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### The Completeness and Unity of "Between the Acts"

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THE COMPLETENESS AND UNITY OF BETWEEN THE ACTS

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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by

David Lansing Ackiss

1974

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

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## ABSTRACT

Critical discussion of Virginia Woolf's posthumous novel Between the Acts (1941) centers on two questions: completeness and unity. Because Woolf died before sending the novel to the publisher, critics often dismiss it as incomplete and therefore not meriting serious regard. Its plot falls into two major components, the Pageant and Pointz Hall; critics tend to deal with these separately, giving rise to charges of disunity, which some attribute to its incompleteness. A complete treatment of the novel must consider both questions.

The problem of completeness is addressed by examining the novel's manuscripts, which consist principally of four typescript versions. These allow a reconstruction of the chronology of its composition which supplants that proposed by Jean Guiguet. This new chronology has Woolf writing four drafts of the novel between 2 April 1938 and 26 February 1941, instead of two drafts as Guiguet indicates, and allows more time for revision. The typescripts themselves show a careful and extensive revision. The proposed chronology and the evidence of the manuscripts, together with Virginia Woolf's own assertion of completeness, proves the novel should be considered complete.

In assessing the unity of the novel, both major components of the plot, the Pageant and Pointz Hall must be taken into account. The former climaxes in an epiphany of beauty similar to such moments in Woolf's other novels, but here she pushes beyond to explore the passing of the moment. The latter climaxes in the final pages in despair, which is lent power and profundity by the dialectical contrast with the earlier epiphany. The two climaxes, instead of indicating disunity, function in a dialectical whole which tragically expresses Woolf's maturer view of the human experience.

THE COMPLETENESS AND UNITY OF BETWEEN THE ACTS

Since Virginia Woolf's posthumous novel Between the Acts first appeared in 1941, critics have offered a considerable variety of opinions concerning its value and meaning. A survey of the critical treatment reveals two fundamental problems around which much of the discussion centers. The first concerns the completeness of the novel. Uncertainty over whether the published novel represents a finished work of art has led many critics to treat the novel as a merely interesting literary relic which shows some promise. The critics seem unwilling to treat the novel with full seriousness. The second problem concerns the unity of the novel, and in this context its meaning comes into debate. Some critics contend that the village pageant, which dominates the action, is the center of the novel. Others find that the developed characters at Pointz Hall who view the pageant are the novel's essential subject. This disagreement raises questions as to whether Between the Acts fails to achieve any unity. Furthermore, critics interpret the meaning of the novel differently depending on which element of the novel appears central to them. Finally, the questions of completeness and unity bear one upon the other. It is possible to attribute the disunity to its incompleteness or to cite the disunity as evidence of incompleteness. Any understanding of the novel must therefore consider both

problems. First I shall address myself to the issue of completeness by referring to the manuscripts of Between the Acts. Then I shall explore the disparate elements of the novel in a search for an underlying unity and meaning in the novel.

The charge of incompleteness dates from the earliest treatments of the novel by reviewers both sympathetic and unsympathetic to its author.<sup>1</sup> The editorial note with which Leonard Woolf prefaces Between the Acts is the source from which readers take the notion that the novel is unfinished: "The MS. of this book had been completed, but had not been finally revised for the printer, at the time of Virginia Woolf's death. She would not, I believe, have made any large or material alterations in it, though she would probably have made a good many small corrections or revisions before passing the final proofs."<sup>2</sup> Critics, finding the novel unlike Virginia Woolf's earlier work and dissatisfied with an uncomfortable feeling of not having understood it, have cited this statement as evidence of the incompleteness which makes the novel difficult to understand.

Doubts about completeness raise many questions for a reader. Should one scrutinize carefully the details, repetitions, echoes, and subtle shades of meaning? Do all the scenes contribute toward a whole or do some digress? Is the pageant a jeu d'esprit or an integral element of the story? Is this a seriously wrought piece or,



like Orlando, a novel written quickly and easily, without great depth? Such doubts about completeness can be answered by three sorts of evidence. First a chronology of the composition of Between the Acts would reveal how much labor Woolf expended on its composition and revision. Second, statements from the author regarding completeness might be regarded as valid evidence. Third, the manuscript drafts might indicate whether it were dashed off or closely revised.

Jean Guiguet presents the most complete published account of the composition of Between the Acts in his extensive treatment, Virginia Woolf and Her Works.<sup>3</sup> Relying almost exclusively on A Writer's Diary, Guiguet constructs a chronology which has Woolf writing the novel in two drafts, the first begun 11 April 1938 and completed 23 November 1940. This slow progress Guiguet explains by positing a year's hiatus in the novel's composition between spring 1939 and spring 1940, due primarily to the work expended upon Roger Fry: A Biography at that time. Guiguet's reconstruction has Woolf composing the second and final draft between 23 November 1940 and 26 February 1941. From this account one infers that Woolf wrote the first draft of this, her shortest novel, intermittently over two and one half years, then re-wrote it in three months, which seems an extraordinarily short time for any substantial revision. Aside from the published diary, Guiguet also had use of an early manuscript of the novel

loaned to him by Leonard Woolf.<sup>4</sup> Guiguet's footnote concerning some details of the manuscript is the only published reference to these materials anywhere in the scholarly literature.<sup>5</sup> Though Guiguet's account is the most complete available, it is mistaken, as becomes evident when one consults the manuscripts, which now reside in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library. These documents, in addition to A Writer's Diary, make it possible to construct a more accurate chronology than the Guiguet version.<sup>6</sup>

The first mention in A Writer's Diary of the novel which eventually becomes Between the Acts occurs on 11 April 1938 with only the cryptic comment, "Last night I began making up again: summers [sic] night: a complete whole: that's my idea."<sup>7</sup> However, in what shall here be called the first typescript, the first page is inscribed "2nd April 1938." By conjecture, this discrepancy may arise from the possibility that these first few pages began as a nameless, even directionless sketch of a group of people, characterless as yet, sitting on a summer night discussing cesspools and Roman roads. It was only a week later, perhaps on 10 April, that these faces took on shape and weight in their author's mind, so that instead of a sketch it became a situation and between these people there arose relations, tensions, and a tomorrow. These first pages, though they contain the essential seeds of the final version, differ substantially both in tone and

in detail. For instance, the first page is a lyrical apostrophe to an oil lamp.<sup>8</sup> The characters comprising the original scene of the summer night are Mr. and Mrs. Parry, Mr. Haines, Bartholomew, and later Isa. However, as it proceeds this first typescript draws more closely toward the novel born of it.

During the early stages Woolf seems to have been interested enough in the process of her own art to date many of the pages, so that part of the chronology of the work may be accurately traced.<sup>9</sup> (The dates found in the first typescript may be found in the appendix to this paper.) Her dating these pages also helps substantiate that this first typescript is equivalent to a first draft. No complete, continuous holograph version ever existed, though Woolf undoubtedly wrote everything out by hand as she composed, as proven by the many holograph fragments of the novel present in the Berg Collection. On page 83 of the first typescript she noted "Sept 16th" [1938]. A holograph fragment corresponding almost exactly to the text on page 83 is also inscribed "Sept 16th." This corroborates the impression given in her diary that she composed longhand in the morning, then later that day typed what she had written, making few changes. By this method she never had to face a huge, stale holograph manuscript.

As Guiguet mentions, Woolf worked on the novel in the intervals of labor on Roger Fry. The strenuous factuality

of biography seems to have exasperated her artistic faculties, so she turned to fiction for relief.<sup>10</sup> Her work on the biography probably forced the lapses of progress indicated by her own dating of the first typescript. Furthermore, the war began during these years, so that part of the novel she wrote in the morning knowing the afternoon would bring an air raid. Despite her other work, the war, and her own weariness, she continued what she now called "Pointz Hall," producing a first typescript paginated to 238, with some pages discarded and some in two or three drafts.<sup>11</sup> The last date inscribed in the first typescript falls on page 168 and is "July 30th 39," so there is no conclusive proof of precisely when she completed this first version. Citing A Writer's Diary for 23 November 1940, Guiguet posits that Woolf meant she had finished this first typescript when she wrote, "Having this moment finished the Pageant--or Poyntz Hall?--(begun perhaps April 1938) my thoughts turn well up, to write the first chapter of the next book. . . ."<sup>12</sup> Guiguet believes that Roger Fry and the war slowed the progress of the novel so that from spring 1939 to spring 1940 Woolf wrote almost nothing. He refers to the diary entry for 29 May 1940 as evidence of this lapse. Woolf wrote: "Began P.H. again today and threshed and threshed till perhaps a little grain can be collected."<sup>13</sup> Aware that this language implies a fresh re-writing, Guiguet discounts the possibility in a note saying she meant,

"Probably not a complete re-writing, since two days later V.W. quotes 'Scraps, orts and fragment' from p. 219(188) of B and A."<sup>14</sup> This inference is made on a shaky textual coincidence. If Woolf were beginning to re-write Between the Acts, certainly she might casually utilize so characteristic a phrase from her first version.

Guiguet evidently knew nothing of the existence of two intermediary typescripts between this first one and the one Leonard Woolf sent to the printer. After completing the 238 page first typescript, Woolf refashioned the still untitled novel into a 187 page second typescript, the last page of which is dated "Nov 22nd 1940."<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the beginning of this second typescript must be the project referred to in the diary entry quoted for 29 May 1940. As she "threshed and threshed" through the summer and fall, she produced a draft coinciding quite closely with Between the Acts, and the last page of this version, page 187, bears the date 22 November 1940. Did she finish on 22 November as the second typescript states or 23 November as A Writer's Diary states? This bothersome discrepancy is resolved by referring to the holograph diary itself, the whole of which is now available to readers in the Berg Collection, though under the stipulation that no notes be taken from it. In the holograph diary the entry stating that the novel was complete is dated "Saturday, November 22nd." A quick check of the calendar for 1940 explains why

Leonard Woolf emended A Writer's Diary to read "Saturday, November 23rd."<sup>16</sup> Virginia Woolf simply had confused the date. Saturday fell on 23 November in 1940. Leonard Woolf logically presumed his wife was more likely to get the day of the week correctly than the date of the month. On the final page of the second typescript Virginia Woolf's 22 November 1940 apparently should read 23 November 1940.

Then, beginning on page 129 of this second typescript, Woolf re-wrote yet again the latter third of the novel, which version also is to be found in the Berg Collection.<sup>17</sup> Though even the latter third of the 187 page second typescript already corresponds closely to Between the Acts, the unsatisfied Mrs. Woolf, nevertheless, re-wrote so carefully a version already so nearly complete that this third typescript also ends on page 187, precisely as did its predecessor. Keeping in mind that the point under examination is the state of completeness of the novel, the closeness of this third re-writing seems significant. What is here called the third typescript bears no date. Placing it chronologically subsequent to pages 129-187 of what is here called the second typescript results from a careful comparison of both versions with Between the Acts. The third typescript simply follows the final text more closely. Woolf expended a great deal of care in revising the last pages of the third typescript. For instance page 180 exists in two drafts, page 181 in

three, page 182 in four, page 183 in three, page 185 in two, page 186 in four, and page 187 in two drafts. One must conclude both that the ending is highly polished and that Woolf considered that the ending required a high degree of perfection. The third typescript Woolf presumably finished around the beginning of January 1941, because by 9 January 1941 she entered in her diary, "I am copying P.H."<sup>18</sup> This entry refers to the fourth and final typescript, which still did not bear its final title at this point.<sup>19</sup> It is again this final typescript, the copy which Leonard Woolf later sent to the printer, to which Virginia Woolf refers in her entry for 16 February 1941, wherein she records, "Finished Pointz Hall, the pageant; the play--finally Between the Acts this morning."<sup>20</sup>

Gauging the state of completion of the novel must remain at best an informed inference, even with this more complete information. A summary account of its composition begins with the 238 page first typescript, equivalent to a rough draft, written between 2 April 1938 and spring 1940. The second 187 page typescript she probably began 29 May 1940 and completed 23 November 1940.<sup>21</sup> The third typescript she must have begun almost at once, rapidly re-writing pages 129-187 of the previous version and taking great care, finishing probably in early January 1941. By 9 January 1941 she enters that she is "copying," and she produced the fourth and final 202 page typescript

by 26 February 1941. Thirty days later she committed suicide.

This account of the novel's progress implies a great deal more work and revision than Guiguet's account allows. The manuscripts reveal that Virginia Woolf typed the last version herself, a fact hitherto unknown, so she had thirty days at least to make the minor changes and alterations her husband mentions. Leonard Woolf with his blue pencil only changed "cess pool" to "cesspool" and added "two lines white space" and many other similar touches, changes undoubtedly he made in each of her novels as it passed under his hand before going to the printer. By the amount of consideration the chronology of the composition indicates, by the number of drafts and the detail of the revision, and by the author's own word, certainly one may conclude that Virginia Woolf left the text of Between the Acts highly complete and that it deserves consideration along with the rest of her novels as an intricate and finely wrought work of art.

One further insight provided by this history of the composition of Between the Acts returns the inquiry to the second problem defined at the outset, the unity or disunity of the novel. Virginia Woolf encountered inordinate difficulty in choosing a title for the novel. She refers to it in her diary variously as Pointz Hall, the Play, and the Pageant.<sup>22</sup> These titles suggest that the author sometimes viewed the novel as centering about



Pointz Hall and the characters' lives there. At other times the village pageant must have appeared centrally significant. It appears that Woolf, herself, until the novel was finished, did not know the relation between these two elements, which seemingly ratifies the opinion that the novel is not unified. However, Woolf finally opted neither for Pointz Hall nor for the Pageant, but chose a title which transcends both and reflects a more complex whole, Between the Acts.

Critics have found the same division in the novel as that reflected by the alternative titles Woolf entertained. Most of the critical reaction sees one element or the other as centrally significant, which has led to extensive disagreement on the novel. This is more particularly so since, depending on which the critics see as the center, they differ widely upon the meaning of the work. An examination of the two divergent readings helps define the problem at hand and to introduce the associated problems of meaning.

The early reviewers tend to fall into two camps, friends and foes, with each faction more interested in praising or reviling the deceased author than in understanding Between the Acts.<sup>23</sup> However, Louis Kronenberger succinctly prefigures the prime point of later critical contention in perhaps the most often quoted remark about Between the Acts: "The pageant reels off solemn travesties of Elizabethan, Restoration, and Victorian

Drama, which are given in full; and the paste-board dramas completely overshadow the flesh-and-blood ones. . . . The book ends with two of the real people about to confront each other: it should of course have begun there."<sup>24</sup>

Such a judgment seems based on the critical preconception that the proper scope of a novel includes character and plot. Insofar as it distracts the reader from the real characters, the pageant has no place in the form. Two early critical treatments of the novel also reflect the two divergent readings of the novel. Warren Beck, writing in 1942, is ready to accept Woolf's experimentation with the genre. It is the pageant he praises as "substantial and persuasive," providing the moral vision of the novel as it welds the community into an organic whole through its artistic experience.<sup>25</sup> His argument is persuasive so far as it goes; unfortunately, he does not adequately account for the dark brooding conclusion of the day. Joan Bennett concludes her treatment of Virginia Woolf and this novel by quoting the last scene in order to make her point that "man's insatiable thirst for the ideal and his constant preoccupation with the trivial" were for Woolf the essential tragic contradiction embodied in the novel.<sup>26</sup> However, Bennett does not account adequately for the pageant or for the epiphany of communal unity which others see as transcending this bleak conclusion. Beck is writing about the Pageant;

Bennett is writing about Pointz Hall. Between the Acts eludes them both.

Insofar as one can summarize the conclusions of the more sophisticated contemporary analyses, these two interpretations of the novel have persisted. Those writing about Pointz Hall interpret in their work the various characters or the symbolic fabric of the imagery or the jealous tensions which comprise the plot. Bazin, for instance, sees the characters almost as allegorical expressions of various male and female urges, so that the development of the novel is Woolf's attempt to fashion some androgynous equilibrium as a solution to the conflict between the male and female aspects of being.<sup>27</sup> Fox ignores the pageant altogether and deals with the imagery of the lily pond.<sup>28</sup> Guiguet, in an excellent analysis, does not ignore the pageant, but concentrating on the closing scene he concludes, "From these final pages a deep disillusionment, akin to despair, spills over on to the whole book, dimming its brightness, sapping its joy. The pageant had at first appeared a parody; now it grows bitterly ironic. . . . Never had Virginia Woolf expressed her pessimism so categorically."<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, those writing about *The Pageant* contend that the dramatic presentation and its effects transcend the solipsistic agonies of the individuals, so that the pageant in Marilyn Zorn's description, serves as Woolf's "affirmation of the artist's vision, his

rarest gift to the individual and to society: to hold up for one timeless moment the mirror or Reality and catch there the human soul, creating by the radiance of that vision--Harmony."<sup>30</sup> These writers, in attempting a comprehensive interpretation of the novel, conclude that the pageant functions as the dominant vehicle for Woolf's vision, which they see as triumphant in its celebration of the transcendence of the eternal moment of art over the mundane triviality of daily existence. The plot and characters of Pointz Hall serve only to demonstrate the moral and social chaos of the period, while La Trobe's pageant provides a redemptive solution through historical consciousness, continuity, and artistic endeavor.<sup>31</sup> The particular value of these studies lies in the perceptive treatment of the pageant they provide, linking the rest of the novel to its process and pointing out the value its moment of unity supplies for the characters. Through their willingness to accept the innovations Woolf introduces into the genre, they serve to balance the critical opinion which places only minor emphasis on the role of the pageant in the novel.

Neither of these modes of analysis willfully discounts one half or the other of Between the Acts, yet neither takes wholly into account the critically significant fact that the novel suggests such a division into two parts, each with its own conflict, development, climax, and moral vision. Neither do they take adequate cognizance of the

antithetical conclusions drawn from the two parts, except to accuse the novel of disunity and confusion. Woolf herself recognized the conflict the two create within the novel. She was too sensitive and accomplished an artist accidentally to have included in a novel a specious dualism. What the critics seem unable to grasp is that this novel is not a simple statement of the joyful triumph of the Pageant or of the sere despair of Pointz Hall. Instead it is the literary embodiment of an intense dialectical struggle for some lasting meaning in a world of mutability and dissolution. Out of this antithesis comes not confusion but growth. Before pursuing further the nature of this antithesis, I shall turn to the Pageant and then to Pointz Hall for a closer view of each.

Miss La Trobe's pageant unfolds amid the foils and contingencies of its production; therefore, it is unlike reading a script straight from the author's pen. Rather than a static object of art, one finds art in process. The play itself has not half the interest its effect upon the audience has. Without mincing words, one must admit that the play itself, the italicized transcription, weakens the novel. The parodies of the Elizabethan, Restoration, and Victorian drama do not lack wit or perspicuity or even interest. However, they lack the depth necessary to integrate them into the complex novel around them. They obtrude. One reads quickly through these passages to get at the more interesting, more important action in the

audience or behind the scenes. Despite this flaw, the pageant proper does fulfill several functions Woolf evidently intended for it. The most obvious is the telescopic sweep of English history it provides. Like Lucy Swithin's Outline of History and the old hall itself, the pageant helps provide the sense of rootedness in time pervasive in the novel. Along with the setting of the action roughly within one day, this sense of historical continuity bestows a universality on the people and events of the present. The parodies furthermore share a common dramatic conflict which thematically links them to the larger conflict of the novel itself. Each vignette presents a young male and female, their love thwarted by the established order of their elders. Each little drama resolves as young love triumphs over the old order to establish itself in a new, better world. This ancient theme or comedy roughly links the three pairs of characters, Carinthia and the young prince, Flavinda and Valentine, and Eleanor and Edgar, to the three pairs at Pointz Hall, Bart and Lucy, Dodge and Manresa, and Giles and Isa, as each looks for a better world. The novel leaves unresolved the question of whether Isa and Giles can establish a better world for themselves.

However, the meaning of the play lies in the audience rather than within the italicized fragments given the reader. Throughout its unfolding the reader sees the pageant through the eyes of its spectators. The climax

resolves not some movement of the play itself but the developing tensions within the audience. The megaphonic voice coming at the end of the pageant addresses itself directly to the spectators, even alluding to them individually. It begins on a note of cynicism congruent with the preceeding chaotic, shattered tableau which throws the viewers into embarrassment and confusion at the sight of themselves and the poverty of their lives. After mentioning hypocrisy, war, and greed, the voice generalizes:

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?

All the same here I change (by way of the rhyme mark ye) to a loftier strain--there's something to be said: for our kindness to the cat; note too in today's paper "Dearly loved by his wife"; and the impulse which leads us--mark you, when no one's looking--to the window at midnight to smell the bean. Or the resolute refusal of some pimpled dirty little scrub in sandals to sell his soul. There is such a thing--you can't deny it. What? You can't descry it? All you can see of yourselves is scraps, orts, and fragments? Well then listen to the gramophone affirming. . . .

(Above in italics in text, p. 188)

The amelioration signaled in the closing sentences prepares the audience for the final movement of the pageant. After correcting a confusion in the records, Jimmy, in charge of the music, fits the right disc on the machine. No one seems sure precisely what piece it is, but its effect is clear:

Like quicksilver sliding, filings magnetized, the distracted united. The tune began; the first note meant a second; the second a third. Then down

beneath a force was born in opposition; then another. On different levels they diverged. 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 the unprotected, the unskinned; and dawn rose; and azure; 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 other uncrossed their legs.

(p. 189)

This is the most lyrically intense moment of the novel, a moment of beauty. Woolf here strives to marshall all the power of her considerable gift for language in order to convey the effect the order and beauty of the music has in creating in its auditors a feeling of unity, a nearly mystical oneness which for a vital moment transcends profane considerations. Like Clarissa Dalloway's rejoicing after hearing of Septimus' suicide, like Mrs. Ramsay at her dinner, like Lily Briscoe finishing her painting, like Bernard confronting death, perhaps like Eleanor beholding the dawn after the reunion, this moment aims at an epiphany, an eternal moment wherein beauty, whether of nature or of humanity, suddenly transcends whatever conflicts are at hand and imbues life with meaning and value. Like these moments in other of her novels, this flood of beauty, which redeems all other conflict or loss, is at the heart of Woolf's vision and is an affirmation of life. Unlike such moments in other of her novels, Woolf



follows this moment of order and beauty through into its anticlimax, into the return of mundane consciousness.<sup>32</sup>

When the pageant begins, Woolf reveals the reactions first of this individual, then that. The opinions are diverse and unrelated. As it continues, a growing unity and sympathy with one another arises between the characters, so that a wordless dialogue may occur.<sup>33</sup>

He [Giles] looked from them at Aunty Lucy. From her to William Dodge. From him to Isa. She refused to meet his eyes. And he looked down at his blood-stained tennis shoes.

He said (without words), "I'm damnably unhappy."

"So am I," Dodge echoed.

"And I too," Isa thought.

(p. 176)

By the conclusion, the individual consciousnesses melt into an aggregate, somewhat like the chorus in Greek drama. Immediately after the music ceases the audience responds, "Was that voice ourselves? Scraps, orts and fragments, are we, also, that?" (p. 189). No audible voice speaks these words. Woolf instead gives us the collective consciousness of the audience. What began as a diverse conglomeration of scraps, orts, and fragments the pageant has rendered a collective entity capable of expressing itself with the first person plural pronoun.<sup>34</sup> As the program ends and the audience begins its dispersal, the chorus again speaks: "O let us, the audience echoed (stooping, peering, fumbling), keep together. For there is joy, sweet joy, in company " (p. 196). From that point

until the strain is broken by two lines white space, one sees and hears the audience as it returns to the cars. Woolf does not bother with identifying the individuals, for each brief glimpse of conversation arises from the audience as a whole (pp. 196-201). Streatfield's interpretation of the drama, as far as it goes, correctly assesses the climactic effect of unity, of cohesion upon the audience. However, Streatfield seems to underestimate the forces of dissolution, disorder, and despair, underlined by the droning airplanes which drown him out (p. 193).

Had Between the Acts ended with the audience streaming back to their automobiles, the tenor of this novel would be something quite different. Through the redemptive value of the communal unity, man may be seen as triumphant, even over the disturbing social chaos of England 1939. Furthermore, as it is the pageant which engenders through its unfolding this moment of beauty, art assumes a fundamental role as the catalyst of this unity. Miss La Trobe, her players, and her audience together have created a meaning for life through art. This might be seen as a statement by Woolf of faith in the value and significance of art.

However, the novel does not end with the pageant. Woolf follows the movement past the moment of climactic beauty into its dissolution. Freed of their role as audience, the spectators resume their identities, their interests. This means a renewal of the conflict between

Bart and Lucy over superstition and religion. For Giles and Isa, jealousy again twists their hearts. So it is for the whole that had been created. It dissolves. What had been beauty shatters. For Miss La Trobe, too, the moment passes from the triumphant into the ordinary:

She could straighten her back. She could open her arms. She could say to the world, You have taken my gift! Glory possessed her--for one moment. But what had she given? A cloud that melted into the other clouds on the horizon. It was in the giving that the triumph was. And the triumph faded. Her gift meant nothing. If they had understood her meaning; if they had known their parts; if the pearls had been real and funds illimitable--it would have been a better gift. Now it had gone to join the others.

(p. 209)

In stressing the value of the giving rather than the gift, La Trobe concisely evaluates the transience of the moment of beauty. Her life as a social outcast descends again upon her, so she retires to the pub to drink herself into the oblivion wherein she can begin the process of creation anew.

From here the novel moves shortly toward the final scene, the climax of the narrative of Pointz Hall. An analogy to cinematic technique describes best the final pages. A distance begins to fall between the reader and the Olivers, as though Woolf were moving her camera back and away. More and more the house, trees, and history dominate the scene and the people dining or reading become less significant, less distinct. Woolf delves less into their personalities; and by the last page, it is not Giles

and Isa sitting facing one another but man and woman, timeless and elemental. For the first time in Woolf's writing there arises a brutal, naturalistic mood, reducing to nothing the intricate web of past and feeling she so delighted in, leaving the man and woman mere animals living out the empty necessities of their destiny. From the time Candish begins clearing the table (p. 212) until Isa and Giles are left alone, the dull quiet of the family circle weaves a shrouding, somber mood. The recurring images of the hollowness of the house, of the hooded chairs, of the day's ending, of drowsy silence, of stone, of colors fading into twilight, and of the immensity of time coalesce in a carefully wrought vision of starkness. These are the most powerfully gripping pages of the novel, where one feels Woolf finally has come to bear on the business before her. When Lucy and Bartholomew retire, when the older generation leaves the younger to work out its own destiny, the mood falls yet further into the cold distance:

The old people had gone up to bed. Giles crumpled the newspaper and turned out the light. Left alone together for the first time that day, they were silent. Alone, enmity was bared; also love. 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.

(pp. 218-219)

The carefully balanced phrases rise and fall evenly, enhancing the monotonous simplicity of their logic. Love

to hate, hate to fight, fight to embrace, embrace to life runs the cycle. Having evoked a meaningless, harsh naturalism, Woolf returns, armed with all the images she has been preparing, to the man and woman, as time dissolves and civilization too, leaving only the primal night:

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 the 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.

(p. 219)

At about the same time the night before the novel had begun with commonplace talk about cesspools, Roman roads, and ill children. The pageant, with its epiphany, with its moment of beauty and unity, has intervened. Finally Giles and Isa are about to resolve in conflict the tensions Mrs. Manresa, William Dodge, Haines, and their own love and hate have created. At the last turn, though, Woolf steps yet further back from them, puts a new frame around them, and leaves us with the perplexing final words of the novel.

What must strike the reader familiar with Woolf's work is that this final climactic vision is devoid of beauty, unlike moments of similar intensity elsewhere. The suicide of Septimus Warren, memories of the dead Mrs. Ramsay, and Percival's death, each marking the threatening tragic catastrophe of each novel, all somehow

partake of beauty. Septimus rejoices in life as he opens the window, and for Clarissa his act makes her own life seem incredibly beautiful. Mrs. Ramsay, though dead, provides the vision which enables Lily to complete her painting and evokes the memories which bring Mr. Ramsay, Cam, and James finally to the lighthouse and to peace. Percival's death draws the six old friends to Hampton Court where his absence transforms them for a final moment into a whole in the beautiful evening. These are personal triumphs against death through beauty. In The Years no single death threatens tragedy; it is no personal dissolution but the death of a generation and the passing of a world into alienation and chaos which broods over the novel. Against this Woolf struggles, though with arguable success, by throwing the golden light of another dawn over the last pages, providing with that beauty further hope. In Between the Acts to the alienation of a generation Woolf adds the incipient destruction of society by war. Of even greater tragic potential is the crisis of personal disorder and emptiness, where normal relations are perverted and robbed of warmth, where life becomes trivial, and where mundane personal reality has not the saving possibility of love, of beauty, or of genuine communication.

It is against this disorder Woolf struggles. Like all great artists, Woolf's integrity enforces upon her a commitment to search out truth, not the empty truths of science or facticity, but the richer, deeper truths of

human being. On one hand, through the homosexuals Dodge and La Trobe, the scatter-brained Lucy, the shrivelled Bartholomew, the complacent Streatfield, the insipid Manresa, and the lonely and jealous and agonized Isa and Giles, Woolf constructs a universe of personal relations which reflects the truth of the personal realm as she perceived it. On the other hand, through the audience, the imagery of conflict, the references to the present day, the production of the pageant, and a multitude of other devices, Woolf achieves a mimetic evocation of the society she saw around her. Each of these two inextricably involves the other, so any division is specious. Rather the social and personal are two facets of the same malady, the same disorder as Woolf depicts it. That they are a malady hardly needs assertion, for the air of unhappiness which broods over the novel is the one thing upon which everyone agrees. Everyone cannot agree, though, on what Woolf makes of her truth; for like all great artists she strives not only to depict reality but also to convey with it her vision of the human experience.

As pointed out before, in other of Woolf's novels the portending tragedy is averted when a character in some bereft, disordered moment perceives a beauty which transcends the meaninglessness. Never naive or accidental, this apprehension of beauty serves to provide the characters with a meaning which makes life worth living. Often the element is referred to as Woolf's mystical awareness. More

precisely, for the characters and for Woolf the beauty perceived in the midst of despair casts over the unbeautiful world a redemptive oneness, so that life itself is apprehended as beautiful. In the greatest of Woolf's novels one shares with the character this perception of beauty, so that one feels the threat of disorder or despair is eclipsed by this new perception. Woolf always struggles to embody effectively the difficulties of the world in a novel, then to perceive a deeper beauty in life which renders it valuable. In her world without gods or metaphysical foundations, beauty represents the only salvation from nothingness.

Woolf's struggle against the social chaos of England in 1939, the incipient chaos of war, and the sterility of personal relations finds expression in Between the Acts. Yet her integrity as an artist and her commitment to truth lead her further than her other novels led. The two climaxes of the novel illustrate this well. As expressed before, the first climax of the novel, the lyrical moment of intense beauty experienced as the pageant concludes, resembles closely other such climactic visions in other of her works. Beauty for an instant surfaces in the minds of all. The loneliness, the war, the sense of tragedy dissolve in the face of beauty so that there is unity, peace, and hope. Yet, unlike her other novels, Woolf follows this beauty past its blossoming into its decay. She sensed perhaps a hollowness in the lyricism or a forced note in



her expression of beauty. Or she recognized that always to end at such a climactic realization belied the transience and fragility of beauty. Had she wished, she might have ended at this point, called it "The Pageant," and given the world a novel very like The Years. Clearly beauty, mere beauty, did not give her a sense of completeness here. In plunging past this moment into the fall of night, Woolf signals a maturation in her art.

So she goes on to explore the dissolution of beauty, the dispersal of the audience, the aftermath for La Trobe the creator, and the fall of night over the Olivers. In going past the epiphany, led on by her artist's instinct for truth, Woolf descends into the tragic mode. The alternative vision to beauty is despair, so Woolf creates in remarkably few pages a powerful, convincing despair. The human proportions and human meanings fall out of the narration as it draws away from the characters, leaving only the stark naturalism of the last pages. In one sense, those critics are correct who contend that the last pages eclipse the rest of the novel, resulting in a serene emptiness. However, they overlook the power which the novel achieves in its statement. In delving past beauty into despair, Woolf's art does not fail but achieves a new profundity. Part of this depth lies in conveying the thrilling beauty achieved by La Trobe's pageant, then tasting fully its demise. This dialectical movement lends greater power both to the poignancy of the beauty and to

the desolation of the fall of darkness. The two contrasting moments of climax each are necessary for the new vision the author seeks to embody, because Between the Acts is not a creation simply of either beauty or despair as the critical interpretations contend. One might say that it is a novel about beauty both in its creation and its passing, a novel about what is left when beauty dissolves in time. It is not without hope. The reference to generation in the last page clearly infers a continuity, the possibility of beauty in the future. Perhaps Woolf leaves that to the later novels she never wrote. This work makes a bold first step beyond the experience of beauty into the gloomy void. Rather than interpret this step as some sort of artistic blunder, it seems one should acknowledge Woolf's power to achieve in her art a new aesthetic profundity.

Why did the vision of beauty which had sustained Woolf in her earlier novels fail to provide a satisfactory answer to the threats of social and personal dissolution in Between the Acts? The author provides an answer of sorts in Lucy Swithin, who is a kind of elderly Mrs. Dalloway. In this character the author comes close to creating someone whose life is given meaning by her private vision of beauty. The difference is that the reader sees her from the outside, with a critical eye. During the falling action between the climax of the pageant and the closing scene, Lucy stands by the lily pond and reveals her limitations

to the reader:

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?

He would carry the torch of reason till it went out in the darkness of the cave. For herself, every morning, kneeling, she protected her vision. (pp. 205-206)

Lucy's "private vision" is just that. It does not transcend her to provide meaning for the book. Bart is right about the behavior of the fish, and his shrugging away the question of meaning undercuts her simple faith and expresses Woolf's own shrug at such questions. Lucy's faith is a private vision of beauty, which is goodness. But though the beauty usually sustains, she realizes that "surely every boat sometimes leaks." Bart, indeed, in the conclusion of the book seems engulfed in the darkness of the cave. Lucy, though, is given no morning. Her prayer is depicted as protecting her vision, which must consequently be fragile and poor. Beauty is the sea on which she floats, but Bart sees that "skimming the surface, she ignored the battle in the mud" (p. 203). The author too has become aware of the battle in the mud, so this last novel must attempt to go beyond the vision of beauty which previously had sustained her.

Having passed beyond the subjective vision that had

informed her other novels with meaning, Woolf writes Between the Acts probing for some solid ground upon which to make a stand. She first sought to create a communal apprehension of beauty through the pageant. Perhaps she thought an intersubjective experience of beauty would achieve greater validity and alleviate her dissatisfaction with a merely solipsistic vision. However, aware now of the battle in the mud, Woolf realizes that the communal identity is transient and that beauty, even on this level, is a momentary experience. So in the last thirty pages the book rapidly moves from one climax to another, from an epiphany of beauty to a dark despair. Without this dialectical development the dissolution of the ending would seem mere emptiness; but because the fall is a fall from beauty, the despair is lent profundity, for something valuable, significant, and even necessary has foundered, has been lost. The excellence of the novel lies in the power of the dialectical movement as an expression of the artist's perception of the world. Like Miss La Trobe, Woolf in Between the Acts finds, "It was in the giving that the triumph was" (p. 209). The achievement of a depiction of reality in art is its own artistic justification. Woolf's intention is to create, here in the tragic mode, a mimetic representation of the human experience. She concerns herself less with realism than with reality, and she conveys the reality through a highly compact language and through the dialectical

development and contrast between the two climaxes. This novel makes tangible the failure of beauty in Woolf's mind to infuse reality with a redeeming meaning. The despairing vision of the last pages is the author's first exploratory step beyond an aesthetic faith in beauty which had borne her through her previous novels. This is a step toward greater maturity and profundity. Just as the reader leaves Miss La Trobe descending into the mud in hopes that a new creation might arise, the reader leaves Woolf descending into the depths of despair, aware of the battle in the mud, perhaps hoping that she could discover a profounder vision.<sup>35</sup>

In the beginning it was pointed out that any analysis of Between the Acts must deal with the problems of completeness and unity. An examination of its four typescript versions, of the chronology of its composition, and of Woolf's assertion that it was "finished" proves that the novel is complete to a very high degree. This disarms any contention that the alleged disunity of the work stems from its having been left in an unfinished state, because even in the first version the novel had the same general shape as in the final version.

The two major plot elements in the novel, referred to here as the Pageant and Pointz Hall, do not exist independently, as the critical treatment might indicate, but function dialectically to create a more powerfully effective whole. The first climax at the conclusion of

the pageant consists of a moment of intense beauty experienced by the audience, but Woolf pushes beyond this point to examine the passing of this moment and the demise of beauty. In the closing pages the novel descends to a climactic expression of despair, which conveys a greater sense of loss because beauty had seemed, for a moment, to have provided meaning for and given value to the troubled lives of the characters. This reading is particularly significant, for it is such visions of beauty, on a private level usually, that serve in Woolf's other novels to provide meaning in the characters' lives. In delving beyond the epiphany of beauty, Between the Acts achieves an expression of Woolf's deeper, and much darker, view of reality.

## APPENDIX

The following lists the dates found inscribed in the first typescript of Between the Acts:

p. 1	"2nd April 1938"
p. 31	"May 11th, 38"
p. 32	"Begun May 20th"
p. 55	"July 3"
p. 59	"1st Aug 38"
p. 70	"Aug 6"
p. 75	"22nd August"
p. 76	"29th Aug"
p. 83	"Sept 16th"
p. 96	"Sept 19th"
p. 100	"Oct 7th, 1938"
p. 147	"5th Feb, 1939"
p. 147	"Feb 27th"
p. 168	"July 30th 39"

The only other date in any of the typescripts occurs on page 187 of the second version: "22nd Nov 1940."

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For examples of this objection of incompleteness see "Mrs. Woolf's Last Novel," Times Literary Supplement, 19 July 1941, p. 346; and Louis Kronenberger, "Virginia Woolf's Last Novel," Nation, 11 October 1941, pp. 344-45.

<sup>2</sup>Virginia Woolf, Between the Acts (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1941), p. 1. All further page references to Between the Acts are drawn from this edition and shall be given in parenthesis in the text.

<sup>3</sup>Jean Guiguet, Virginia Woolf and Her Works (London: Hogarth Press, 1965), pp. 319-22.

<sup>4</sup>Guiguet, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup>Guiguet, n. 573, p. 321.

<sup>6</sup>It should be noted here that Guiguet, though he had access to the first typescript, did not have access to the entire array of manuscripts; therefore, the chronology he proposes fails largely through a lack of information rather than a mistaken scholarship.

<sup>7</sup>Leonard Woolf, ed., A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1953), p. 278.

<sup>8</sup>The lamp is a sort of hybrid cross between Mrs. Flanders' oil lamp and Mrs. Ramsay's lighthouse. Cf. Virginia Woolf, Jacob's Room and The Waves (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1960), pp. 11-13; and Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1927), esp. pp. 96-97.

<sup>9</sup>A detailed biographical chronology of this period may be found in Quentin Bell, Virginia Woolf: A Biography (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1972), II, 249-252.

<sup>10</sup>Guiguet, p. 321.

<sup>11</sup>Due to some caprice in cataloguing, this typescript is shelved in two parts. The first is paginated 1-189 and is catalogued, "[Between the acts] Typescript, with the author's ms. corrections, unsigned, dated throughout



## Notes to pages 7 through 12

from April 2, 1938-July 30, 1939." The second, an obvious continuation of the first, is catalogued "[Between the acts] Typescript of end of projected longer version, with variant ending, paginated 190-238, with the author's ms. corrections, unsigned and undated." The ending is not a "variant" but instead is close to the final version. I can perceive no rationale for this division of the manuscript.

<sup>12</sup>A Writer's Diary, p. 345.

<sup>13</sup>A Writer's Diary, p. 321.

<sup>14</sup>Guiguet, n. 569, p. 321.

<sup>15</sup>This version is catalogued "[Between the acts] Later typescript, with the author's ms. corrections, unsigned, dated Nov. 22, 1940."

<sup>16</sup>A Writer's Diary, p. 345.

<sup>17</sup>This version is catalogued "[Between the acts] Typescript of later draft, p. 129-187, with the author's ms. corrections, unsigned and undated."

<sup>18</sup>A Writer's Diary, p. 348.

<sup>19</sup>This version is catalogued "Between the acts. Final typescript, with the author's ms. corrections and Leonard Woolf's editorial corrections and instructions to the printer."

<sup>20</sup>A Writer's Diary, p. 351.

<sup>21</sup>Though paginated to 187, the second typescript consists of 247 pages because many pages are in numerous drafts, another indication that the novel is highly finished.

<sup>22</sup>A Writer's Diary, pp. 345, 351.

<sup>23</sup>These battle lines were drawn long before Woolf's death, and one gets the impression that both friends and foes would have written as they did regardless of the merits of the novel. Most notable among the friendly reviews are "Mrs. Woolf's Last Novel," Times Literary Supplement, 19 July 1941, p. 346; Elizabeth Bowen, "Between the Acts," New Statesman and Nation, 19 July 1941, pp. 63-64; Hudson Strode, "The Genius of Virginia Woolf," New York Times, 5 October 1941, sec. 6, pp. 1, 30;

## Notes to pages 13 through 20

and Elizabeth Drew, "The Atlantic Bookshelf: Between the Acts," The Atlantic Monthly, October 1941, p. xxxiv. The most virulent of the unfavorable reviews is F. R. Leavis, "After To the Lighthouse," Scrutiny, 10 (1942), 295-98; while the most telling of the unfavorable reviews is Louis Kronenberger, "Virginia Woolf's Last Novel," Nation, 11 October 1941, pp. 344-45.

<sup>24</sup>Kronenberger, p. 344.

<sup>25</sup>"For Virginia Woolf," American Prefaces, 7 (1942), 318. In this article Beck answers Kronenberger's attack.

<sup>26</sup>Virginia Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1945), p. 150.

<sup>27</sup>Nancy Topping Bazin, Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers, 1973), pp. 201-213.

<sup>28</sup>Stephen Fox, "The Fish Pond as Symbolic Center in Between the Acts," Modern Fiction Studies, 18 (1972), 467-73.

<sup>29</sup>Guiguet, pp. 326-327.

<sup>30</sup>Marilyn Zorn, "The Pageant in Between the Acts," Modern Fiction Studies, 2 (1956), 31-35.

<sup>31</sup>In addition to Zorn, the principal proponents of this view are Werner J. Deiman, "History, Pattern, and Continuity in Virginia Woolf," Contemporary Literature, 15 (1974), 49-66; Renee Watkins, "Survival in Discontinuity: Virginia Woolf's Between the Acts," Massachusetts Review, 10 (1969), 356-76; and Ann Y. Wilkinson, "A Principle of Unity in Between the Acts," in Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Claire Sprague (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 145-54.

<sup>32</sup>The anticlimax is made poetically graphic in the paragraph immediately following the musical interlude: "As waves withdrawing uncover; as mist uplifting reveals; so raising their eyes (Mrs. Manresa's were wet; for an instant tears ravaged her powder) they saw, as waters withdrawing leave visible a tramp's old boot, a man in a clergyman's collar surreptitiously mounting a soap box" (p. 189). The boot on the shingle also appears on pp. 96, 215.

<sup>33</sup>For other examples of this growing collective entity see pp. 178, 182-184, 186.

## Notes to pages 20 through 32

<sup>34</sup>Other like uses of the first person plural occur on pp. 183-84, 186, 190, 196.

<sup>35</sup>"[Miss La Trobe] raised her glass to her lips. And drank. And listened. Words of one syllable sank down into the mud. She drowsed; she nodded. The mud became fertile. Words rose above the intolerably laden dumb oxen plodding through the mud. Words without meaning-- wonderful words"(p. 212).

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