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Embracing "Scraps, orts and fragments": Virginia Woolf's Narratives of History in *The Years* and *Between the Acts*

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I

In her article, "Where Are the Missing Contents? (Post)Modernism, Gender and the Canon," Ellen G. Friedman remarks the significant gendered difference between male and female texts of modernity in their perceptions of history. According to Friedman, the sense of historical mourning that has been considered predominant in modern literary narratives permeates only male modernism: in their rage for order, male texts of modernity express "the yearning for fathers, for past authority and sure knowledge" (240), along with the conviction that the past has redemptive powers over the present which is perceived as a chaotic void. Friedman argues that this rejection of the present in the search for the missing fathers is only one feature of modern narratives because women's narratives of modernity show "little nostalgia for the old paternal order" (242) and perceive the present as a site of

historical celebration, a place of hopeful change, not a tragic condition to escape. Instead of the obsessive backward look, Friedman concludes, women writers "aim their gaze unabashedly and audaciously forward" (251).

Friedman rightly challenges a single paradigm of modernism, but her reading of gender-inflected modernisms, while offering a corrective to the canon-fixed literary history, may not account for Virginia Woolf's much more complex gaze at the past and the present in *The Years* (1937) and *Between the Acts* (1941). These two novels, both written at a time of multiple political crises in Europe-the rise of European Fascism and the impending outbreak of World War II-show neither a joyful response to historical changes, nor reveal nostalgia for the old order of things.[1] These two novels are not about either historical mourning or historical celebration[2]; rather, the two novels question how the novelistic discourse narrativizes history. In every respect, from the deliberate rupturing of the traditional narrative modes to the enacting of the performative nature of history, *The Years* and

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1) Woolf's perception of historical changes in her later works has been at critical issue. Considering the impact on Woolf of dramatic social changes in the 1930s, James Naremore reads *The Years* as an aesthetic longing for the peaceful unity of community, and Alex Zwerdling reads *Between the Acts* as an artistic affirmation of England's pastoral past. Instead of emphasizing the sense of historical decay and human alienation in these novels, Susan Squier argues that *The Years* traces the social changes in the lives of modern men and women and presents a vision of men and women in the future, and Melba Cuddy-Keane reads *Between the Acts* as a comedy celebrating the emergence of a new pluralistic society in place of the old constricted one. These readings provide all valuable views for understanding both Woolf's uneasy perception of historical changes and her political vision in her later novels, but my argument here is that the two novels encompass both hope and despair, embodying Woolf's phenomenological conception of history.

2) I have borrowed these terms, "historical mourning" and "historical celebration," from Leo Bersani. He identifies a compulsion to define the historical experience of modernity by reflecting on discontinuities between the past and the present in all discourses on modernity. He states, "The type of historical reflection about the times we live in, expressed by efforts to define discontinuities between the present and the past, is perhaps always motivated by a need for historical celebration or historical mourning. Modernism was rich in this type of reflection" (47).

Between the Acts problematize the nature of fiction and history rather than propose coherent fictional statements on history. As such, the two novels bring up specific issues of historiographic narrative: the question of the referentiality of language and representation, the textualized nature of the past, and the indeterminacy of historical experiences.

In reading *The Years* and *Between the Acts* as problematizing the process of writing about history, I take as my point of reference Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history, specifically in "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In his fragmentary prose on the conception of history, Benjamin criticizes the concept of historical progress implicit in the nature of historiography. He questions the concept of the "continuum of history" which is constructed "to fill the homogeneous empty time" (262). Arguing against the conception of a history of causality and temporal homogeneity, Benjamin conceives of history as phenomenological. He asserts that the task of a true historian is to arrange the constellation of historical phenomena, not to establish causal connections between them. He states, "A historian [...] stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one" (263). The figure of the constellation stresses the irreducible dynamics of the relationships between the past and the present-the indeterminacy and contingency of those relationships-as opposed to the teleological ordering within the system of "universal history" (262). In contrasting the configuration of constellations with the idea of historical progress, Benjamin's conception of history suggests that there is no single location of historical meaning, because history is a dialectical field in the sense that the past becomes historical "posthumously"(263) and that the past is "experienced in remembrance" (294) and thus constantly reconstitutes the present. Benjamin's famous claim to "brush history against the grain" (257) embodies his refusal of one-dimensional, progressive history and his resistance to a totalitarian foreclosure of history.

Benjamin's acid critique of the concept of homogeneous historical progress and his phenomenological comprehension of historical experience illuminate the

complex and intricate responses that Woolf's novels propose to historical experience. Just as Benjamin rejects the totalitarian conception of historical progress, Woolf refuses to present her historical narratives as self-contained forms that impose meaning and formal coherence on the chaos of historical events. In "The Narrow Bridge of Art" (1927), Woolf anticipates the novel of the future to take "the mould of that queer conglomeration of incongruous things-the modern mind" (226). What Woolf envisions in the novel of the future is "the power of accepting anything simply for what it is" (223) while holding "all sort of different things" (220). Instead of reshaping only selected events into a linear and seamless, unified and conclusive narrative, *The Years* and *Between the Acts* accumulate the discord and the incongruity of events and human perspectives on them without privileging any of them and thereby embody Woolf's concept of the novelistic discourse proposed in her essay. As a "system that did not shut out" (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf* 4: 127), the two novels preserve the inconclusiveness of human experience and the heterogeneity of history. Thus, *The Years* and *Between the Acts* show the overwhelming tendency to contain and accumulate the "scraps, orts, and fragments" (*Between the Acts* 188)[3] which are floating over the surface of reality without ordering them into the unified whole.

II

The Years might easily be read as tracing in the form of a family chronicle a linear progress of history from 1880 to the unspecified present day (presumably 1934),[4] but Woolf resists the conventional narrative desire to order and shape the Pargiters' historical experiences by using subversively narrative conventions such as structure, plot and characters. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory,*

3) *Between the Acts* is hereafter referred to as BA.

4) Woolf recorded that she had finished the first draft of *The Years* in her diary dated in September 30, 1934 (*The_Diary of Virginia Woolf* 4: 245).

Fiction, Linda Hutcheon defines both historiography and fiction as the same narrative act of "refiguration, of reshaping of our experience of time through plot configurations" (100). What Woolf does in the writing of *The Years* is to resist such narrative acts of reshaping historical experience-the narrative desire "to select, construct, and render self-sufficient and closed a narrative world that would be representational but still separate from changing experience and historical process" (Hutcheon 109). Woolf's diary entries during the period she was composing *The Years* contain numerous references to her search for a way to keep "[c]ontact with the surface" (4: 207) while holding "the thing-all the things-the innumerable things-together" (4: 162). She states that the purpose of the novel is "to take in everything, sex, education, life &c; [...]. Everything is running of its own accord into the stream. [...] I find myself infinitely delighting in facts for a change, & in possession of quantities beyond counting: though I feel now & then the tug to vision, but resist it" (*Diary* 4: 129).

As its title implies, *The Years* spans a long period of time-about sixty years-portraying the family history of the Pargiters and the national history of England from the collapse of the old Edwardian order based on patriarchy and imperialism to the international confrontation with Fascism. While *The Years* alludes to many historical events including the death of King Edward, the Great War, the Irish Civil War, the suffragist movement, and the rising threat of Mussolini, Woolf rejects any attempt to make a pattern of these events. Woolf's resistance "to vision," to establishing causal connection between historical events, is clearly revealed in the ways she narrates them. Each section of the novel describes a randomly chosen year with little regard to its historical significance. Historical events such as King Edward's death and the end of the Great War are often inadvertently overheard, mixed with the noises and voices of typical daily life. King Edward's death is a historical signal to indicate the virtual end of the old order of things, but a nameless man's shouting of this news in the street is blended with the hammering sound in the next house, a woman's voice shrieking at a man from a far window, and heavy footsteps on the pavements. Likewise, Crosby hears from

"somebody" (*The Years* 305)[5] the news that the war is over when she does her usual grocery shopping. The news does not cause old Crosby any excitement, nor does it relieve the rheumatic pain in her legs. The novel's grounding in such historical events renders the narrative more realistic, but also calls into question both the cognitive status of historical events and the possibility of making a significant connection between the public events and the private lives of Woolf's characters. Using ordinary language, as Alan Wilde points out, *The Years* depicts realistic seasons and weather as opposed to the symbolic time which is described with poetic, metaphorical language in *The Waves* (147). Unlike the interludes in *The Waves*, the prologues of each section in *The Years* do not offer the reader any metaphorical clue for structural patterns of the following narratives. Woolf acknowledges that the writing of *The Years* is different from her previous writing. She writes of the necessity to "break every mould & find a fresh form of being, that is of expression, for everything." She writes, "Here in H. & N. I am breaking the mould made by *The Waves*" (*Diary* 4: 233).[6]

In order to appreciate the dynamics of phenomena, which cannot be summed up, Woolf has abandoned what we call a plot-the story's purposeful movement with its crises, causal connections, and resolution. The story or stories of the Pargiters have no forward, unified movement toward closure, and there is no centralized character. *The Years* relates various experiences and perceptions of the fifteen Pargiters across three generations without centering any of them. Some characters disappear suddenly and others appear from nowhere in the middle of the novel: Abel Pargiter, who appears in the very first scene of the novel as the representative of the tyrannical yet collapsing old authority dies before the novel is half over. Even though his death in 1913 marks a monumental moment, the end of the

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5) *The Years* is hereafter referred to as TY.

6) "H. & N." is the shorthand term for "Here and Now" which Woolf considered as a title for *The Years*. "The Pargiters" was the original title for *The Years* before she called it "Here & Now": "Suddenly in the night I thought of Here & Now as a title for The Pargiters. I think it better" (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf* 4: 176).

patriarchal family, nevertheless it takes place offstage. On the other hand, Nicholas, Peggy and North show up in the middle of the novel and become important figures in its latter half. Although Eleanor and Sara may be identified as mediating figures in the center of this web of family relations, the complex network of the relations and experiences of all the characters makes it impossible to conclude whose story *The Years* is. Rachel Blau DuPlessis points out that Woolf "has equalized the characters" (164) in her later novels. DuPlessis defines Woolf's "communal protagonist" as a "critique both of the hierarchies and authoritarian practice of gender and of the narrative practice that selects and honors only major figures" (162-63). Woolf's subversive use of characters in *The Years* not only resists the cultural reproduction of the gender ideology implicit in the heterosexual romance narrative but also illuminates the sense of co-existence of people and discontinuity of their experiences.

Similarly, Woolf rejects any single model of progress in women's history by tracing the different experiences of the Pargiter daughters once they leave their patriarchal house. Three of them marry and the other three do not. Both the romantic and defiant Delia and the home-devoted Milly settle into their marriages to conservative squires; Maggie finds herself in an unconventional marriage to a Frenchman, a marriage which Eleanor conceives of as ideal; Eleanor lives an old spinster's life; Rose, the adventurous girl, becomes a militant suffragette; Sara finds herself isolated in a shabby apartment where she has to share a bathroom with other tenants. In spite of being the most isolated outsider, "déclassé, alienated from the sexual roles and class privileges of her compatriots" (DuPlessis 172), Sara is nevertheless the center of a relational web with Nicholas, Martin and North. Not only does Sara become the closest friend Nicholas, a homosexual Polish exile, but she also is the only one who understands North's sense of alienation after he returns from the African colonies to a bewildering, more industrialized, modernized London. The only third generation woman, Peggy, is a New Woman with an education and a profession. By delineating different changes in the Pargiter daughters' lives and by portraying Peggy as a liberated yet frustrated woman, Woolf

calls into question a modern capitalist model of progress in feminist history.

In *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf warns about the limits that women's freedom from the patriarchal family structure might set on future women's lives. Woolf acknowledges the necessity of economic independence for modern women and remarks on benefits which women's entering into the professional workforce might bring to women: "we may change our position from being the victims of the patriarchal system [...] to being the champions of the capitalist system. [...] It is a thought not without its glamour" (67). However, at the same time, she raises a doubt about the capitalist procession which modern women start to participate in: "we, daughters of educated men, are between the devil and the deep sea. Behind us lies the patriarchal system; the private house, with its nullity, its immorality, its hypocrisy, its servility. Before us lies the public world, the professional system, with its possessiveness, its jealousy, its pugnacity, its greed. [...] It is a choice of evils. Each is bad" (74). Woolf argues that historical progress for women (and for the whole society) is not merely a matter of releasing women from domestic entrapment to involve them in a public system, since the tyranny of the private realm has established and sustained the public system itself. In *The Years*, Woolf pursues this same critique of the current socio-economic system through the story of Crosby as well as her portrait of Peggy. The family servant Crosby mourns the closing up of Abercorn Terrace when Eleanor, a daughter of a gentleman, regards it as the promising end of the old patriarchal structure and is willing to put the life of Abercorn Terrace behind her by selling it. While Eleanor can enjoy traveling to India with money that comes from her father Abel's service in the colonies, old Crosby has to keep working as a charwoman. Although Eleanor is sympathetic and philanthropic enough to take care of repairing the ceiling for old and poor Mrs. Potter (*TY* 98-100), she does not recognize that Crosby has lived in a low and dark basement room for all the years she has served the Pargiters and that she has kept her strong sense of commitment to both the family and the house (216-17). For Eleanor, Crosby has always been the voiceless "third person" who "never answered but only grinned" when she is spoken to (152). Nevertheless, Crosby feels she still

belongs to the family even after leaving Abercorn Terrace and starting a new life. She arranges on the mantelpiece of her new room odds and ends which were discarded by the family:

> [Her room] was small, but when she had unpacked her things it was comfortable enough. It had a look of Abercorn Terrace. Indeed for many years she had been hoarding odds and ends with a view to her retirement. Indian elephants, silver vases, the walrus that she had found in the waste-paper basket one morning. [...] She ranged them askew on the mantelpiece, and when she had hung the portraits of the family-some in wedding-dress, some in wigs and gowns, and Mr. Martin in his uniform in the middle because he was her favorite-it was quite like home. (218)

The passage suggests her inability to break the tie to the past and to live for the present and future. The death of the old family dog, Rover, which still accompanies Crosby in her lonely life at Richmond, also implies how she is helpless and suffering outside as well as inside Abercorn Terrace. Through the story of Crosby, Woolf implies that a certain historical change, while allowing partial freedom to an educated man's daughter, still leaves a working class woman in a marginalized position.

Crosby's collection of "odds and ends" ranged "askew on the mantelpiece" images what the whole novel proposes to hold-"the mould of that queer conglomeration of incongruous things." Such sense of discontinuity and multiplicity exists not only in the characters' experiences but also in the ways they perceive the past and the present. The experiences and memories of the characters are closely related yet different enough to allow for various versions of the past. The portrait of the young Rose Pargiter illustrates how characters remember the past differently and how the past is reconfigured into a different shape through the act of remembering. The portrait is first introduced in a passage describing the family drawing room at Abercorn Terrace: "Over the fireplace the portrait of a red-haired young woman in white muslin holding a basket of flowers on her lap smiled down

on them" (10). Hung in a stuffy Victorian drawing room, the picture of a young woman wearing a white dress and holding flowers reflects the ideologically charged values of the angel in the house-chastity, domesticity and passiveness. The innocent smile of the young Rose creates a grotesque effect when it coexists with the presence of the old Rose Pargiter, the dying mother upstairs and with the overwhelming sense of entrapment and frustration experienced by the daughters, Delia and Milly. Yet, as Jane Wheare points out, the portrait makes a different impression on each of the characters (142): it reminds Milly of the presence of her loving yet dying mother (*TY* 37), but to Delia it is a symbol of her entrapment (39); to Martin, it reasserts the stability of the family in 1908; for Maggie, the portrait is simply that of "a girl with red-hair" (179) with no personal association; to Peggy it is just "the picture of her grandmother" (349) whom she has never met. These characters share the memory of Rose's picture but differ in their responses to it.

Furthermore, not only do the characters attach different meanings to the portrait, but the portrait itself is reconstituted by memories. In 1908 Martin peers into a dark corner of the portrait and remembers that "There used to be a flower in the grass." But "now there was nothing but dirty brown paint," and Eleanor does not even remember whether or not there was a flower in the picture. Interestingly, in the last section of the novel Eleanor urges Peggy to notice the little flower which is restored after Eleanor has had it cleaned, and Peggy sees clearly "a flower-a little sprig of blue-lying in the grass" (325). That the presence of a little blue flower in the portrait is erased underneath a layer of dirt and then restored by memories not only suggests "the passing of time" (Wheare 142) but also implies the textualized nature of the past and the dialectical force between the past and the present, that the present reconstitutes the past and that the past needs to be uncovered. Like the portrait, material objects such as the crimson-gilt chair, the rose patterned tea kettle, the walus pen holder, and the necklace-Abel's birthday gift for Maggie-trigger several characters' memories by repeatedly appearing in different times and different places. Woolf's characters constantly retrieve these objects from the past to the present, and each time the objects reappear, they are endowed with different

shapes and meanings. By dismantling any fixed spatial or temporal location for the material objects and characters' responses to them, *The Years* shows that the present destabilizes the pastness of the past and sustains the dynamism of history in which "every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concern threatens to disappear irretrievably" (Benjamin 255).

The phenomenological comprehension of historical process-its multiplicity and its inconclusiveness with all its temporal movement-is echoed in the very final scene of *The Years* when Eleanor exclaims, "There!" at the sight of a young couple and then says "And now?" (434). The figure of a young couple and Eleanor's final words in the last scene set in the dawn of a spring day may be read as the final affirmation of a new world.[7] However, it should be noted that Eleanor's last word is enunciated as a question rather than as a final answer.[8] Earlier in the novel, Eleanor contemplates "a gigantic pattern" (369) which brings unity and wholeness to human experiences, and she finds "extreme pleasure" in the thought that "there was a pattern." In the context of the novel, however, what is significant about Eleanor's gesture toward defining a pattern of human experiences is the fact that although Eleanor raises a question, she cannot answer: "But who makes it? Who thinks it? Her mind slipped. She could not finish her thought" (369). The desired pattern is elusive, and Eleanor only confirms, "Nothing was fixed; nothing was known; life was open and free before them" (382). Eleanor's remarks not only

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7) James Naremore reads the figure of a young couple as a "symbol for the sexual accord and fulfillment" holding a "potential for harmony" (260); Susan Squier finds a "vision of affirmative response to otherness and change" in Eleanor's final words and in her gesture holding out her hands to Martin (225).

8) Pamela L. Caughie makes an excellent comment on this uncertain ending in her study, *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism: Literature in Quest and Question of Itself.* Caughie remarks: "Yet the uncertain ending of *The Years* does not necessarily represent an uncertain future in the face of Word War II or the dawn of a new, nonauthoritarian social order (two common thematic readings); rather, it is a *structural necessity* in a narrative that conceives of history and story as a dynamic complex of relations" (106). I am indebted to Caughie's discussion of the thematic uncertainty and narrative structure of *The Years*.

acknowledge the sense of uncertainty that pervades the novel but also affirm the indeterminacy and contingency of human experiences. The ending scene of *The Years* is another echo of such phenomenological perception of "Here and Now" which is not fixed and thereby remains dynamic, multiple and heterogeneous. The presence of a nameless young couple implies that here is another untold story of strangers in spite of the great number of characters, events, and situations that the stories of the Pargiters cover. The final scene of *The Years* reverberates with the stories that remain untold in the text-the stories of the Indian, the violet-selling woman with no nose, and the voices from the streets or neighborhood. Nobody sums up these stories or unifies these voices since there is no pattern which divides, distinguishes, and hierachizes the phenomena and their contingencies.

Ⅲ

Woolf's resistance to a narrative desire to construct a linear, unified and conclusive history results in a parodic transformation of the representational narrative in *Between the Acts* and thereby discloses the arbitrariness and artificiality of narrative conventions. Miss La Trobe's pageant, the play within the novel, effectively illuminates the double nature of history-the narrative and the performative aspects of history.[9] Through the pageant, Woolf reveals that the

9) In "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation," *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha posits the double-inscription of the people as both the pedagogical object and the performative subject of the discursive process of signifying a nation. He remarks: "In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*" (145-46). My argument of the double nature of history as the narrative and the performative is indebted to both Benjamin's concept of the double-time of history and Bhabha's adoption of Benjamin for his theoretical argument of writing the nation.

representation of history depends on a history of representations since the unity and continuity of the play, which offers a survey of English history, is created through the literary conventions of genres representative of the Elizabethan, Restoration and Victorian ages. This dependence on literary conventions reveals the textualized nature of La Trobe's pageant, and consequently revels that history itself depends on narrative. As David McWhirter notes, the pageant is "both a representation of history and a history of representations" and incorporates "not only a vast array of historical contingencies, past and present, but also the diverse forms [...] of comedy, tragedy, satire and romance-through which human beings embedded in history attempt to invest those contingencies with shape and pattern" (803).

As such, the pageant reveals the arbitrariness of representation.Mrs. Swithin's comment on the Chinese convention which represents a battle by putting "a dagger on the table" (*BA* 142) suggests that representation is dependent on culturally determined literary conventions. As Mrs. Manresa comments, the enacting of English history in the village pageant is to represent only what is selected from the island's history: "It would take till midnight unless they skipped" (81-2). Significantly, La Trobe's program states that "Owing to lack of time a scene [in the second playlet] has been omitted" (141) and asks the audience to imagine the final resolution of the intricate plot of the pseudo-Restoration comedy. Furthermore, the pageant itself raises a suspicion about the self-enclosed form of historiography by questioning where history begins and ends. The audience's confusion about whether the play-a survey of English history-has begun or not implies the arbitrariness of the marking of an origin of history. The narrating voice expresses their uncertainty: "Then the play began. Was it, or was it not, the play? [...] So it was the play then. Or was it the prologue?" (76). Near the end of the play, Colonel Mayhew assumes the play is already over: "'The play's over, I take it,' muttered Colonel Mayhew, retrieving his hat. 'It's time...'" (186). However, a megaphonic voice stops the audience from leaving by asserting itself from the bushes: "*Before we part, ladies and gentleman, before we go...* (Those who had risen sat down) ... *let's talk in words of one syllable*" (187). Just as Colonel

Mayhew's gesture of picking up his hat is probably suspended at this moment, the sense of ending is also suspended and deferred.

The process of enacting the pageant undermines the *narrative* unity and continuity of the pageant and thereby illuminates the *performative* nature of history which is most clearly implied in the uncontrollability of enacting it. Various unpredicted interruptions disrupt the continuous flow of the pageant: the young England, little Phillis Jones, forgetting her lines, repeats the grand proclamation, "*England am I*" (77); the gramophone repeatedly fails to produce a proper tune at La Trobe's signals for music; Mrs. Swithin arrives long after the play begins; the words of the peasants' chorus are drowned out by wind; a cow's mooing, a bird's twittering, and the breeze interfere with Queen Elizabeth's lines. These interruptions are so frequent that Christopher Ames describes the novel as employing "an elaborate aesthetics of interruption" (395). Betraying her will to order the world of the play into unity, La Trobe growls about "the torture of these interruptions" (*BA* 79) which break the unity and continuity of the pageant. As the writer and director of the pageant, La Trobe is anxious to maintain the "shape and pattern" embedded in the three playlets and to keep the audience's emotion in order. In her first appearance, La Trobe is portrayed as "the typical artist of the [nineteen-] twenties" whose concerns are to maintain artistic "illusion and continuity" (Wilde 152). Her desire to control both the play and the audience is described in military and violent terms: people call her "Bossy" (*BA* 63); she has "the look of a commander pacing his desk" and "the attitude proper to an Admiral on his quarter deck" (62); she curses the audience when they have "slipped the noose" (122). She is imagined as a powerful witch who brings "odds and ends" together to creates a new order: "she was one who seethes wandering bodies and floating voices in a cauldron, and makes rise up from its amorphous mass a re-created world" (153).

Regardless of La Trobe's intended aim of unifying the voices of the actors, the village peasants' chorus and the audience's response to the pageant, she fails. As the pageant goes on, La Trobe is transformed from an authoritative director of the pageant into a more tolerant artist who submits to the elements of chance and their

control over her art. At a moment when the cows bellow together, La Trobe perceives it as a transition between the scenes, not an interruption, that covers embarrassing moments of emptiness and silence over the stage: "The cows annihilated the gap; bridged the distance; filled the emptiness and continued the emotion. La Trobe waved her hand ecstatically at the cows" (140-41). When her experimental playwriting for "the present time reality" which would be "*the* play" "without an audience" (179, 180) fails to impose the intended dramatic illusion on the audience, a sudden, short downpour over the stage and the audience relieves her frustration as a failed artist. When she is called onto the stage after the play ended, she refuses to be acknowledged as the director by hiding herself behind the tree. She prefers to remain anonymous; she becomes "Whatshername" (184) instead of "Bossy."

Woolf highlights the near-impossibility of enacting the pageant as it is scripted by discrediting the shaping force of plot. She deliberately yet humorously undermines the plot in creating a pastiche out of the Elizabethan romantic comedy and the Restoration comedy of manners, two types of comedy known for their intricate plots with elements such as mistaken identities, disguises and tricks, and climatic resolution of misunderstanding. Watching the first playlet and struggling futilely to understand what happens on the stage, Isa asks, "Does the plot matter? [...] Don't bother about the plot: the plot's nothing" (90-1). The futility of trying to understand the play is also evident when Mrs. Elmhurst reads, "for the benefit of her husband," the program which summarizes the titles, characters, and plots of each playlet; yet ironically her husband "was deaf" (125). Mrs. Elmhurst's absurd attempt to convey the summary of the plot to her deaf husband is hilariously juxtaposed with one audience member's exclamation after the Restoration drama: "All that fuss about nothing!" (138). By the time when the pageant reaches the final act, the plot is altogether abandoned. Consequently this act, which represents "The Present Time. Ourselves," emphasizes the performative nature of history. La Trobe's pageant starts within the limits of the conventions of past narrative genres, but her sarcastic use or violation of conventions becomes more and more explicit

to the extent that the pageant itself enacts ruptures of history. The final act violates the convention of the invisible fourth wall which divides the audience and the actors. To the audience's embarrassment and consternation, there is no performance on the stage for the duration of ten minutes: "Nothing happened" and "The tick of the machine was maddening" (176). After this unendurable delay, members of the cast appear flashing mirrors at the audience, forcing the audience to stare at their own reflections and to become part of this plotless performance. They are "exposed" at their own gaze with no "time to assume" how to enact themselves (184). They have no choice but to perform even though the last act is no longer entertaining, only "so distorting and upsetting" (184).

The final act not only reverses the roles of who is watching and who is performing, but also blurs the conventional boundary between the performed world and the real world. Excited by the uproar of the cacophony, the dogs and the cows join in, "walloping, tail lashing" and "scurrying and worrying" (184). In the next moment, the actors from the previous three playlets-Queen Bess, Queen Anne, Budge the policeman, the pilgrims, and the lovers-all reappear, each declaiming some "fragment from their parts" (185) and mingling with the mirror bearers and the audience's own performance. When young Bonthorp stops suddenly, unable to lug the heavy cheval glass any longer, the whole scene stops, leaving the scene suspended in "here and now." They-the actors and the audience-are suspended in the middle of their performance. The whole scene is "malicious; observant; expectant; expository," and they are embarrassed at their inability to read the meanings of their own performance. The interpenetration of the actors and the audience, of the past and the present, is exhilarating and at the same time terrifying, for the actors and the audience are caught up in one and the same world-acting and living simultaneously-just like the village idiot Albert whose acting does not differ from living his real life. Thus, the pageant itself emblematizes Benjamin's conception of history as "time filled by the presence of the now" (261). The scene disrupts the concept of the successive flow of history by intermingling the past and the present day and thereby showing that acting the past and living the present are

one and the same performance. Violating all the narrative conventions such as story, plot, and characterization which form the meaning of acted events, the final act of "The Present Time" refuses to be represented and interpreted. The present is not to be interpreted but to be performed.

In this sense, it creates the same effects that the children's song does in "The Present Day" of *The Years*. Following Martin's encouragement, the children of the building's caretaker burst into a song which is alien and incomprehensible to the adults:

> That was what it sounded like. Not a word was recognizable. [...] The rhythm seemed to rock and the unintelligible words ran themselves together almost into a shriek. [...] Their voices were so harsh; the accent was so hideous. [...] Then they stopped. It seemed to be in the middle of a verse. They stood there grinning, silent, looking at the floor. Nobody knew what to say. There was something horrible in the noise they made. It was so shrill, so discordant, and so meaningless. (429-30)

Like the final act of the pageant in *Between the Acts*, the song stops as if in the middle of the performance. Like the audience of the final scene in *Between the Acts*, the party members are embarrassed at their inability to understand the meaning of the song: "The grown-up people did not know whether to laugh or to cry" (430). Nobody knows what to say about the indecipherable language. Typically, only Eleanor tries to find "one word for the whole," one word describing this "younger generation" (429) who "had looked so dignified" yet "had made this hideous noise": "'Beautiful?' she said, with a note of interrogation, turning to Maggie. 'Extraordinary,' said Maggie" (430, 431). Yet their comments only raise another suspicion about the referentiality of language, for Eleanor is not sure that "they were thinking of the same thing."

Woolf deliberately refuses the narrative act of resolution as "The Present Day," the final section of *The Years*, and "The Present Time. Ourselves," the final act of the pageant in *Between the Acts*, show. In *The Years*, Eleanor's gestures toward a

confirmation of an ideal design for human experiences and historical changes are always suspended in unfinished thoughts and unanswered questions. Similarly in *Between the Acts*, La Trobe's and the Reverend Streatfield's attempts to impose a unified meaning on the whole performance are disrupted by unexpected interruptions and result in either cacophony or silence. The anonymous yet authoritative voice which raises the unsettling question of the meaning of the pageant trails off into "chaos and cacophony" (*BA* 189): "[The voice said] *All you can see of ourselves is scraps, orts and fragments? Well then listen to the gramophone affirming...* A hitch occurred here. The records had been mixed. Fox-trots, Sweet Lavender, Home Sweet Home, Rule Britannia" (188). After this accidental musical medley, the audience is still caught in the tune of "chaos and cacophony," hearing "scraps, orts and fragments."

Woolf's deliberate ellipsis of the final answer to the question of "Scraps, orts and fragments, are we?" (189) is repeated in her satiric rendering of the Reverend Streatfield's speech.[10] The Reverend Streatfield interjects into the confusion his speech on "What message [...] was our pageant meant to convey?" (191). In spite of his clerical authority and the audience's courteous attention to him, with their hands folded "in the traditional manner as if they were seated in church" (191), the first words of his sermon-like interpretation are lost in the wind just as the actors' lines have been blown away. His speech, imparting a grand vision of the unity and wholeness of humanity, insisting that every scrap, ort and fragment can be unified, seems to make sense of the situation the pageant has evoked, so that even the swallows "seemed cognizant of his meaning"(192). Woolf, however, does not allow such a clean resolution. Streatfield becomes so distracted by the antics of Albert, the idiot, that he ends up losing his command of language. The Reverend's vision of unity and wholeness is invaded by the irrational antics of the village idiot and dies away when he "had no further use of words" (194), just as the "anonymous bray of the infernal megaphone" (188) was interrupted by chaotic sound and died

10) Melba Cuddy-Keane provides an excellent discussion of Woolf's treatment of the Reverend Streatfield in both satiric thrust and amiable comedy.

away. Both the extreme disharmony of sounds and the awkward silence imply the inability of language to encompass the discord and incongruity of human experiences.

Woolf's deliberate refusal to impose one meaning on the incongruities of historical experiences is closely related to her suspicious yet playful attitude toward language. In *The Years*, Sara often voids meaning from sounds by mimicking other's words or making a childish rhythm from the meaningless repetition of words. When Sara mimics others's language, she enjoys liberating the sound from the meanings.[11] Sara hears "Only voices" (247), even when Martin and Maggie's conversation turns to their parents' secret past which suggests the possibility that they might be "brother and sister" rather than cousins. In their surrealistic dinner conversation in the final section, Sara and North quotes fragments from each other's letters against the background noise of "a trombone player" and "a voice of a woman practicing her scales" (316). Just as the incomprehensible song of the children does, Sara's use of language in *The Years* calls into question the referentiality of language. The same critical, yet more despairing, suspicion of the function of language prevails in *Between the Acts*. Isa is portrayed as a pseudo-poet, constantly seeking the right word or the right rhyme. Although her poetry writing provides her with an emotional escape from her unhappy marriage with Giles, it is always "abortive" (15), much like her day-dreams of romance with Mr. Haines. Far from being creative in her use of language, Isa confirms her identity with cliches that describe the roles ascribed to her by the very patriarchal system that she hates: she is "Sir Richard's daughter"(16); she loves "The father of my children" (14). She fosters a secret desire to transform her prosaic language into a poetic one, but she slips easily "into the cliche conveniently provided by fiction" (14). The burden of cultural legacy has been laid on Isa in the form of those cliches

11) Michael Lucey also notes the effect which Sara's mimicry evokes. He argues that Sara's mimicry is a way of relieving the burden of a self constructed by the vision of others: "[Sara's] mimicking of sounds might liberate her form the violence of specular relations [...] The comic effect produced, the laughter, is [...] a sign of the threatened dissolution of a constructed self" (262).

that represent and reproduce sexual and class ideologies. The power of fictive language, which imprisons Isa within the false identity embedded in those cliches, is further illustrated in the story of the lily pond where a ghost of a drowned lady haunts at night. The story of a drowned lady turns out to be unsupported by any evidence. It is a self-authorizing story: its origin may be fictive, yet it still has the power to frighten the servants.

Between the Acts shows, however, that though the dead and fictive language wields enormous power over human subjectivity, strategic uses of language can subvert it. The house servants have developed their own language which subverts the authority of the language spoken by the Master. Significantly, Mrs. Sands, the cook, calls the cat in Pointz Hall "Sunny" in the kitchen, not "SungYen" which is "his drawing room name" (32). Like the cat, Mr. Oliver is referred to differently in two different domestic spaces. He is the "Master" in the drawing room, but "in the kitchen" the servants call him just "Bartie"(32). These different names suggest that the act of naming does not impose absolute identities on subjects and further implies that language can be strategically or playfully appropriated in different power relations. Like the servants, Isa should confront the burden of clichés rather than surrender to it in order to throw away the false and dead language and complete her own language. As long as Isa remains an "abortive" poet and Giles an oversexed man, "the muscular, the hirsute, the virile" (106) and Mrs. Manresa's "sulky hero" (107), the fictive and dead language wields power over them, containing their identities within conventionalized gender roles. As another victim of the patriarchal tyranny who hasn't been given the choice to live his own life as a farmer rather than as a stockbroker as he wished, Giles only relieves himself by enacting hatred, falsity and self-destructive violence. Giles' married life with Isa is based on his infidelity to her and their hatred of each other. While Isa fantasies a romance with a gentleman farmer as an escape from her unhappy marriage, Giles projects his repressed anger on others, frustrated at his inability to enact his rage against both his father and the Fascist tyranny. In this context, the quarrel between Isa and Giles at the end of the novel can be interpreted as the first attempt to

confront the burden of the past, the trap of the false and dead language. Instead of isolating each other in mutual hatred and imposing their own anger upon others, they face up to each other and confront their repressed desire and rage squarely. As the quarrel begins, the night is regressing toward a precultured, primitive era, but the regression also implies the possibility of a new life through the primordial couple, Isa and Giles. At the same time, La Trobe is imagining a new play which adumbrates the vision of "two scarcely perceptible figures" (212) in the primeval darkness. The curtain is rising, yet the reader cannot hear the first word of a new play, which is at the same time the last word of the novel. The words are left unspoken since there is no single word that can represent ever-changing history. Like the final act of the pageant, like the children's song in *The Years*, the new play is simply performed, not interpreted.

Ⅳ

The composition of *The Years* and *Between the Acts* comes from Woolf's desire to create a new narrative language as opposed to the conventionalized narrative whose fictive and self-contained language tends to reshape only what is selected and to dismiss what is left out. In this sense, Woolf's narrative experiments in *The Years* and *Between the Acts* are akin to Bakhtin's conception of the novel as the critique of the "ossified generic skeleton" (8). Bakhtin states, "The novel parodies other genres [...] ; it exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language" (5). *The Years* and *Between the Acts* parody the nature of the narrative genre, betray its ossified conventionality and thereby constitute a criticism of the relationship this genre bears to reality and history. In resisting the authoritative and monologic narrative which presents a script to organize and order incongruous multiplicity and to prescribe the direction of history's movement, Woolf textualizes the discontinuities of historical experiences and reveals the indeterminacy of those experiences. In negating and parodying the narrative act of "refiguration, of

reshaping of our experience of time through plot configurations," Woolf refuses to give *an* answer to the often asked question about her perception of historical process: does she look forward to the development of a new society despite the horror of the impending war, or does she give up such hope and take a refuge in the safe, stable, and unified past? Woolf's gaze at history in *The Years* and *Between the Acts* expresses neither historical celebration nor historical mourning. In rejecting a single, authoritative voice, the two novels encompass horror, blessing, melancholy, and hope at the same time. By embracing all the "scraps, orts and fragments," they recognize a history of "ceaseless lateral textualizing" (Eagleton 272) rather than a history of linearity and causality. Configuring constellations of the phenomena in which reality is narrated as dynamic and relational and history as incongruous and inconclusive, *The Years* and *Between the Acts* play on the slippage between the double temporality of history-the narrative and the performative. By withholding any final answers and by recognizing many untold stories, Woolf's narratives of history sustain the indeterminacy of historical phenomena without foreclosing history.

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Abstract

Embracing "Scraps, orts and fragments": Virginia Woolf's Narratives of History in *The Years* and *Between the Acts*

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Virginia Woolf's last two novels, *The Years* and *Between the Acts*, show both her conceptualization of history and her experimental writing to narrativize history in the novelisitc discourse. *The Years* traces in a form of a family saga social changes from 1880 to the present day, portraying the collapse of the Edwardian social order and concerning the rise of Fascism in the 1930s. Set on a mid June day in 1939, *Between the Act* stages in the form of a village pageant, the play within the novel, the history of England from the primeval times through the various eras of English civilization to the present year. Intense and pervasive as the sense of the present is, the two novels are saturated with allusions to the past. While some critics such as James Naremore and Alex Zwerdling read the two novels as Woolf's aesthetic affirmation of the past in face of the present marked with the sense of historical decay, Susan Squire and Melba Cuddy-Keane emphasize the possibility of the new social order and a new concept of English community that the two novels envision.

Considering the fact that Woolf's *The Years* and *Between the Acts* embrace all at once the sense of despair and hope, melancholy and blessing on the course of history, this paper proposes to read the two novels not as either mourning or celebrating historical process but as problematizing the nature of fiction and history. Woolf questions the referentiality of language and representation, deliberately disrupting the traditional modes of narrative. If *The Years* shows Woolf's complex comprehension of historical process with its multiplicity and its inconclusiveness with all its temporal movement, *Between the Acts* plays on the slippage between the double temporality of history-the narrative and the performative.

■ 주제어 : Virginia Woolf, *The Years*, *Between the Acts*, history, Modernism, the narrative, the performative(버지니어 울프, 『세월』, 『막간』, 역사, 모더니즘, 서사성, 실행성)