The Authority of Illusion: Feminism and Fascism in Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*

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“We are not passive spectators doomed to unresisting obedience,” Woolf wrote at the close of *Three Guineas*, “but by our thoughts and actions” we can change the figure who “is called in German and Italian Führer or Duce; in our own language Tyrant or Dictator.”¹ In June of 1938 the book written in response to the question a distinguished public official was said to have addressed to Woolf—”How in your opinion are we to prevent war?”—allowed her to say all that had been building in her during the thirties, as she collected newspaper clippings of Hitler’s speeches and Nazi political rallies which she had an opportunity to observe firsthand in 1935 when she and her husband Leonard traveled through Germany and saw written on a banner stretched across a street in Bonn: “The Jew is our enemy” and “There is no place for Jews in—.”² When, at the close of *Three Guineas* Woolf argues that art reminds us of “the capacity of the human spirit to overflow boundaries and make unity out of multiplicity,” she emphasizes the role of the artist whose work is necessary in a crisis to keep alive “the recurring dream that has haunted the human mind since the beginning of time; the dream of peace, the dream of freedom” (143).

These two concerns preoccupied Virginia Woolf in the last decade of her life: the nature of her own narrative authority and its relation to the external crisis in social and political authority as she saw it—patriarchy at home and its extreme form abroad,
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fascism. These two concerns meet not only in Three Guineas, her most radical feminist pamphlet, but in her posthumous novel, Between the Acts, where she creates in the lesbian playwright, Miss La Trobe, a female artist who in key moments of crisis—most notably when the power of her artistic illusions fails—bears a striking resemblance to a petty dictator in her will to re-impose unity on her fragile, dispersed, uncontrollable work of art, a pageant of English social life which disintegrates as soon as it reaches the “present day.”

La Trobe takes command of a strip of what the narrator tells us is naturally “hallowed” high ground above Pointz Hall (which is built in a “hollow”), as the outdoor stage for the village’s yearly pageant. The narrative of family life in the troubled Oliver house where the aging brother and sister, Bart and Lucy, live with the estranged middle-aged couple, Isa and Giles, is continually interrupted by the pageant, which brings the playwright and actors—all marginal people, the “ riffraff”—to this genteel country home. But the pageant, too, is continually interrupted. La Trobe plans for formal intervals between the acts of her play, with each act representing an epoch. But even in mid-act, her play is interrupted, both by nature (the wind separates shopkeeper Eliza from her costume as Queen Elizabeth and blows the actors’ words away) and by human will (sometimes neither the actors nor the audience know how to play their parts).

This year—1939—La Trobe has decided to present a pageant of English history enacted as a series of social occasions laced with witty and sardonic references to England’s great writers. But both the history of England as a place and as a people proves terrifyingly elusive: as Lucy Swithin, the comic elderly woman in the novel, learns from
an Outline of History, England the island was once part of Europe, the continent presently blistering with war.4 The English channel represents a fragile physical gap between barbarism and civilization, between slavery and freedom; one, furthermore, which we learn is an accident of nature. The fear of invasion by Hitler is embodied in the fiction in the eerie knowledge that the geographical gap opened by natural force might, at any moment, be closed by modern technological force wielded by a tyrant.5 For the first time in Woolf’s career, she seizes hold of the gap, the distance, the interval, and the interrupted structure not as a terrible defeat of the will to continuity or aesthetic unity. Rather, she elevates the interrupted structure to a positive formal and metaphysical principle.

In Between the Acts, Woolf celebrates rather than mourns the impossibility of final meaning. She cultivates the generative ground of language and being, more clearly distinguishing among kinds of silence that have always concerned her. In contrast to the silence which provokes a horror vacui, the silence marking a cut-off voice, a violently abruptly moment, or death, the end of all language, Woolf muses over the silence akin to the white space on a blank canvas (the staring whiteness that transfixes Lily Briscoe in To the Lighthouse) or the music of the world Septimus Smith perceives as a series of meaningful intervals of sound and silence, the very “pattern” of nature: “Sounds made harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds.”6 Even the physical properties of her book reflect this concern. Woolf creates no chapter headings. She uses only large blank spaces between narrative acts. Visually, Between the Acts evokes the unstructured or anti-structure, what Victor Turner has
identified and named as the occasion for an irruption of new, potentially subversive meanings.  

In both theme and structure, Woolf’s last work becomes a meditation on the proximity of artist to dictator—of author to authoritarian ruler—when language is used as if there were no gap between sound and meaning, sign and referent. But this deep puzzling over words and their nature was not an ahistorical, apolitical enterprise for Virginia Woolf. Rather, it was a struggle of life against death, of meaning against annihilation. For Virginia Woolf, when words collapse out of meaning, when speech or writing becomes private and self-referential, we have the beginning of totalitarianism. In *Between the Acts*, Woolf forces the likeness of woman playwright to fascist dictator to press her recognition of her own will to power as practicing author, a will to unify, to find or to make—by force of imaginative skill—a principle of continuity. At its inception, this will to unity is a life-affirming impulse. For Woolf, art was a primary means of resistance to all that would violate the individual. Virginia Woolf saw that even in the hands of a powerful feminist author (and she was at the height of her powers in the thirties), narrative bears within it a temptation to bend the reader/audience to the author’s will.

To appreciate Woolf’s understanding of the relationship between narrative and political authority we must remember that the word commonly used for the fascist tyrants—dictators—derives from a fundamental perception of the relationship between an abuse of language and the will to dominate by force, to dictate rather than to communicate meaning. Communication necessarily entails recognition of the physical and spiritual distance or difference between speaker and listener. Woolf exploits this
distance between the “I” and the “you” of every speech-act both within her work and
between herself and her reader. In Between the Acts, La Trobe embodies the author-as-
tyrant when she succumbs to the temptation to treat meaning as “hers,” finished when
written, complete as she has conceived it. At times, she would urgently impose upon her
audience, whose freedom feels damnable when it threatens her play’s performance. But
in her finer moments, Woolf’s playwright becomes the author as anti-fascist. Then La
Trobe celebrates the intrusion of nature’s wild and uncontrollable whims to counter the
fixity of social behavior. When La Trobe stops resisting the freedom of the wind, the rain,
the instincts of the grazing animals, she treats meaning as shared, as mutually generated
by author, players, and audience. Then meaning is fragile and free, and it is a struggle to
bring it into being, and then an even riskier struggle to communicate it.

In the novel, as in the play within it, every attempt to speak is interrupted; every word
becomes a gesture, provisional, in process. Indeed, the audience of La Trobe’s pageant is
our primary concern, the drama of their lives occurring during the intervals. Shocked and
frightened by the effect upon her inner life of the loss of her audience to the general panic
and suffering of war, Woolf was moved to make a work of art that openly explored the
artist’s need for her audience:

A kind of growl behind the cuckoo & t’other birds: a furnace behind the sky.

It struck me that one curious feeling is, that the writing “I”, has vanished.

No audience. No Echo. Thats [sic] part of one’s death. (D 5: 293)

The most extreme threat to civilization revealed to the modernist who was also an ardent
feminist her dependence upon the listening, reading “you.” Ill at ease in exile in Lewes,
Woolf’s snobbery was assaulted by the more rustic life of the country; her intellect was outraged by the resurgence of misogynist and anti-intellectual rhetoric in the press.

Still, Woolf remained passionately devoted to England and its literature and felt that she could best express these two great loyalties only by writing. But unlike many of her male contemporaries, such as George Orwell whose argument that the popular slogan to rally the people of England faced with the threat of invasion by Hitler should be “Arm the People,” Woolf refused to make unequivocal patriotic gestures. England was not her country “right or left.” As a woman I have no country,” she argued in Three Guineas, “As a woman I want no country” (109). Her defiance must be read in the context of the muscular patriotism of the day, just as her last fiction must be read as a confession of a deep and perhaps helpless love of England—an England whose history and hope lay, for Woolf, primarily in literature. Comic hope characterizes Woolf’s early vision of her last novel in April of 1938:

But to amuse myself, let me note: Why not Poynzet Hall: a centre: all literature discussed in connection with real little incongruous living humour: and anything that comes into my head; but ‘I’ rejected: ‘We’ substituted: to whom at the end there shall be an invocation? ‘We’. . . 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? And English country; and a scenic old house—and a terrace where nursemaids walk—and people passing—and a perpetual
variety and change from intensity to repose, and facts—and notes; and—
but eno’! (D 5:135)

From the beginning, then, apparent discontinuity (the incongruous, random, and
capricious) was to reveal achieved unity, aesthetic and social. Aesthetically, unity is a
product of the artist’s act of imagination: the power to disclose how all things radiate to a
center. Socially, it is a process of substitution—”we” for “I.” In the published novel, as
the audience departs from Miss La Trobe’s pageant, though they have all just been
transformed from disparate “I’s” into a unified “we,” one of them is heard to say: “What
we need is a centre. Something to bring us all together.” The shifts in Woolf’s title, like
the character’s observation that the community lacks the articulated center that Pointz
Hall was originally meant to provide, suggests an important transformation in Woolf’s
idea of “the center” from which all things radiate.

“Poynzet Hall: a centre,” a name borrowed from Thackeray’s Pendennis (also the
source of Arthur’s Education Fund, so central to Woolf’s arguments in Three Guineas),
became Pointz Hall by May 5th, 1938, and then became The Pageant some time in late
1940. Only in its final stages in early 1941 did the book become Between the Acts:
“Finished Pointz Hall, the Pageant: the Play—finally Between the Acts this morning” (26
February 1941; D 5: 356). The first substitution represents a shift in focus from place to
performance, from the domestic to the dramatic. But then Woolf makes another
substitution, moving from a center to an interstice, from a concrete place (Pointz Hall) to
a radically indeterminate time—indeed, to a time which is also a figural space, nameable
only with the periphrasis “between the acts.” Between the Spring of 1938 (before the
Munich Crisis) and the late winter of 1941 (during the bombing of London) Woolf’s concept of her fiction underwent a decisive change. To attend to this change is necessarily to raise a second, related question: why did Woolf choose to fix the time of the action as mid-day, mid-June, 1939 when she began to write the fiction more than a year earlier and completed it more than six months later? The question necessarily engages us with the political events of the moment and their implications for art.

Mid-summer, 1939, the moment Woolf’s fiction represents, was the last interval of ‘normal’ life before Britain ceased to be a spectator and became an actor in the war. Both her narrative and La Trobe’s pageant dramatize the “mental tension” which was “rapidly approaching the breaking-point” in Britain between Hitler’s occupation of Czechoslovakia in March and his invasion of Poland in September of 1939, when Britain unilaterally declared war against Germany.9

The summer of 1939 was also the last moment when the radical Left in Britain could believe that Stalin’s communist regime offered a real alternative to Hitler’s fascism. The signing of a non-aggression pact between Germany and Russia in August, 1939 marked the “complete reversal of the grand battle between Communism and Fascism which Spain had been supposed to be about.”10 The extremes had met, and through Stalin’s treachery, the symmetry of right and left was manifest. But for Woolf, who remained anti-ideological, the likeness of enemies had been visible for some time, and the infection of art with propaganda—even if it was anti-fascist propaganda—represented a dangerous weakening of art’s true power to represent the deep, hidden structures of culture.
In *Between the Acts*, the threat of collapsed distance without—the fear that Hitler was powerful enough to decisively rupture if not destroy Britain’s national boundaries—has its counterpart within Britain. The culture’s internal violence (which persists during periods of both “war” and “peace”) is represented in sexual terms in a newspaper story about an English girl raped by soldiers of the prestigious Horse Guards at Whitehall.

Rape undermines the officially defined difference between “ourselves,” the decent English and “them,” the brutal Germans. War against the common enemy is a form of false community, which obscures internal differences (violence against the vulnerable victim) not by transcending them, but rather by suppressing them in the name of a falsely construed unity, the false transcendence of the state.

For Virginia Woolf, as for most of her peers, the outbreak of war on the continent and the agonizing moral and political question of England’s role as an ally meant not only that the artist could no longer expect to live by the old “contract” of reciprocal dissociation from the state, but that the meaning of art—and even the possibility of continuing to produce it—was called into question.¹¹

As early as 1936 Walter Benjamin had observed the double truth of Nazi culture. Fascism made great art impossible. Instead, Benjamin observed, Hitler had succeeded in the “aesthetization of political life.”¹² As Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s Minister of Propaganda, declared publicly,

Politics, too, is an art, perhaps the highest and most far-reaching one of all, and we who shape modern German politics feel ourselves to be
artistic people, entrusted with the great responsibility of forming out of the raw material of the masses a solid, well-wrought structure of a Volk.¹³

To achieve the goal of creating this folk community (identified with *structure*), the Third Reich redefined every occasion which used to offer the people a taste of *communitas*, or release from official structure: folk celebration, religious ritual, and art. For every major event in both the religious and secular calendar, the Nazis substituted “artificially created customs and staged folklore.” In addition to Hitler’s party day rallies, mass events were staged for the Volk. More than 400 theatres were built on “historically consecrated ground” for ideological performances produced as part of *Thingspiel*, state sponsored drama. For playwrights and audiences alike, participation in these “celebrations” (which were performed for up to 60,000 at a time) was mandatory.¹⁴

In Germany, the extreme right violently exploited the human need for art and ritual while reifying the state. In England, the radical Left also used theatre and performance to create a unified community of “the people” but to the end of revolutionizing the state. In 1938, The Left Book Club helped sponsor an alternative professional theatre whose name—Unity—signaled the decision among the splintered Left to form a popular, united front against fascism. Their theatre was overtly political in form and content, a synthesis of the avant-garde performance of the politically motivated amateur theatre groups, including agitprop theatre (inspired by anti-fascist German and Russian models from the early thirties) and The Worker’s Theatre Movement.¹⁵ Unity softened the confrontational tactics of the theatres of resistance, which had been criticized for being “too much agit and not enough prop.” However, in moving away from the
excesses of “agitation,” Unity moved more toward overt propaganda, as the sympathetic review of Unity’s opening night performance (itself a piece of propaganda) demonstrates:

Here before an audience representing a cross-section of London’s cultural and social forces, Unity, built by workers, was to give its first vital message through the medium of drama.

The theatre programme opened with five songs by the London Labour Choral Union. These songs were put over with terrific vigor, and evoked an equally vigorous applause.

The Workers’ Propaganda Dance Group then gave a performance of *A Comrade Has Died*. Here we saw the brutality and inhumanity of fascism and the inevitability of its overthrow in the workers’ revolution.

Unity’s opening night was in every way a triumph. The audience told us so, and what is far more important, the building itself showed that the workers for Unity had achieved all that they had striven for. In its self-deluded rhetoric of “inevitability” and its appeal to externalized, material structure as the ultimate sign of community, the left sounds like a bad parody of the extreme right. The Nazis, too, claimed that externalized structure expressed the highest attainment of unity, as Hitler claimed in a public address celebrating the opening of a new piece of monumental architecture:
These works will become for the Germans a part of a feeling of proud togetherness. They will prove how ludicrous our petty differences are in face of these mighty, gigantic evidences of our community.\textsuperscript{17}

Despite its apparently different end, Unity Theatre’s means resembled those of its opposite number, 	extit{Thingspiel}, in several crucial ways. Both employ a rhetoric of community which suppresses internal differences by transforming an audience into a mob. Both exploit what Le Bon and Freud observed about the psychology of groups: the loss of individual will and discernment, the emergence of a “collective mind” bent to the will of the leader who, by exploiting the group’s susceptibility to “the truly magical power of words” can either rouse or calm “the most formidable tempests in the group mind.” Groups not only “demand illusions and cannot do without them,”\textsuperscript{18} but as Adorno and his colleagues in the Frankfurt School were also to find in studying the characteristics of the mind susceptible to authoritarianism, the individual in a group has an extreme passion for authority.\textsuperscript{19} Woolf, who was avidly reading Freud’s \textit{Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego} while writing \textit{Between the Acts}, worries about Freud’s premise that “Just as primitive man survives potentially in every individual, so the primal horde may arise once more out of any random collection,” including the audience at a play.

Shouting the same word together becomes the sign of solidarity, whether in Nazi Germany where the audience was required to shout “Heil Hitler!” in unison, or in London’s Unity Theatre where the regularly staged performances of Clifford Odet’s \textit{Waiting for Lefty} culminated in the moment the actors on the stage turned to the audience and roused them to join in shouting “Strike!” Both fascist aesthetized politics and anti-
fascist politicized theatre justified war, for both generated community by suppressing internal differences in the name of union against a common enemy. Both Left and Right exploited the performative power of art to transform an audience, a group of unaligned and self-interested spectators, into a group which submits to authority and could be roused to violence.

As a woman and a feminist, Woolf had excellent reason for distrusting most expressions of mass solidarity, for the falling birth rate, the high level of unemployment, and general social unrest had led in England, as in Germany, to a resurgence of virulent anti-feminist sentiment and suggestions (in England) and enactment (in Germany) of laws to enforce the gender status quo. In the name of the state, the “natural law” of male dominance was invoked to quell social unrest and unify the people terrified by the prospect of Nazi invasion. The call that “we” should “forget our differences,” meant that women were asked to abandon the luxury (or, as E. M. Forster was to declare on behalf of several of Woolf’s uncomprehending male friends among the Bloomsbury Group, the irrelevance) of feminist activism and unite with men in the name of their common identity. The incendiary tactics of Three Guineas expose and destroy this “oneness” while Between the Acts explores the fragile hope that art can, even in a crisis—perhaps especially in a crisis—mediate moments of authentic community.

Despite their famous (or notorious, depending upon one’s position) intimacy, the members of the Bloomsbury Group were not in agreement about the relationship between art and politics in this period. I believe Woolf was so extraordinarily isolated in her views, that her friends, and even Leonard, did not comprehend the meaning of her work.
As much as she respected Leonard, Virginia Woolf did not share his view of fascism. While she was working on *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts* Leonard wrote and published his own work on the “clear and present danger”: *Barbarians at the Gates* was published by the Left Book Club in 1939 (see D 5: 248). In contrast to Leonard, Virginia Woolf nursed no easy sense that England represented the forces of civilization over against Germany. To her mind, the crisis was at once less clear and more sinister: fascism was not alien to England or to any culture. “We must attack Hitler in England,” she wrote in her diary during May of 1938 (D 6:142). And while she recognized that British culture was patriarchal, she was honest enough to search out and name the impulse to dominate and destroy within herself, an impulse she explored with frightening originality in that much misunderstood work, *The Waves* (1931). Woolf’s fiction, far more than her essays (including her feminist essays) moves deeper and deeper into the question of whether it is possible to constitute an identity, whether as individual or group, except at the expense of an other who is at once model, rival, authoritarian persecutor, and ultimately, victim to the self.

*The Waves* undermines the ostensible difference between those, like Louis, who openly crave authority and those, like Neville, who think they scorn it. When they enter chapel at their boys’ school for the first time, Louis takes refuge in the Headmaster’s “bulk, in his authority” while Neville, sitting nearby, thinks the Headmaster “menaces my liberty when he prays.”\(^\text{22}\) We may take Neville’s angry resistance to the Headmaster’s authority as a clue to the central paradox of the fiction. Though he asserts that “The words of authority are corrupted by those who speak them” it is he who later confesses that he must preserve
his “absurd and violent passion” for Percival from misunderstanding. Silently, Neville lives in a constant state of anguished desire: “Nobody guessed the need I had to offer my being to one god; and perish, and disappear” (52). Neither Neville nor most critics see the profound contradiction between his outward posture of defiance and his inward passion to submit to the authority of another. Critics have been slow to wrestle with the nature of desire in Woolf and its relation to authority, the sacred, and violence. It may feel outrageous to read Percival as a figure for the blond ideal of Hitler’s aryan dream, but his apotheosis in the minds of his friends is described in rhetoric chillingly like fascist propaganda in this era.23

Slavish submission to authority in The Waves is accomplished by no external dictator. It is not the Headmaster, representative of established patriarchal institutions, who dominates and vitiates the inner lives of Rhoda, Jinny, Susan, Louis, Neville, and Bernard. It is the secret Master within—blond, beautiful, and brutish Percival, a peer, a friend—who is thought to possess transcendent, “monolithic” Being. Percival is experienced as so autonomous, spontaneous, and powerful that, as Neville confesses, he cannot help offering himself up totally, as if in ritual slaughter of his innermost being.

The six characters in this novel are not rebels against authority. Nor is Bernard a model of positive narrative authority; his last gesture is a feeble imitation of Percival, a ride toward death and silence. In truth, the six friends crave authority, they suffer for it, they do symbolic violence to others and to themselves in the name of it—but always blindly. Theirs is a negative passion, a dark twin of the transcendence so badly represented by the corpulent and verbose Headmaster. All differences (gender, class,
sexuality) are subsumed by this profound likeness: all six are deluded in their desire for Percival. So far from being a hero, Percival is both tyrant and, as the ritual sacrifice Rhoda and Louis imagine during his farewell dinner suggests, victim of his friends’ desire to substitute him for the divine Author they have evicted from the center of their lives. *The Waves* is perhaps Woolf’s most profound exploration of the origins of totalitarianism in the individual. What is glimpsed in *The Waves* is enacted between La Trobe and her audience: the rejection of authority conceals within it a deep craving to be dominated into meaning, a temptation no less fatal to the writer than to her audience.

The crisis *Between the Acts* commemorates is at once literary and political: precisely what choice of meaningful action could the writer take to resist Nazi aggression, to rouse an audience to relinquish the stance of “unresisting obedience” to authority so necessary to the triumph of a dictator? For Woolf, as for the German intellectuals who opposed Hitler and became known as members of the Frankfurt School, fascism was not new, was not accidental or surprising. As Adorno put it, “The true horror of Fascism is that it represents a slow end-product of the concentration of social power.” Any art that refuses to make this visible, Adorno added, “conjures away the true threat.”

For Virginia Woolf the “old plot” of love and hate finds its most common expression in the transformation of desire into violence, its smallest social unit in the pair: man and woman. And Woolf, like Benjamin, believed that art must “expose what is present” and move the audience to *reflection* because “events are alterable not at their climaxes, not by virtue and resolution, but only in their strictly habitual course, by reason and practice.”
The habitual relations at Pointz Hall breed violence, a suppressed war that comes to light on the day of the pageant when a flagrantly nonconforming artist decides to strip her audience of protection—to denature the role of spectator and to lay bare the suspense and terror of the present by emptying her stage. “Time Present” is made available to the senses as an unacted possibility, the time and place between the official acts of history when meaning is suspended and members of the audience can no longer enjoy their anonymity and false safety. Words are cut in two by the “distant music” which turns out to be no voice from the sky but twelve war planes droning by overhead (193). What rouses La Trobe’s audience to rage and ridicule, what brings out their well-buried terror of the impending war and their withdrawal from the scapegoat—”But what about the Jews? . . . people like ourselves?”—is not agitprop theatre (121). It is a scriptless act, a staged confrontation with “life itself,” a pastoral with no poetry. The un-mediated and unendurably mute physical plenitude of the earth is what La Trobe’s audience must see behind her stage, a primitive substitute for the ritual space of early drama. The English audience that finds it impossible to complete the thought that the Nazis’ victims might really be “people like ourselves” is finally forced to see when La Trobe abandons her experiment with ten minutes of unmediated reality (“Reality too strong” she notes in the margins of her text) and has the actors confront the audience with “hand glasses, tin cans, scraps of scullery glass, harness room glass, and heavily embossed silver mirrors”; “Anything that’s bright enough to reflect, presumably, ourselves?” (BA 183,185).

Woolf’s readers no less than the audience within the fiction are asked to submit to “The mirror bearers,” who ask us to consider how “scraps, orts and fragments” may be
transformed not into a herd moved by bestial instinct to unite against a victim/enemy, but into a community conscious of its internal differences but momentarily united and at peace.

In *Between the Acts* the author’s loss of control marks the birth of meaning. The urgent, if not desperate, need for a final, finalizing affirmative gesture like that of Woolf’s earlier artist-hero, Lily Briscoe, is renounced. In contrast to Lily’s private victory over her violent desire to become “one” with Mrs. Ramsay (“I have had my vision”), in *Between the Acts* words “put on meaning” only when each speaks as part of a community, “as one of the audience” (191). In Woolf’s last work, the artist not only has no subject, she is subject to her audience and the perpetual need to renew the play. Woolf intentionally contrasts while uniting the action of the pub, or Public House where La Trobe drinks and muses in a smoke-wrapped crowd as she hears the first words of her new play, and “real life” in the Private House, Pointz Hall, where Isa and Giles renew their struggle with only the slimmest suggestion of an open ending.

Meaning cannot be one or the product of one mind in *Between the Acts*; the focus is not the individual, nor the artist, not “I” but “we,” the group. Communication and community, dialogue rather than monologue, shared meaning rather than autonomy and originality are at issue, and Woolf was never more sophisticated and terrifying a writer than in this work.

From the very beginning of her career, Woolf envisioned authority as operating along a continuum reaching from the private house to the highest position of power in the public state. What is argued from the biographies of Victorian women in *Three Guineas*
is incarnated in a contemporary woman in *Between the Acts*: Isa’s suffering is an expression of “the fear which forbids freedom in the private house” which is connected “with the other fear, the public fear” of the dictator “which is neither small nor insignificant” (*Three Guineas* 142). Like Horkheimer and his colleagues of the Frankfurt Institut who produced the study “Authority and the Family” in 1935, Woolf understood that the turn-of-the-century family, so far from proving a locus of resistance to dehumanizing social structure, initiated children into the politics of dominance and submission. It is only as the audience leaves La Trobe’s performance and Bart looks back to Pointz Hall that we find the “end” of the pageant articulated: “The house emerged; the house that had been obliterated” (204).

In *Between the Acts* the practices of art, the production of a work of literature and a public performance, are scrutinized for relations of power, both the danger of inciting people to violence and the hope of destroying reified structure in order to generate peace. But La Trobe’s creative violence, unlike a German bomb, leaves the beautiful house and setting intact—and attacks only the static violence, the little, local acts of domination it represents.

But in order for art to function as both process and performance, as both metaphor and metamorphosis, it must violate the conventions which have made it possible for people no longer to feel threatened by great art’s power to estrange them from their daily lives. And in this “making strange” (a term Benjamin invented for Brecht’s theatre) the artist first appeals to individuals, who, if she succeeds, will begin to feel their habitual alienation in order that they may desire community for its own sake.
Insofar as *Between the Acts* legitimates the use of violence to achieve desired unity, the only enemy it is justifiable and *necessary* to oppose with the full force of intentional violence is the dead letter. And the only victim the serious play marks for ritual sacrifice is the passive, falsely neutral self—whether petty dictator like Giles or self-destructive victim like Isa—who refuses to give up being a member of the audience in order to become one of the actors. But in what drama? Woolf had already sketched it out in *Three Guineas*. When she issued a provocative call to “cremate the corpse” of the word “feminist,” because it had become obsolete, since women had earned the “only right, the right to earn a living . . . and a word without meaning is a dead word, a corrupt word” (101). This shocking idea (would that the word “feminist” really had become obsolete) has a positive motive: “The word “feminist” is destroyed; the air is cleared; and in that clearer air what do we see? Men and women working together for the same cause” (102). The cause is peace, and the enemy is fascism at home and abroad: “The whole iniquity of dictatorship, whether in Oxford or Cambridge, in Whitehall or Downing Street, against Jews or against women, in England, or in Germany, in Italy or in Spain is now apparent to you. But now we are fighting together” (103). This was a hope; the events of ensuing years complicated this hope as Woolf renounced direct discourse and returned to the indirection of fiction. Woolf’s own shift from the direct discourse of *Three Guineas* to the subtleties of *Between the Acts* is replicated in the fiction when La Trobe puts down her megaphone (and renounces its ‘infernal bray’) and abandons her script, letting the actors run freely among the audience.
Miss La Trobe’s pageant moves toward the ensuing momentary but powerful achievement of “the essential ‘We’” by an inversion of the characters’ process of domesticating language. On the day of her pageant language becomes strange again:

‘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. (59)

The nursery,’ said Mrs. Swithin.

Words raised themselves and became symbolical. The cradle of our race, she seemed to say. (71)

And just as words rise up from the sentence as it is spoken, sometimes with power and meaning independent of the speaker’s motives, so all those at the pageant are at once not themselves (estranged from their habitual ways of being) and more essentially themselves than ever. For Giles, who is unwilling to say “we” except as an interrogative (“We?”), sitting in the audience as a spectator makes his actual status as passive observer of the war too plain:

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. (60)

Enforced passivity is the hallmark of daily life at Pointz Hall, where people live in a constant state of undeclared war. With a real war threatened, the pageant makes Giles’
status as spectator and the force bred by his enraged helplessness painfully obvious by exaggerating it, by formalizing it as his definitive role.

The violations of literary genre and social manners in La Trobe’s pageant and Woolf’s narrative are calculated to realize the unarticulated middle: “the third emotion,” clearly identified as “peace” (91-92). Significantly, the third term Isa can only envision, until the final moment, as the last of a string of separate feelings—”Love. Hate. Peace.” (215)—is intimated in the mysterious issuing forth of “another voice ... a third voice . . . saying something simple” (115). This is described as the antithesis of the Dictator’s force-backed utterance. Because it is “the voice that was no one’s voice” this newly articulated presence, a ghostly echo of the ancient voice of Anon, may well be “the voice that is everyone’s voice.”

Both Woolf’s prose and La Trobe’s play reflect what Bakhtin has called the “carnivalisation” of literature. As a celebration of “change itself,” the carnival celebrates “the very process of replaceability. . . rather than that which is replaced.”29 In other words, this is a refusal to “absolutize” anything—a subversion of the univocal or “single leveled” expressions of political authority. When Carnival moves from the town square to the literary text it becomes a revolt not only against the absolutizing of political power, but also a revolt against “literary finalization.”30

Like Bakhtin, Adorno and Benjamin also attempted to distinguish between literature that participated in the hidden violence of false knowing and objectifying naming and that which resisted such foreclosures of language and experience. Isa’s wordless interpretation of Giles’ clenched fist as he sums up Dodge (“homosexual,” he
concludes, using a word which, like “lesbian” is unspeakable in this world), like Dodge’s revulsion (and Bart’s condescension) for what Lucy’s cross signifies, are only a few of the reified words or ideas in circulation in proper English society. The violence of easy interpretation of other people has its counterpart in the hacked up bits and pieces of literature Woolf’s characters quote to their own private ends. Her late formal experiments offer a meaningful revolt against these tendencies.

Woolf understood, as did Benjamin, that fascism has a counterpart in degraded art, specifically art that reproduces a relationship of dominance and submission between author and reader (or audience). Like Nazi politics, such art represents a corruption of a means of producing community, an abuse of “an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values” to violent ends: politically, Benjamin argued, the “Führer cult,” artistically, the cult of the author.\(^\text{31}\)

Woolf’s last work becomes a fiction formally and thematically dedicated to the carnivalesque. Her narrative as well as La Trobe’s performance celebrate the re-doubling of language. Both the figure of the local worker—big strong Eliza for great Elizabeth, Monarch—and the very word “monarch” are carnivalized in Between the Acts, where the important Monarchs and Admirals are not figures of political and military authority. Instead, they are either butterflies—Red Admirals—that come and feed, with delight, on the actor’s glittering costumes strewn in lovely profusion on the grass behind the bushes; or they are artists:

Miss La Trobe was pacing to and fro between the leaning birch trees. One hand was deep stuck in her jacket pocket; the other held a
foolscap sheet. She was reading what was written there. She had the look of a commander pacing his deck. The leaning graceful trees with black bracelets circling the silver bark were distant about a ship’s length.

Wet would it be, or fine? Out came the sun; and, shading her eyes in the attitude proper to an Admiral on his quarter-deck, she decided to risk the engagement out of doors. Doubts were over. All stage properties, she commanded, must be moved from the Barn to the bushes. It was done. And the actors, while she paced, taking all responsibility and plumping for fine, not wet, dressed among the brambles. Hence the laughter. (62)

As the word-play in the narrator’s description suggests, the dramatic “properties” of life on La Trobe’s side of the bushes include comic resistance to violently closed structures of thought and representation. La Trobe cannot bring the audience back there with her, but she can struggle to transport her vision across the fragile yet active threshold dividing them. The “mobbed” bushes represent a necessary division between audience and author, one meant not to mystify the author’s stature, but to keep attention on the play. The bushes also seem active in protecting her from the possibility that the audience, once roused to see their prejudices and ignorance exposed, once they realize that the object of La Trobe’s artistic playful violence is their own rigid dedication to convention, might become a mob and turn against her, stranger that she is.

La Trobe is herself a comically mixed form, and in her martial strutting she inspires not fear but laughter. In this lesbian artist, a female outsider detached from and therefore better able to see the nature of social and political fictions which protect official
structure, Woolf makes the substance as well as the illusion of the author’s power obvious. The actors may laugh, but they also obey. La Trobe speaks and her subjects, in response to the artist-as-monarch or admiral, perform: “It was done.” But La Trobe’s dominion is ephemeral, and it is only by the consent of actors and audience alike that she has even these brief moments of rule. Her glory is fitful and agonizingly incomplete. She has no authority but the power of illusion: art. Outside the boundaries of the play, she would do nothing to intercede with her audience, to interrupt or to obstruct them should they rise to leave. La Trobe uses no physical force, no overt coercion on anyone. Her “whip” is entirely symbolic, never coming into play except as a sign of her self-restrained will to power.

In *Between the Acts* the authority of illusion unmasks the illusion of authority. To the audience’s anxious questions, “Whom to thank? . . . Whom to *make responsible*?” (194-95, my emphasis), La Trobe and Woolf respond by remaining “invisible” (191). Insofar as there is a work of art anymore in Woolf, it is no longer represented by the bound book, but by the script—a text which must be performed—and which only then binds author, actors, and audience together as an authentic community. Miss La Trobe’s momentary desire to be author of “the play without an audience—*the play*” (180) and the consequent momentary sacrificial death she experiences when her will to power is frustrated, represents a retreat from the acted production with its collective, public audience, to the bound book with private reader. As the comic violence behind the “mobbed” bushes suggests, the artist becomes both tyrant and victim when she misappropriates language’s free play to her own ends: “Panic seized her. Blood seemed
to pour from her shoes. This is death, death, death, she noted in the margin of her mind; when illusion fails” (180).

The fiction ends with a simultaneous arrival at a new beginning for the artist, the central couple, and the reader. Isa and Giles appear to act out the drama La Trobe is that moment dreaming up, a drama of cultural regression, a return to origins: “There was the high ground at midnight; there the rock; and two scarcely perceptible figures. . . . She set down her glass. She heard the first words” (212). As La Trobe opens herself to the inspiration of a new play in the public house, Isa and Giles prepare for the scene they have avoided all day, not a fight to the death between predator and prey. This private war—from which new life might be born—is figured as a necessary struggle between creatures of the same species. Fox and vixen, male and female, suggest the perpetual ‘war at home’ whose players must move past enmity to peace and renewed hope. In a farewell gesture to her audience, Woolf removes our gaze from the author with finality, leaving us, her readers, poised on a threshold.

Left alone together for the first time that day, they were silent.

Alone, enmity was bared; also love. Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night. . . . The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks. Then the curtain rose. They spoke. (219)
Like Woolf’s characters, we her readers are asked to move from being spectators to becoming actors, to name accurately the violence loose in the world as originating within and between us. And like La Trobe, Woolf the author withdraws. Now we, too, are left before a lifted curtain, on the threshold of meaning, with no words except the ones we choose to utter ourselves.  

Notes


14. Stollman 42-44.


17. Stollman 46.


20. Dr. E. Woermann, Counsellor of the German Embassy to the Royal United Service Institution in London, December, 1927: “To believe that a woman’s principal work was family life and bringing up the younger generation was simply a return to natural and eternal law.” *Virginia Woolf’s Reading Notebooks*, ed. Brenda Silver (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977) 310-11.

21. “Homes are the real places of the women who are now compelling men to be idle. It is time the Government insisted upon employers giving work to more men, thus enabling them to marry the women they cannot now approach.” Quoted from *The Daily Telegraph* (22 January 1936), *Three Guineas* 51.


23. See Bernard’s vision of Percival in India which concludes, “He rides on, the multitude cluster round him, regarding him as if he were—what indeed he is—a God” (136), and his “We are creators” peroration (146).


27. “What is Epic Theatre?” *Illuminations* 150.


30. Bakhtin 47.


32. Vanessa Bell’s original cover for the novel depicted an empty stage with outer curtains lifted.