadlock of the Western civilization, which is choked by the ravages resulting from the violence of war entangled with violence within the patriarchal system. Giles' reaction, crushing the snake to make his white shoes bloodstained, recalls the destructive means of the First World War and its repetition in the impending war. The inevitable coming to arms against the Nazi invasion would drive a million people to death, even though, as "action," it might relieve the suffocating situation: a vicious circle of violence begetting violence.

III. Re-configuring the Present Time for a New Plot

Putting on stage the past eras of the English history, the play in the pageant historicizes the present time and exposes the fictional nature of the conventions. As "a feminist renegotiation of the past" (Wiley 9), the play renders each era in terms of its public image reflected on personal relations. Starting from the little girl image of England and the warrior figure of Roderick, "Armed and valiant / Bold and blatant / Firm elatant" (79), in a popular tune, the patriarchal values run throughout "a medley" (90) of past times; even in the hodge-podge scene of Merry England, where the Queen and the idiot, marriage and funeral are mixed in a carnivalesque spirit, we see a continuation of patriarchal values in the figuration of Queen Elizabeth, "Mistress of pinnacles, spires and palaces" (84), who conducts the imperialist expansion.

The basic terms of conquest and domination in patriarchy become clearer when Miss La Trobe puts on stage the age of Reason, whose represented figure describes the savage sweating in distant mines, and the following scene from *Where there's a Will there's a Way*, where the Sway of Reason accompanies lust for money and conspiracy corrupting the domestic relationship. The critique of social and moral

forces in the past culminates in the symbolical figure of a Victorian constable, acted by Budge the publican, who, waving his truncheon, directs “the traffic of ‘Er Majesty’s Empire” (161) under the laws of God and Man: “It’s a Christian country, our Empire; under the white Queen Victoria. Over thought and religion; drink; dress; manners; marriage too, I wield my truncheon” (162). The following scene shows that the ideology of “the white man’s burden” (163) has its counterpart in the evangelical fervor to “convert the heathen” (166) and in the ideology of “Sweet Ome” with the daughters submissive to the authority of their parents.

When the pageant finally comes to “the Present Time,” the novel catches the unhappy feeling of the audience, “suspended, without being, in limbo” (178). The audience, “neither Victorians nor themselves” (178), is exposed to confront their reality as they are “here and now” (186). At this moment when the audience turned into the actors, the invisible wall between the stage and the audience breaks down to direct the satirical criticism of history in the play toward “ourselves.” The painful recognition of the state of “a monstrous inversion” in the present time points to the need for “a new plot” (215), which should be shaped to “a different song and a different conclusion.” When the following scene projects the image of rebuilding civilization, however, it implies the possible repetition of the same line of history: “Civilization (the wall) in ruins; rebuilt (witness man with hod) by human effort; witness also woman handing bricks” (181). In this scene described by Mr. Page the reporter, man lays bricks to build a wall with woman handing bricks for the civilization and thus being complicit in the possibility of repeating the old plot to the old conclusion.

The tension between destruction and construction remains unresolved at the ending, even though a cacophony of parts and splinters turns to a traditional tune of harmony. The highlight of Miss La Trobe’s little game to expose the audience is the moment they are reflected in parts on the collected pieces of mirrors: “Ourselves? But that’s cruel. To snap us as we are, before we’ve had time to assume. . . . And only, too, in parts. . . . That’s what’s so distorting and upsetting and utterly unfair” (184). As the megaphonic voice affirms, “All you can see of

yourselves is scraps, orts, and fragments" (188), the mirrors reflect a negative image of the fragmented modern age; "The young, who can't make, but only break; shiver into splinters the old vision; smash to atoms what was whole" (183). But this exposure of ourselves as "scraps, orts, and fragment" may turn positive by letting us discover and realize new potentialities as it reveals the fictional nature of the fixed identities we assume in our historical time.

Mrs. Manresa, the only person who remains unashamed before mirror bearers, preserves her identity, for she has already been acting with the mask of "a wild child of nature" (41), which is used just to attract the male characters within the boundary of patriarchal values. Then, Woolf's concern in denying the essential nature of identity is not merely with asserting that we are just acting certain parts. The reaction of Mrs. Swithin is interesting in comparison with Mrs. Manresa's, when she says to Miss La Trobe, "What a small part I've had to play! But you've made me feel I could have played . . . Cleopatra!" (153). The play stirred in Mrs. Swithin her "unacted part" (153)—her potentialities and possibilities of what she might or could have been.¹ In other words, she recognizes her potential part as Cleopatra, a woman figure of power, which has been suppressed in her acted part as a dependent woman.

Through Mrs. Swithin, who is reading "An Outline of History" (8), the novel offers glimpses of historical time and space beyond the human-centered perspective.

Forced to listen, she had stretched for her favourite reading—an Outline of History—and had spent the hours between three and five thinking of rhododendron forests in Piccadilly; when the entire continent, not then, she understood, divided by a channel, was all one; populated, she understood, by elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging, slowly writhing, and, she supposed, barking monsters; the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon; from whom presumable, she thought, jerking the window open, we descend.
(8-9)

1) For a reading of the novel in terms of the queer performance of self and history, see Delsandro.

Critics have read Mrs. Swithin's vision of this "pre-history" as an indication of Woolf's fear of the European society's regression to a savage state or her "longing for a world that is not defined by patriarchy." Detloff suggests that Mrs. Swithin's imaginative projection provides "a commentary on the material effects of war" (415). I suggest it is significant that this fantasy of a non-human world comes from a character who is portrayed as open to otherness. William, seeing himself as "a flickering, mind-divided little snake in the grass" (73) as projected by people like Giles, feels healed by Mrs. Swithin, who says, "But we have other lives, I think, I hope...We live in others, Mr. . . . We live in things" (70).

If Mrs. Swithin's fantasy can be called "feminine," it is still something yet to be articulated. Woolf presents two pictures hanging on the wall, one a portrait of a male ancestor with "the rein in his hand," who was "a talk producer," and the other a picture of a lady, not an ancestor but an imaginary creation for a male gaze, "a picture, bought by Oliver because he liked the picture" (36). The lady's eye described as rising "into silence," the empty room is figured as a shell;

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. (36-37)

If Woolf regards language as what is most important to humans in their fight against barbarism (Whittier-Ferguson 243), silence and emptiness in the passage are not simply negative signs of repression or regression. Emptiness and silence here, tense with possibilities to be realized, are rather similar to what Certeau calls "the unspoken element implied by the closure of the discourse" in redefining history as "a work on the margins" (40) from the perspective of a discourse on the other. What remains unspoken, silenced, or excluded, shown forth through "rifts and crannies" on the edges of discourse, invite our imaginary reconstructions of the past real.

If Miss La Trobe's glory lies in making a re-created world out of "wandering bodies and floating voices" (153), the recreation is not on the side of unity and

harmony with any difference erased. The re-created world will be rather something like the tree turned into a rhapsody which she suddenly grasps after the pageant:

The whole tree hummed with the whizz they made, as if each bird plucked a wire. A whizz, a buzz rose from the bird-buzzing, bird-vibrant, bird-blackened tree. The tree became a rhapsody, a quivering cacophony, a whizz and vibrant rapture, branches, leaves, birds syllabing discordantly life, life, life, without measure, without stop devouring the tree. (209)

The novel itself, as a re-created world, continuously vibrates between unity and dispersity without any conclusive answer. When Mrs. Swithin affirms that all are one in her one-making imagination, William points out the exclusion of history in that way of thinking. The appearance of aeroplanes interrupts the summary of the Reverend Streatfield, the "representative spokesman" of the village, that "we act different parts; but are the same" (192). Furthermore, the following various responses of villagers in a discordant rhapsody of voices disrupt the seeming symmetry between sameness and difference in their spokesman's summary; someone saying, "And if one spirit animates the whole, what about the aeroplanes?" (197) and another, "what we need is a centre" (198). While these different responses reverberate in her ear, the reader, a part of "ourselves," is left with questioning without a final answer. As one voice remarks, to endure this questioning with no hasty conclusions, perhaps, will lead us to find a breakthrough and create a different world; "if we don't jump to conclusions, if you think, and I think, perhaps one day, thinking differently, we shall think the same?" (200).

IV. Coda

As I mentioned in the beginning, the title of the novel points to the interval between the two wars, in which its fictional space is set. The story of Pointz Hall and the pageant is read against the coming war looming threateningly. In her

inspection of fascism at home and meditations on the relationship between unity and dispersity, however, Woolf does not conceive the interval time and space just as closed between the gloomy memory of the past war and the doomed prospect of a future war.

At a glance, the ending scene seems to indicate that the dark vision of the present and future, “the heart of darkness” (219), overwhelms Giles and Isa, left alone and confronted with their conflicting relationship between love and hate. Woolf conflates this moment with images of prehistoric age; the figures of Giles and Isa become huge against the darkness of the night seen in prehistoric caves. Does this mean that their fight would be destructive with its implication for the German invasion? Before the confrontation, Isa thinks that it is time “someone invented a new plot” (215), and Giles crumples the newspaper, whose daily information of events reduces a present time to fleeting moments in empty and homogeneous time. Associated with the words Mrs. Swithin reads from the *Outline of History*, “Prehistoric man . . . roused himself from his semi-crouching position and raised great stones” (218), the fight Giles and Isa will begin is imbued with a possibility of building a new civilization: light born out of the heart of darkness.

This conflation continues Woolf’s feminist vision of the personal as political. But it is not clear whether their fight would create a different song or their embrace after the fight beget the repetition of the same history. As, in *Three Guineas*, she urges women to make creative efforts toward “a different conclusion” from that of the existing civilization, in this open ending, Woolf is attempting to configure a present time with potentials and possibilities for “a new plot.” The interval time between the two wars then becomes “a radically indeterminate time” (Joplin 92), or what Benjamin calls the “time of the now” (263). And the open ending invites the reader to fill up the emptiness and silence left when Giles and Isa “spoke” as the curtain rises; the words spoken but untold to the reader are “words without meaning—wonderful words” (212).

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Abstract

Writing for a “New Plot” in Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*

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Writing *Between the Acts* under the threat of an impending war, Virginia Woolf attempts to reconfigure the present time for a new plot against the seeming inevitability of war through her reflections on people’s individual and collective identities (re)constructed through their performance of daily routines and roles. The novel examines how violence within the patriarchal system entangled with the violence of war is choking the interval time between the two wars in a deadlock. Looking into representations of British history through the pageant’s ironic performance, the novel questions the vision of historical unity as provided in the nationalist historical discourse. The play in the pageant historicizes the present time and exposes the fictional nature of the conventions. Attentive to the repressed desires and silenced possibilities of main characters and to the outsiders, those marginalized in the nationalist historical discourse, Woolf explores the possibilities for “a new plot” with a “different song and different conclusion.” In the ending, those words Giles and Isa spoke but untold to the reader invite the reader to fill the silence.

■ Key words : Virginia Woolf, unity, dispersity, performance, silence, otherness, war

(버지니아 울프, 단일성, 분산, 퍼포먼스, 침묵, 타자성, 전쟁)

논문접수: 2019년 5월 31일

논문심사: 2019년 6월 18일

게재확정: 2019년 6월 25일