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THE ROLES OF SILENCE IN
VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *BETWEEN THE ACTS*

by

LIZA EPPRECHT

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

PROFESSOR KATZ
PROFESSOR MATZ

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Abstract

In this thesis I explore the roles of silence in Virginia Woolf's last novel, *Between the Acts* (1941). I focus on three readings of silence in the text. First, I consider her portrayal of malicious silences as unsaid judgments and aggressions and their impact on interpersonal relationships and interactions. Second, I look at detached, empty silence and its relation to the critical passivity Woolf noted in her audience in the early years of WWII. Finally, I consider silence as feminist resistance to traditional narratives through the intertwined experiences of Isa and Miss La Trobe.

Introduction

Virginia Woolf is known for the unusual lucidity with which she portrays human interactions in her novels. Her focus on the interior workings of characters and the unseen and unheard levels of interaction that define human relationships helped to expand the boundaries of fiction. Woolf's novels tend to focus around private life and the nuclear family. Yet her attention shifted slightly in the 1930s. During this last full decade of her life, Woolf became increasingly occupied with the threat of another World War. While Woolf did not write explicitly political novels, the logic of her later works implicates a larger central community. This wider-scale view can be glimpsed in the "Present Day" part of her penultimate novel *The Years*, and in her book-length essay *Three Guineas*, which explores the connection between pacifism and women's rights. Yet it wasn't until she wrote her last novel, *Between the Acts*, published posthumously in 1941, that Woolf intentionally highlighted the experiences of an entire community.

It is important to consider how her last work was influenced by a "late style." While Woolf did not necessarily plan for her suicide in March 1941, death weighed heavily on her psyche. She began writing *Between the Acts* in the spring of 1938, before the official onset of World War II. As the war began and bombings of London increased, the English lived in constant fear of a total Nazi invasion. Woolf and her husband Leonard made a suicide pact should the Nazis invade. Woolf herself was aging. She felt strongly that the war meant the end of an era; that it would destroy everything she had ever known. She wrote in her diary in August 1938: "it may be war. That is the complete ruin not only of civilisation in Europe, but of our last lap." (*A Writer's Diary,* 289) As Edward Said writes of late style, "Lateness is being at the end, fully conscious, full of memory, and also very (even preternaturally) aware of the present." (Said, 14)

It is impossible to deny the accuracy with which Said's description of "lateness" describes Woolf's position at the start of WWII. As critic Alice Wood writes, in *Between the Acts* Woolf "exposes and mocks the imperialist values, localized thinking and patriarchal gender roles of the society whose passing she ambivalently mourns." (Wood, 104) Woolf does not lack nostalgia or love for the England she has known. But her underlying critique of the community she portrays on a June day in 1939 proves her intense awareness of the violent moment she lived.

Woolf's beliefs on art's role in society had an important influence on *Between the Acts.* Woolf and her intellectual circle of Bloomsbury were inspired by the Kantian idea that art is "a manifestation of freedom that mediates sociability and community – not by imposing taste but by transporting its beholders beyond egotism into (possible) disinterested pleasure, and thence into noncoercive dialogue about the *sensus communis*, or common values." (Froula, 14) Woolf believed that art has the power to restore the intensity of emotion necessary to unify us in a common goal for a better future, and she infused this ideology into the novel. The idea that art inspires critical dialogues and pushes its beholders to try to view things as they are and "to think as oneself in the place of the other" was particularly impactful for Woolf. (Froula, 13) In fact, the potentially elusive commentary she makes in *Between the Acts* only serves her point. Woolf refuses to feed her audience political intentions or opinions; rather, she hopes to provoke deeper thought and open conversation in order to inspire the kind of disinterested critical engagement that would unify her readers. As an adamant pacifist whose earlier novels were heavily impacted by the toll of World War I on European society, Woolf's ultimate desire is to instill in her readers the importance of critical engagement with reality.

Silence plays many roles in Woolf's last novel. Aggressive feelings between characters are often expressed through silent dialogues. The community is portrayed as critically disengaged and silent on the topic of war, revealing a larger trend of passivity in prewar English society. On the other hand, two female characters, Isa and Miss La Trobe, use silence as a way to resist patriarchal narratives. Silence is not clearly coded in the text, but, as in many of Woolf's novels, it plays an essential role in supporting her overarching design. Gillian Beer recognizes that the novel is not meant to be interpreted systematically: "Indeed the work's partial, fugitive method of allusion and recall characteristically lets the reader brood or skim at will. Things go awry with interpretation here when the critic seeks, as some have done, to turn glimpses into systems." (Beer, 128) Silence does not have one defined place in *Between the Acts*, just as it does not play one overwhelming role in life. It is essential, however, to consider the different ways in which silence impacts this last novel, without assuming a structured relationship between these forms.

The silences in *Between the Acts* reveal the violence Woolf fiercely combatted within England. In *Three Guineas*, she expresses her belief that the inequality of the sexes is its own form of tyranny:

> […] are we not all agreed that the dictator when we meet him abroad is a very dangerous as well as a very ugly animal? And he is here among us, raising his ugly head, spitting his poison, small still, curled up like a caterpillar on a leaf, but in the heart of England. (*Three Guineas*, 53)

The questions Woolf raises through the complex relationship between language and silence in *Between the Acts* prompt the reader to consider the individual's complicity in a larger social culture. Woolf argues that it is essential to question the reasons for and intentions behind our

silences. If we are able to "calmly consider ourselves," we can develop a clearer idea of the necessary progression of civilization. (*Between the Acts*, 187) Without this kind of self-analysis, society cannot move on from the cycle of war and violent political regimes epitomized by Europe in the early twentieth century.

Silence as Unspoken (But Not Unheard) Hostility in *Between the Acts*

The narrator of *Between the Acts* meticulously details every word and noise that is uttered throughout the June day of the pageant at Pointz Hall. This patient attention to seemingly inconsequential dialogue, sound, and interruption is part of Woolf's resolve to portray human life as realistically and lucidly as possible. As Christine Froula writes: it is as if "behind the narrative's quasi-documentary mode, a metavoice (the artist? the author?…) were weaving everything, from the not very privileged script to the most trivial interruption, into an encompassing intention or design, an aesthetic whole…" (Froula, 305) Every comment and sound is part of a larger picture that requires each detail to appear whole and come to life. Froula goes on to discuss the way mundane comments inspire poetic ones: "Like a stone chip in a mosaic, the most ordinary utterance brushes against, calls out, even becomes poetry through context and contiguity […] Speech is never naked […] Every utterance is richly laden, nuanced, made strange by spatial and temporal resonances, reverberating with and against others like the strings of a piano, exceeding any speaker's intention." (Froula, 306) Despite Froula's focus on the audible in her interpretation, silence also resonates in *Between the Acts*. The silences are shaded with voices, thoughts, and emotions, and are essential to the documentarian narration. In fact, the unbiased description of every audible sound arguably pulls the reader's curiosity in the

direction of all that is unsaid. These moments of unspoken communication are filled with truth about the characters' opinions of each other and their reactions to what is going on around them. Silences reverberate throughout the novel, perhaps even more loudly than words.

Silence takes the place of unsaid judgments, feelings of resentment, and hatred in *Between the Acts*. Woolf does not portray silence as something missing, but rather an integral part of human interaction. For example, Isa's first and rather negative impression of Mrs. Manresa upon the flirtatious woman's visit to Pointz Hall is portrayed in quotation marks, as if Isa's silent thoughts have the impact of something spoken. The narrator then confirms this notion:

> 'Or what are your rings for, and your nails, and that really adorable straw hat?' said Isabella, addressing Mrs. Manresa silently and thereby making silence add its unmistakable contribution to talk. (*Between the Acts*, 39)

Woolf asks her reader to consider the role of silence when she refers to it as making an "unmistakable contribution to talk," but she does not explain what this means. Rather, she exemplifies the contributing role of silence repeatedly throughout the novel, particularly (as with Isa's condescending tone towards Mrs. Manresa) in the way that aggression and competition are consistently portrayed as unspoken but "unmistakably" felt. This is not unusual for Woolf; aggressive silences between characters can be found in all of her novels. In *To the Lighthouse*, James cannot express his momentary hatred of his father when he insists that the weather will not be fair for sailing. In both *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, the couples feel incapable of saying "I love you," revealing a silenced tension. The inner monologues of the characters in *The Waves* are laced with feelings of competition and resentment towards each other. Giles's hostility towards William Dodge, Isa's feelings of hatred for her husband, and Bart's judgment of Lucy's

faith are major examples of Woolf's portrayal of the violent silence that lurks beneath conventional social cues in *Between the Acts*.

Giles is the only character whose consciousness the reader can access who is actively upset about the approaching war. He is offended by the disregard the people around him have for the oncoming catastrophe. For this, the reader automatically feels some sympathy; in a novel that dwells on the passivity of the community, Giles is the one character who shares the reader's sense of anxiety while reading the almost surreal peacefulness of this scene in the English countryside, only three months before England declared war. It is important to imagine contemporary readers' reactions when the book was published in 1941, during which time England was being actively bombed by the Germans and the fear of invasion was very alive. But besides his sympathetic desire to take action, Giles is an aggressive and ultimately passive character. Despite its noble source, his anger primarily serves to embitter him into a state in which he feels wronged. He is consumed by his unspoken anger to the point that there is no room for self-criticism. Rather than channelling his awareness into starting an open conversation on the war, he lets his silenced resentment tinge his interactions with negativity.

Upon Giles's introduction to the novel he is described as "enraged. Had he not read, in the morning paper, in the train, that sixteen men had been shot, others prisoned, just over there, across the gulf, in the flat land which divided them from the continent?" (*BA,* 46) But "the ghost of convention rose to the surface" and he exchanges the normal pleasantries with his guests. (*BA,* 46) Nevertheless, his silent anger becomes part of the scene. His father notices: "Bartholomew… noted his anger – about what? But he remembered his guest. The family was not a family in the presence of strangers." (*BA,* 48) Giles's anger stays in the sphere of silence, because convention

works to keep it there, but it adds its part. Almost immediately, however, Giles's silence is tinged with negative feelings that have nothing to do with the war. He dislikes William Dodge without any given reason as soon as he sets his eyes on him. He "nodded to the unknown guest; took against him; and ate his fillet of sole." (*BA,* 47) The line "took against him" is sandwiched between his two exterior actions, placing it on an equal plane with what is openly expressed while also evading attention. Giles's silent dislike for Dodge is important to the novel, but it begins so quietly that its unfounded beginning is easily overlooked.

Giles's thoughts become increasingly violent towards Dodge after his introduction and the sympathetic portrayal of his concern for the war. During lunch, he thinks:

> What for did a good sort like the woman Manresa bring these half-breeds in her trail? Giles asked himself. And his silence made its contribution to talk – Dodge that is, shook his head. 'I like that picture.' That was all he could bring himself to say. (*BA*, 49)

Woolf portrays Giles's thoughts through free-indirect style, embodying his violent language ("half-breeds") in the narration. The line, "Dodge that is, shook his head," connects the silent aggression Giles launches and connects it to the exterior world; "Dodge that is," both confirms the subject of Giles's thought and provides the subject for "shook his head." The last line implies a kind of unspeakable hurt on Dodge's part at Giles's words, although we know them to be unspoken. Yet without Giles's judgment, the moment would be far more pleasant, and the interactions between characters much less strained, because, as Woolf suggests, silent animosity is a major force fueling the discord and hate that plagues society. After lunch, Giles observes Dodge with heightened enmity as he watches him consider the design of a coffee cup:

> His 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; but a teaser and twitcher; a fingerer

> of sensations; picking and choosing; dillying and dallying; not a man to have straightforward love for a woman…but simply a —— At this word, which he could not speak in public, he pursed his lips […]. (*BA,* 60)

Before the reader is launched into the rush of insults, the narrator gives us a hint as to his motives: he wishes to "hang his rage" on someone as he has already been described to do with his aunt ("He hung his grievances on her, as one hangs a coat on a hook, instinctively"). (*BA*, 46) The "convenience" is particularly telling of Giles's essentially passive character. He not only takes no action in the text that would prove him to be a genuinely engaged and concerned citizen, but he wishes to hang his rage on other people, and thus rid himself of its burden.

The most striking example of Giles's desire to (albeit silently) take advantage of his arbitrary hatred of other people in order to feel superior and exempt from his own scrutiny comes later in the novel, at the end of tea: "He looked, once, at William. He knew not his name; but what his left hand was doing. It was a bit of luck – that he could despise him, not himself." (*BA,* 111) One of the most jarring aspects of this excerpt is the implication that Giles is at least somewhat aware that he is hating Dodge in order to avoid looking inward at himself. That awareness, complete or not, reveals the frightening way in which silent aggression breeds a terrible form of hypocrisy in human relations, breeding the kind of violence that Woolf would have considered part of the "Hitler in England" that she wishes to combat. (Froula, 289) In reference to a scene just before tea when Giles kills a snake that is dying because it is unable to swallow its prey ("…he stamped on them. The mass crushed and slithered. The white canvas on his tennis shoes was bloodstained and sticky. But it was action. Action relieved him.") critic Alex Zwerdling remarks that, "his instinctive violence makes it clear that he too is a natural killer, a frustrated man of war." (*BA*, 99; Zwerdling, 307) Zwerdling even goes so far as to suggest that,

"Giles's behavior is, despite his patriotic feeling for England, very close to the Fascist threat he fears. His aggressive masculinity and Nordic looks remind one of the Master Race […]. He is filled with hatred and contempt for […] the homosexual William […] even for his wife. He is a good indigenous example of the ethos Woolf had seen in the first days of Italian Fascism and described in *A Room of One's Own*[…]." (Zwerdling, 308) Giles's characterization in *Between the Acts* is an example of the impact of silent aggression on both the community and the self. Although social norms sustain Giles's outward politeness, his unspoken animosity is still heard and felt, serving only to foster further discord in the community.

Isa recognizes her husband's silent rants, which bother her and give her more of a reason to outwardly ignore and inwardly mock him throughout the day. She is already angry, due to her feeling of constraint in her domestic role, for which she partly blames Giles. When he comes in for lunch, the narrator enters into Isa's thoughts: "It was a shock to find […] how much she felt when he came in […] of love; and of hate." (*BA,* 49) Her husband's hateful thoughts towards Dodge spur Isa to respond in the sphere of silent dialogue. When Giles launches into his silent attack of Dodge after lunch, stopping before calling him "queer," "Isa guessed the word that Giles had not spoken. Well, was it wrong if he was that word? Why judge each other? Do we know each other?" (*BA*, 61) She begins an argument that continues to hover between them for the rest of the day, despite the fact that they never speak.

At tea, when Giles relishes in his hate for Dodge, Isa addresses him loudly but silently: "'No,' said Isa, as plainly as words could say it. 'I don't admire you,' and looked, not at his face, but as his feet. 'Silly little boy, with blood on his boots.'" (*BA*, 111) His aggression provokes her own; she mocks and belittles him, partly in defense of Dodge, but mostly out of her own anger,

which she cannot express in public and must communicate to him through a seething and rather vocal silent treatment. Her silence is even depicted as a weapon at the end of the novel. As she walks alone towards the driveway after most of the guests have left, she picks a leaf of Old Man's Beard and pulls it apart, "shriveling the shreds in lieu of words, for no words grow there, nor roses either […]." (*BA*, 208) She channels her feelings into tearing the leaf apart, since words, even as silent thoughts, cannot adequately express her emotions. "Turning the corner, there was Giles attached to Mrs. Manresa. She was standing at the door of her car. Giles had his foot on the edge of the running board. Did they perceive the arrows about to strike them?" (*BA,* 208) Despite her lack of language in this moment, Isa's fury at seeing Giles with Mrs. Manresa, who he has been flirting with since lunch, is depicted as arrows about to strike; a distinctly violent representation of her enraged silence. The question as to whether "they perceive the arrows" reminds the reader that it is possible they do. Woolf depicts a form of frustrated but passionate silence through which the characters express themselves when the vocabulary of socially acceptable speech limits them. Whether or not it would be healthier for these silences to be outwardly expressed, they take the place of the dialogues that are restricted by the public or external sphere.

Lucy's religious faith and unconventional quirkiness are quietly mocked throughout the novel both by those close to her and the villagers. Most notable, however, is the silent frustration her brother Bartholomew holds about her religion. He cannot take her seriously as an intellectual equal due to her belief in God. There is a distance between them because of their opposing philosophies, but this distance is accentuated by Bart's silent dismissals and degradations of her faith. During their discussion of the origin of the saying, "touch wood," Bart asks himself how,

"in Lucy's skull, shaped so much like his own, there existed a prayable being?" (*BA*, 25) He is vehemently against the role of religion in society, as the reader gathers when he thinks, "The love, he was thinking, that they should give to flesh and blood they give to the church…" (*BA,* 25) Yet he does outwardly voice some of his criticisms of her religion, replying "'Superstition'" when she asks again about the origin of "touch wood." (*BA*, 25)

> She flushed, and the little breath too was audible that she drew in as once more he struck a blow at her faith. But, brother and sister, flesh and blood was not a barrier, but a mist. Nothing changed their affection; no argument; no fact; no truth. What she saw he didn't; what he saw she didn't – and so on, *ad infinitum*.
> 'Cindy,' he growled. And the quarrel was over. (*BA*, 25-26)

Interestingly, despite Bart's hurtful comments and unforgiving thoughts regarding Lucy's piousness, their impact is not as lasting as that of the silent anger Giles expresses. Their sibling bond breaks down certain conventional hesitations, so that Bart's jabs at Lucy have less of a haunting impact on her or the other characters present. He is actually able to speak some of his thoughts, albeit passively, when he responds "'Superstition,'" or says that they can "'provide umbrellas'" after Lucy says they "'can only pray'" that it doesn't rain during the pageant. (*BA*, 25; 23) The fact that he can voice some of his frustrations because of their sibling bond allows for their argument to be more open. It is more of an age-old disagreement than an actively violent, silent attack.

That is not to say that Bart's quiet frustration with Lucy's faith does not significantly limit their relationship. After the pageant, when Lucy asks him whether they should thank Miss La Trobe, he thinks,

> How imperceptive her religion made her! The fumes of that incense obscured the human heart. Skimming the surface, she ignored the battle in the mud […] 'She don't want our

> thanks, Lucy,' he said gruffly. What she wanted […] was darkness in the mud […]. (*BA*, 203)

His frustration creates a silence between them as they consider the lily pond, in which they see two very different scenes. Lucy feels a "glint of faith from the grey waters…she followed the fish; the speckled, streaked, and blotched; seeing in that vision beauty, power, and glory in ourselves." (*BA*, 205) Yet, even the possibility of Bart's response to her interpretation, which she knows so well it swims up into her mind, troubles her vision:

> Fish had faith, she reasoned. They trust us because we've never caught 'em. But her brother would reply: 'That's greed.' 'Their beauty!' she protested. 'Sex,' he would say. 'Who makes sex susceptible to beauty?' she would argue. He shrugged who? Why? Silenced, she returned to her private vision; of beauty which is goodness; the sea on which we float. Mostly impervious, but surely every boat sometimes leaks? (*BA*, 205)

His dissent is so palpable to her that his voice appears in her own mind as provoking a silent argument, which ultimately silences her even within the already silent realm of their disagreement. Although their sibling bond allows for more forgiveness and honesty about their dispute, Bart's primarily unspoken disapproval of Lucy's faith discomforts her and silences her even in the presence of family. Woolf portrays the deeply resonant power of silence to build upon itself. Unspoken judgments foster insecurity, which discourages productive confrontation. It is not altogether a bad thing that Bart inspires Lucy to question her assumptions. But the fact that she is prompted to do so by her awareness of his condescension exemplifies the hurtful ways in which we limit each other. Ultimately, Lucy reverts to deeper silence in order to protect herself from Bart's intrusions.

Woolf does not suggest a clear remedy for the malicious form of violence detailed in many of the silences of *Between the Acts*, but she does portray unspoken hostility as fueled by

constraining social norms. Giles feels bound to convention and the small-talk required at the pageant, which only intensifies his rage at others' silence about the war. In a greater sense, he is constrained by his decision to be a stock broker and take up the position of the family-supporting businessman when,

> Given his choice, he would have chosen to farm. But he was not given his choice. So one thing led to another; and the conglomeration of things pressed you flat; held you fast, like a fish in water. So he came for the week-end, and changed. (*BA*, 47)

He lives a life that was not his choice and which actively constrains him. Giles is bound to the role he has chosen to play in order to support his family, which leads to intense frustration that he could only fully express by revolting against the role he has chosen. Isa's fury is similarly derived; she hates her domestic role and the limitations it puts on her experience, but she cannot act out without threatening to destabilize the only foundation she has – her marriage, her family, and the general respect of the community. Therefore her resentment resides in the realm of silence. Although as siblings, convention has less sway over their interactions, Bart restrains from speaking his mind to Lucy about her religion, both because he knows she is already aware of his views, and also because he knows it would be impolite to do so. Instead, he keeps most of his thoughts on the matter inside, only occasionally cracking a mean-spirited joke about her faith.

The idea that social norms silence feelings of anger, judgment, and hatred is further implied by Mrs. Manresa's ability to "break the silence" with her constant refusal to abide by conventions. It is when she speaks her mind, often through an unorthodox confession, such as that she believes in fortune telling, that "now they could follow in her wake and leave the silver and dun shades that led to the heart of silence." (*BA*, 50) The others are happy when she breaks

with convention and momentarily dispels malicious silence with her unabashed comments. She tells the family that when arrives in the country the first thing she does is:

> 'Can I say it aloud? Is it permitted, Mrs. Swithin? Yes, everything can be said in this house. I take off my stays […] and roll in the grass. Roll – you'll believe that…' She laughed wholeheartedly. She had given up dealing with her figure and thus gained freedom.
> 'That's genuine,' Isa thought. Quite genuine.
> […] A thorough good sort she was. She made old Bart feel young. (*BA*, 42-43)

She dismisses all thoughts of "what can be said," giving herself the freedom to speak openly and therefore granting those around her that freedom as well. Her "stays" are a literally constraining piece of clothing that she takes off, an analogy for her decision to "give up dealing with" social expectations and live her life. When she pushes past convention, she releases some of the tension that has built as the other characters attempt to abide by social norms. The others feel less inwardly frustrated when she is able to momentarily relax the dynamic. Isa is impressed by Mrs. Manresa's genuine nature and Bart feels young, implying a sense of freedom and lightness. Mrs. Manresa's positive rupture with conventions is contrasted with the depressing state of the other characters' ongoing confinement to social norms. Woolf's portrayal of malicious silence in *Between the Acts* serves to argue that the social ideologies upon which we build our "civilized society" are the very constraining forces that make so many individuals feel trapped, angry, and vengeful. Yet the power of convention is so strong that many people feel unable to express what troubles them. Instead, negativity builds up as unspoken frustration and resentment of others. As we see in *Between the Acts*, the resulting aggressive silences enable the pervasiveness of hatred and disturb the sense of community between individuals.

For Woolf, silence has its own meaning. She uses prose to express what in external interactions cannot explicitly be heard, but is nonetheless felt, granting silence the attention it deserves. Silence can take the place of dialogue as its own form of conversation. In this way, silence relates directly to reality. But Woolf, never shying away from depicting life as accurately as possible, also dares to ask: what does silence look like when it is not related to reality? We have already seen how Giles hides behind his malicious thoughts targeted at others in order to avoid looking inward. In *Between the Acts*, Woolf also explores silence as passivity; a kind of detached silence that represents the community's reluctance to take a critical look at their world.

Silence as Passivity in *Between the Acts*

All of Woolf's novels are influenced by war, but as tyrannical regimes took hold in Europe in the 1930s, her writing became more explicitly involved with the threat of violence. Alice Wood writes that she "became increasingly preoccupied with dissecting the links between patriarchy, patriotism, fascism and war." (Wood, 2) Woolf considered her domain as an artist to be the cultural and social; she felt that "the novelist, as an intellectual, has a responsibility to critique contemporary culture." (Wood, 133) She therefore turned her attention to critiquing social ideologies like patriarchal values and patriotism, and their influence on the political sphere. In this time she wrote the novel *The Years* (1937) and the book-length essay *Three Guineas* (1938), in which she forcefully attacks the patriarchal structure of English society, famously drawing a parallel between the feminist movement within England and male politicians' fight against fascism abroad. (*Three Guineas,* 156) The fight for women's rights was not just a parallel for Woolf, however; she felt strongly that combatting interiorized tyranny in

England was the best chance of arresting the cycle of war with the rest of Europe. Her last three books reflect her determination to expose the patriarchal systems that she saw as a root cause of war. However, her focus remained as always on the social and cultural. As Wood quotes Mark Hussey, "'The connections between male supremacy and war are rarely explicit,' […] because she 'wants the reader to *become aware* for herself in the process of reading.'" (Wood, 107) For Woolf, what was important was not explicitly asserting her view, but, "'creating art that subtly transforms our perspectives by enacting in its form a subversive content.'" (Wood, 107) Through her nuanced depictions of English society, Woolf provokes her readers to question their assumptions about their own role in that society.

Woolf had reason to believe that members of English society were becoming complacent in their attitude towards war. As Wood quotes Katie Overy, "'By early 1938, the idea of war as a systemic inevitability was widespread.'" (Wood, 103) Woolf seems to have noted this assumption of inevitability among her fellow citizens. As a response to her sense that the necessary social progress was not being made, in her last three major works, Woolf portrays a Britain that is not making progress towards a truly civilized and peaceful society. It is interesting to consider how a possible "late style," influences these last works. Edward Said writes that "the experience of late style […] involves a nonharmonious, nonserene tension, and above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going *against*…." (Said, 7) Woolf certainly writes "against" in these last works. Alex Zwerdling argues that, "*The Years* can be read as a critique of the idea of progress." (Zwerdling, 304) Despite the social, political, and technological advancements that are made over the long course of the novel, "the sense of restlessness is as powerfully present in the younger, 'liberated' generation as it had been in its elders." (Zwerdling,

305) As her final novel, *Between the Acts* appears as the ultimate critique of what Woolf felt was a society dangerously resistant to an urgent need for change. Woolf's ambition to "attack Hitler in England" through Miss La Trobe's pageant is further proof that she was intent on exposing the fascist tendencies of her home society in the context of the external conflict. (Froula, 289) In *Between the Acts*, resistance to change is depicted as a passivity among the characters that can be read as silence. Every mention of the war is interrupted by empty, superficial comments. The audience members are all but forced by Miss La Trobe to take a critical part in the pageant. Yet questions such as "do we change?" haunt the text, unsettling both the audience within the novel and the reader. (*BA*, 121) It is due to this late style of irresolution between the voices in the novel that Woolf's own audience is forced to ask: do we? Can we? Will we? And further, if we aren't progressing towards an equal, peaceful society, why is that? And, if we can, how could it be done? Woolf lures out of her reader a voice, fostering an echo that gives life to hope.

As the war began and Woolf worked on *Between the Acts* and her biography of Roger Fry, she noted in her diary that the onset of war had muted the critical audience that sustained her sense of purpose as a writer. On June 9, 1940 she wrote:

> It struck me that one curious feeling is, that the writing 'I' has vanished. No audience. No echo. That's part of one's death. Not altogether serious, for I correct *Roger*, send finally I hope tomorrow: and could finish P.H. But it is a fact — this disparition of an echo. (*A Writer's Diary*, 323)

She could not hear her audience; the onset of war had dampened critical engagement with her work. Given what we know of Woolf's philosophy on the role of art to unify its audience through a common, disinterested experience, the fact that the prewar and early war period was resulting in less critical engagement with art and literature would have been acutely unsettling to her – she

compares it to death. Roger Fry's view of art as "'a necessary and culminating function of civilized life…without which modern civilization would become a luxurious barbarity,'" resonated deeply with Woolf. (Froula, 14) In May 1940, Woolf read her essay "The Leaning Tower," to the Workers' Educational Association. In one passage, she states that if England has made an effort to unify the classes, it can be seen in the establishment of the public library:

> That is England's way of saying: 'If I lend you books, I expect you to make yourselves critics.' […] It is thus that English literature will survive this war and cross the gulf – if commoners and outsiders like ourselves make that country our own country, if we teach ourselves how to read and to write, how to preserve, and how to create. ("The Leaning Tower")

She prevails upon her audience to "make yourselves critics," and directly links active critical engagement with progress and cultural survival. Woolf urges her audience to make noise, break the silence, and thus give peace and unity a chance.

In *Between the Acts*, silence is described as "the still, distilled essence of emptiness." (*BA*, 37) This idea of silence as emptiness appears connected to Woolf's feeling that an echo, or a response from an audience, was missing during the early years of World War II. In the novel, the lunch scene is hinged on the risk of slipping into the "heart of silence." If silence is emptiness, the heart of emptiness is death, bringing us once more to Woolf's words in her diary: "No echo. That's part of one's death." Silence is depicted as paralyzing, a slippery slope into death-like passivity. After lunch, the characters look at the view, an activity presented as distanced from present reality, since, as Lucy remarks, "'It'll be there […] when we're not.'" (*BA*, 53) The characters feel inclined to let their passivity overcome them, like succumbing to inertia:

Mrs. Swithin and William surveyed the view aloofly, and with detachment.

> How tempting, how very tempting, to let the view triumph; to reflect its ripple; to let their own minds ripple; to let outlines elongate and pitch over – so – with a sudden jerk. (*BA*, 66)

Silently looking at the view is described as akin to falling asleep. The view, like the picture of the lady in the dining room, seduces the characters into a state of passivity. Contextualized with Giles's (unspoken) anger only minutes before at the other characters' lack of concern for the impending war, this disconnected silence feels definitively evocative of Woolf's observation of a lacking critical audience in those pre- and early war years. Mrs. Manresa tries to pull herself and the others out of the silence: "Mrs. Manresa yielded, pitched, plunged, then pulled herself up. 'What a view!' she exclaimed […]." (*BA*, 66) She tries to begin conversation, but, "Nobody answered her. The flat fields glared green yellow, blue yellow, red yellow, then blue again. The repetition was senseless, hideous, stupefying." (*BA*, 67) Repetition, looking only at "what they knew," as the view is described, leads to senselessness; the characters are not using their power of intellectual individuality, and this is "hideous." (*BA,* 53, 67) The word "stupefying" not only describes the blank-minded stupor that the characters fall into as they regard the view, but the actual stupidity that prevails over the characters as they relinquish intellectual engagement with reality. By letting themselves become the view, they are no longer taking an active part in the present moment, but resigning themselves to the terrifying sense of inevitability that Woolf writes against. This complacency is depicted through the characters' passive silence.

Considering Zwerdling's argument that Woolf meant to critique the idea of progress, her description of this terrifying "progression" towards a death-like paralysis can be interpreted as a cutting critique of the sort of anti-progress she observed in the prevailing dialogues in England at the start of the war. While the characters may speak, they only discuss the view, on which hardly

any opinion can be had. Their words finally die away, until nobody bothers to answer Mrs. Manresa. The narration suggests that the characters have given up on language; as they stare into the senseless repetition of the view they forget the meaning or importance of discussion, slipping into a coma-like state. Even silent dialogues are muted. No wonder Woolf related the "disparition of an echo" to death – a comatose society at such a critical time in history means death, both of a chance at progress and quite literally of people, who were being killed every day in the war (a fact that Woolf paid particular attention to in her diary as air raids increased in England).

Set in June 1939, three months before England declared war on Germany, it is important that for the most part the impending war is ignored by the portrayed community summering in the countryside outside of London. Throughout most of the novel, conversations about the war are quickly interrupted by superficial comments about day-to-day concerns: "'It all looks very black.' 'No one wants it – save those damned Germans.' There was a pause. 'I'd cut down those trees…' 'How they get their roses to grow!'" (*BA*, 151) It is as if the community cannot sustain a dialogue about the war. Their silence on the subject that demands their critical attention ("There was a pause") is concealed by empty words requiring no intellectual effort, reflecting the silence Woolf sensed when she wrote, "No audience. No echo." As the characters look at the view, Giles's thoughts warn the reader of the juxtaposition of the violence outside of England with the seemingly peaceful day portrayed in the novel:

> Giles nicked his chair into position with a jerk. Thus only could he show his irritation, his rage with old fogies who sat and looked at views over coffee and cream when the whole of Europe – over there – was bristling like… He had no command of metaphor. Only the ineffective word "hedgehog" illustrated his vision of Europe, bristling with guns, poised with planes. […] He, too, loved the view. And blamed Aunt Lucy, looking at views, instead of – doing what? (*BA*, 53)

The last two words – “doing what?” – are essential to Woolf’s realistically complex portrayal of this prewar reality. The threat of war is undeniably real, and yet Giles’s inability to answer his own question as to what they should be doing instead of looking at the view reveals the difficulty citizens felt at knowing what other role they could take. Woolf admitted in her diary in August 1939 that, “It’s the comment – the daily interjection – that comes handy in times like these. I too feel it.” (*A Writer’s Diary*, 303) Woolf allows for the fact that individuals such as the characters in *Between the Acts* feel quite powerless against the coming of war and fascism abroad. This sense of powerlessness can be read in their desire to lapse into small talk and stare unthinking at the view. Woolf depicts the sense that many had that, if there was nothing they could do, why talk about it? What can more discussion change? Despite her somewhat sympathetic portrayal of the tendency toward defeated silence, Woolf’s response as an artist is that although the political may feel out of reach, engagement with art and cultural critique brings about productive questioning that has the potential to uproot values that lead to violence and war.

Interestingly, Woolf’s belief that engagement with art is key to a progressive, rather than silenced, society is hinted at on the following page when Bartholomew asks Dodge, who is interested in art, why we are, “‘as a race, so incurious, irresponsive and insensitive…to that noble art, whereas, Mrs. Manresa…has her Shakespeare by heart?’” (*BA*, 54) Mrs. Manresa, the honest, open, silence-shattering one is, presumably, curious, responsive, and sensitive to art; specifically, given the reference to Shakespeare, to literature. Given her role as silence-breaker, Bart’s comment contrasting Mrs. Manresa’s character with the rest of their “incurious, irresponsive, insensitive” society suggests a buried commentary by Woolf on art’s potential to bring out the honesty and progressiveness embodied by Mrs. Manresa, as long as one is willing

to interact with it. In her unfinished autobiography, Woolf wrote: "'*Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.'" (Froula, 300) Mrs. Manresa is famously the only character who is unafraid to look at her own reflection during the pageant's "Present Time" mirror scene. The fact that she can look herself in the eye when no other character can is related to Woolf's belief that art reflects "we." To turn away "incurious, irresponsive and insensitive" from art is a refusal to look at our own troubled reflections, which inhibits our potential as a society.

The audience is not only portrayed as passive, but considers itself to be a definitively passive part of the pageant. When Mrs. Manresa, always the active force, asks if they can do something to help, Bart replies, "'No, no…We are the audience.'" (*BA*, 59) Bart's conviction that it is their role to do nothing is immediately challenged: "'We remain seated' – 'We are the audience.' Words this afternoon ceased to lie flat in the sentence. They rose, became menacing and shook their fists at you." (*BA,* 59) While the audience members are decidedly uninvolved as the pageant begins, words are personified as angry and frustrated with the oblivious passivity of those who should be using them in a critical, productive way. The contrast between the passive phrases repeated in this line and the image of words shaking their fists reveals Woolf's view that while we may appear to speak, empty language is a form of silence. Language that evades the topic of war that weighs on the political and social moment is actually silence; it exists to fill a void that is ultimately still there, and works against progress. Directly after this line, we dip into Giles's consciousness: "This afternoon he wasn't Giles Oliver come to see the villagers act their annual pageant; manacled to a rock he was, and forced passively to behold indescribable horror."

(*BA*, 60) Although Giles is too influenced by convention to break out of the effacing role of passive audience member to which he feels chained, the image of being "forced passively to behold indescribable horror" evokes a sense of terrifying muteness, like being stuck in a nightmare and unable to scream. The direct use of "passively" in relation to "indescribable horror" closely links silence as critical resignation and horror, which is very similar to the connection between "senseless" and "hideous" less than ten pages later. The language is hyperbolic in the context of the pageant, but successfully evokes the violence of war and the danger of silence, revealing Woolf's submerged critique.

Woolf writes La Trobe's audience as a metaphor for her society as consumers of art. Miss La Trobe, the artist, wants to convince her audience to engage with the art by provoking emotion within them. As Froula writes, she attempts to "bring out the community's voices, hidden and potential." (Froula, 303) But while the pageant does begin to get under the audience members' skin, they resist engagement for as long as possible. As the first lines of the pageant are spoken, Mrs. Manresa feels an uncomfortable distance between herself and the actors:

> [Phyllis Jones's] words peppered the audience as with a shower of hard little stones. Mrs. Manresa in the very centre smiled; but she felt as if her skin cracked when she smiled. There was a vast vacancy between her, the singing villagers and the piping child. (*BA*, 78)

She senses an empty space dividing the audience from the action on stage, and her smile feels false and broken. Considering the relationship between emptiness and silence in the text, the "vast vacancy" can be interpreted as the silence of the audience's uninvolved stance as onlookers. Later, at tea, Mrs. Manresa tries to talk about the play with other audience members:

> 'And what did you think of the play?' she asked.
> Bartholomew looked at his son. His son remained silent.

> 'And you Mrs. Swithin?' Mrs. Manresa pressed the old lady.
> Lucy mumbled, looking at the swallows.
> 'I was hoping you'd tell me,' said Mrs. Manresa. 'Was it an old play? Was it a new play?'
> No one answered. (*BA*, 109)

Bartholomew, Lucy, and Giles all but refuse to answer; they remain silent rather than breaking with their passive position as unquestioning bystanders. The characters' almost guilty but resolute self-exemption from the conversation Mrs. Manresa tries to start reveals the community members' reluctance to intellectually engage with art.

Later, as villagers change the scene on stage, "the audience sat gazing; and beheld gently and approvingly without interrogation, for it seemed inevitable, a box tree take the place of the ladies' dressing-room […]." (*BA*, 134) As they finish placing the props, "Mrs. Elmhurst roused herself from her reverie," in order to read the program aloud to her husband. The audience is described as asleep, accepting whatever happens on stage "approvingly without interrogation." Most shocking, however, is the line, "for it seemed inevitable." Their silent acquiescence due to a sense of inevitability is startling in the context of Woolf's critique of society's dumbfounded passivity facing World War II.

It is Miss La Trobe's experiment with "Present Time" that catches her audience so off-guard that they can no longer deny their active role in the play. Despite some curiosity as the play goes on, the audience is still slipping into passive silence. On the program, they read: "'The Present Time. Ourselves.'" (*BA*, 178) Their reaction, not ascribed to any particular character, is telling of their desire to detach themselves from the point of attention or responsibility:

> 'Ourselves….' They returned to the programme. But what could she know about ourselves? The Elizabethans, yes; the Victorians, perhaps; but ourselves; sitting here on a June day in 1939 – it was ridiculous. 'Myself' – it was impossible. Other people, perhaps… (*BA,* 178-9)

The specific reference to a date in history reveals the characters' attempt to exempt themselves from history and deny their own place in the pageant. They refuse to acknowledge their own part in that moment. The line "Other people, perhaps…" brings to the fore the passivity they are attempting to defend. Woolf blurs the lines between third person narration and free indirect discourse, in order to "emphasize the common tongue" and reveal aspects of a shared mindset. (Beer, 135)

La Trobe senses the audience's reticence to consider why she has included this part of the pageant. Her reaction reminds the reader of Woolf's diary entry relating death to a lacking echo:

> She wanted to expose them, as it were, to douche them, with present-time reality. But something was going wrong with the experiment. 'Reality too strong,' she muttered. 'Curse 'em!' She felt everything they felt. Audiences were the devil […] Every second they were slipping the noose. […] Grating her fingers in the bark, she damned the audience. […] This is death, death, death, she noted in the margin of her mind; when illusion fails. (*BA*, 180)

She is out of tools to conjure emotion within her audience, and she is losing them to their sleep-like default state; she feels powerless. She is testing the connection between silence and physical reality, hoping that the silence on stage prompts the audience's awareness of their existence in space. But when reality becomes "too strong," they start to become lost to an unattached, unintellectual silence. It is only when a sudden, unexpected rain shower pours down on them "like all the people in the world weeping" that her experiment regains its potential force because of the intense emotion evoked by the rain. (*BA*, 180) As La Trobe murmurs with a twinge of Woolfian humor, "'That's done it.'" (*BA*, 180) Maria DiBattista notes that silence almost kills emotion at several points during the pageant. (DiBattista, 208) Woolf portrays nature "as ground, as reality" in *Between the Acts*, and contrasts it with the manmade, which belongs to a portrayed

history of “error, burden, constraint.” (Froula, 297) In this scene, Nature is personified as rescuing the moment from silence by grounding the audience in the emotion of the moment; “Nature had once more taken her part.” (*BA*, 181) The rain shower can be read as representative of the undeniable reality that will finally pull everyone out of their denial-driven reverie – the official onset of World War II, perhaps. But the audience is still caught up in their conviction that they are due a flattering image of themselves.

When the villagers begin to put up a new scene including an unfinished wall representing civilization, the audience responds with “a burst of applause,” at this “flattering tribute to ourselves.” (*BA*, 182) Here, the narration makes ironic use of free indirect discourse. “Crude of course. A painted cloth must convey – what the *Times* and *Telegraph* both said in their leaders this very morning.” (*BA*, 182) The audience members have gravely misinterpreted the wall, however, which is still being built (notably with the help of a “woman handing bricks”). Froula discusses Woolf’s disagreement with Freud’s belief that civilization is necessarily masculine, writing that “Woolf frames woman as civilization’s *natural* inheritor[…]. For Freud civilization is *naturally* masculine; for Woolf it is *unnaturally* masculine.” (Froula, 294) This analysis plays into Wood’s reading of *Between the Acts* as “a sustained work of cultural criticism through which Woolf interrogates art’s social role and delivers an oblique feminist-pacifist commentary on the past, present and potential future of English culture.” (Wood, 103) In *Three Guineas*, Woolf argues that unless the daughters of educated men are granted access to education and profession, “those daughters cannot possess an independent and disinterested influence with which to help you to prevent war.” (*Three Guineas*, 84) Her hope for a peaceful, equal future in which

"disinterested culture and intellectual liberty," is preserved relies on the inclusion of women as equal members of society. (*Three Guineas*)

La Trobe's wall represents the view that civilization does not yet exist and that hope for its completion rests on the development of a society no longer formed by patriarchal values – hence the woman helping to build. (*BA*, 181) As Froula argues, members of the Bloomsbury group, influenced by Kant's idea that Enlightenment is an "unending struggle," felt that civilization had never existed. (Froula, 3) Yet the audience members, comforted by the assumption that they are civilized, are so out of the habit of self-analysis that they can't see La Trobe's point. The silence of the dash between "convey – what the *Times*" puts into question whether the publications said anything worth discussing, and if they did, whether the audience members are able to remember. Even if the papers had said something of worth, the community members' thoughts cannot reach or express what that might have been, suggesting a lack of intellectual engagement with the material. Again, the subject of war and current events is skipped over and left to silence. Rather than consider La Trobe's pageant from a critical stance that could threaten their sense of exemption from history, the audience opts for a passively optimistic view of "ourselves" as civilized and accomplished.

Miss La Trobe plays jazz over the gramophone, using sound to clash with the audience's sense of comfort with themselves, and the mirror scene begins. The villagers hold up reflecting objects to the audience, capturing the fragmented images of those passive onlookers. The audience is shocked, portrayed as fish out of water: "Out they leapt, jerked, skipped. Flashing, dazzling, dancing, jumping. Now old Bart…he was caught. Now Manresa. Here a nose… There a skirt… Then trousers only… Now perhaps a face…." (*BA*, 184) As Woolf ruminated over the

novel that would become *Between the Acts* in the spring of 1938, she wrote that she wanted to depict the idea of, “we all life, all art, all waifs & strays – a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole.” (*A Writer’s Diary*, 279) In this scene, Woolf portrays a fragmented community, but we know from her initial vision that she holds out hope that these “waifs & strays” can unify. In the mirror scene, the audience is mortified by their reflections. The narrator enters once again into an unidentified free indirect discourse: “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.” (*BA*, 184) They are embarrassed at being exposed for what they are, making it difficult to excuse or defend their reflections. The ultimate truth about their situation is not, however, in the fragmented reflection of themselves, but in their immobility. When the actors stop moving and flashing the mirrors and hold their reflecting props still, “the audience saw themselves, not whole by any means, but at any rate sitting still.” (*BA*, 185) This is the ultimate point. The stillness of the audience, which returns us to “the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence.” (*BA*, 37) The novel relates stillness, emptiness, and silence from the beginning, linguistically and philosophically connecting the stubborn passivity of the audience members with a community-wide silence.

It is at this point in the novel that the metaphor of La Trobe’s audience as Woolf’s contemporary English society becomes most profound. Shifting between third person narration and free indirect discourse once more, the narration emphasizes the consciousness Miss La Trobe has forced upon her audience:

The hands of the clock had stopped at the present moment. It was now. Ourselves.

> So that was her little game! To show us up, as we are, here and now. […] Even Bart, even Lucy, turned away. All evaded or shaded themselves – save Mrs. Manresa who, facing herself in the glass, used it as a glass[…].
> 'Magnificent!' cried old Bartholomew. Alone she preserved unashamed her identity, and faced without blinking herself. Calmly she reddened her lips. (*BA*, 186)

Their disgust at or even fear of their own reflections reveals a fear of recognizing one's own identity, and one's responsibility as an individual to take part in the whole. It is embarrassing, even shameful. They attempt to fill this embarrassed moment with empty language in order to conceal the deeper silence with superficial words: "'Must we submit passively to this malignant indignity?' the front row demanded. Each turned ostensibly to say – O whatever came handy – to his neighbor." (*BA*, 186) They wish to take action in order to escape exposure, but still revert to a kind of void-filling silence. Woolf uses "malignant indignity" both to evoke the denial-ridden view of the audience members, but also to make the point that the passive silence she criticizes in her community is undignified.

The following speech by the gramophone holds these now captured individuals accountable before anyone is able to leave. It begins,

> *Before we part, ladies and gentlemen, before we go…* (Those who had risen sat down) ... *let's talk in words of one syllable, without larding, stuffing or cant. Let's break the rhythm and forget the rhyme. And calmly consider ourselves.*" (*BA,* 187)

In its first lines, the gramophone's speech suggests the idea of excessive, indirect language as silencing the considerations that lead to progressive thought. Reminiscent of Said's idea that late style is often a "bristling, difficult, and unyielding […] challenge," Woolf challenges her own medium, language, by confronting words' power to congest and distract. The gramophone calls the audience "*Liars most of us*," and proceeds to ask them to "*Consider*" numerous times, until it says: "*Consider the gun slayers, bomb droppers here or there. They do openly what we do*

slyly." (*BA*, 187) In one of the most direct moments of the novel, La Trobe attacks her audience's complicity in a society that is once more facing war, linking their passive silence to the violence of guns and bombs. Woolf argues that everyone plays a part, and while denying one's impact may be comfortable, that kind of low-lying stance in which we ignore our own part and the violence we commit ("*what we do slyly*") enables a culture of unquestioned violence to continue to pervade society and lead to war. Froula argues that the voice "borrows Hitler's braying tactics," and reclaims them, "to insist […] on the spectators' agency." (Froula, 313) The gramophone continues:

> *Look at ourselves, ladies and gentlemen! Then at the wall; and ask how's this wall, the great wall, which we call, perhaps miscall, civilization, to be built by* (here the mirrors flicked and flashed) *orts, scraps and fragments like ourselves*? (*BA* 188)

The voice demands that the audience members "*Look*" and "*ask*," as it calls for unification. Woolf's philosophy that critical engagement with art results in unification is distinctly visible here. Zwerdling argues that Woolf is testing "the liberal-pacifist ideal of mankind's fundamental unity." (Zwerdling, 309) If true civilization is to be our ultimate achievement, Woolf argues that unification through critical dialogue is an essential prerequisite.

In the final pages of *Three Guineas*, Woolf returns to the image of a photograph portraying a tyrant surrounded by dead bodies and houses destroyed by war. She examines the emotions the photograph is meant to rouse, which does not include "the sterile emotion of hate." (*Three Guineas*, 142) In a striking passage, she reveals how a critical look at the photograph has the power to remind us of our fundamental unity as humans:

> It suggests that the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected; that the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other. It suggests that we cannot disassociate ourselves from that figure but that are ourselves that figure. It

> suggests that we are not passive spectators doomed to unresisting obedience but by our thoughts and actions can ourselves change that figure. A common interest unites us; it is one world, one life. How essential it is that we should realise that unity the dead bodies, the ruined houses prove. For such will be our ruin if you in the immensity of your public abstractions forget the private figure, or if we in the intensity of our private emotions forget the public world. (*Three Guineas*, 142)

Woolf exemplifies the power of critical awareness in the face of war to remind us of our "common interest," which is peace. When we face reality and portrayals of reality, without shying away from the pain or discomfort that might result from that engagement, we have given ourselves the opportunity to make positive change. Woolf is adamant on the essential connection between public and private life. It is essential to Woolf that citizens recognize, through critical thought, their complicity in society. In her portrayal of the audience in *Between the Acts,* she attempts to describe the ways in which individual interactions and attitudes directly reflect society on a grander, political scale.

After the gramophone's speech, the audience is portrayed as increasingly unified. This evolution is described through the classical tune that begins to play from the gramophone. As the melody and harmonies converge, the narration evokes the audience's critical awakening:

> On different levels ourselves went forward; flower gathering some on the surface; others descending to wrestle with the meaning; but all comprehending; all enlisted. The whole population of the mind's immeasurable profundity came flocking; […] from chaos and cacophony measure; but not the melody of surface sound alone controlled it; but also the warring battle-plumed warriors straining asunder. To part? No. Compelled from the ends of the horizon; recalled from the edge of appalling crevasses; they crashed; solved; united. And some relaxed their fingers; and others uncrossed their legs. (*BA*, 189)

The motif of the many floating voices throughout the novel is depicted here through music, and the "chaos and cacophony" of different opinions and questions expressed becomes "measure," a kind of progressive rhythm that leads to solution and unification. Woolf's use of "enlisted," as

well as other military references throughout the passage suggests that thinking is the real fight, and stresses that remaining critical in wartime supports the possibility of unity in the future. Music as layered, complex sound leads to unity as it combats silence, or the critical passivity that prevents society from moving towards civilization and away from violence and war.

The end of the pageant is followed by a thoughtful speech by Reverend Streatfield, who proposes that "'it was indicated that we are members one of another. Each is part of the whole. Yes, that occurred to me, sitting among you in the audience. […] Surely, we should unite?'" (*BA*, 192) His speech is an unexpectedly good interpretation of La Trobe's intention, but his deadpan surprise at his own analysis and his hesitation as he suggests unification – "'Yes, that occurred to me,'" and "'Surely, we should unite?'" – is a wry jab from Woolf at the society she critiques. Represented by Reverend Streatfield, the audience members are portrayed as so out of practice of using their critical abilities that they shock themselves, and feel self-conscious in the act of expressing such thoughts. As the crowd starts to disperse, the gramophone speaks once more:

> *Dispersed are we; who have come together. But*, the gramophone asserted, *let us retain whatever made that harmony*.
> O let us, the audience echoed (stooping, peering, fumbling), keep together. For there is joy, sweet joy, in company. (*BA*, 196)

The harmony that has finally brought them together happened when the audience became an engaged part of the pageant. As if to prove that harmony was made by a certain break in silence, "the audience echoed." There is an echo, or a response, after so much silence from the audience. That echo is then continued in the form of questioning speech by audience members:

> 'I thought it brilliantly clever… O my dear, I thought it utter bosh. Did *you* understand the meaning? Well, he said she meant we all act parts… He said, too, if I caught his meaning, Nature takes part…. Then there was the idiot…. Also, why leave out the Army, as my husband was saying, if it's history?' (*BA*, 197)

Woolf portrays the audience as unified in speech, but not in opinion. They are conversing, disagreeing, searching for meaning as a group that has shared the experience of observing a piece of art. Froula argues that this portrayal of unresolved critical discussion is part of Woolf's fight against Hitler in England: "the difference and disagreement voiced in the pageant's wake become practical proofs of the spectator's freedom […] against the totalitarian threat" of a singular accepted viewpoint and interpretation forced upon the subjects of a fascist regime. (Froula, 320)

As the audience members question their individual places in society, the unidentified characters vaguely express Woolf's meaning:

> '…He said she meant we all act. Yes, but whose play? Ah, that's the question! And if we're left asking questions, isn't it a failure, as a play? I must say I like to feel sure if I go to the theatre, that I've grasped the meaning… Or was that, perhaps, what she meant? […] that if we don't jump to conclusions, if you think, and I think, perhaps one day, thinking differently, we shall think the same?' (*BA*, 199-200)

The goal is not to think the same ideas, but to take responsibility for the power of our individual voices in the hopes that one day we might think the same; thinking, adding to the echo rather than to silence, is keeping the opportunity for peace alive. (Froula, 321) War can only be considered an inevitability by those who have ceased to engage in cultural critique and consider positive change.

The audience members also become more honest and open about the coming war in the these last snippets of conversation. They ask complex questions that would not have been spoken earlier in the text, such as: "'[…] can the Christian faith adapt itself? In times like these…'" and, "'I agree – things look worse than ever on the continent. And what's the channel, come to think of it, if they mean to invade us?'" (*BA*, 198-99) Their self-protective denial of the war seems to

have become less powerful; they ask difficult questions and admit the impending danger that has been so strikingly ignored for the majority of the novel. One voice says, "'It's true, there's a sense in which we all, I admit, are savages still.'" (*BA*, 199) This line appears as a revolutionary moment in the text. Throughout most of the novel, characters discuss savagery as something of the past. The ability to admit the existence of savagery in all of us, which is also an implicit acceptance of our individual effect on a larger social culture, is an essential step toward the self-aware progressiveness that Woolf (through La Trobe) hopes to foster in her audience.

In her essay-speech "The Leaning Tower," Woolf expresses her hopes for the future of England after the war. She argues that, despite her disagreements with the "Leaning Tower" generation of writers, the leaning-tower writer,

> has had the courage to tell the truth, the unpleasant truth, about himself. That is the first step towards telling the truth about other people. By analysing themselves honestly, with help from Dr. Freud, these writers have done a great deal to free us from nineteenth-century suppressions. The writers of the next generation may inherit from them a whole state of mind, a mind no longer crippled, evasive, divided. ("The Leaning Tower")

Her speech relates directly to the improved ability of the audience members to speak the unpleasant truths about "ourselves" after the mirror scene and the gramophone's speech force them to reflect and to question. Woolf expresses her hope for a classless, equal society after WWII, and hinges this hope on the active critical engagement of all members of society. Wood writes: "Through her writing *Between the Acts* Woolf explored communal fears for the future of English culture, British society and Western civilization in the face of international conflict with grim pessimism while, paradoxically, maintaining a persistent hope that from this conflict a positive new future for Britain and for Europe might emerge." (Wood, 104) As we see in the early scenes of *Between the Acts* in which Mrs. Manresa raises the morale of the other characters

as she leads them away from the "heart of silence," open, honest, and grounded speech is the opposite of the silence and emptiness that Woolf relates to death and war. The final line of the novel, "They spoke," portrays Isa and Giles finally about to speak, both in their real lives and in Miss La Trobe's imagination as the actors of next year's play. (*BA*, 219) The audience members are placed directly into the play of the future, in which they finally break the silence that has lasted between them throughout the entire novel. While nothing is resolved, Woolf proposes that hope for their unification, and in a greater sense England's and Europe's, rests in honest speech.

Silence as Feminist Resistance in *Between the Acts*

Silence in its many forms has depicted unspoken and unchallenged forces in society throughout literary history. Yet silence can also be written as resistance. This somewhat counterintuitive idea of silence can be traced throughout Woolf's works. *Jacob's Room*, considered her first mature novel, is an experiment on exclusion; the gaps in narration challenge conventions of plot, and its titular character is decidedly unknowable. The middle section of *To The Lighthouse*, "Time Passes," is an indirect depiction of WWI, focusing on the destructive, erosive power of nature rather than humanity; the deaths of characters are famously written in brackets, as side-notes. In *Orlando*, the pseudo-biographer is provocatively silent on the most obvious oddities of the story, notably Orlando's sudden change of sex and the fact that she lives for approximately three hundred years. *The Waves* is a novel without a narrator or external dialogue, composed completely of the interior musings of six characters over their lives. By the time Woolf wrote *Between the Acts*, she was confident in her use of silence as a subversive device through which she could challenge normalized narratives. The onset of WWII and her

intensified focus on writing a feminist-pacifist philosophy into her works gives resistant silence a distinctly feminist objective in this last novel. Isa and Miss La Trobe's silences are presented as a linked resistance against traditionally patriarchal narratives. Isa refuses to speak to Giles as she reconsiders her domestic role, and Miss La Trobe, like Woolf, writes silences into her pageant in order to provoke cultural criticism from her audience. Froula notes that Woolf had been reading Freud's theory on the evolution of marriage while writing *Between the Acts.* Freud argues that men created the marriage system in order to legitimize sexuality through marriage, sacrificing women's autonomy in order to enable peace between naturally violent, jealous men. (Froula, 294) Froula clarifies: "The sacralized exchange of women forges bonds among men who might otherwise be at war, while the exogamous bride functions as a scapegoat whose expulsion from the community buys peace." (Froula, 294) Woolf clearly disagreed with Freud's conviction that this patriarchal system that silences women prevents war or upholds civilized life. Through her depictions of Isa and Miss La Trobe's resistant silences, Woolf challenges the patriarchal values of a society that once again faces war with Europe and proposes that "next year's play," or the next post-war society reconsider the patriarchal narrative that led to two World Wars in a span of twenty years.

Isa and Miss La Trobe are presented as subversive feminist characters from the beginning of the novel. The narrator's voice is unusually audible as it describes Isa:

> 'Abortive,' was the word that expressed her. She never came out of a shop, for example, with the clothes she admired; nor did her figure, seen against the dark roll of trousering in a shop window, please her. Thick of waist, large of limb, and, save for her hair, fashionable in the tight modern way, she never looked like Sappho […]. (*BA*, 16)

She is not the charming, slight of waist leading lady one has learned to expect. The tension between her stereotypical domestic role and her character is apparent from the first moment we see her, the evening before the pageant, when her romantic interest in Mr. Haines, “the gentleman farmer,” is restricted by her marriage: “But his snow-white breast was circled with a tangle of dirty duckweed; and she, too, in her webbed feet was entangled, by her husband, the stockbroker.” (*BA*, 5) But she acts against convention, sitting when Mrs. Haines stands to leave. Thus Woolf hints at Isa’s part as an “abortive” version of the wife and mother figure.

La Trobe is first presented retrospectively, as Bart remembers her visit to Pointz Hall over the winter to see the grounds. “‘That’s the place for a pageant, Mr. Oliver!’” she says of the high ground, which, as Froula notes, is where the narrator has previously said the house was erroneously not built:

> It was a pity that the man who had built Pointz Hall had pitched the house in a hollow, when beyond the flower garden and the vegetables there was this stretch of high ground. Nature had provided a site for a house; man had built his house in a hollow. (*BA*, 57, 10; Froula 301)

La Trobe chooses to perform her pageant on the “higher ground” where Nature, personified as feminine throughout the novel, would have preferred man to build his house. Woolf’s nuanced metaphor here is only substantiated by the character description of La Trobe that follows, in which we find out among other things that she is likely a lesbian (“She had bought a four-roomed cottage and shared it with an actress”) and that,

> Outwardly she was swarthy, sturdy and thick set; strode about the fields in a smock frock; sometimes with a cigarette in her mouth; often with a whip in her hand; and used rather strong language – perhaps, then, she wasn’t altogether a lady? At any rate, she had a passion for getting things up. (*BA*, 58)

La Trobe, like Isa, does not conform to society's ideals for women, but to a more extreme degree. The narrator's question, "perhaps, then, she wasn't altogether a lady?" asks the reader, with deceiving nonchalance, to consider what makes a lady, and whether we agree that these external indicators of personality and lifestyle somehow exclude La Trobe from femininity. Woolf presents La Trobe, her own representative, as an embodied provocation of gender roles.

Both Isa and Miss La Trobe are pitted against the literary canon in the text. Isa's silence manifests itself in a rebellious inner poetic dialogue in which she bemoans her domestic role and develops her own voice. Isa writes her poetry in "a book bound like an account book lest Giles might suspect." This detail adds to Woolf's commentary on the literal bounds of literature and the limitations that society's prescribed narratives put on "outsider" voices such as those of women like Isa. (*BA*, 50) Isa is silenced by the narrative that she must abide by in order to preserve her heteronormative, middle class marriage. Their relationship is described and excused through the use of clichés throughout the text. As Isa daydreams about Mr. Haines, she pulls herself back to reality by reminding herself that Giles is "'The father of my children,'" which the narrator qualifies as "the cliché conveniently provided by fiction." (*BA,* 14) The connection to fiction suggests that the constraint of heteronormative domestic roles is caused by fictional or imagined boundaries. But it also implies that fiction, or the literary canon to which Woolf's readers would refer, is so defined by patriarchal assumptions of gender roles and sexuality that those narratives have become clichéd and inadequate. Later, when William Dodge observes Giles and Isa interact at tea, he notes their extremely clichéd situation: "Hirsute, handsome, virile, the young man in the blue jacket and brass buttons, standing in a beam of dusty light, was her husband. And she his wife. Their relations, as he had noted at lunch, were as people say in novels

'strained.'" (*BA*, 106) The unnecessary repetition of their roles as husband and wife, the romantic but unoriginal description of Giles, and the reference once again to their resemblance to couples in novels questions the prevalence of ideals that lead to such "strained," unhappy relationships in the first place.

In the morning, Isa searches the house's library for a book that will soothe her after Bart provokes her about her son, even though he knows that "she loathed the domestic, the possessive; the maternal." (*BA*, 19) In an expository passage on male dominion over academia, Isa considers books of all backgrounds, hoping to find something that will, to use Woolf's metaphor, cure her raging toothache. Every book she considers, from every intellectual realm is written by a man:

> […] she considered: Keats and Shelley; Yeats and Donne. Or perhaps not a poem; a life. The life of Garibaldi. The life of Lord Palmerston. Or perhaps not a person's life; a county's. *The Antiquities of Durham; The Proceedings of the Archaeological Society of Nottingham*. Or not a life at all, but science – Eddington, Darwin, or Jeans.
> None of them stopped her toothache. (*BA*, 19-20)

Woolf leads the reader through Isa's impossible search for a book that might reflect her soul, if "'The mirror of the soul'" they are. (*BA*, 19) It is clear that this last cliché is also only applicable to a society built for men, by men. Woolf extends beyond the context of her own novel to show that women's voices are not represented in the metaphorical "library."

Instead of a book, Isa reads an article about the gang rape of a young girl by three British soldiers – a story Woolf took from contemporary newspapers. Wood notes that this use of a real life story challenges the idea of English soldiers protecting the island from external violence, when among them are perpetrators of cruelty against fellow citizens. (Wood, 125) The story deeply affects Isa, and actually becomes part of her inner experience. As she listens to Bart and

Lucy predictably discuss the weather, the narrator writes of their conversation as a series of chimes: "The same chime followed the same chime, only this year beneath the chime she heard: 'The girl screamed and hit him about the face with a hammer.'" (*BA*, 22) The story can be seen as an instigator for Isa's intensified questioning of her role as a woman throughout the day, initiating "her private struggle toward speech" and calling "women's desire and speech out from the crevices, the secret account books, of a civilization still mired in barbarism." (Froula, 296) Her resistant silence, which she uses to meditate upon her true desires and resist Giles's demands, is tinged with this story of the very real violence women face as a result of society's internalized sexism.

Even the silenced counter-narrative Isa explores is enough to throw her and Giles's power dynamic into flux. She is generally angry with him, and his behavior, particularly his silent violence against Dodge and his flirtation with Mrs. Manresa, does not improve her opinion. Rather than speak to him openly, she challenges him silently. She knocks over a coffee cup rather than coax him out of his enraged state after lunch; she responds soundlessly to his angry rant about Dodge, asking, "was it wrong if he was that word?" (*BA*, 61) She is upset with his attachment to Mrs. Manresa at tea, thinking: "She could hear in the dusk in their bedroom the usual explanation. It made no difference; his infidelity – but hers did." (*BA*, 110) In her silent thoughts, she questions the "usual." When he protests her silent treatment at tea, he "did what to Isa was his little trick; shut his lips; frowned; and took up the pose of one who bears the burden of the world's woe, making money for her to spend." (*BA*, 111) Although the reader is told that this is "his little trick," implying that it usually has an effect, Isa is unmoved. She responds with continued silence in which she takes an unexpected stance: "'No,' said Isa, as plainly as words

could say it. 'I don't admire you,' and looked, not at his face, but as his feet. 'Silly little boy with blood on his boots.' Giles shifted his feet. Whom then did she admire?" (*BA*, 111) She not only refuses to speak or show sympathy, but belittles him, refusing to stoop to his level at her own expense. This rattles him – he "shifted his feet," revealing that he feels destabilized by her silent resistance of their usual dynamic.

La Trobe is in the position of writing a history pageant, which has an established tradition that her audience likely recognizes and expects. Instead of following a typical historical narrative, La Trobe mocks the literary traditions of the historical periods she portrays and focuses her scenes on cultural references. Woolf makes a case for her belief that literature should appear apolitical through La Trobe's cultural critique, which implicitly interrogates into how cultural values impact politics without ever mentioning war or political events. (Wood, 116) Many of her scenes might appear random, but ultimately they illuminate the immorality and absurdity within the cultural history she delineates, which is not so far removed from the present-day society represented in the audience. In the scene, "Where There's a Will There's a Way," the comedy is unsettled by Sir Spaniel's intense misogyny, which La Trobe writes into his silences, or his "asides," reminding us of Woolf's focus on the violence that can be communicated through silence. While openly flattering Lady Harpy Harraden in the hopes of marrying her niece who has a large inheritance, Sir Spaniel is despicably insulting in his asides, saying, "*The old hag stinks like a red herring that's been stood over head in a tar barrel!*" and "*She jingles like a she-ass at a fair!*" (*BA*, 128-9) His hyperbole is comedic, but La Trobe writes this scene into her history pageant in order to highlight the sexist, money-driven culture that has shaped contemporary English society.

La Trobe's silence, or exclusion, of a politically driven narrative of English history is purposeful and provocative. She creates space between scenes, which can be viewed as writing in silences, in order to stimulate discussion from her audience. The audience members seem to be constantly "between acts," – there are many intervals, and the phrase "the stage was empty" crops up again and again. During some of these moments, random characters find themselves thinking about La Trobe's meaning, and how her scenes connect to the historical narrative they already know. Mrs. Lynn Jones asks herself why the home life of the Victorian period didn't last, concluding that, "What she meant was, change had to come, unless things were perfect; in which case she supposed they resisted Time." (*BA*, 174) Colonel Mayhew is disconcerted by La Trobe's silence on war: "the choice of scenes baffled him. 'Why leave out the British Army? What's history without the Army, eh?' he mused." (*BA*, 157) His question is proof that La Trobe's silence resists the idea of "history" with which the audience members feel comfortable. Characters begin to ask whether as a society they have really changed. During the interval after "Where There's a Will There's a Way," they are portrayed as feeling,

> Not quite themselves […]. Or was it simply that they felt clothes conscious? Skimpy out-of-date voile dresses; flannel trousers; panama hats; hats wreathed with raspberry-coloured net in the style of the Royal Duchess's hat at Ascot seemed flimsy somehow." (BA, 149)

Their clothes feel flimsy, out of date, not enough to cover up the fact that La Trobe, through her silent resistance of the normalized, self-congratulatory narrative, is slowly exposing them for the close descendants of Sir Spaniel's society that they are.

Miss La Trobe's unusual take on the historical pageant provokes a poetic dialogue within Isa about history's influence on the present. She stands beneath the pear tree, a fertility symbol, and murmurs,

> 'How am I burdened with what they drew from the earth; memories; possessions. This is the burden that the past laid on me, last little donkey in the long caravanserai crossing the desert. 'Kneel down,' said the past. 'Fill your pannier from our tree. Rise up, donkey. Go your way till your heels blister and your hoofs crack.''
> The pear was hard as stone. […] 'That was the burden,' she mused, 'laid on me in the cradle; murmured by waves; breathed by restless elm trees; crooned by singing women; what we must remember: what we would forget.' (*BA*, 155)

She feels an intense weight from the history that has informed her life. She describes it as a burden that works against one from birth. The burden seems to be a maternal one, since she contemplates the pear tree when she imagines the past's voice demanding that she fill her pannier. Yet she admits that the burden exists for a reason – "'what we must remember: what we would forget.'" La Trobe's counter-narrative inspires Isa's contemplation of the cultural history, and the feminine history ("crooned by singing women") from which she descends. After this inner poetic monologue, she notes that, "The clock was about to strike. 'Now comes the lightning,' she muttered, 'from the stone blue sky. The thongs are burst that the dead tied. Loosed are our possessions.'" (*BA*, 156) After thinking of the burden of history as possessions, Isa now prepares to break with that narrative, to discard with those ties. Her contemplation of the sky feels like a foreshadowing of the rain shower that saves La Trobe's pageant from the death of emotion and overpowers Isa, who murmurs, "'O that our human pain could here have ending!'" as the rain pours down. (*BA*, 180) La Trobe's pageant both influences and parallels Isa's evolving thought process. Isa's and La Trobe's motives are intertwined as their different resistant silences

inform each other and build up toward an increasingly radical push against the social norms that they actively, albeit silently, resist.

La Trobe's resistance of the traditional plot comes to a head during her unforgettable "Present Time. Ourselves" final scene. She experiments with silence on the part of the actors, who reflect the audience onto themselves, forcing them to grapple with the silence on stage and the immediacy of the moment. Even the words of the actors are actually stolen from the audience members; the lines the actors speak are phrases that the characters watching the pageant have already spoken at different points throughout the day. (Froula, 312) The end of the gramophone's speech embodies La Trobe's reticence to speak and thus make it too easy for the audience: "*All you can see of yourselves is scraps, orts and fragments? Well then listen to the gramophone affirming*…. A hitch occurred here." (*BA*, 188) Although it is described as a hitch, the reader can't help but suspect that La Trobe never intended the speech to end tidily. When Reverend Streatfield calls her to the stage in order to give thanks and in the hopes of a speech, she hides in the bushes, refusing to provide the audience with a reassuring explanation of her pageant and their place in it. The audience is unsettled:

> It was an awkward moment. How to make an end? Whom to thank? Every sound in nature was painfully audible; the swish of the trees; the gulp of a cow; even the skim of the swallows over the grass could be heard. But no one spoke. Whom could they make responsible? Whom could they thank for their entertainment? Was there no one? (*BA*, 194-5)

La Trobe once again forces the audience upon themselves, drowning them in the silence she unexpectedly creates in order to stimulate an awareness of the present moment and their responsibility for the plot that is still being written. It is after this final silence that the audience begins to converse, more than ever, on the meaning of the pageant.

Isa directly questions plot after the end of the pageant in a confrontational thought that seems influenced by La Trobe's own resistance. The nuclear family is alone in the house after the guests have left, and Isa silently considers Giles once more:

> Giles now wore the black coat and white tie of the professional classes, which needed – Isa looked down at his feet – patent leather pumps. 'Our representative, our spokesman,' she sneered. Yet he was extraordinarily handsome. 'The father of my children, whom I love and hate.' Love and hate – how they tore her asunder! Surely it was time someone invented a new plot, or that the author came out from the bushes… (*BA*, 215)

Isa sneers at the idea of Giles, the stockbroker, as the embodied representative of "us," as a society. And yet she does love and desire him. It is quite clear in this scene that it is not Giles who causes Isa so much inner pain, but the traditional structure of their relationship, which defines and constricts her life. She hates the cliché, "the father of my children," which assumes her flat, maternal role. Isa even seems to wish she could fully love Giles and no longer be "torn asunder," by love and hate, but refuses to because she is determined to resist the inequality of their relationship. The reader is more able to disentangle Giles from a larger social context because Isa is actually more aware of this difference by the end of the novel, evident from her explicit denunciation of the old plot. Her reference to La Trobe, or the author hiding in the bushes, confirms the subversive pageant's influence on Isa's perspective.

The last several pages of the novel depict nightfall as stripping the world of all signs of civilization and modern life, until the scene resembles a dark, prehistoric world. The characters grow cold, shivering, as shadows lengthen. Lucy reads in her *Outline of History* of a time when England was a swamp, and "'Prehistoric man […] half-human, half-ape, roused himself from his semi-crouching position and raised great stones.'" (*BA*, 218) Finally only Isa and Giles are left in the dark. They are silent. The narrator assumes a god-like voice:

> Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night. (*BA*, 219)

The prehistoric depiction of the scene reflects Woolf's belief that the war would destroy everything her society had known. Yet she was determined to find hope in the destruction, which she saw in the opportunity of a new start, from which new narratives and social structures could arise. Froula interprets Woolf's reference to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a "challenge to Marlow's famous speech-act, the mortal-tasting 'lie' he throws to the sentimental idea that women must be kept 'out of' the public world 'lest ours gets worse.'" (Froula, 318) Isa, possibly on the brink of voicing the thoughts she has thus far withheld in silence, is a woman empowered with words that hold the potential for a better future.

The following, final paragraph of the novel sets Isa and Giles against a fully prehistoric backdrop, which equalizes them:

> Isa let her sewing drop. The great hooded chairs had become enormous. And Giles too. And Isa too against the window. The window was all sky without colour. The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks.
> Then the curtain rose. They spoke. (*BA,* 219)

Isa drops her sewing, signaling her autonomous break from domestic constraint. Both characters are described as "enormous," like equally large silhouettes about to speak the first words of a new civilization. "They spoke," – not he, nor she, but they; there is a distinctly equal, genderless quality to this final line that suggests the beginning of an altogether new narrative that puts men and women on an equal plane.

This final scene is depicted as occurring simultaneously with Miss La Trobe's imagining of next year's pageant. She, too, envisions a prehistoric scene. As she leaves Pointz Hall she

begins to imagine, thinking, "It would be midnight; there would be two figures, half concealed by a rock." (*BA*, 210) But she cannot think of the first words. Later, in the pub, as Isa and Giles sit in the dark in silence, it as if Miss La Trobe, through the couple's real time moment together, is able to channel the scene again: "There was the high ground at midnight; there the rock; and two scarcely perceptible figures. Suddenly the tree was pelted with starlings. She set down her glass. She heard the first words." (*BA*, 212) Miss La Trobe considers a metaphorical "next year's play," an allusion to the future of history, which has yet to be written. The audience members have become part of the plot now, and Isa will speak the first words. Miss La Trobe, a woman, writes this new plot, giving Isa and Giles the chance to begin again, to renegotiate their roles, and to move forward peacefully. While these ideas are suggested, Woolf's narrator refrains from supplying those first words, or even confirming that the two figures do embrace or bring new life into the world. Woolf presents the potential of this opportunity, but leaves it up to her audience, or readers, to decide what to do with their voices.

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