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## Playing the audience: A reader's production of *Between the Acts*

Jill Scanlan

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PLAYING THE AUDIENCE:  
A READER'S PRODUCTION OF BETWEEN THE ACTS

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A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State  
University, San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
English Composition

---

by  
Jill Scanlan  
June 1986

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## Abstract

Virginia Woolf was in the vanguard of a twentieth-century movement that has established the open, dialectical text as a literary tradition. Members of this community have sought an egalitarian relationship between writer and reader as co-creators. They base their emphasis on the views that life is too complicated for an author to presume to hand it over as a thesis statement; that such a presumption not only over-simplifies life, but also demeans and subjugates readers; and that conventions designed to espouse clearly the author's meaning limit a work's artistic potential.

Between the Acts, Woolf's last novel, is an example of a text within this tradition. It causes readers to act out the negation of the conventions they have come to expect in closed texts, including the reliable omniscient narrator and the distinct sympathetic character. Readers' activity increases as they seek out the author's meaning through such conventional methods, only to have their expectations disrupted. Because their involvement is so intense, they experience the text as a living event. They also pay more attention to the language techniques that provoke this activity.

The final gestalt that individual readers may reach in open texts is a product of what they bring to the text and what they experience within the text. Therefore, in a production such as Between the Acts, the role of the audience also includes playing actor and playwright.

## Acknowledgements

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Thanks to J. Harold Harris for digging up and chiseling out a definition for methectic (see page 12):

Methexis is a noun straight from the Greek

( ΜΕΘΕΞΙΣ = participation in the Platonic sense.

. . .) and is derived from the Gr. verb ΜΕΤΕΧΩ

( ΜΕΤΑ = with, ΕΧΩ = go), meaning "I

share, partake." There is no adjective form listed,

but it should be methectic. Not even the noun is listed in the OED.

Thanks to my fellow cave-dwellers for sharing the climb (upward?), stone by stone.

Thanks to Susan Weisenhelder and Jennifer Randizi for pointing out obstacles and alternative pathways.

Thanks to Bruce Golden for playing Socrates.

## Table of Contents

Chapter I	
Opening the Text . . . . .	2
Chapter II	
<u>Dramatis Personae</u> : Unmasking Mrs. Brown . . . . .	24
Chapter III	
Onomatopoeic Style . . . . .	53
Conclusion	
Dandelion Harvest . . . . .	85
Works Cited . . . . .	95

Newton was a mere materialist--Mind in his system is  
always passive--a lazy Looker-on on an external World.  
If the mind be not passive, if it be indeed made in God's  
Image, & that too in the sublimest sense--the Image of  
the Creator--there is ground for suspicion, that any  
system built on the passiveness of the mind must be  
false, as a system. (709)

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Chapter I  
Opening the Text

In his 1941 review of Between the Acts, critic David Cecil complains that Virginia Woolf mixes realism and non-realism, and therefore fails to "make her meaning altogether clear." Alas, he writes, "Perhaps had she lived to revise the book, Mrs. Woolf would have brought it into clear pattern and harmony. As it is, it must be counted as in part a failure" (437). Had Woolf revised her novel again--and it is possible she would have, since she painstakingly revised and edited her works over and over--Cecil probably still would have been disappointed. Woolf considered "clarity" and "realism" to be tyrannical conventions that stagnate the reading experience and falsify reality. She says in her diary:

And more and more I come to loathe any dominion of one over another; any leadership, any imposition of the will. Finally, my literary taste is outraged by the smooth way in which the tale is made to unfold into fullblown success, like some profuse peony. (10)

The concepts of closed and open texts correspond with the opposing perspectives of Cecil and Woolf. Cecil preferred novels that give readers a closed meaning. We can easily read such works, which Woolf considered traditional, because their authors have used conventions we are accustomed to. We also are comfortable with such books because the authors have tried not to leave unanswered questions, so that we may easily arrive at the authors' intention,



or meaning. On the other hand, the open text does not close onto "a nugget of pure truth" (Woolf, A Room of One's Own 3). Instead, the open text causes confusion and leaves unanswered questions so that the meaning, ultimately, is not contained within the text, but comes into being in a creative reader's mind.

According to Northrop Frye, the disagreement over what literature (or a rhetorical production) should do is not limited to contemporary critical theory; in fact, it dates back to Aristotle and Longinus (who followed Plato): "These two views are the aesthetic and the creative, the Aristotelian and the Longinian, the view of literature as product and the view of literature as process" (Anatomy of Criticism 66). In The Well-Tempered Critic, he outlines qualities often attributed to closed and open texts (although he, himself, does not think the two schools are mutually exclusive, so does not believe that the dichotomy is a valid way to judge literature). The Classical, Aristotelian tradition sees literature as a mimetic, self-contained "artifact." As an observer, or interpreter, of this piece of art, the reader remains aloof from the text (115). In To the Lighthouse, Woolf has Mr. Ramsay represent such a view of literature. His son Andrew tells Lily that Ramsay's books are about "Subject and object and the nature of reality . . . . Think of a kitchen table then . . . when you're not there" (38). The Longinian perspective, however, emphasizes the "sublime" experience, so shifts focus from "the thing made" to the reader's involvement in the text. Frye says, "This emphasis is psychological rather than esthetic, and is based on participation rather than detachment" (115). When Mrs. Ramsay encounters literature--and for

her it is the poem--she becomes involved in it: "She did not know what they meant, but, like music, the words seemed to be spoken by her own voice, outside her self saying quite easily and naturally what had been in her mind the whole evening while she said different things" (156). The narrator describes her as "zigzagging this way and that" when she reads (179). During a dinner party, her husband reads a poem, yet the words seem to belong neither to the text nor Mr. Ramsay; they evolve "as if no one had said them, but they had come into existence of themselves." Instead of belonging to the author, the words are "floating like flowers" (156). She imagines that the others at the party also feel that the anonymous words "were their own voice speaking" (167). As audience, Mrs. Ramsay becomes involved in the movement of the poem, and its words become her words.

This sense of being a creative participant in literature was important to Woolf because the reader expands texts by giving them more life and "meaning" than provided by the words on the page. It is the sublime journey Coleridge speaks of when he comments:

The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself. (149)

Echoing Coleridge's interest in the excitement of the mind (in the sense of both excited pleasure and excited activity), Woolf wrote in The Common Reader that when we read Dostoevsky's novels, "The pace at which we are living is so tremendous that sparks must rush off

our wheels as we fly" (179); in the works of Chekhov, "the horizon widens; the soul gains an astonishing sense of freedom" (178); and Jane Austen "stimulates us to supply what is not there" (138). Authors like Woolf are not just trying to impress readers when they strive to stimulate our minds into active involvement. The intention is to free us from the artifact so that we can become a creator. The difference between Woolf and Cecil is that Cecil would have the reader confined to the boundaries, the enclosures, of the work, while Woolf would like readers to go beyond the work and open it up to new possibilities and to life. The two different forms of literary communication have been described by Stanley Fish in terms of good and bad physicians.

In Self-Consuming Artifacts, Fish compares the two traditions of open and closed texts by placing them under the categories of "rhetorical" and "dialectical" presentations. Rhetoricians, he says, try to appeal to their audiences, so they accommodate the audiences' predispositions and operate "within the categories and assumptions of received systems of knowledge" (1). Such presentations are smoothly structured so that the reader can easily follow and agree with the arguments. Fish explains:

. . . by reminding us of what we know already, artifacts constructed with a rhetorical, or persuasive, intent stabilize our knowledge at its present inadequate level. Rhetoric tends, as Robert Cushman notes, to canonize the status quo; for "to persuade is to render plausible and to render plausible is frequently to render something one

believes and desires apparently conformable to what one's hearers also believe and applaud." (15)

On the other hand, a dialectical text does not follow conventional structure or mimic common beliefs, but makes its audience members move beyond their present philosophical situation. The text then acts as a "good physician," Fish says, because it does not simply pamper and make comfortable, but disturbs the audience--the patient--into working toward self-improvement. Such texts make readers live through a dialectical experience in which they must frequently negate the closures they have made and reformulate new conclusions that are never given within the text. In this way, the meaning of the text comes into existence outside the printed page through the reading process:

The good-physician aesthetic, then, is finally an anti-aesthetic, for it disallows to its productions the claims usually made for verbal art--that they reflect, or contain or express Truth--and transfers the pressure and attention from the work to its effects, from what is happening on the page to what is happening in the reader.

(3-4)

The meaning is not given by the author; it is not brought to the text by the reader. Through a dialectical movement between text and reader, reading and writing merge, and the final creation--the text's meaning--is in the reader's productive mind. Because focus shifts from the self-contained artifact to the reader involved in a creative act, the reader pays more attention to the strategies that are keeping him or her in motion.

However, Fish's dialectical presentation still has product, rather than process, as its final goal. The good physician seeks to make readers abandon preconceptions and move up a Platonic ladder. Such a text, Fish says, is "anti-art-for-art's-sake" because it moves readers toward "something its forms cannot capture" and "is concerned less with the making of better poems than the making of better persons" (3-4). Nevertheless, the product is still an important goal for the author: the objective is to get readers somewhere. Readers go beyond both their present sphere of understanding and the text, but the process leads to truth. The good physician wants people to make themselves better. It seems that although one might see these texts as open, since meaning is neither contained within the text nor predetermined, some sense of closure still is the goal for reader and writer. But what if the text refuses closure? What if the goal is not to make better persons and the process is not a Socratic dialogue?

Wolfgang Iser's comparisons between dialectical and didactic texts correspond to Fish's interpretations, but Iser leaves room in his dialectic category for non-Platonic texts, those that do not take the reader up the Platonic ladder to an ideal end. Like Fish, Iser says that readers experience less confusion and have less to do in didactic texts because there are fewer obstacles. The authors' aim is that readers easily accept a message, so didactic works help readers move consistently forward without affronting readers' present perspective ("theme" [97]). These authors carefully provide transitions and explanations that guide readers along (to use Iser's term, there are fewer "gaps" in the text [165]). The "virtual

possibilities," those potential ideas that readers relegate to the background when they conflict with a current viewpoint (126), are either entirely negated as not valid, or lose their virtualness and are integrated into the reader's present perspective. In other words, they are "eclipsed" during the reading process (127). Gestalt-forming is easy and reliable, as the gestalten tend to be final. The "wandering viewpoint" (the process of shifting comprehension through the text [109]) does not wander much. In dialectical texts, however, readers discover that the conventions they have learned to rely on to get their bearings no longer exist or are unreliable. Readers no longer can move from "A" to "Z," as Mr. Ramsay would like his ideas to do, because of a dynamic tension between the strategies that "entangle" (127) and the readers' own efforts to untangle themselves. The gestalten tend to be open, themes continually change shape--or never take shape--and readers find themselves skipping over or falling into gaps. The result is an intense activity. "If the text reproduces and confirms familiar norms, he [the reader] may remain relatively passive, whereas he is forced into intensive activity when the common ground is cut away from under him," Iser says (84-85).

Iser also notes, as Fish does, that the dialectical motion takes readers out of the text into what Iser calls a "third dimension." As readers attempt to form gestalten that are continually aborted by "alien associations" ("virtual possibilities" that become very real all of a sudden [126]), readers focus their attention more and more on their own activity. In addition, the

text seems more real to them because they have been actively involved (126-28):

The result is a dialectic--brought about by the reader himself--between illusion-forming and illusion-breaking. It provokes balancing operations, if only because a gestalt that has been undermined by "alien associations" [the expression is Walter Pater's] will not immediately fade out of the reckoning; it will continue to have after-effects, and these are necessary if the "alien associations" are to attain their ends. The 'conflict' can only be resolved by the emergence of a third dimension, which comes into being through the reader's continual oscillation between involvement and observation. It is in this way that the reader experiences the text as a living event.

If the zigzagging between illusion-forming and illusion-breaking adds to the impression that a text is a real experience, one might wonder about Cecil's complaint that "realistic" and "non-realistic" conventions "do not blend" (437). When authors involve their readers in a dialectical experience, "This does not necessarily mean that such a process is to lead to the enlightenment and reeducation of the reader . . ." Iser says; instead, one of the main effects is "It gives rise to a mode of communication through which the openness of the world . . . is transferred in its very openness into the reader's conscious mind" (211). Perhaps this openness of the world is the "reality" Woolf wished to evoke for her readers. She once complained that in Arnold Bennett's work, "There

is not so much as a draught between the frames of the windows, or a crack in the boards. And yet--if life should refuse to live there?" ("Modern Fiction" 147). The "life" she speaks of includes literature's ability to be truly like life and to make reading an active, living experience. First of all, in her opinion the traditional conventions no longer could be considered true to life; perhaps life once seemed so simple and straightforward that it could be imitated as a nugget. But Woolf asked:

What is meant by 'reality'? It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable--now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper, now in a daffodil in the sun. . . . Sometimes, too, it seems to dwell in shapes too far away for us to discern what their nature is. (A Room of One's Own 113-14)

Woolf sometimes described the life she thought novels should communicate to readers as a woman's sense of reality. The stereotypic male reality would be conveyed through the traditional closed text, woman's reality through the open text. To safeguard against an overly subjective and personal emphasis, the feminine style would incorporate some of the male objectivism. In A Room of One's Own, she compares literature to a spider's web "attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners" (43). Woolf uses Coleridge's metaphor of the androgynous poet to represent this style and, as Phyllis Rose notes, to "signify the transcendence of sex" (188). Woolf thought the male tradition sought to stabilize life according to objective facts, chronological time, and the status quo (see Fish quoted above, page 5). Her



impression of masculine reality is reflected in a diary entry in which she describes some train passengers:

Odd to look at this cool man's world: So weather tight: insurance clerks all on top of their work; sealed up; self-sufficient; admirable; caustic; laconic; objective; and completely provided for. (307-08)

Although the masculine tradition dominated literature, Woolf hoped that women (who had been silent because no one would listen or had spoken artificially through man-made conventions) would write in a new way that would reflect a different kind of reality. Rose, who combines biography, psychology, and literary criticism in her study of Woolf, says:

Certainty and stability played little part in Woolf's sense of herself, and it was on her sense of herself that she predicated the new form of the novel: shifting, subjective, unassertive in its moral stance, it would impose no rigid thirty-two chapters on experience, but would let the emphasis fall where it might. (100)

This new form would allow the reader a more complex and suggestive texture, bringing out language's generative (Woolf called it "poetic") potential. It seems she wanted more women to write like Dorothy Richardson, whose sentences "are of a more elastic fibre than the old, capable of stretching to the extreme, of suspending the frailest particle, of enveloping the vaguest shapes" ("Dorothy Richardson" 191).

Some critics have found that women--especially feminists--frequently do use an open style to reflect their view of reality.

Margaret Atwood is an example of a writer who portrays the different perspectives of space and time. According to Frank Davey, while she presents male space as rational, mathematical, "substantial, ostensibly unchanging; female space is insubstantial, anonymous, subject to time, and often expressed in organic matter" (17).

Whereas time experienced in the female mode is ever-fluctuating and cycling, in the male mode it moves straightforward chronologically, predicting and accomplishing an end. Male space consists of static objects; whereas female space consists of organic life involved in the changes and cycles of existence. As Davey explains:

Male time is measured time; its alternative is not static but fluid, metamorphic, multiple, without temporal landmarks, in motion but not systematically in motion. . . . Such poems [as Atwood's] are not temporal in being outside process, only in being outside rationalized time. (53-54)

Others have noted that the male mode shows a "need for closure," while the female mode stresses openness. Women's writing tends to be characterized by "indirection," which instead of following inductive or deductive reasoning:

seems to proceed without a readily recognizable plan. The thinking represented in the female mode seems eidetic, methectic, open-ended, and generative, whereas the thinking in the male mode appears framed, contained, more pre-selected, and packaged. The ideas seem less processed and controlled in the female mode than in the male mode and hence become closer to recreating the

process of thinking as it normally occurs in real life, where thinking is as much a matter of unconscious as of conscious process and certainly does not move in formal logical structures even when it relates to them or reflects them. (Farrell 909-10)

While the male mode seeks to lead readers to a logical conclusion, excluding on its way anything that might detract from a well-rounded, usually deductively derived, conclusion, critics have echoed Woolf's view of the elastic and enveloping quality of women's writing, noting in Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook, for example:

The holistic sense of life without the exclusionary wholeness of art. These holistic forms: inclusion, nonselection because selection will exclude some important piece of data, or evidence, or knowledge that the writer is not yet sure the meaning of" (DuPlessus 138).

It would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to prove that women and men, as separate biological, psychological, and sociological communities, write differently. And as any "subculture" should realize by now, there is great danger in espousing scientific determinism. But it is the case that many twentieth-century women authors have chosen, as Woolf did, an open style to show a reality that is not as solidly defined as traditional conventions would recreate it and to avoid the authorial didacticism of closed texts. It probably is impossible to determine if women writers have caused, as Rose wonders, a twentieth-century "feminization of fiction" (102), or if the twentieth century itself has helped shape the

women's mode. Woolf complained that as of her time, women had no literary heritage. If this is true, women's literary tradition would seem to have been emerging as a force primarily during this century, with Woolf in its vanguard. It would seem possible that the women's mode, therefore, would reflect the twentieth century's sense of "reality" and its growing emphasis on the reader's role in literature as people turn away from easy answers imposed by authority:

Historically, there appears to be a connection between the unitary and all-encompassing perspective of the omniscient author/narrator on the one hand, and the predominance of monotheism and the belief in a unitary and objective reality on the other. It would not be surprising, therefore, if the death of God proclaimed by Nietzsche's mad man were to undermine not only the belief in objective reality independent of the various possible perspectives on it, but also the validity of literary realism. Indeed, it is Nietzsche's perspectivism that is the important precursor of the "multiperspectival" narrative characteristic of authors such as Joyce, Faulkner, Beckett--and Virginia Woolf. (Parkes 39)

If reality is seen as "undependable" and "erratic" (see page 10 above), then it follows that people would view skeptically another's attempt to impose meaning and order. Because the nugget of truth seems so unreal, its imposition often is considered not only contrary to reality, but somehow deceitful. And liars usually have self-serving purposes, as Adrienne Rich notes:

In speaking of lies, we come inevitably to the subject of truth. There is nothing simple or easy about this idea. There is no "the truth," "a truth"--truth is not one thing, or even a system. It is an increasing complexity. . . .

This is why the effort to speak honestly is so important. Lies are usually attempts to make everything simpler--for the liar--than it really is, or ought to be.  
(187-88)

The bad physician, in other words, not only seeks to maintain the patients in their current state of health in order to appease and pamper, but also in order to subjugate. Much as the lover described in Socrates' first speech to Phaedrus, the bad physician would keep his lover "totally ignorant and totally dependent upon himself and his standards of conduct, securing the greatest pleasure for himself, but the greatest harm for the boy" (18-19).

In "Arguers as Lovers," Wayne Brockereide compares authors to rapists, seducers, and lovers. The rapist "conquers by force of argument," the seducer "operates through charm or deceit" (4), and the lover, the ideal philosopher, "asks for free assent, advancing arguments openly and asking for open criticism" (7). He says:

Whereas the rapist and seducer seek to establish a position of superior power, the lover wants power parity. Whereas the rapist and seducer argue against an adversary or an opponent, the lover argues with his peer and is

willing to risk his very self in his attempt to establish a bilateral relationship. (?)

Another commentator on the ethical issues involved in the different speaker/audience relationships established by open and closed presentations has provided an extensive list of attitudes that the speakers reflect:

In monologue the attitude of senders toward receivers is marked by such qualities as deception, superiority, exploitation, dogmatism, domination, insincerity, pretense, personal display, self-aggrandizement, coercion, distrust, self-defensiveness, and viewing the Other as an object to be exploited for self-serving purposes; they are not taken seriously as persons. Focus is on the speaker's message, not on the audience's real needs. The core values, goals, and policies espoused by the speaker are impervious to influence exerted by receivers. Audience feedback is used only to further the speaker's purpose; an honest response from receivers is not wanted or is precluded. Often choices are narrowed and consequences obscured.

While the authoritarian rhetorician tries to compel and deceive, the egalitarian dialogist wishes to establish the bilateral relationship:

Dialogue, in contrast, is characterized by such attitudes as honesty, concern for the welfare of the Other, trust, genuineness, open-mindedness, equality, mutual respect, empathy, directness, lack of pretense, non-manipulative

intent, encouragement of free expression, and acceptance of the Other as a unique individual regardless of differences over belief or behavior. Although the speaker in dialogue may offer advice or express disagreement, he does not aim to psychologically coerce an audience into accepting his view. The speaker's aim is one of assisting the audience in making independent, self-determined decisions. While the speaker may express judgment of policies and behaviors, judgment of the intrinsic worth of audience members is avoided.

(Johannesen 96)

Roland Barthes has said that open texts are "read without the father's signature" ("From Work to Text" 78). Without the authoritarian author, whom Woolf considers the writer of the male mode, readers are freed to produce their own conclusions from their experience. Women breaking away from the authoritarian control of a male society, it seems, naturally would prefer a style of writing that reflects the desire for egalitarian communication, effort, and reward. Barthes has compared the reader's creative effort in the open text to "playing" music. Whereas traditionally musicians simply interpreted music, some compositions today require that a musician become "the co-author of a score which he completes rather than 'interprets.'" Barthes goes on to say, "The Text is largely a score of this new type: it asks the reader for an active collaboration" (80). Instead of a product ("the work"), we have a production ("the Text"). The former can be reduced in meaning (in other words, the reader "consumes it" [79]); the latter is an

"irreducible plurality" (76) because the reader (and there are many individual readers, and each reading by each one brings a new writing) becomes a writer. The open text combines reading and writing, "linking the two together in a single signifying process" (79). In S/Z Barthes calls the closed text "readerly," one that can only be read, and the open text "writerly," one that the reader can write (4). And in The Pleasure of the Text, Barthes calls the closed text the "text of pleasure" and the open text the "text of bliss." He lists their attributes as follows:

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (14)

Woolf was interested not only in representing the complex reality she experienced, but in freeing readers from conventions that she felt restrained their creative interplay with the text, and thereby limited a text's potential. The language strategies themselves, because of their capacity to spark creativity, became more important to her than theme, character, and plot. In "The Art of Fiction," she complains that E.M. Forster and others who critique literature focus on everything but style, even though the writers she considers best take great pains about the language they use.



"Flaubert," she chides these critics, "spends a month seeking a phrase to describe a cabbage" (112). In her essay "On Not Knowing Greek," Woolf regrets that because we do not know how ancient Greek sounded, "We can never hope to get the whole fling of a sentence. . . . We cannot pick up infallibly one by one all those minute signals by which a phrase is made to hint, to turn, to live" (35). Style is the life-force of the novel.

On the other hand, the killers are rules that require closure. In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Woolf criticizes restrictions that require novels to seek social reform and to flesh out scene and character. "But those tools are not our tools," she writes, "and that business is not our business. For us those conventions are ruin, those tools are death" (330). Woolf was in the forefront of artists--and critics--who began to rebel against authoritarian constrictions of art:

So much of the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story is not merely labour thrown away but labour misplaced to the extent of obscuring and blotting out the light of conception. The writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccable that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour. The tyrant is obeyed; the novel is done to a turn. But sometimes, more and more

often as time goes by, we suspect a momentary doubt, a spasm of rebellion, as the pages fill themselves in the customary way. Is life like this? Must novels be like this? ("Modern Fiction" 149)

Woolf believed that the tyrant of convention not only diminishes the value of readers, but also inhibits authors, and therefore art itself. Reader and writer involved in a bilateral relationship are communicating through dialogue between individuals who not only have equal status, but who also have equal responsibility for the outcome of the reading experience. Authors of open texts trust that their readers want both to perform and to co-create the text. In "How Should One Read a Book?" Woolf tells us, "Do not dictate to your author; try to become him. Be his fellow-worker and accomplice" (235). It seems that some readers, such as Cecil, would mandate that authors provide closed texts. But then, as Barthes points out, "writerly" texts, the texts of "bliss," make uncomfortable reading. Open texts are unsettling, and creativity is a lot of work.

Frank Kermode interprets E.M. Forster's A Room with a View as a work that combines convention (in order to accommodate the "common reader" [The Art of Telling 140]) with some potential for openness. Calling the common reader Uncle Willie (a name bestowed by reviewer Edward Garnett), Kermode says that while Forster's openness is something Uncle Willie can overlook because there is enough of the old familiar ground for him, "More is going on than meets, or is intended to meet, Uncle Willie's eye" (11). But when texts emphasize openness, and do not offer enough common ground for Uncle

Willie to stand on, he becomes bored and gives up the effort of reading. The common reader dislikes Conrad's Under Western Eyes, for example, because the reader "values" authority and is bored by the novel's unconventions, such as the confusing structure and the unreliable narrator that "complicate the message." Kermode says of such complications:

They are more or less bound to bore or antagonize the simpler reader who feels that he has been left outside and cannot, without pains he is unwilling to take, gain access on his own terms, the observance of a due sequaciousness being one, and another the manifest presence of authority, so that he need not reason why.

(140)

When she wrote The Common Reader, Woolf envisioned a different kind of readership. She wrote essays intended to bring readers into a more dynamic and personal relationship with the texts she enjoyed. In this anthology, Woolf tried to communicate to readers her own sense of the minds and times and art of authors, as well as how we-- a "we" that included herself--experience literature. Woolf's common reader is the individual; Kermode's is the mass. The Uncle Willies would be similar to the followers of Ivan's Grand Inquisitor in The Brothers Karamazov. Although Christ would give people the freedom of choice, the Inquisitor knows:

But man seeks to worship what is established beyond dispute, so that all men would agree at once to worship it. For these pitiful creatures are concerned not only to find what one or the other can worship, but to find

something that all would believe in and worship; what is essential is that all may be together in it. (301)

if the authority of the Inquisitor were taken away, who could agree on anything? There would be chaos. Sensing this inevitability, the crowd prefers to remain a herd and chooses subjection to authority, rather than freedom.

Woolf wrote for a common reader she hoped would enjoy the adventure of reading as much as she did. She hoped her reader would be willing to accept the responsibility and work--and discomfort--required in equal partnership. In her introductory essay to The Common Reader, she says, "Above all, he is guided by an instinct to create for himself, out of whatever odds and ends he can come by, some kind of a whole--a portrait of a man, a sketch of an age, a theory of the act of writing" (1). The end, as the reader "never ceases, as he reads, to run up some rickety and ramshackle fabric" (1) is, finally, up to the reader.

"What was on her mind, eh? What idea lay behind, eh?  
What made her indue the antique with this glamour--this  
sham lure, and set 'em climbing, climbing, climbing up  
the monkey puzzle tree?"

Cobbet of Cobbs Corner

(Between the Acts 97)

## Chapter II

### Dramatis Personae:

#### Unmasking Mrs. Brown

When we think of the "persona" of a literary work, we usually think of the speaking voice behind a poem or of the prose fiction narrator who is a character in the story he or she relates. In Between the Acts, there is no one voice giving us an individual's perspective, and there is no first-person character/narrator, yet the anonymous and omniscient narrator is still a very active participant in the text. Perhaps a look back to an earlier definition of persona would give us a way to imagine Woolf's narrator. According to M.H. Abrams, "Persona was the Latin word for the 'mask' used by actors in the classical theater, from which was derived the term 'dramatis personae' for the characters in a drama, and ultimately, the English word 'person,' a particular individual" (131). By assuming different roles as she tells her story, the narrator becomes various dramatis personae and gives us a complex webbing of points of view, so complex, in fact, that we can only be frustrated if we try to find and capture a conventional narrator or character to express the author's meaning. As Fish and Iser note happens in open texts, such a quest might make us turn our attention away from these conventions and toward ourselves as the primary actors and authorities.

Within the first four pages of Between the Acts, we sense that Woolf's narrator is playing more than one narrative role. The novel begins with an objective and informative tone:

It was a summer's night and they were talking, in the big room with the windows open to the garden, about the cesspool. The county council had promised to bring water to the village, but they hadn't. (3)

In this opening paragraph, we meet an objective omniscient narrator who sets the scene, giving us time, place, and action. We are not told what the big room is, but we can overlook that small detail. Although we do not know who "they" are, we anticipate that the narrator soon will let us know:

Mrs. Haines, the wife of the gentleman farmer, a goosefaced woman with eyes protruding as if they saw something to gobble in the gutter, said affectedly:

"What a subject to talk about on a night like this!"

In this paragraph, the narrator introduces us to her first character, Mrs. Haines, and alludes to another. By using the article "the" instead of "a" when she says "the gentleman farmer," the narrator hints that perhaps this man is another character in the room. Also, we now meet a narrator who is willing to intrude and interpret for us by giving us her unflattering opinion of Mrs. Haines' appearance and manner.

Then there was silence; and a cow coughed; and that led her to say how odd it was, as a child, she had never feared cows, only horses. But, then, as a small child in a perambulator, a great cart-horse had brushed within an inch of her face. Her family, she told the old man in the arm-chair, had lived near Liskeard for many

centuries. There were the graves in the churchyard to prove it. (3)

The clause that stands out is "and a cow coughed." We compute anthropomorphism: cows/people, person/goose (we'll do this throughout the novel). Would it register in Mrs. Haines' mind that cows cough? Even though the noise triggers Mrs. Haines to compare cows and horses, it seems as though only the narrator, for her own purposes, would create this correlation. The narrator's involvement in the passage goes even further. After the cow coughs, we get a summary of Mrs. Haines' conversation. By moving from direct quotation to indirect summary, the narrator seems to be condensing Mrs. Haines' words. We would like to trust our narrator, but the final sentence seems too ill-mannered for Mrs. Haines to have said it. Instead, the omniscient narrator continues her editing role by condensing her character's words (or were they thoughts only, or just her manner?) into a sentence that gives the gist of Mrs. Haines' expressed or unexpressed idea.

Where are we now? Although at first we may have felt comfortable with our omniscient narrator, by now we might feel a bit impatient for her to let us know what she knows. So far, although we may have expected to hear a conversation, we've encountered only one direct quotation, a comment meant to cut off the conversation. We have, in the last paragraph quoted above, a clue about a third character, who we are sure is in the room since the narrator tells us Mrs. Haines speaks to the old man in an armchair. But we have not fully entered the room yet. Mrs. Haines can see who she is talking to; the narrator knows; but to us the old man is only a



shadow, and the gentleman farmer is an empty space. Our narrator is in the room, and it is she who seems to obstruct our view.

A bird chuckled outside. "A nightingale?" asked Mrs. Haines. No, nightingales didn't come so far north. It was a daylight bird, chuckling over the substance and succulence of the day, over worms, snails, grit, even in sleep.

Our narrator speaks in the voice of a poet. We compute again the connection between animals and people, thinking that chuckling and coughing are common noises interfering in human conversation. After we make the connection between people and animal noises, we encounter apparently a direct quote ("A nightingale?"). The narrator creates this impression by using quotation marks and attribution. Then Mrs. Haines (or is it only we?) gets a peculiar answer that at first seems to be a paraphrase of another character's words, but because no one else has spoken to us, it seems as though no one else is quite all there yet. We also have the sense that perhaps no one is speaking the words since it would be so simple to quote, "No, nightingales don't come this far north." The sentence that follows confirms our sense that we are listening to our narrator-poet, who echoes lines from Romeo and Juliet (Act V, lines 2 and 6), then mixes up day and night with the paradox of chuckling, eating, sleeping daylight birds.

The old man in the arm-chair--Mr. Oliver, of the Indian Civil Service, retired--said that the site they had chosen for the cesspool was, if he had heard aright, on the Roman road. From an aeroplane, he said, you could

still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house; and by the plough, when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic wars. (4)

We see the man in the chair, and feel confident that Mr. Oliver, Indian Civil Service, retired, would know about such things as cesspools and politics, airplanes and history. Because people do not normally speak so eloquently and embed their conversation with isocolon, perhaps our poet-narrator is rewriting Mr. Oliver's words to render the effect of history's onward movement. But we are not let into the conversation, since again we have a paraphrase. We note in the last clause the linking of plowshares with swords; we also note the incongruity of placing an Elizabethan manor house in the midst of battle. Would Mr. Oliver do this?

"But you don't remember . . ." Mrs. Haines began. No, not that. Still he did remember---- and he was about to tell them what, when there was a sound outside, and Isa, his son's wife, came in with her hair in pigtails; she was wearing a dressing gown with faded peacocks on it. She came in like a swan swimming its way; then was checked and stopped; was surprised to find people there; and lights burning. She had been sitting with her little boy who wasn't well, she apologized. What had they been saying? (4)

Not much, actually. Oliver hadn't remembered something. But Mrs. Haines had not completed her sentence, so how could he know what she was talking about? Then Mr. Oliver's words (a paraphrase?

a thought?) were broken off by an emphatically long dash when Isa entered. But now that Isa has joined the party, something definite, "real," seems to begin to happen. We have a third definite character, and we know something about who she is, what she looks like, and how she makes her entrance. Yet the narrator paraphrases Isa's words so that she enters the conversation, but we do not. We feel the narrator constantly distancing us by this technique. It seems so simple a thing to have quoted, "My son is ill, so I've been sitting with him. What have you been talking about?"

"Discussing the cesspool," said Mr. Oliver.

"What a subject to talk about on a night like this!"

Mrs. Haines exclaimed again. (4)

We have direct quotations, but because we already know all of this information, it seems the narrator could have paraphrased here, if anywhere. It seems as though Mrs. Haines reacts instinctively, too, as though the word "cesspool" automatically triggers her to repeat her line. As far as fact gathering, the information is of little use to us.

What had he said about the cesspool; or indeed about anything? Isa wondered, inclining her head towards the gentleman farmer, Rupert Haines. She had met him at a Bazaar; and at a tennis party. He had handed her a cup and a racquet--that was all. But in his ravaged face she always felt mystery; and in his silence, passion. At the tennis party she had felt this, and at the Bazaar. Now a third time, if anything more strongly, she felt it again.

(4-5)

Indeed, Rupert Haines had said nothing about anything. This paragraph's redundancies are intriguing. The cup and racquet of the fourth sentence repeat the idea that Isa met Rupert Haines twice. The fifth sentence introduces a pair of impressions that Isa had of the gentleman farmer. Then the sixth sentence combines the ideas contained in both pairs, making also a second repetition of Isa's observations and a third mention of the events. The final sentence then echoes her feelings toward him a third time. The chiming effect, discussed in the next chapter of this essay, is one of the dominant style techniques I find in Between the Acts. But if we try to interpret the above paragraph only in terms of its narrative voice, we have difficulty attributing it entirely to Isa. Maybe her thoughts flow like this, or maybe the narrator is trying to impress upon us Isa's attraction to this man, or maybe the repetition amounts to hyperbole. After all, Isa met him only twice, but the emotion duplicates like the et cetera of a writer who has simply run out of things to say. Regardless of our difficulty interpreting the repetitions, we feel more assured as Rupert Haines fills the empty space, and we are ready for our plot: the love triangle.

"I remember," the old man interrupted, "my mother. . . ." Of his mother he remembered that she was very stout; kept her tea-caddy locked; yet had given him in that very room a copy of Byron. It was over sixty years ago, he told them, that his mother had given him the works of Byron in that very room. He paused.

"She walks in beauty like the night," he quoted.

"So we'll go no more a-roving by the light of the moon." (5)

Mr. Oliver not only is interrupting other characters' thoughts, he is interrupting our newly seeded plot. He breaks in with a fragment that eventually will be completed by a paraphrase and by a quotation of a quotation. At first we think the sentence after the fragment is another summary of conversation, but the redundant sentence that follows ("It was over sixty years ago . . .") makes us wonder if we are following thoughts triggered in Oliver's mind and unspoken. This possibility seems more probable because the final thought about his mother triggers his speaking aloud the redundant sentence. Of course, for us he does not repeat the thought aloud. We get a paraphrase. Again the technique of indirect quotation distances us from this conversation. The technique of indirect interior monologue makes us feel that we are within the minds of the characters, but we also remember that we are getting thoughts filtered through the omniscient narrator, not as first-hand, stream-of-consciousness narration. There is so little direct quoting of thoughts or speech that we are glad to get fragments of poems as doubles for "real" conversation. The quotations also, because of the juxtaposition of hope and despair, act as transitions to Isa:

Isa raised her head. The words made two rings, perfect rings, that floated them, herself and Haines, like two swans down stream. 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. Sitting on her three-cornered chair she swayed, with her dark pigtailed hanging, and her body like a bolster in its faded dressing-gown. (5)

In this paragraph, the narrator reports "real" action, a head raised, then brings us Isa's thoughts, turning them into poetry to re-present Isa's impression wholly. The sense of Isa's feelings would have been lost if translated into such real language as, "The first lines of poetry made Isa wish she could float away with Rupert Haines; the second made her realize he was tied down to his goosefaced wife and Isa to her stockbroker husband." Later we discover that characters, especially Isa, often talk and think in poetic voices, and the technique evokes a consciousness that is outside of language. However, we still have the feeling we are reading a paraphrase because, first of all, there are no quotation marks and, secondly, because we have the past-tense voice of our narrator. The final sentence of this paragraph we link to Isa (since we think we have been in her mind), who seems to be looking at herself. Yet the details of dark pigtailed hanging and Isa swaying in a three-cornered chair make it seem as though we are looking through the eyes of another observer, such as another character or the narrator, as well as, perhaps, getting Isa's point of view of how she looks in her faded gown. We just can't be sure whose point of view we are observing through. The narrator then turns to Mrs. Haines' thoughts:

Mrs. Haines was aware of the emotion circling them, excluding her. She waited, as one waits for the strain of an organ to die out before leaving church. In the car

going home to the red villa in the cornfields, she would destroy it, as a thrush pecks the wings off a butterfly. Allowing ten seconds to intervene, she rose; paused; and then, as if she had heard the last strain die out, offered Mrs. Giles Oliver her hand. (5-6)

Here the narrator reports Mrs. Haines' actions and seems to intrude a negative opinion of the woman's state of mind. It is doubtful that Mrs. Haines could have thought herself a thrush pecking the wings off a butterfly, although she may have felt that vindictive. But we have just left, or so we thought, Isa's mind, so perhaps Isa is the one interpreting all of Mrs. Haines' actions. Perhaps we are seeing and hearing through Isa. We can't know. When the narrator says that Mrs. Haines waits "as one waits for the strain of an organ to die out before leaving church," we must pause to use our own experience or imagination to decide how one feels waiting for church music to stop. With controlled impatience? Because we have to feel for ourselves how Mrs. Haines felt, we are pulled into the scene more, and when the narrator has Mrs. Haines call Isa (silently) "Mrs. Giles Oliver," we have an immediate sense of Mrs. Haines' point of view. The loud silence in this paragraph and in the following leaves us with the impression that we are experiencing, at the same time, the clashing of two minds:

But Isa, though she should have risen at the same moment that Mrs. Haines rose, sat on. Mrs. Haines glared at her out of goose-like eyes, gobbling, "Please, Mrs. Giles Oliver, do me the kindness to recognize my existence. . . ." which she was forced to do, rising at last from her

chair, in her faded dressing gown, with the pigtailed  
falling over each shoulder. (6)

Because our predominant impression immediately before was that we were seeing through the characters Isa and Mrs. Haines, we think that Mrs. Haines believes Isa should have risen (rather than think the narrator is commenting on common courtesy). We think Isa notes the glare and gobble of those goose-like eyes (although weren't these the narrator's own words before?) because the eyes are directed toward Isa. Then it seems the perspective becomes Isa's, since it is Isa who "hears" Mrs. Haines' command. Just who is noting, again, Isa's gown and pigtailed we can't know. Perhaps it is one of the characters, or perhaps it is the narrator emphasizing, for her own purposes, the contrast between Isa as swan/lover and Isa as faded peacock/housewife.

There is no first-person narrator in this opening scene of the novel, yet the infiltration of indirect interior monologue gives the impression that we are experiencing the points of view of three characters: Isa, Mrs. Haines, and Mr. Oliver, because we seem to "overhear" their silent thoughts and moods. (Rupert Haines' silence is even silent, however.) Although we aren't always sure we are overhearing their thoughts or the narrator's, overall the illusion works, possibly because we are accustomed to the omniscient narrator who knows the unknowable. We also have the illusion that the characters are "real," in the sense of being individual, life-like representations of persons, because we have real facts: a time, summer's night; a place, the big room; and objects which include an arm chair, dressing gown, and three-cornered chair. Mr. Oliver has



a past in the Indian Civil Service; Mrs. Haines' family heritage is in Liskeard (we even have objects, the graves, to prove it), and she and her gentleman-farmer husband live in a red villa in a cornfield. Isa is married to stockbroker Giles Oliver, son of old Mr. Oliver; Isa became attracted to Rupert Haines at a bazaar and a tennis party, and she wears pigtails. All these details are conventional facts given to render the scene "real." We have not received very many facts yet, but we have enough to accept the illusion that the characters are also real.

We also have the illusion of reality because the characters speak aloud so that we can "hear" them. Yet there are only nine quoted lines. Two are repetitions in which Mrs. Haines cuts off conversation: "What a subject for a night like this!" Three are fragments: "A nightingale?" (and we wonder if Mrs. Haines spoke this); "But you don't remember . . ."; and "Discussing the cesspool" (which is merely a reiteration of the topic introduced in the first paragraph and never discussed while we listen). Two of the quotations are lines of poetry, and one is the non sequitur "I remember my mother. . . ." (which is written as a fragment). The only other bit placed between quotation marks is Mrs. Haines' silent command for Isa to rise (also written as though it were a fragment): "Please, Mrs. Giles Oliver, do me the kindness to recognize my existence. . . ." We may have expected at the beginning of the text to hear a conversation among characters, but by the end of this first scene we wonder what we've heard as our narrator seems to have stepped forward to carry on her own strange conversation about a conversation.

Between the quotations (the "acts" of our characters here), we get paraphrases of thoughts, paraphrases of conversation, and comments by the narrator. We often are confused about who is thinking or speaking (which character; character or narrator) because the narrator is not straightforward about her role. We have the continuous feeling of fluctuating from character to character to narrator, and sometimes of being suspended between two or more of these "masks." Because we get a bit of fact, a bit of direct dialogue, and a peek into the thoughts of the characters, we are seduced into thinking we may somehow wholly enter the scene, extract it from the text complete. However, it should have become apparent by now that our narrator just is not that reliable. And yet we have learned that to interpret any novel, we must know and understand the narrator. What kind of a narrator are we dealing with? Just who is she?

The audience was assembling. They came streaming along the paths and spreading across the lawn. Some were old; some were in the prime of life. There were children among them. Among them, as Mr. Figgis might have observed, were representatives of our most respected families--the Dyces of Denton; the Wickhams of Owlswick; and so on. Some had been there for centuries, never selling an acre. On the other hand there were newcomers, the Manresas, bringing the old houses up to date, adding bathrooms. And a scatter of odds and ends, like Cobbet of Cobbs Corner, retired, it was understood, on a pension from a tea plantation. Not an asset. He did his

own housework and dug in his garden. The building of a car factory and of an aerodrome in the neighborhood had attracted a number of unattached floating residents. Also there was Mr. Page, the reporter, representing the local paper. Roughly speaking, however, had Figgis been there in person and called a roll call, half the ladies and gentlemen present would have said: "Adsum; I'm here, in place of my grandfather or great-grandfather," as the case might be. At this very moment, half-past three on a June day in 1939 they greeted each other, and as they took their seats, finding if possible a seat next one another, they said: "That hideous new house at Pyes Corner! What an eyesore! And those bungalows!--have you seen 'em?" (74-75)

In the above passage, we see how the narrator can be playwright, audience, and actor at the same time. The description, which includes information on seating arrangements, goes on for two more paragraphs. The passage acts much like a playwright's directions to actors. But because we are "watching" the audience arrive, we also might consider the passage to be the first scene of our pageant, one that incorporates La Trobe's creation into the audience's interaction and reaction. We also receive information that we could not get if we were merely watching a play, so it seems the narrator/playwright also assumes, indirectly, the role of a Mr. Page, local reporter with the inside scoop. Doubles abound in this novel, and we might view the narrator as an anonymous double for Page, as she is for La Trobe. The narrator, like a good reporter,

turns to authority to validate opinion and information when she refers to Figgis, the author of Figgis's Guide Book (52). Like a reporter, she fills in holes, documenting the names of notable arrivals and telling us the exact time and month and year, although we might wonder why she does not throw in the date of the month. This passage is not straight news, however. We might consider the interpretation of attitudes to be the work of an omniscient and intrusive narrator, but we also might view such information as coming from a member of the audience itself. For one thing, the narrator notes "our most respected families" (italics added), hinting that the narrator considers herself (and us?) to be members of this community. We also think that the narrator might be an insider because only a local would know that Cobbs is considered part of the "scatter of odds and ends," unaccepted by old-time, landed gentry because he does his own housework (What, no servants!) and tends his own garden like a world-wearyed Candide. The reporter knows who are gentry, who are relatively acceptable newcomers, and who are the outcast miscellaneous folks. It seems our own playwright may be a member of this novel's cast, and that her role is both observer of the novel's audience and member of this audience. It is as though she undertakes these three functions simultaneously. We have little problem with her method in this passage, however, because as recorder of facts she has filled in the gaps tidily, and we know we are comfortably on the grounds of Pointz Hall.

Frequently during the pageant itself, the narrator-playwright intrudes into Miss La Trobe's production as author, then steps back,

as La Trobe does, to hide behind the bushes and let the audience do the work. Following is an example of our narrator's authorial intrusion:

The Queen of this great land . . .

--those were the first words that could be heard above the roar of laughter and applause.

Mistress of ships and bearded men (she bawled)

Hawkins, Frobisher, Drake,

Tumbling their oranges, ingots of silver,

Cargoes of diamonds, ducats of gold,

Down on the jetty, there in the west land--

(she pointed her fist at the blazing blue sky)

Mistress of pinnacles, spires and palaces--

(her arm swept towards the house)

For me Shakespeare sang--

(a cow moed. A bird twittered)

The throstle, the mavis (she continued)

. . . . . (83-84. Ellipsis added.)

There are several more lines to this passage, but interruptions by our narrator are more abundant in these first lines. By interrupting the fragmented first line, the narrator brings the audience into the scene. The first three parenthetical interruptions seem to be there to let us know how the actor sounds and motions, but even though the interruption "she bawled" adds information, "she continued" is unnecessary and emphasizes the narrator's interference. The interruptions (which include bringing cows and birds--domestic and undomestic animals--into the scene)

become more a part of the play when they match rhythmically the poetic lines. Queen Eliza continues to bawl for twelve more lines, with one more narrator interruption, until the wind stops her by nearly blowing off her headdress and ruffle. Then watch how the narrator-playwright withdraws to relinquish command:

"Laughter, loud laughter," Giles muttered. The tune on the gramophone reeled from side to side as if drunk with merriment. Mrs. Manresa began beating her foot and humming in time to it. (85)

This is a play in which everybody gets into the act. The gramophone (an active and unreliable voice throughout the novel) is audience here, and Mrs. Manresa is actor. Also, Giles' voice takes over for the narrator-playwright to give directions. During a later scene in the pageant, Mrs. Manresa provides directions when she reads from the program:

"This is Scene Three. Lady Harpy Harraden's Closet. The sound of horses' hooves is heard in the distance."

Then our narrator takes over:

The sound of horses' hooves, energetically represented by Albert the idiot with a wooden spoon on a tray, died away. (142)

Sometimes our playwright brings both plays--that of the Olivers and other audience members, and that of the pageant--together simultaneously, as in the following passage:

"Play out the play," Great Eliza commanded. An aged crone tottered forward.

("Mrs. Otter of the End House," someone murmured.)

She sat herself on a packing case, and made motions, plucking her dishevelled locks and rocking herself from side to side as if she were an aged beldame in a chimney corner.

("The crone, who saved the rightful heir," Mrs. Winthrop explained.)

'Twas a winter's night (she croaked out)

I mind me that, I to whom all's one now, summer or winter.

.....(88-89. Ellipsis added.)

First of all, the actors in this pageant are local residents, so they appear both as themselves, in their "real life" roles as villagers, and in the roles we are to believe were written by Miss La Trobe and related to us by the narrator. In this way, we might consider these characters as wearers of three different masks. The passage itself involves mostly directions: from cast, narrator, and audience. By reading their programs, the audience members also bring in the directions as they would be written by Miss La Trobe. Because we hear so many voices at once, we sense that everyone is directing and writing this production. At other times during the pageant, even nature joins in this role. For example, in one passage cows give directions to the audience: "Suddenly the cows stopped; lowered their heads and began browsing. Simultaneously the audience lowered their heads and read their programmes" (141). Everyone substitutes for everyone else, and no one seems to stay within a set role. When audience members read plot, character, and scene descriptions for us, we experience a strange multiple masking

effect. The narrator observes them reading something written by Miss La Trobe, but because the narrator also is playwright, this program reading is part of a scene. But the overall effect is not that all are united in their multifunctions. The effect is a splintering of characters into an even greater number of separate fragments. We just wish the narrator would get her voices into harmony so we could achieve our gestalt.

Sometimes we have the impression that we are hearing one voice over an extended passage. In the following excerpt, the narrator seems almost to disappear as she gives us dialogue interspersed with indirect interior monologue that represents William Dodge's thoughts. Lucy Swithin, Oliver's sister, is conducting a tour of Oliver's home for two unexpected visitors, Dodge and Mrs. Manresa.

"Now," she said, "for the bedrooms." She tapped twice very distinctly on a door. With her head on one side, she listened.

"One never knows," she murmured, "if there's somebody there." Then she flung open the door.

He half expected to see somebody there, naked, or half dressed, or knelt in prayer. But the room was empty. The room was tidy as a pin, not slept in for months, a spare room. Candles stood on the dressing-table. The counterpane was straight. Mrs. Swithin stopped by the bed. (69-70)

So far, we have what seems to be the omniscient narrator relating a dialogue and telling us what William Dodge saw. But the phrase "not slept in for months" seems beyond Dodge's knowing, so



perhaps the narrator is adding information only she and the Olivers would know. Or perhaps Dodge, if he is a writer as Mrs. Manresa claims, is writing in his own details. As the passage continues, the narrative seems as though it comes increasingly through Dodge's mind:

"Here," she said, "yes, here," she tapped the counterpane, "I was born. In this bed."

Her voice died away. She sank down on the edge of the bed. She was tired, no doubt, by the stairs, by the heat.

"But we have other lives, I think, I hope," she murmured. "We live in others, Mr. . . . We live in things."

She spoke simply. She spoke with an effort. She spoke as if she must overcome her tiredness out of charity towards a stranger, a guest. She had forgotten his name. Twice she said "Mr." and stopped.

The furniture was mid-Victorian, bought at Naples, perhaps, in the forties. The carpet was covered with small purple dots. And a white circle marked the place where the slop pail had stood by the washstand.

Could he say "I'm William"? He wished to. Old and frail she had climbed the stairs. She had spoken her thoughts, ignoring, not caring if he thought her, as he had, inconsequent, sentimental, foolish. She had lent him a hand to help him up a steep place. She had guessed his trouble. Sitting on the bed he heard her sing,

swinging her little legs, "Come and see my sea weeds, come and see my sea shells, come and see my dicky bird hop upon its perch"--an old child's nursery rhyme to help a child. Standing by the cupboard in the corner he saw her reflected in the glass. Cut off from their bodies, their eyes smiled, their bodiless eyes, at their eyes in the glass.

Then she slipped off the bed.

"Now," she said, "what comes next?" and pattered down the corridor. . . . (70-71. Final ellipsis is added.)

In the first three paragraphs above, we still seem to be viewing the scene directly through the narrator's eyes, but once Lucy addresses William ("Mr. . . ."), we begin to see through William, who notices that Mrs. Swithin has forgotten his name. The details about the decor seem to belong to the narrator, since it would be unusual for a person to speculate about exactly where an item had been purchased. But during another scene, in the same objective tone, William examines daggers on a coffee cup "made perhaps at Nottingham; date about 1760" (60). Oddly incongruous is the "perhaps" that limits the reliability of these very specific "facts." Regardless of the impression that we are "seeing" through Dodge's eyes, we always have perspectives filtered indirectly through our narrator, who does not make her attributions clear, so we cannot be sure. The "bodiless" eyes reflected in the mirror belong to both Dodge and Mrs. Swithin, so here we might have a merging consciousness as both characters silently communicate and seem to lose their individual identities. As Lucy slips off the bed

and prepares to continue the tour, we feel an objective shift back to the narrator's point of view, although we may still be seeing through William. Moving through these different viewpoints and getting characters' impressions second-hand give us the uneasy feeling that we are both inside and outside of their thoughts at one time. And not knowing exactly where we are gives us the feeling we are both inside and outside the scene.

The most perplexing portion of this excerpt is Lucy's nursery rhyming. Characters in the novel speak in different voices, silently and out loud, and often quotation marks are unreliable indicators, so we cannot be sure whether she sang her rhyme aloud. Since at this point in the passage we seem to be looking through Dodge's eyes, we might be getting his interpretation of Swithin's acceptance of him as one would unequivocally accept a child (especially if one is, although old, a child too). So the song may be a silent "communication" that is only a hope in William's mind. Or perhaps Lucy, through her silent voice, communicates to Dodge what she actually feels. We simply cannot know. Doesn't it matter who speaks for the author--and us Uncle Willies?

We do know, as we progress through the text, that silence is a very loud communicator. Much of the "action" is the thinking voice that replaces conversation. Twice during the luncheon with guests, the narrator states that "silence made its contribution to talk" (39, 40). Sometimes the characters' silent thoughts communicate as though they were spoken aloud, as in the following scene from the pageant:

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

"So am I," Dodge echoed.

"And I too," Isa thought. (176)

Characters' unspoken thoughts often are communicated to the audience of a play, but here these silent thoughts connect as though heard by each other. The parenthetical "without words" seems a cue to us readers not only that the quote is not uttered, but that the quote is a communication outside of language. The following passage intermingles indirect interior monologues in a similar way. The gramophone's needle has run out of music and so tick tick ticks and chuff chuff chuffs:

"Marking time," said old Oliver beneath his breath.

"Which don't exist for us," Lucy murmured. "We've only the present."

"Isn't that enough?" William asked himself. Beauty-- isn't that enough? But here Isa fidgeted. Her bare brown arms went nervously to her head. She half turned in her seat. "No, not for us, who've the future," she seemed to say. The future disturbing our present. Who was she looking for? William, turning, following her eyes, saw only a man in grey. (82-83)

William doesn't know that the man in grey is Rupert Haines, but by this time we do. Beginning with clear attribution so that we know whose silence we are hearing (Oliver's and Lucy's), the passage ends with confusion. First, "Isn't that enough?" is quoted once, then repeated without quotation marks. The communication has occurred between quoted silences, yet when William rephrases "Isn't that enough?" so that the sense of his idea has moved from "the

present" to "beauty," this silence is without quotations. Do quotation marks indicate communication? Yet Isa fidgets after the unquoted repetition. On the other hand, her fidgeting seems so unconsciously automatic. Then "She seemed to say" indicates that someone (possibly Dodge) is interpreting Isa's silent communication. Is it Isa, Dodge, or the narrator who qualifies her quoted remark by saying "the future disturbing our present"? The thought might be Dodge's, since he is looking at her and since immediately following what seems to be her silent "words," he turns to discover Isa looking at the man in grey.

Is the narrator paraphrasing silent thoughts? Perhaps. Even quoted conversation is sometimes a paraphrase, as in the following excerpt where the nurses talk, "rolling words, like sweets on their tongues":

This morning that sweetness was: "How cook had told 'im off about the asparagus; how when she rang I said: how it was a sweet costume with a blouse to match;" and that was leading to some thing about a feller as they walked up and down the terrace rolling sweets, trundling the perambulator. (10)

The quoted conversation is rendered in dialect, yet it is a paraphrase of pieces of conversation. The exact words of the conversation are not important, we realize, because the nurses are simply chit-chatting, and the technique communicates that effect. We also feel as though we are watching the scene from a distance, catching drifts of conversation. The nurses' voices seem to move further away when the paraphrase loses its quotation marks. We may

have the illusion that we are watching the nurses, but actually we are still listening to our unreliable narrator and looking through the window of her viewpoint. Although the quoting of paraphrases gives us a sense of eavesdropping, the effect is more like gossip. We want to believe, but we have a hard time discerning what is "real" and what is illusion.

At one point in Between the Acts, we read that Isa thinks, "'Abortive,' that was the word that expressed her" (15). Because of the jumble of voice fragments, the seemingly haphazard use of attribution, and the inconsistent and unreliable use of quotation marks, all the personae seem abortive. No voice--including that of our narrator--dominates the text as bearer of the author's signature. Just who is speaking is less important than the techniques that involve us in a process of trying to uncover the author's meaning (if we are like Uncle Willie) or of trying to formulate our own gestalt (if we are Woolf's common reader). What makes the novel seem real is not the individuality of the personae, but their complexity. In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Woolf comments that on recalling great novels:

you do at once think of some character who seemed to you so real (I do not by that mean so lifelike) that it has the power to make you think not merely of itself, but of all sorts of things through its eyes--of religion, of love, of war, of peace, of family life, of balls in country towns, of sunsets, moonrises, the immortality of the soul. (325)

Woolf's emphasis is that the whole flux of the novel should cause a life experience within the reader. So it is more important to her that characters add to this effect, rather than that they be individual and unique. A character, say a Mrs. Brown, "is eternal, Mrs. Brown is human nature, Mrs. Brown changes only on the surface, it is the novelists who get in and out . . ." (330) Woolf complains that the Edwardians, like Bennett, never have looked at Mrs. Brown, "never at life, never at human nature" (330). Who is Mrs. Brown? No longer the stranger who sits across from us on our journey, she is "the spirit we live by, life itself" (337). Take off her mask--her illusion of being an individual and distinct character--and we discover ourselves. In Between the Acts, it is we who are behind the masks of actor, playwright, and audience.

The only character in Miss La Trobe's production who plays himself is the town idiot. Yet jesters never play themselves; they play their audiences. They are a playwright's device to poke fun at his or her audience. We might view the town idiot in this novel as a jester who hints to us that we are being teased by our own expectations if we do not early on realize that it is we who will have to link the monkey puzzle pieces to see the tree entire. In one scene, the jester does a little jig that parodies our movement:

Hoppety, jiggety. Albert resumed

In at the window, out at the door,

What does the little bird hear? (he whistled on his fingers)

And see! There's a mouse. . . .

(he made as if chasing it through the grass)

Now the clock strikes!

(he stood erect, puffing out his cheeks as if he were  
blowing a dandelion clock)

One, two, three, four. . . .

And off he skipped, as if his turn was over. (87)

We might wonder whether the jester ever leaves us, or whether his departure is only an "as if" illusion. At one point in the novel, Mr. Oliver informs Mrs. Manresa, "Our part . . . is to be the audience. And a very important one too." Then Mrs. Swithin recalls that "One year we wrote the play ourselves" (58-59. Ellipsis added). The audience's role as passive observer is an "as if" illusion, because La Trobe's audience becomes involved as authors and as dramatis personae in La Trobe's pageant. But we, too, are an "as if" audience. We chase after mice--including the voice that may echo the author's meaning--as they scurry away. We experience time--whether prehistoric (rather, ahistoric) flux or historic chronology--as it scatters through the text like dandelion seeds. Are we that "little bird," and what do we "hear"? We are always going "in at the window, out at the door." We are always watching characters and narrator play "as if." Inevitably, we realize that we are playing "as if." We, if we are like Uncle Willie, want to sit back and play the audience; instead, we have to become busy actors involved in playing out Woolf's imaginary "life itself." If we are the common readers Woolf envisioned, we might enjoy our own performance. We also might experience a keener sense of participation, hence enjoyment, because Between the Acts, a "writerly" text read without the author's signature (see pages 17-



18), gives us the chance to write the script. Since no persona-- including the anonymous narrator--voices the original creator's authorial Word, we might enjoy the freedom to co-create with Woolf, bringing into play our own background and "life itself."

'Tis not enough no Harshness gives Offence,  
The Sound must seem an Eccho to the Sense.

Alexander Pope

(An Essay on Criticism 155)

### Chapter III

#### Onomatopoeic Style

Woolf composed her final novel while German bombers threatened to destroy English civilization. To Woolf, who viewed art as the center of this culture, the destruction had already begun because public fear had replaced public interest in the arts. The result for this artist was an ebbing of her self-identity. "It struck me," she wrote in 1940, "that one curious feeling is, that the writing 'I' has vanished. No audience. No echo. That's part of one's death" (A Writer's Diary 323).

Woolf had always been greatly concerned about the reactions of public, critics, and friends toward her work. Their responses, their echoes, diminished during the war. After publishing her biography of Roger Fry, she complained in her diary about the lack of critical response: "Complete silence surrounds that book. It might have sailed into the blue and been lost. 'One of our books did not return' as the B.B.C. puts it" (327). Also, Woolf always emphasized literature's suggestive quality, and without a reading public, this vital force could not exist. It seems to me that an author's identity as an artist, her writing "I," expands in proportion to the capacity of her texts and her readers to enter the third dimension that Iser speaks of, where they merge in a new creative voice, a unifying "we" different from and broader than the individual voice of either writer or reader. Without the artistic "I," the writer is merely the isolated and self-contained "I" of the ego. The lack of interest in writing that the war brought (in

addition to the waning number of Woolf's friends still alive) made Woolf feel more and more confined within her own personality.

On the other hand, while her sense of isolation increased as her readership diminished, she also noted a profound unity among the English people, brought together because of the fear and hardships of war. When Woolf began working on Between the Acts, she summarized her sense of a fluctuating separation and unity of the English people in a paragraph which has colored my experience within and interpretation of the novel:

. . . What's odd . . . is the severance that war seems to bring: everything becomes meaningless: can't plan: then there comes too the community feeling: all England thinking the same thing--this horror of war--at the same moment. Never felt it so strong before. Then the lull and one lapses again into private separation. (302)

In Between the Acts, Woolf uses a great many variations of dramatic, poetic, and prose fiction styles that keep us continually changing direction. There are nursery rhymes and doggerel, for example, and lyrical passages and burlesques. There are euphonic and cacophonous paragraphs, as well as paragraphs in which harmony and dissonance live side by side. Fragments, parenthetical insertions, and ellipses litter the text, as do repetitions and parallels. Some sections are comfortably straightforward and objective. In order to limit my study of Woolf's style here, I will analyze some of the passages that, I believe, help evoke by the onomatopoeic quality of their syntax a zigzagging movement between

fragmentation and continuity, a movement I find to be the predominant one of the text.

One of the author's most frequent techniques to show connections between characters is "chiming," where thought or dialogue seems to be passed along, through mind connections, from character to character. The following excerpt is an example of this method. In it, old Bartholomew Oliver and his sister, Lucy Swithin, reenact an annual ritual:

The words were like the first peal of a chime of bells. As the first peals, you hear the second; as the second peals, you hear the third. So when Isa heard Mrs. Swithin say: "I've been nailing the placard on the Barn," she knew she would say next:

"For the pageant."

And he would say:

"Today? By Jupiter! I'd forgotten!"

"If it's fine," Mrs. Swithin continued, "they'll act on the terrace . . ."

"And if it's wet," Bartholomew continued, "in the Barn."

"And which will it be?" Mrs. Swithin continued. "Wet or fine?"

Then, for the seventh time in succession, they both looked out of the window. (21-22)

In his glossary of literary terms, Abrams notes that "onomatopoeia" can refer to a word or group of words that sound like the noise they represent, or the term can refer "to words or passages

which seem to correspond to what they denote in any way whatever--in size, movement, or force, as well as sound . . . " As Pope said, "the sound should seem an echo of the sense" (126). It seems that the passage from Between the Acts corresponds with the broader interpretation that syntax, as well as the sounds of vowels and consonants, can echo sense. For example, the second sentence, because of its semicolon, combines the first, second, and third peals of a chime. Because the first chime is subordinated in an adverbial clause, the second chime in the main clause seems to take over. But because of the ongoing effect of the simple present tense and the conjunction "as," the first chime flows over into the second. The semicolon here connects two sentences, rather than breaking them up. (Woolf also often uses semicolons to cause abrupt stops between lexical groups, thereby creating a disjointed and fragmentary effect.) Because the semicolon causes this connection, because the second "sentence" structurally parallels the first, and because the repetition of "the second" causes a chain, all three chimes link and seem to continue simultaneously.

By preceding this ritual dialogue with the information that the conversation seemed to Isa like peals of chimes, and by actually setting us into the chiming motion, Woolf prepares us for continuing this movement throughout the dialogue. We are not disappointed (an unusual reaction during this novel, which continually sets up, then aborts movements); we will notice throughout a chiming effect. First, triple structures abound to echo our first three chimes. There are three "and"s to connect pieces of dialogue with each other and to echo the chimes, and the triple repetition of "continued" has

the same effect. Although attributions inserted mid-quote seem to break the flow, they also act as connecting units since they are embedded, rather than placed after the quotes as end stops. While the embedding adds continuity, it also breaks the quotations into three couplets with two stresses per line:

if it's fine  
they'll act on the terrace . . .

And if it's wet  
in the Barn.

And which will it be?  
Wet or fine?

Linking the couplets together is the repetition of sound caused by the redundant "fine" at the end of the first and final lines. Also linking the three is "wet or fine" in the final stanza, which brings together the "fine" of the first couplet and "wet" of the second. (This may sound far-fetched, but one can also imagine the flipping over of "fine and wet" to mimic the action of a bell turning upward.) The "wet and fine" echo, by the way, will continue throughout the novel, both as the words themselves and as the idea of sunshine and rainfall.

Another triplet in this brief passage includes the use of past, present, and future tenses. The narrator's use of conditional past tense also gives us past (narrative voice), future (the effect of the cause), and present (because we're actually experiencing the ritual as we read). Although Bart's interjection "Today? By

Jupiter! I'd forgotten!" seems to interrupt the chain of dialogue, it echoes the triad because it has three parts. We also have a three-part structure of introduction, body, and conclusion.

Another element adds to the passage's three-chime effect. There are three characters contributing to this conversation. At first Isa hears Mrs. Swithin say, "I've been nailing the placard on the Barn," but the next couple of quotations are from Isa's mind. She is thinking of what Lucy and Bart "would" say. Not until the beginning of the wet and fine couplets do we lose the "would" and gain the illusion that we're hearing the other characters' voices. Still, it is an illusion, since Isa is projecting the future by repeating the past.

The words themselves are not as important here as the pattern of the conversation. What stands out is the monotony and redundancy, especially obvious since we're told that this ritual has been repeated, verbatim, for seven years. The most important unifying aspect of this passage is not the characters' ability to communicate something new to each other, but their willingness to repeat a convention. It is as though the invisible outside force of convention pulls strings that make each character speak in turn, on cue, then by the end of the passage turn simultaneously to look out of the window. The repetition of pattern--this ritualistic dance--establishes a continuity of time and a bond among characters.

Whereas chiming gives readers a sense of continuity and unification, "rippling" is a process of handing down units of characters' thoughts or speech without the sense of being an established convention. Characters seem to react impromptu,



although sometimes their actions seem too well choreographed. In the following example, Isa tries to get Giles' mind off the dismal fact that he has to sit through the pageant. Notice how Isa knocking over the coffee cup, an insignificant act in itself, ends Giles' hyperbolizing about himself--modern-day Prometheus who would give mortals fire if only he didn't have to watch the afternoon performance. Also, as the cup spills over into the next paragraph, it acts as a transition that links Isa with Dodge, acts as a chime for the ever-absent Rupert Haines (he and Isa met over a cup of something), and challenges Dodge to a duel:

"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. 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. His face showed it; and Isa, not knowing what to say, abruptly, half purposely, knocked over a coffee cup.

William Dodge caught it as it fell. He held it for a moment. He turned it. From the faint blue mark, as of crossed daggers, in the glaze at the bottom he knew that it was English, made perhaps at Nottingham; date about 1760. 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 a straightforward love for a woman--his head was close to Isa's head--but simply a ---- At this word, which he could not speak in public, he pursed his lips; and the signet-ring on his little finger looked redder, for the flesh next it whitened as he gripped the arm of his chair.

"Oh what fun!" cried Mrs. Manresa . . . (59-60.

Ellipsis added.)

Like the wet and fine passage quoted previously, this excerpt is onomatopoeic. The first sentence echoes old Bart's comment to Mrs. Manresa that she needn't help cut up bread and butter for the pageant, since "We are the audience," a sentence re-presented now in Giles' mind. The dash links the two sentences into one, but since dashes normally are used to set off lexical units that interrupt the grammatical flow of sentences, this dash also accentuates the separateness of the two sentences that reflect for him the same meaning, almost as though the sentences occupy either side of an equal sign. They are split in Giles' aggravated consciousness, one following the other to make Giles' frustration emphatic. Sentence structure begins to increase with the two simple sentences that follow, because one adds infinitive and prepositional phrases and the other contains a three-part compound verb. The "you" could be considered "one," or perhaps the comment is directed toward the reader, since words also cease to lie flat for us. The movement is more intense in the next sentence because the semicolon pushes together two sentences into a compound structure and because the

anastrophe "manacled to a rock he was" stresses the first word, adding to the sense of outrage. The final sentence mimics the idea that words ceased to lie flat because a sense of bounding up is evoked by the parenthetical interference of "not knowing what to say," "abruptly," and "half purposely." Finally, the paragraph ends by spilling the coffee cup over into the next paragraph, where Dodge catches the cup's pronoun.

The second paragraph begins as flatly as the first as William catches and looks over the cup. The fourth sentence begins with a suspension of what Dodge will make of this challenge as we wade through four prepositional phrases that list information about the cup, only to end up with some banal "facts" completely out of accord with Giles' anger. As the itemization continues, this time in Giles' mind, with "considering the daggers, coming to this conclusion," we are ready to build momentum with Giles, but find only that the sentence lapses into an explanation by our intrusive narrator, who closes with the sarcastic punchline "conveniently." Now words really jump up angrily as Giles goes into a tirade of /i/ and /l/ sounds, alliteration, rhyming, fragments broken off abruptly by semicolons, and all this intense name-calling broken into twice by the opposing reasonable "realistic" voice: "not a downright plain man of his senses" and "not a man to have a straightforward love for a woman." Because of the juxtaposition of the two statements, the parenthetical insertion "his head was close to Isa's head" especially emphasizes the comparison between Giles (who supposedly has straightforward love for woman) and Dodge (whose head is close to Isa's). Giles' final epithet is silent, but Isa will pick up on

it six paragraphs later: "Isa guessed the word that Giles had not spoken" (61), and we certainly know what it is. Though brave Giles is unable to speak, we've moved past euphemism. Now that we have moved beyond words into a very noisy silence, the words can begin to lie flat again, which they do in the loose list of clauses and phrases that ends the paragraph.

Giles is a mock hero. When Mrs. Manresa exclaims, "Oh what fun!" after Giles has drawn the blood from his own hands, the words seem to be non sequitur, as they are followed by words that echo what Bart and Lucy had told her about the pageant. But they do follow in the sense that Giles is play-acting. This soldier does one aggressive act: during a pageant interval, he squashes a snake that will die anyway (since it's choking on a toad [an echo of toady? Who is the snake?]) and bloodies his tennies. "But it was action. Action relieved him. He strode to the Barn, with blood on his shoes" (99). The action prior to this violent dragon-slaying is the onomatopoeically represented game of kicking stones:

. . . Stone-kicking was a child's game. He remembered the rules. By the rules of the game, one stone, the same stone, must be kicked to the goal. Say a gate, or a tree. He played it alone. The gate was a goal; to be reached in ten. The first kick was Manresa (lust). The second, Dodge (perversion). The third, himself (coward). And the fourth and the fifth and all the others were the same. (98-99. Ellipsis added.)

Notice how the action of stone kicking is repeated in the short, simple sentences. "One stone, the same stone" acts to chop up the

second sentence, since it is inserted parenthetically, and also causes a lexical repetition that parallels the idea of kicking the same stone again. Most of the passage reads like a straightforward, downright plain book of well-defined rules. The polysyndeton in the final sentence renders the effect of the separate beats of the kicks angrily picking up speed. I hear the rhythm as: And the fourth and the fifth and all the others were the same.

The only other action Giles performs also is play. He drives off with Mrs. Manresa, a move which does not give him much credibility as a man with a straightforward love of woman, if one recalls his wife, Isa. Giles seems to be angry at William because William will not pick up the gauntlet; however, Giles' machismo is posturing. The "real" threat that Dodge offers Giles is that Dodge is much more straightforward and downright plain than is Giles, and Dodge seems to be much closer to Isa. Throughout the novel, Dodge reads Isa's mind or lips, and we are told Dodge is Isa's conspirator, "a seeker like her after hidden faces" (207). Following is one example of how they come together in their own ritualistic performance:

"There's something for your buttonhole Mr. . . ." she said, handing him a sprig of scented geranium.

"I'm William," he said, taking the furry leaf and pressing it between thumb and finger.

"I'm Isa," she answered. Then they talked as if they had known each other all their lives; which was odd, she said, as they always did, considering she'd known him perhaps one hour. Weren't they, though, conspirators,

seekers after hidden faces? That confessed, she paused and wondered, as they always did, why they could speak so plainly to each other. And added: "Perhaps because we've never met before, and never shall again." (114)

We are told they only just met, yet the narrator intrudes to let us also know that they act together "as they always did." The idea that "perhaps" "she'd known him one hour" has the double meaning of perhaps she'd known him about one hour, or perhaps it is not true that she'd known him one hour. And the "perhaps" in the final sentence makes us wonder if perhaps Isa and Giles had met before and will meet again. It seems, because no quotation marks are used, Isa's confession is made in silence, yet the final sentence, it would seem, is aloud. It seems we are watching a well-rehearsed minuet. It is as though the performance were pre-scripted, and the roles (perhaps even by different actors behind the masks) have been repeated season after season. As the passage continues, William echoes Isa's dramatic voice:

"The doom of sudden death hanging over us," he said.

"There's no retreating and advancing"--he was thinking of the old lady showing him the house--"for us as for them." By interlinking Lucy, "the old lady," and Bart and Lucy, as "them," into the sentence, William speaks not only for his and Isa's generation, but also for past generations as he predicts doom. In the sentence that follows, Isa and Giles connect in their premonition. Notice we are told the future is "a criss-cross of lines making no pattern," a phrase I find helpful in forming a gestalt for Between the Acts:

The future shadowed their present, like the sun coming through the many-veined transparent vine leaf; a criss-cross of lines making no pattern. (114)

Of course, Dodge is not always so much in league with Isa. Connections are always to be disconnected. Earlier during the pageant's first interval, "He forgot how she would have looked against vine leaf in a greenhouse. Only at Giles he looked; and looked and looked" (106). Later, when Isa offers to show Dodge the greenhouse, he impatiently reacts (in silence): "Oh not now, he could have cried. But had to follow, leaving Giles to welcome the approaching Manresa, who had him in thrall" (112). The force of convention has become a nuisance.

After the coffee cup tips over, another game of passing the gauntlet occurs, this time from Mrs. Manresa to Dodge, who again remains silent and inactive. Notice that Mrs. Manresa has difficulty explaining in words, so finishes her sentence twice with an act that mimics her meaning. When she acts out "so clumsy," the adjective phrase turns, in essence, into an adverb that links up with Dodge's setting down the cup "very delicately."

"For myself," Mrs. Manresa continued, "speaking plainly [here we have an echo of Giles' "plain"], I can't put two words together. I don't know how it is--such a chatterbox as I am with my tongue, once I hold a pen----" [the dash echoes Giles' reticence and so links the two characters] She made a face, screwed her fingers as if she held a pen in them. But the pen she held thus on the little table absolutely refused to move.

"And my handwriting--so huge--so clumsy--" She made another face and dropped the invisible pen.

Very delicately William Dodge set the cup in its saucer. "Now he," said Mrs. Manresa, as if referring to the delicacy with which he did this, and imputing to him the same skill in writing, "writes beautifully. Every letter perfectly formed."

Again they all looked at him. Instantly he put his hands in his pockets. (61)

The link caused by placing hands in pockets and forming letters by hand causes the fourth paragraph to spill over into the fifth. The pointing effect of the italicized "he" makes us, with the others, automatically look at Dodge, who again is expected to pick up the gauntlet. Instead, he jerkily stuffs his hands into his pockets. We cannot be sure who Dodge is because Mrs. Manresa is play-acting "as if," and because when she first accused him of being an artist, he corrected her by saying, "I'm a clerk in an office" (38). Most of the time he keeps telling people that he is William, a statement which seems to make him a double for Isa, whose name sounds like "I's a . . ." Like Dodge, she is linked to art because she surreptitiously writes poetry in a journal, as he hides his artist's hands in his pockets. Perhaps each dislikes the stereotyping that goes along with their stereotypical masks (housewife/homosexual). It seems that their "I" is the "real" person behind the mask, yet because we never meet the real person, we wonder if again we have characters just playing "as if."



We also might interpret the "I" as, ultimately, a mask if we pay close attention to the stockpiling of first-person pronouns in certain sections of the text. There are three places where "I" usage is especially dense. One is where the Reverend Streatfield tries to impose his critical view and his thesis statement on the crowd. The other times are when La Trobe's troupe enacts a Restoration comedy and when Mrs. Manresa speaks, as in the conversation quoted above. To represent the Age of Reason, Miss La Trobe produces a nonsensical farce about phony characters who try their damndest to get their own way. The title is, appropriately, "Where there's a Will there's a Way" (125. Italics are Woolf's, as Mrs. Elmhurst is reading from a program). Giles and Mrs. Manresa seem to be doubles for the play's characters, and they are quite active during this performance. Mrs. Manresa provides directions for background noise (142. Quoted above on page 40), and during an interval they act out their grossly stereotypic roles of Man and Woman (although, characteristically, Giles is a bit insecure in his role). Bart makes the connection between Giles and a character in the play, Sir Spaniel Lilyliver, by using "Sir," with its capitalized "S":

"Reason, begad! Reason!" exclaimed old Bartholomew, and looked at his son as if exhorting him to give over these womanish vapours and become a man, Sir.

Giles sat straight as a dart, his feet tucked under him.

Mrs. Manresa had out her mirror and lipstick and attended to her lips and nose. (133)

Mrs. Manresa's objects--the facts that buttonhole her--are the mirror, since she always is focused on herself alone, and lipstick, since this self is a veneer, a mask. In the following ripple, her lack of contact with the minds of others is apparent. To concentrate on the ripple, I have included only the first sentence in a few of the paragraphs (so the ellipses are added). Within the first paragraph, we move from a group consciousness to that of Bartholomew Oliver. We have separate paragraphs about the individual minds of Giles, Isa, and Mrs. Manresa, followed by a paragraph in which Mrs. Swithin and William "survey aloofly, and with detachment," yet receive our focus simultaneously:

The heat had increased. The clouds had vanished. All was sun now. The view laid bare by the sun was flattened, silenced, stilled. The cows were motionless; the brick wall, no longer sheltering, beat back grains of heat. Old Mr. Oliver sighed profoundly. His head jerked; his hand fell. It fell within an inch of the dog's head on the grass by his side. Then up he jerked it again on to his knees. (65-66)

The paragraph begins with two simple, flat sentences, structurally redundant, that give us the sense of action--"increased" and "vanished"--accomplished because of the past perfect verb tense. "Now" in the next sentence gives us the illusion we're there, in spite of the past tense verb. One effect of asyndeton, according to Arthur Quinn, is that the lack of conjunction makes the parts seem to occur simultaneously (?), and this does seem to be the effect of "flattened, silenced, stilled." We also have a sense of

faits accomplis and stasis because of the passive construction. The polysyllabic "motionless" and "sheltering," plus the extension of "the brick wall" by the parenthetical insertion, abruptly contrast with the brisk note of "beat back," a phrase that alliteratively sharpens our sense of the character's exasperation at the heat. "Old" often comes before "Mr. Oliver," possibly because the word extends the "O" sounds that dominate when profound old Oliver speaks or is spoken of. Also happening in this paragraph is a hyperbaton in the final sentence that causes "up" to jerk up in iambic pentameter ("then up").

The next three paragraphs focus on three separate individuals. Our vision abruptly jerks from one persona to the next because there are no transitions and because the subject-verb construction places the character immediately in view, as though we're watching a series of freeze-frames (again, the ellipses are added):

Giles glared. . . .

Isabella felt prisoned. . . .

Mrs. Manresa longed to relax and curl in a corner with a cushion [she likes comfort], a picture paper [she's no reader], and a bag of sweets [we recall the sweet chit-chatting of the nurses. Perhaps Mrs. Manresa's conversation is as unimportant].

Mrs. Swithin and William surveyed the view aloofly, and with detachment. [Because "aloofly" and "with detachment" are synonymous, it is possible to think that Mrs. Swithin surveyed aloofly, William with detachment, and both of them are united in their viewpoint.]

Now the characters join together, as we have what seems to be a syntactically onomatopoeic thesis statement for the motion we've just experienced:

How tempting, how very tempting, to let the view triumph; to reflect its ripple; to let their own minds ripple; to let the outlines elongate and pitch over--so--with a sudden jerk.

It is tempting for us to view this pitching over from character to character as some kind of unifying chain. Mr. Oliver began the motion with the jerking of his hand, and we feel the jerking through the next paragraphs. Finally, the fragmentation of individuals begins to come together with Mrs. Swithin and William, and now ends in a unified perspective. Not only does this paragraph seem to be a thesis statement because of what it says, it also repeats in its syntax the elongating and pitching over it speaks of. "How tempting" ripples into "how very tempting"; "to let" ripples into "to reflect" and back to "to let," "to let." The parallel structure that repeats throughout has also a chiming effect, in which something that occurred once continues to occur. We're lulled into the rippling motion also because of the passive sense of "to let." Then, abruptly, a "so" interrupts the flow of the last phrase and we jerk, just as the "so" tells us we do. Now Mrs. Manresa interferes:

Mrs. Manresa yielded, pitched, plunged, then pulled herself up. (65-66)

There's a sputter of power in those alliterative pitching, plunging, pulling sounds, and "up" appropriately comes at the end of

Mrs. Manresa has won. Although the other characters do not focus on her, her wish for action will be fulfilled. But this is a play, and everything has been written down in advance. It seems our personae are puppets following a script. It was inevitable that Mrs. Manresa would "pull herself up." Notice how she also "yielded." The simile that ends the scene makes the connection obvious:

She addressed no one in particular. But William Dodge knew she meant him. He rose with a jerk, like a toy suddenly pulled straight by a string. (67)

It seems strings also set Mrs. Manresa into motion. Perhaps they activated old Oliver's hand in the episode described above (page 68). Mrs. Swithin also seems to be compelled, "as if" it's time, to offer to show the house. We sense that we are watching puppets on strings pulled by convention? life itself? creator?

"Play" has different connotations in Between the Acts. Play is action; it is performance. Play can be fun, as when children play games; but games may be war games. After William Dodge catches Isa's cup, Giles Oliver is ready for war to prove his manhood. Although Giles himself is a joke, there's nothing playful in his attitude. As Mrs. Manresa's ironic non sequitur hints, Giles is game playing. But the game he would initiate is a war game. There is something sinister about Mrs. Manresa's sense of fun. She seems to be both snake and apple in the Garden of Eden, manipulating her way between Isa and Giles. If we recall the importance Woolf seemed to place on Mrs. Ramsay's ability to create union through family, by comparison we might consider Mrs. Manresa to be disrupting a

creative act that unifies people. Certainly in the above passage Mrs. Manresa has the power to trigger action that puts an end to the quiet revelry that threatens to bring people together. Even old Oliver feels like a young warrior again in her presence.

Like everything else in the novel, the idea of people being moved along together recurs again and again. Even though Woolf noted that war caused a communal bond, she also thought that war was not as "real" as intellectual and aesthetic action. In 1938, she wrote in her diary, "And for the hundredth time I repeat--any idea is more real than any amount of war misery" (306). When the mass consciousness takes over, the introspective individual, such as Dodge and Isa, loses (as do small circles of like-minded people, such as Bloomsbury, perhaps):

And as we're all equally in the dark we can't cluster and group: we are beginning to feel the herd impulse: everyone asks Any news? What d'you think? The only answer is Wait and see. (291)

While there may be chimes of tradition--the conventions and habits that culturally unite people--there also may be bells that summon people into battle. Behind the pastoral quaintness and the strolling and the quiet chiming of country bells, rings war. As war moved closer, Woolf wrote in her diary:

Ding dong bell . . . ding dong--why did we settle in a village? And how deliberately we are digging ourselves in! And at any moment the guns may go off and explode us. L. is very black. Hitler has his hounds only very lightly held. A single step--in Czechoslovakia--like the

Austrian Archduke in 1914--and again it's 1914. Ding dong ding dong. People all strolling up and down the fields. A grey close evening. (290. Ellipsis Woolf's.)

The audience was assembling. The music was summoning them. Down the paths, across the lawn they were streaming again. There was Mrs. Manresa, with Giles at her side, heading the procession. In taut plump curves her scarf blew round her shoulders. The breeze was rising. She looked, as she crossed the lawn to the strains of the gramophone, goddess-like, bouyant, abundant, her cornucopia running over. Bartholomew, following, blessed the power of the human body to make the earth fruitful. Giles would keep his orbit so long as she weighted him to the earth. She stirred the stagnant pool of his old heart even--where bones lay buried, but the dragon flies shot and the grass trembled as Mrs. Manresa advanced across the lawn to the strains of the gramophone. (Between the Acts 118-19)

This scene is the last one in the first interval of Miss La Trobe's pageant, and it acts both as an end to the interval and a beginning to a new act. Before the interval, Great Eliza (shopkeeper Eliza Clark as Queen Elizabeth), whose "size made her appear gigantic" (83), loomed. Here looms Mrs. Manresa, mother-queen-seductress. The diction is military: assembling (of troops), summoning (to battle), procession (marching), scarf (ascot); buried bones (dead men); shooting dragon flies (airplanes); Manresa

advancing (soldier-like). "To the strains of the gramophone" (a call to duty) occurring twice in the paragraph adds an undercurrent of march rhythm. Also picking up the cadence are "down the path, across the lawn" and "but the dragon flies shot and the grass trembled."

We sense the forward-marching movement because of the paragraph's syntax. The simple sentences that begin the paragraph are doubles because they refer to the same movement by La Trobe's audience (summoned to assemble), but the second sentence colors the first with an overlay of passivity. And, again, the asyndeton causes the actions of moving down and across to occur simultaneously. In addition, the lack of a conjunction adds to the passage's briskness, giving us a better sense of marching steps. The inclusion of the conjunction in "but the dragon flies shot and the grass trembled," however, gives us a greater sense of the chronology of events, of the difference between the two actions, and it also stretches the movement. Because they are introductory, the two prepositional phrases in the third sentence emphasize the movement they refer to; whereas the embedded modifying phrase in a later sentence syntactically mimics the visual structure of the march: "There was Mrs. Manresa, with Giles at her side, heading the procession." The parenthetical phrase with Giles' name appears (as we're told Giles does) next to Mrs. Manresa. "There" at the beginning of the fourth sentence acts as a pointer, giving us the illusion that we are watching the parade. Because our eyes have been focused on Manresa, the "taut plump curves" at the beginning of the next sentence seem to be hers, until we find we must quickly



shift our focus to the scarf. "Bartholomew, following, . . ." appropriately follows ". . . her cornucopia running over," because we get the spatial sense of old Bart catching what Manresa leaves behind in her wake. Present participles, used either as adjectives or in the past progressive tense, also evoke the sense of ongoing, forward marching.

The sentences are relatively short, ranging from four to fourteen words, except for two of them notable for their list-like structure. The sentence that begins "She looked, as she crossed . . ." has a parenthetical insertion that spreads the sentence out, lengthening it in a way to match both the procession and the idea of a cornucopia running over. The many-syllabled list of adjectives also lengthens the flow of the sentence. It is the final sentence, however, that is most unusual. With thirty-six words, it extends onward a great distance, leaving us finally, almost breathlessly, with the rhythm of "to the strains of the gramophone" after three independent clauses, two dependent clauses, and four prepositional phrases:

She stirred the stagnant pool	(indep. clause)
of his old heart even	(prep. phrase)
where bones lay buried	(dep. clause)
but the dragon flies shot	(indep. clause)
and the grass trembled	(indep. clause)
as Mrs. Manresa advanced	(dep. clause)
across the lawn	(prep. phrase)
to the strains	(prep. phrase)
of the gramophone.	(prep. phrase)

The march movement continues into the next paragraph because of the similar paralleling of the two simple first sentences. However, we lose the fluid, forward motion. Notice first how the verb tense switches to past, picks up the past progressive again when the third sentence refers to the voice reflected in the previous paragraph, then, via quotes, switches into present tense to render the sense of present-day reality:

Feet crunched gravel. Voices chattered. The inner voice, the other voice was saying: How can we deny that this brave music wafted from the bushes, is expressive of some inner harmony? "When we wake" (some were thinking) "the day breaks us with its hard mallet blows." "The office" (some were thinking) "compels disparity. Scattered, shattered, hither, thither, summoned by the bell. 'Ping-ping-ping' that's the phone. 'Forward!' 'Serving!'--that's the shop." So we answer to the infernal agelong and eternal order issued from on high. And obey. "Working, serving, pushing, striving, earning wages--to be spent--here? Oh dear no. Now? No, by and by. When ears are deaf and the heart is dry. (119)

There is discord in paradise. Some of this paragraph's diction hints at its onomatopoeic movement: serving, forward, ping. This is a tennis match (echo of Rupert Haines), where balls bounce back and forth between courts. We have the back and forth movement caused by sing-song rhythms and rhymes, as well as by quotes and attributions:

scattered/shattered

/ / / /  
 hither/thither  
 / / / / / /  
 infernal/eternal  
 / / / / / /  
 working/serving  
 / / / / / /  
 pushing/striving  
 / / / / / / / /  
 'Ping-ping-ping' / that's the phone  
 / / / / / /  
 'Forward!' / 'Serving!'  
 / / / / / / / /  
 'Forward!' 'Serving!' / --that's the shop

While in the previous paragraph the crowd was hypnotized into unity by the cadence of the gramophone and the image of the mother-queen, now the crowd begins to fracture into opposing sides, as we're told by the parenthetical "(some were thinking)." These attributions, by the way, break the quotes into halves, or opposing courts. The sentence that follows the cacaphonic "Feet crunched gravel. Voices chattered," reflects harmony with its euphonic and paralleled "the inner voice, the other voice," as well as its past progressive tense and modifying phrases, which include the rather obviously overworded and unrhythmically prosaic "is expressive of some inner harmony." But "inner voice, outer voice" also expresses contraries and predicts the next "action," in which the lilting inner voice breaks into the everyday competitive tone of man's working/playing world. The "working, serving . . ." list seems to chide the ongoing movement established by present participles in the previous paragraph, as do the sarcasm of the three closing fragments and the echo of marching rhythm in the final fragment: "When ears are deaf and the heart is dry." Breaking "to be spent" and "here?" apart from the sentence with dashes makes these units into emphatic

fragments. Also, the split causes "here?" to set up a back and forth motion:

--here?/Oh dear no

Now?/no, by and by

When ears are deaf/and the heart is dry

And whereas the previous paragraph closed with a long periodic sentence, this one ends in fragments.

Eventually the crowd will break up into individuals, represented by four paragraphs filled with ellipses between brief sentences and fragments that comment and question the past, present, and future (120-122). James Naremore notes that Woolf uses more ellipses in this novel than in any of her previous ones (223) and that the "peppering of fragmentary quotations throughout the scenes is perhaps the most distinctive attribute of the novel" (224). These ellipses and fragments cause gaps for the reader. Another outstanding rhetorical scheme that I find is parenthesis, used both syntactically and structurally, which aborts rhythms of continuity and causes the sentences and the episodes to break into pieces. If we imagine the text visually, therefore, we might see it as a series of dots.

According to Naremore, the result of experiencing all the bits and pieces is harmony. He says, "Objective events are shown to have the same texture as internal monologues, so that everything, inside and out, in this person and that, combines to make what Mrs. Ramsay called a "single stream." (225). It does happen that voices merge. But they also separate and cut each other off. We seem to have threads through the text: reptiles, birds, farm and wild animals,

pools of water. But these play "Pop Goes the Weasel." They pop up, then just as quickly disappear. Echoes sound and fade, or abruptly halt. Music infiltrates in the fractured forms of chimes, nursery songs, records on the gramophone, and the rhythmic voices of the personae. According to Charlotte Walker Mendez, Woolf admired poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, who thought of rhymes "in relation to a harmonious chiming of various objects and events in the universe, with the ultimate hope of a universal divine harmony" (226). So we might think of Woolf's rhythms, especially the insistently intermittent sing-song and nursery rhyme effects, as echoes of this unity. Yet the rhythms never last long, but are continually cut off by other rhythms, just as voices may merge but are just as likely to be aborted by other voices.

In her diary, Woolf said she thought of Between the Acts as a "medley" (298). She wrote:

But to amuse myself, let me note: Why not Poyntzet Hall [later, Between the Acts]: a centre: all literature discussed in connection with real little incongruous living humour: and anything that comes into my head; but "I" rejected: "We" substituted: to whom at the end there shall be an invocation? "We" . . . the composed of many different things . . . we all life, all art, all waifs and strays--a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole--the present state of my mind? (279. Ellipsis Woolf's.)

It seems her idea was that the waifs and strays, scraps and fragments, would come together into some kind of whole. Woolf

compared her own favorite reading experiences to the illusion of stillness caused by the quick speed of airplane propellers: "When one reads the mind is like an aeroplane propeller invisibly quick and unconscious--a state seldom achieved" (286). A year later she described this consciousness as "that exciting layer so rarely lived in: where my mind works so quick it seems asleep; like the aeroplane propellers" (301). Perhaps in her last novel she tried for this effect: to cause so much rapid movement between voices, scenes, rhythms, everything, that we would achieve a sense of being suspended in some timeless realm where scattered individuality, patterns, and disarray are unified into an undefinable Whole.

Well, I never achieve this state of consciousness. And I never float downstream for long. I bounce and bob, back and forth, here and there, all through the book, and by the closing scene, when Miss La Trobe prepares to write her new pageant and the curtain rises on Giles and Isa, I'm ready for more of the same. David Cecil comments that real and unreal don't mix. Susan Robinow Gorsky comments that, while she appreciates the novel's emotional appeal, "On the other hand, the language does suffer from the mixture of methods. The blend of prose and poetry in the intervals is especially jarring, and the language used is not always consistent with the minds of those who use it" (138). According to Jean Guiguet, the mixture of genres--novel, poem, play--

is indeed effectively achieved, too effectively perhaps, so that the reader remains divided between various possible attitudes. One is tempted to conclude, like the author: ". . . it's an interesting attempt in a new

method." The variety and perfection of each page are more striking than the general design and the meaning of the whole, which the structure is insufficient to elucidate. . . . this last book is, like Jacob's Room, a brilliant experiment in synthesis, but it is only an experiment. (328-329)

It is possible that comments such as these miss the point. Perhaps it is not for Woolf to do the blending and synthesizing for us. Perhaps the inconsistencies and the jarrings are supposed to whirl our minds into such rapid movement that our reading experience coalesces into a sense of Oneness. Yet while I read, I am confronted by separate dots, and even stepping back from the text I see disconnected dots. If life is like the experience of reading Between the Acts, if we merge and splinter continually, we've got to be in motion. While trying to form a gestalt in that co-creative third dimension Iser noted, I wonder about a passage in Woolf's diary that relates the experience (rather, the non-experience) of death to the ellipses:

And all the air a solemn stillness holds. Til 8:30 when the cadaverous twanging in the sky begins; the planes going to London. Well it's an hour still to that. Cows feeding. The elm tree sprinkling its little leaves against the sky. Our pear tree swagged with pears; and the weathercock above the triangular church tower above it. Why try again to make the familiar catalogue, from which something escapes. Should I think of death? . . . .  
Oh I try to imagine how one's killed by a bomb. I've got

it fairly vivid--the sensation: but can't see anything but suffocating nonentity following after. I shall think--oh I wanted another 10 years--not this--and shan't, for once, be able to describe it. It--I mean death; no, the scrunching and scrambling, the crushing of my bone shade in on my very active eye and brain: the process of putting out the light--painful? Yes. Terrifying. I suppose so. Then a swoon; a drain; two or three gulps attempting consciousness--and then dot dot dot. (340. Ellipsis added.)

We could rest comfortably during our trip through the text if the author would not fragment and if she would use convention to carry us along an unaborted track toward her destination. If we had no expectations that could be frustrated, we also would have nothing to do. As Iser notes of our experience reading modern open texts, our movement between illusion-forming and illusion-breaking causes a life (alive) experience (see page 9). The illusion--including the expectation of convention--is just as real as its negation. In Woolf's novel, it seems impossible to hover motionlessly between the acts because we are continuously acting, either forming or destroying illusions. The ellipses, the gaps in the text, are aborted as frequently as are the fragments of common ground. The overall effect is far removed from the dull tick tick ticking of a conventional monologue. Nor do we hear the dot dot dotting of some monotonous metronome marking timeless anonymity. Perhaps the coming together of the dots can only be achieved once the ellipses becomes the denouement, once we lose our "I" and stop moving altogether.



Every summer, for seven summers now, Isa had heard the same words: about the hammer and the nails; the pageant and the weather. Every year it was--one or the other. 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." (Between the Acts 22)

## Conclusion

### Dandelion Harvest

In 1924, Woolf compared an author's use of convention to a hostess' talk about the weather:

The hostess bethinks her of the weather, for generations of hostesses have established the fact that this is a subject of universal interest in which we all believe.

. . . The writer must get into touch with his reader by putting before him something which he recognizes, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him willing to cooperate in the far more difficult business of intimacy. ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" 330-31.

Ellipsis added.)

She thought that the authors of her generation, the Georgians, were experimenting with new methods that might better match modern consciousness, "an incessant shower of innumerable atoms" ("Modern Fiction" 150), than the Edwardian conventions that closed the text onto material and objective facts. It was up to the Georgian revolutionaries to overthrow the old reigning institution, even though the young had not yet developed a "code of manners":

At the present moment we are suffering, not from decay, but from having no code of manners which writers and readers accept as a prelude to the more exciting intercourse of friendship. The literary convention of the time is so artificial--you have to talk about the weather and nothing but the weather throughout the entire visit--

that, naturally, the feeble are tempted to outrage, and the strong are led to destroy the very foundations and rules of literary society. ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" 334)

When she wrote Between the Acts, however, Woolf sensed that literary society's existence was threatened by war. The hostess had fewer and fewer opportunities for intimate conversation, and concerns about the "real" world replaced any bother about whether writers should use "a fork or their fingers" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" 334). Phyllis Rose notes that for all the novel's focus on tradition, in Between the Acts, "There is a prevailing isolation" (228), because war threatens to destroy England's common ground of culture and custom. According to Rose:

One must fill in the unspoken threat which helps give the book its poignancy and power. This civilization--strained marriages, amateur theatricals, the serving of tea. It may not be much, but it had taken a long time to evolve, and it was perhaps about to be lost. (226)

Throughout the novel, we experience what Iser calls the "minus function," and what we might consider aborted conventions. Iser says, "It is typical of modern texts that they invoke expected functions in order to transform them into blanks. This is mostly brought about by a deliberate omission of generic features that have been firmly established by the tradition of the genre" (208). Readers have certain expectations, but because writers do not follow tradition, readers become more actively creative as they adjust to the text and form the connections and codes themselves (209-10). In

Between the Acts, Woolf increases our expectations because she teases us with fragments of literary conventions she never fulfills. The scenes during La Trobe's pageant typify Elizabethan, Restoration, and Victorian plots. But the Elizabethan play is impossibly convoluted and plagued by interruptions and the wind blowing words away. The Restoration comedy omits a scene--the climax!--and is so nonsensical that we might agree with the anonymous voice that exclaims (as Miss La Trobe "glowed with glory"), "All this fuss about nothing!" (138-39). The actors play out the Victorian script without gaps, but it ends in a hyperbole of good-deed doing as Eleanor and Edgar declare their intentions "To convert the heathen!" and "To help our fellow men!" (172), and Budge the publican sings out, "Be it never so humble, there's no place like 'Ome" (173). The pageant continues with "Present Time" actors: the audience sitting in uncomfortable and confused suspense (177). Finally, La Trobe's troupe carries mirror fragments that splinter the audience. We wonder if Isa gives us a clue:

Did the plot matter? She shifted and looked over her right shoulder. The plot was only there to beget emotion. There were only two emotions: love; and hate. There was no need to puzzle out the plot. Perhaps Miss La Trobe meant that when she cut this knot in the centre.

Don't bother about the plot: the plot's nothing.

But what was happening? The Prince had come. (90-91)

If "the plot's nothing," why does Isa look over her shoulder, a gesture that reminds us of the love triangle, and why does she care about what's happening on stage? Plot is an old habit, and as

Iser notes, "Ridding oneself of such prejudices--even if only temporarily--is no simple task" (8). The conventions we anticipate do matter. They are operative forces because we bring them into play with the text. Those prejudices, the "reader's repertoire of norms," contribute to the reading experience by their negation (211). In Woolf's novel, the aborted conventions evoke a greater sense of isolation because the beginning of a communication bridge between author and reader has been erected only to be torn apart. We, the readers, must bridge the gap now. If plot is nothing, perhaps our experiencing its nothingness and thereby losing our common ground could contribute to the text's "meaning."

Rose suggests that the novel's title "may refer, among other things, to the nature of our life, suspended between [love and war]" (235). We do seem to be moving between such acts. Aside from Giles' mock-heroic stomping on a snake, we do not "see" an act of hate. We're also moving between love acts. Although Isa's pull toward Rupert Haines continues sporadically, they never get together. She looks for him or at him during the pageant, and the narrator reports this information as buried one-liners. As far as we're concerned, the man in grey never speaks or thinks. He is merely a shadow. His goosefaced wife, who occupied so much space in the first passage, pops up only once again: "Mr. and Mrs. Rupert Haines, detained by a breakdown on the road, had arrived" (81). There are vague references to Dodge's attraction toward Giles, and Giles seems jealous of Isa's mind connection with Dodge, but nothing comes of these potential intrigues. Another love triangle between Giles and Mrs. Manresa teases, but nothing happens for us here,

either. After the pageant, they leave in a car, we're told, but what happens between them falls between the gaps of the text. At the close of the novel, the narrator tells us that Isa and Giles will fight, embrace, then "From that embrace another life might be born" (219). We thank the narrator for the reassuring hypothesis, but based on our experience reading this novel, we might respond, "Not in my lifetime." The final line is "Then the curtain rose. They spoke." We don't see or hear them speak. This plot is not our plot, but a preview of some action-packed play we never will see. We also suspect that if the sequel is anything like its predecessor, the prediction is a ruse.

Our search for theme is no more fruitful. One thesis statement is provided by the Reverend Streatfield, who plays the role of literary critic and, like Figgis the guide-book writer, is quoted by reporter Page as a voice of authority. "Scraps, orts and fragments!" Streatfield summarizes. "Surely, we should unite?" (192) Notice that his thesis statement is posed as a question. Notice also how unreliable he sounds when we edit his words down to bare phrases and clauses containing "I":

"I have been asking myself . . . what meaning, or message, this pageant was meant to convey?"

If he didn't know, calling himself Reverend, also M.A., who after all could?

"I will offer, very humbly, for I am not a critic . . . For what reason, I asked, were we shown these scenes? . . . I mistake . . . Am I too presumptuous? Am I treading, like angels, where as a fool I should absent

myself? . . . did I not perceive . . . excuse me, if I get the names wrong . . . That I leave to you . . . I thought . . . I perceive . . . I ask myself . . . I leave that to you. I am not here to explain . . . I speak only as one of the audience . . . I caught myself too reflected . . ." (191-92. Ellipses added.)

As bearer of the author's signature, Streatfield is a sham. There is a lot of apologizing and "as if" acting in his monologue. He not only presumes what he claims not to presume, that he will interpret the production for others, but he also presumes to know what he does not know, the pageant's meaning. He is as much a reflected fragment as any other persona in the novel (and, by the way, a fool, both in the sense that he attempts the ridiculous and that he parodies the critic and scholar in us). "As Treasurer of the Fund" for "the illumination of our dear old church" (192), he has an ulterior motive for his interpretation. The reverend seems particularly untrustworthy simply because he attempts to pull a thesis statement out of La Trobe's pageant. As Iser notes, referring to the critic in Henry James' The Figure in the Carpet, "Instead of being able to grasp meaning like an object, the critic is confronted by an empty space. And this emptiness cannot be filled by a single referential meaning, and any attempt to reduce it in this way leads to nonsense" (8).

But here's the problem: In my opinion, Between the Acts is Woolf's most humorous novel, and it seems to end on the upbeat note that the battling Isa and Giles will come together to love and to perpetuate life. After all the splitting apart, it is pleasant to

end with the optimistic prediction that they will overcome adversity. Yet is the novel a comedy? Isolation and fragmentation litter and dominate this novel of elusive and illusory unions. And, as they become archetypes for first man/first woman, Isa and Giles' anticipated reunion is almost too prehistoric, too lacking of anything other than the mindless repetition of acts of love and hate. What happened to society's code of manners? What happened to human consciousness, art, "life itself"?

When the pageant character of Queen Elizabeth dies, an anonymous voice adds the word "peace" to the basic emotions of love and hate. Perhaps social and cultural traditions are between acts of love and hate, since tradition peacefully binds individuals together as a community. Woolf considered convention to be an important element in communication. But she also said that the old tools were "death" (see pages 10 and 19) because they caused a creative stasis. The lifeless queen, "She to whom all's one now, summer or winter," is at peace (92). Is death between the acts? I do wonder if, like William Dodge, Woolf began to find it difficult to identify herself as an artist because of the public's disinterest in literature. While isolation from her reading public might make an author feel more an individual because of the sense of self-enclosure, she also must feel self-limited, since her art cannot reach its creative potential in others' minds. Since they obstruct the dialogue between reader and writer, old conventions limit that creative potential, Woolf thought, so they are "ruin." But sharing no tradition at all maroons creativity on the author's island. Either way, there is no bond formed between writer and reader, and



since art is communication, there is no artistic identity in isolation. Isolation is death to the artist.

In 1924, Woolf predicted that "we are trembling on the verge of one of the great ages of English literature" (337). She saw the Georgian period as a necessary prelude, but not a part of the great age. In 1941, she saw English literature on the brink of an abyss. Kermode calls the notion that moderns are suspended in a timeless end zone the "myth of modern transitionalism" (The Sense of an Ending 103). English culture--along with the old conventions of authorial narrator, plot, character, and theme--continues forty-five years after Woolf's death. But another transition myth she believed was that her contemporaries were only breaking down traditions. They and she actually were building the foundation for the tradition of the open, non-Platonic text and the emergence of the reader as creator. Iser notes of James Joyce's "new mode of communication":

Instead of being compressed into a super-imposed pattern, everyday life can here be experienced as a history of ever-changing viewpoints. The reader is no longer supposed to discover the hidden code, as he was in the nineteenth century, but he must produce for himself the conditions of 'experienceability', which emerge as a history of open-ended transformations of the connections established and invalidated by the wandering viewpoint.

(210-11)

If we think of character in Woolf's novel as being, ultimately, the reader, her statement that "in or about December, 1910, human character changed" translates into a change in

readership ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" 320). When Woolf says that "All human relations have shifted--those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children" (324), she is implying that the writer/reader relationship also has changed. Today, because readers have adapted their expectations as a result of their experiences with novels like Between the Acts, the institution of the open text is a well-established one. Perhaps in Woolf's day there were more common readers tired of Uncle Willie's lazy tyranny than Woolf imagined. Readers who have grown accustomed to enjoying reading as a creative activity would not apologize today for texts by saying that "where so much strength is spent on finding a way of telling the truth, the truth itself is bound to reach us in rather an exhausted and chaotic condition" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" 335). These readers care very much whether the writer uses a fork or her fingers, not because they are concerned about propriety, but because the writer's techniques make a difference in the reader's potential for writing and playing the text. Since so much of a text's potential depends upon the author's language techniques, there is nothing haphazard about the devices created by writers and performed by readers of the open text. We might say of Woolf, as she did of Laurence Sterne, "the forerunner of the moderns":

And though the flight of this erratic mind is as zigzag as a dragon-fly's, one cannot deny that this dragon-fly has some method in its flight, and chooses the flowers not at random but for some exquisite harmony or for some brilliant discord. ("The Sentimental Journey" 98)

Virginia Woolf wished somehow to reach a common ground with her reader, to form that "close and equal alliance" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" 336). If she thought that she could replace the tired conventions of a doomed society with a writer/reader union caused by spinning the reader so rapidly through the fragmented "life itself" that she knew, until the reader reached some eternally peaceful moment of sublime Oneness that she hoped for, the ideal was an illusion. No one truly believes that those propeller blades stand still. But by stressing the importance of reading as a life experience and the reader as an equal partner in the creation of art, Woolf was at the forefront of a new form of intimate communication between reader and writer. We may never achieve a gestalt at the end of Between the Acts, but we certainly can enjoy being part of the production.

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