BETWEEN THE ACTS

Virginia Woolf worked at Pointz Hall, afterwards Between the Acts, while still at Roger Fry, throughout the years 1939 and 1940. The completion of the novel was first recorded in the Diary on November 23, 1940. Three months later, Virginia Woolf indicated the extent to which she had been revising it, and announced for a second time its completion:

Finished Pointz Hall, the Pageant; the play - finally Between the Acts this morning.

But the novel was published posthumously by her husband.

The scene is laid in Pointz Hall, a spacious country house; and the pageant which is performed outdoors covers, as in Mrs. Dalloway and The Waves, only a day in the lives of the inhabitants of the village. From the evening before the gathering to the evening after the event is the total period covered. As is already known, E.M. Forster had put up, in 1934, at the village of Abinger, for the Abinger Church Preservation Fund, a pageant. Virginia Woolf appears to have used this as a model so far as the basic plan of her own pageant is concerned. Pointz Hall, however, gets its name, as Renee Watkins brings out, from Thackeray's History of Pendennis and has just the same locale as is therein. But the similarities with Thackeray and Forster are at best trivial and convey nothing of the intrinsic merits of Virginia Woolf's pageant. Watkins writes:

While Thackeray explicitly refuses to relate 'private' feelings, Virginia Woolf works primarily in soliloquies.
While he observes the lucid encounters of one will with another, she examines feelings hidden in silence, feelings that embarrass and encumber the minds of her characters and hamper their power of will. These feelings are, nevertheless, guessed at between persons, and they form the substance of what each recognized in others. At the same time, these secret states of mind bar overt communication.  

Virginia Woolf made significant additions to Forster's work as well. Watkins observes:

What Virginia Woolf added to this bit of actuality was the characters of a novel to go around it and the scenes parodying English literary history which she inserted within it.  

The title *Between the Acts* points primarily to the intermissions in the pageant. "It refers", writes C.Basham, "most obviously to the intervals in the village pageant when 'the audience slipped the noose, split up into scraps and fragments'; then to that longer interval between the first and second European wars; and the development of this latter theme makes it clear that it refers also to the strained relationship between Isa and Giles Oliver." Watkins' comment on the title is more perceptive: "Its most obvious and pervasive meaning, however, is psychological and indirectly metaphysical: silent moments full of thought and feeling lie between human gestures and determine their meaning."

Virginia Woolf turns to show the full horror and the crisis and the sense of fragmentation to which the Second World War exposed the whole tradition of English culture and history. But she demonstrates that in between there lie moments of creative energy, and that the danger to man's physical and spiritual existence can be averted through indifference to death and will to resist.
The theme of Between the Acts is, therefore, the unity of life. Though the forces of disunity, and disintegration are always at work, life's urge to preserve its integrity is basic and very assertive. This theme, indeed, is worked out in all the novels of Virginia Woolf. She, like her mentors and friends, Roger Fry and Clive Bell, has in her a strong vein of Idealism. The impressions of disintegration that we sometimes receive from her novels are but flimsy and transient. With a strong sense of history and tradition, life for Virginia Woolf is one whole and has an inherent capacity to survive amid all sorts of pulls and pressures. A feeling of constant flux in life and the relationship of time as a conditioning factor in all of perception pervades Virginia Woolf's work and culminates finally in the important theme of evolution in Between the Acts.

In The Waves, Virginia Woolf had to rely exclusively on the interior monologue as her structural unit because of the prevailing implication of the book that states of mind alone exist and can become meaningful vehicles for communication. But in Between the Acts, which is so preoccupied, among other things, with the problems of history and art, Virginia Woolf's obsession with self and separation has been transcended - both in the author's vision and in that of the artist, Miss La Trobe. The major characters are really forced, by the device of the pageant and the realisation of an imminent war, to juxtapose the monads of their own identities to an exterior reality. Ralph Freedman
very aptly observes:

In *Between the Acts*, the problems of *The Waves* approach their solution. The moment of illumination in life is juxtaposed with an archetypal image of time; the social world is transfixed by a mythical world through the intervention of art. Both levels are brought together by the performance of a play which acts simultaneously as the content of the novel and as a symbolic motif.6

We may also note that the constant breakdown in the performance of the pageant and the equally constant sense of precariousness and probable crisis which attend it are structurally related to the theme of history which pervades *Between the Acts*. Virginia Woolf entertains the intention to present a kind of theory of history which aspires to the belief in continuity in history, considers the inevitable arrival of the unforeseen and the role of the trivial as well as the major in history and bows before the inscrutable power, which asserts itself in the novel in the sudden downpour of rain and the moving of cows. In short, all that happens in the pageant together with the events, both overt and furtive, of a twenty-four hour period, becomes a microcosm for the greater macrocosm of history towards which the dimensions of *Between the Acts* tend.

Avrom Fleishman classifies *Between the Acts* as a historical novel. But he is quick to add that it is much more than merely traditional historical fiction. The traditional element consists in that Virginia Woolf "portrays history as a series of projections of personal style."7 A further affinity between Virginia Woolf's last novel and the traditional historical fiction is reflected by her "interest in both the transitoriness and the
continuity of history" and by her insistence to maintain "the double perspective of the past and the present." Virginia Woolf is also in tune with the major English and Continental historical novelists in so far as her Between the Acts is a "debunking" novel. But here ends Virginia Woolf's companionship with the traditionalists. She introduces in historical fiction a significant new note which Fleishman says:

not only reduces entire institutions, such as the aristocracy, to the personal qualities which compose them - which are subject to various articulations of style by the historical process - but sees the self as an esthetic object related to its historical medium in the manner of a work of art.

The novel opens at Pointz Hall, at the end of an evening, with a sketch of the Olivers who later become the principal audience in the pageant. The Olivers have guests, Mr. and Mrs. Haines, who are about to depart. But before they do so, Isa Oliver finds herself secretly in love with Mr. Haines. Mr. Oliver, of the Indian Civil Service, retired, and father-in-law of Isa, had been discussing the cesspool with Mr. Haines when Isa feels her clandestine love for Mr. Haines surge up:

What had he said about the cesspool; or indeed about anything? Isa wondered, inclined 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 (8).

The situation is familiar but disgusting.

The scene then shifts to the next morning: "Pointz Hall was seen in the light of an early summer morning to
be a middle-sized house" (9). We get only a glimpse of the life of the inhabitants of the house. Little George is moving through grasses and flowers when he "saw coming towards him a terrible peaked eyeless monster moving on legs, brandishing arms" (13). The monster turns out to be his grandfather. Later when the old man chides his daughter-in-law, Isa, for being the mother of a cry-baby and coward, she "frowned. He was not a coward, her boy wasn't. And she loathed the domestic, the possessive; the maternal. And he knew it and did it on purpose to tease her, the old brute, her father-in-law" (18).

It is through these pictures and references that we move on. The older Mr. Oliver and his sister, Lucy Swithin, enact their own drama of conflict and quarrel. They have strong differences on the subject of religion. Mrs. Sands and Mrs. Swithin discuss the weather. Mrs. Swithin driving home the point that nature is superior to man: "'Will it be fine?' asked Mrs. Swithin... 'Seems like it', said Mrs. Sands... 'It wasn't last year', said Mrs. Swithin. 'D' you remember what a rush we had - when the rain came - getting in the chairs?'" (28). Attention is also invited to two pictures, one of a long lady and the other of a man holding his horse by the rein, hanging opposite the window. Virginia Woolf makes a clear distinction between portraits and pictures, thus reflecting her preference for the amorphous over the representational:

The lady was a picture, bought by Oliver because he liked the picture; the man was an ancestor. He had a name. He
held the rein in his hand. He had said to the painter: 'If you want my likeness, dang it sir, take it when the leaves are on the trees'. There were leaves on the trees. He had said: 'Ain't there room for Colin as well as Buster?' (29-30)

The section ends with a note on Virginia Woolf's favourite theme of eternal silence; and brilliant images evoke the sense of the past:

The room was empty. Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell, singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence (30).

Then some voices are heard. Mrs. Manresa enters the house accompanied by "an unknown young man (William Dodge) with tow-coloured hair and a twisted face" (30-31). She at once becomes an object of speculation for others. The theme of silence reasserts itself: "there was an element of silence, supplied by Isabella, observing the unknown young man" (31). Reference to silent speech is again made: "'Or what are your rings for, and your nails, and that really adorable little straw hat?' said Isabella addressing Mrs. Manresa silently and thereby making silence add its unmistakable contribution to talk" (32). Virginia Woolf's belief that it is difficult to know one from the outward appearances is also given vent to: "Her hat, her rings, her finger nails red as roses, smooth as shells, were there for all to see. But not her life history" (32). Mrs. Manresa, the "wild child of nature", goes about "ogling" people, and there is something "vulgar" about her (33). She becomes a factor of turbulence in the house of the Olivers since Giles, Isa's husband, feels attracted towards her.
All this takes place against the cultural milieu of the present. But Virginia Woolf employs many devices by which the past continues to persist in the minds of the characters and remains operative. Virginia Woolf's vision of life in *Between the Acts* includes a grand view of history which goes all the way back to the time of the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon about which Mrs. Swithin takes much delight in reading her *Outline of History*. In the historical vision of Virginia Woolf, the past is irretrievably linked with the present. That is why there lie scattered in Pointz Hall numerous references to ancient and even prehistoric events. For instance, Mrs. Haines snobbishly tells Mr. Oliver that her family "had lived near Liskeard for many centuries. There were the graves in the churchyard to prove it"(7). The old Mr. Oliver tells Mrs. Haines that the marks on the land "made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house"(7) could still be seen from an aeroplane. Mrs. Swithin stretches "for her favourite reading—an *Outline of History*—and had spent the hours between three and five thinking of rhododendron forests in Piccadilly; when the entire continent... was all one; populated, she understood, by elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging, slowly writhing, and, she supposed, barking monsters: the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon; from whom presumably, she thought... we descend"(10). The stone Barn to which Lucy had nailed her placard reminds those "who had been to Greece... of a temple"(23). Mitchell's boy had to deliver fish "right over the hill at Bickley;
also go round by Waythom, Roddam, and Pyeminster, whose names, like his own, were in Domesday Book\(^2\) (26). The reference to the lily pool in which a lady is said to have drowned herself is meant to mix the archaic with the actual.

Then begins the second movement covering the pageant which Marilyn Zorn says is a gay parody of "the contents of a course in 'Survey of English Literature'."\(^1\) Pantomime, chorus, and skits are enacted by villagers, including shopkeepers, clerks, farmers, and even the village idiot. The chorus involves a happy identity of actors and roles, since the villagers really play themselves in past eras. The audience consists of more gentry than village folk and emanates venerable history and grotesque self-importance. Miss La Trobe, a gifted Bohemian who somehow happens to live in the village, has written the play and is directing it. She tries to create unity, but frustration overtakes her. Miss La Trobe who experiences moments of frustration and agony over her failure to put across her viewpoint to the audience represents the modern artist.

There are four skits; parodies of Elizabethan, Restoration, and Victorian drama followed by a kind of example of Dadaist theatre. The pageant deals out the past, but just as in the first movement the present and the past are juxtaposed with each other while remaining part of the same continuous flow leading to the future, so the pageant too flows over into the life of the present drawing sustenance from it and at the same time contributing to it.
The pageant begins with a prologue showing England as a little girl, played by Phyllis Jones. In Act I, Hilda, the carpenter's daughter, represents the grown up England. It is "England in the time of Chaucer", Mrs. Swithin points out (60), for the Canterbury pilgrims appear in the background "tossing hay on their rakes" (61). The plan is to depict: "Early Briton; Plantagenets; Tudors; Stuarts" (61). But probably Miss La Trobe "had forgotten a reign or two", Mrs. Manresa comments (61). These are the gaps in the theory of Evolution which according to Virginia Woolf are beyond explanation and perhaps beyond comprehension, but in no way able to affect the overall unity. The parody behind the pageant is apparent from Queen Elizabeth played by "Eliza Clark, licensed to sell tobacco" (62).

A parody of a Shakespearean romance is enacted before Queen Elizabeth. The scenes of disguise and recognition take place. Laughter is mixed with tears. The saints and the sinners come together in a mood of reconciliation. There is "a medley of things" and "the confusion of the plot". But as Isabella Oliver mutters: "Did the plot matter?... 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" (67). The emotion had been soundly expressed. Sweeping his hat off, the Prince had said: "'Hail, sweet Carinthia!'" She had responded to him, "raising her eyes: 'My love! My lord!'" (67) And
Isa remarks: "'It was enough. Enough. Enough'... All else was verbiage, repetition" (67).

The first interval is announced: "The music chanted: Dispersed are we. It moaned: Dispersed are we. It lamented: Dispersed are we" (70). But the interval has come a bit too quick. So far the audience have not been able to grasp the idea behind the fragment, the reason being that the emotions of love, hate, and peace which for Virginia Woolf constitute the "ply of human life" (68) have not come as yet twisted together. Isabella hums: "'Dispersed are we... All is over. The wave has broken. Left us stranded, high and dry. Single, separate on the shingle. Broken is the three-fold ply'" (70-71).

The ensuing sense of frustration attacks not only the audience, but also Miss La Trobe. She becomes painfully conscious that she has failed to create unity and realise her vision:

Now Miss La Trobe stepped from her hiding. Flowing, and streaming, on the grass, on the gravel, still for one moment she held them together - the dispersing company. Hadn't she, for twenty-five minutes, made them see? A vision imparted was relief from agony... for one moment... one moment. Then the music petered out on the last word we. She heard the breeze rustle in the branches. She saw Giles Oliver with his back to the audience. Also Cobbett of Cobbs Corner. She hadn't made them see. It was a failure, another damned failure! As usual. Her vision escaped her (71-72).

In *Between the Acts*, we find a special dilemma as this painfully isolated artist and social outcast discovers that personal and artistic success, even survival, depend on some kind of reintegration of herself, through art, into society. Another implication in this passage that art
somehow redeems the self from time through its power of continuity appears again when Miss La Trobe undergoes a similar ordeal in the next Act.

Annoyed with everyone and everything, Giles wanders off towards the Barn. In his annoyance, he kicks a stone along the path. Giles is a symbol of bestiality in *Between the Acts*. Virginia Woolf specifies that the stone is "a sharp stone, edged as if cut by a savage for an arrow. A barbaric stone; a pre-historic" (72). Giles is immediately linked with another era, and the description of the stone together with the words - "Stone-kicking was a child's game" (72) - classifies him with the world of underdeveloped, basically animal human beings and emphasises the uncivilised and barbaric beneath his blue coat with brass buttons. He gives the stone ten kicks to reach his goal:

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.

He reached it in ten. There, couched in the grass, curled in an olive green ring, was a snake. Dead? No, choked with a toad in its mouth. The snake was unable to swallow; the toad was unable to die. A spasm made the ribs contract; blood oozed. It was birth the wrong way round- a monstrous inversion. So, raising his foot, he stamped on them. The mass crushed and slithered. The white canvas on his tennis shoes was bloodstained and sticky. But it was action. Action relieved him. He strode to the Barn, with blood on his shoes (72-73).

The picture is at once brilliant, grotesque, and shocking and comprises in miniature the theme of evolution in *Between the Acts*. As two lesser species find themselves deadlocked in their struggle for survival, the superior force of man eliminates both. The act also provides to Giles a release from sadism which is both genuine and vicarious.
Attracted by music, people push to their seats from behind, and while moving, they discuss the dilemma of change and continuity. Change in Virginia Woolf's imagination is only relative, for the past is not only contained in the present but is also identified with it. The Elizabethans and others are only a moment of space away:

'Where did we leave off? D'you remember? The Elizabethans... Perhaps she'll reach the present, if she skips.... D'you think people change? Their clothes, of course.... But I meant ourselves... do we change?' (87)

They refer to the affairs in Russia and Rome; they discuss Queen Mary and the Duke of Windsor; they express concern for the Jews, only to conclude that things have always been the same.

The next Act begins with the Restoration-Eighteenth Century. It satirises as well as evokes the theatrical conventions and the literary styles of the period. Flamboyant youth is set against stinking, tyrannical age. The young lovers meet to elope throwing off the patronage of their elders. To Miss La Trobe, the Flavinda - Valentine episode seems to be a success and she feels crowned with glory. But she is mistaken. The emotion that she had generated dies rather quickly. A rising wind and the sound of rustling leaves sweep away the words of the actors whose mouths are open but seem suddenly soundless. Nature, symbolised by the cows, however, comes to her rescue. But it may be mentioned that the interference of nature is more out of accident than benevolence: nature is above cognition. Virginia Woolf also perhaps wants to say that historical
events depend to an appreciable degree upon the element of chanciness and thus defy causal explanations.

The vision of the artist is now referred to as the illusion of art. Life without art is equated with not only agony but the emptiness of death: "Illusion had failed. 'This is death'", Miss La Trobe murmured (99). However, among the insensitive audience, like Bartholomew and Giles Oliver, who see a moral in the tableau, there is Mrs. Swithin, who has been stirred in her soul and says to Miss La Trobe: "'But you've made me feel I could have played... Cleopatra!'"(107)

Virginia Woolf has a special sneer for the Victorian Age which follows. British imperialism, militancy and respectability receive a really hard knock from her. Col. Mayhew muses:

'Why leave out the British Army? What's history without the Army, eh?'... Mrs. Mayhew protested after all one mustn't ask too much. Besides, very likely there would be a Grand Ensemble, round the Union Jack, to end with (110-111). Budge the publican appears disguised as a constable carrying on his shoulders the burden of protecting the Empire. He is the interpreter and even dispenser of the "laws of God and Man". We get glimpses of the Victorian fads through him. Life is regular like a clock and everything is spick and span, and in this well-ordered world there is home and happiness for the squeamish, like Budge:

Go to church on Sunday; on Monday, nine sharp, catch the City Bus. On Tuesday it may be, attend a meeting at the Mansion House for the redemption of the sinner; at dinner on Wednesday... Some bother it may be in Ireland; Famine. Fenians. What not. On Thursday it's the natives of Peru require protection and correction; we give 'em what's due.
But mark you, our rule don't end there. It's a Christian country, our Empire; under the White Queen Victoria. Over thought and religion; drink; dress; manners; marriage too, I wield my truncheon. Prosperity and respectability always go, as we know, 'and in 'and. The ruler of an Empire must keep his eye on the cot; spy too in the kitchen; drawing-room; library; wherever one or two, me and you, come together. Purity our watchword; prosperity and respectability (113-114).

But there is something unhygienic, if not impure about this home. It is, therefore, good that winds of change have blown through it. The process of change must also continue till perfection is achieved. Change is vital even for survival:

But Mrs. Lynn Jones still saw the home. Was there, she mused, as Budge's red baize pediment was rolled off, something - not impure, that wasn't the word - but perhaps 'unhygienic' about the home? Like a bit of meat gone sour... Time went on and on like the hands of the kitchen clock.... If they had met with no resistance... they'd still be going round and round and round. The Home would have remained; and Papa's beard, she thought, would have grown and grown; and Mama's knitting... Change had to come... unless things were perfect... (121).

In a penultimate paragraph of The Waves, Bernard surveys the succession of days and seasons, the cycle of growing and dying, and concludes:

'Yes, this is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again' (255).

The pattern which Bernard perceives and finally accepts is one which Eleanor, in The Years, searches for and finds:

Does everything then come over again a little differently? she thought. If so, is there a pattern; a theme, recurring, like music; half remembered, half foreseen? ... a gigantic pattern, momentarily perceptible? The thought gave her extreme pleasure: that there was a pattern (297).

In this regard, we remember reading, in Between the Acts, when William Dodge and Isa Oliver have their important introductory conversation that:
The future shadowed their present, like the sun coming through the many-veined transparent vine leaf; a criss-cross of lines making no pattern (83).

This statement holds true for the entire vision of this novel. The problem at hand, involving both pattern and time, is that of continuity, and the sense of history; and the subject of time is finally absorbed in Between the Acts, in Virginia Woolf's feeling for the continuity of life. This reminds us of the lines from "Little Gidding" in T.S. Eliot's The Four Quartets:

A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments. So, while the light falls
On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel
History is now and England,
With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling. 13

It is always clear that Virginia Woolf believed very much in history and that in her awareness she was redeemed from the obsession with time which had obviously plagued her all of her life.

There are many personal and haunting references in the Diary which indicate the extent to which Virginia Woolf was pressed in the most extreme and personal of ways by her meditations on life's mutability; in her more optimistic moments she could see the human species, both as successive and continuous, as in the following excerpt:

Now is life very solid or very shifting? I am haunted by the two contradictions. This has gone on for ever; will last for ever; goes down to the bottom of the world - this moment I stand on. Also it is transitory, flying, diaphanous. I shall pass like a cloud on the waves. Perhaps it may be that though we change, one flying after another, so quick, so quick, yet we are somehow
successive and continuous we human beings, and show the light through. But what is the light? I am impressed by the transitoriness of human life to such an extent that I am often saying a farewell—after dining with Roger for instance; or reckoning how many more times I shall see Nessa.

Though such questions as these are never boldly stated in *Between the Acts*, they somehow appear in the very texture of this novel. Miss La Trobe's pageant on the History of England is a noble attempt in art to transcend the ravages of time by describing the momentary state of Man before, as Virginia Woolf says in *Mrs. Dalloway*, "the pageant of the universe would be over" (91).

The audience think that the pageant will come to an end with the Victorians. But Miss La Trobe is not content to do so, for her conception is wider than that, and is designed to administer a shock. That is why it fills the audience with alarm and indignation when they read "Ourselves" on the programme. In parodying the bygone periods, Miss La Trobe had free access to the creative sources of her faculties and could enjoy manipulating human intent, deed and gesture. But the twentieth century was too complex and illusive, and therefore, totally beyond the grasp of her imagination.

'Ourselves....' They returned to the programme. But what could she know about ourselves? The Elizabethans yes; the Victorians, perhaps; but ourselves; sitting here on a June day in 1939—it was ridiculous. 'Myself'—it was impossible. Other people, perhaps... Cobbot of Cobbs Corner; the Major; old Bartholomew; Mrs. Swithin—them, perhaps. But she won't get me—no, not me. The audience fidgeted. Sounds of laughter came from the bushes. But nothing whatsoever appeared on the stage (124-125).

This leaves Miss La Trobe frustrated, powerless and numb:
something was going wrong with the experiment. 'Reality too strong', she muttered. 'Curse 'em!' She felt everything they felt. Audiences were the devil. O to write a play without an audience - the play. But here she was fronting her audience. Every second they were slipping the noose. Her little game had gone wrong. If only she'd a backcloth to hang between the trees — to shut out cows, swallows, present time! But she had nothing. She had forbidden music. Grating her fingers in the bark, she damned the audience. 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. Unable to lift her hand, she stood facing the audience (125).

Then there is a transition: the rain falls, bringing hope and renewal. A tableau, depicting the rebuilding of civilisation after the War and coming together of the nations once again, appears. The gramophone plays a waltz. The swallows and the martins perched on the wall... seemed to foretell what after all "The Times" was saying yesterday. Homes will be built. Each flat with its refrigerator, in the crannied wall. Each of us a free man; plates washed by machinery; not an aeroplane to vex us; all liberated; made whole.... (127).

But this prophecy is not fulfilled: the behaviour of the gramophone suggests it. It constantly breaks down, and instead of producing music, emits grating sounds of chuff, chuff, chuff, or tick, tick, tick. These are confusing sounds: comments on the present state of things.

The twentieth century leaps on to the stage: a crowd, not the cast. They carry all sorts of mirrors in their hands. Unlike the Elizabethan, Restoration and Victorian pageants, there is now no skit, no plot. Cacophanic rhythms in place of smooth measures of waltz are heard:

The tune changed; snapped; broke; jagged. Foxtrot was it? Jazz? Anyhow the rhythm kicked, reared, snapped short. What a jangle and a jingle! Well, with the means
at her disposal, you can't ask too much. What a cackle, a
cacophany! Nothing ended. So abrupt. And corrupt. Such an
outrage; such an insult; and not plain. Very up to date,
all the same. What is her game? To disrupt? Jog and trot?
Jerk and smirk? ... O the irreverence of the generation...
The young, who can't make, but only break; shiver into
splinters the old vision; smash to atoms what was whole
(127-128).

The actors move their mirrors abruptly, haphazardly and
almost malevolently. The audience gets a fragmented portrait
of itself and reacts nervously:

   Out they leapt, jerked, skipped. Flashing, dazzling,
dancing, jumping. Now old Bart... he was caught. Now
Manresa. Here a nose... There a skirt... Then trousers only
... Now perhaps a face.... Ourselves? But that's cruel. To
snap us as we are, before we've had time to assume... And
only, too, in parts.... That's what's so distorting and
upsetting and utterly unfair (128).

Every one with the exception of Mrs.Manresa, who uses
her mirror to powder her face and set a disturbed curl, is
embarrassed and tries to evade the reality of his present
situation.

   One must agree with Allen McLaurin that the mirror
occupies an important place in the aesthetic articulation
of Roger Fry. It serves two functions: firstly, it reflects
the image of an object, and secondly, it lifts an object
out of its actual surroundings and confers on it a status
of its own. McLaurin writes:

   The looking-glass itself is not simply a copy of our
ordinary experience; it can remove a scene from the sphere
of practical activity, a requirement which Fry sees as the
minimum for a work of art.15

Such is the case with Virginia Woolf as well. The whole
thing, indeed, centres round the problem of 'reality' and
how to solve it in aesthetic terms. In Between the Acts,
presentation of 'reality' is not a simple affair though
Miss La Trobe understands that art to be effective must always depend on some selection, must always resort to some exclusion. The reason for the failure of her experiment, indeed, was that the audiences were not as yet accustomed to a new vision of 'reality'. In a way, art involves distortion. Accordingly, the process of distortion and denigration can be seen at work throughout the novel.

Finally, Rev. G.W. Streatfield, the village minister, makes a sincere but ineffectual effort to draw the meaning of the pageant. He suggests that what the pageant purports to convey is that "we are members one of another. Each is part of the whole" (133). Another possible interpretation according to him is that, "'We act different parts; but are the same'" (134). The minister sees oneness in plurality and believes that the pageant shows that we are a part of one larger spirit, and to complete our personality, we need go out of ourselves: "'Dare we... limit life to ourselves'" (134). He makes still another effort and says that since we are "'scraps, orts, and fragments! Surely, we should unite?" (134). But the attempts at unity are disrupted: Rev. Streatfield is interrupted by the sounds of aeroplanes flying overhead.

Virginia Woolf's view of the unity of life is not traditional. That is why she has been a great deal critical of Rev. Streatfield whom she describes as "a piece of traditional church furniture; a corner cupboard; or the top beam of a gate, fashioned by generations of village carpenters after some lost-in-the-mists-of-antiquity
model” (132). Virginia Woolf believes in the manyness of men and things. The frequent interruptions and disruptions in the novel refer to such a belief. James Hafley's observation in this respect deserves attention:

It is the unity of the separateness beneath separate individuals which constitutes the One, from this point of view; the One is, therefore, Manyness. It is precisely the interruption which is the unity.

The gramophone also takes up the note of physical dispersal and emotional unity which means that art inspires and unites:

The gramophone was affirming in tones there was no denying, triumphant yet valedictory: *Dispersed are we; who have come together.* But, the gramophone asserted, *let us retain whatever made that harmony.*

O let us, the audience echoed... keep together. For there is joy, sweet joy, in company (136-137).

It is also to be noted that every dispersal is followed by assemblage.

At the end of the pageant, the bond of sympathy between Miss La Trobe and William Dodge emerges. Mrs. Swithin, in spite of her desire to thank Miss La Trobe, is restrained from doing so by the injunction of her brother. William Dodge alone comes forward and says: "'So I thank you'" (144). Bohemian and rather emotionally isolated, Miss La Trobe and William Dodge are sharp observers. They are not much cared for by the gathering, yet they are able to score their points in the end. William Dodge succeeds in seeing through the affairs of the Giles family and La Trobe in conceiving again the moment of creative rapture in her fantasy. Till now she had appeared
to her audience only as a preacher.

Enough has been said and suggested at various points about the heroic dimension of Miss La Trobe's endeavours and the extent to which even her identity as well as raison d'être depend on her constant and determined effort to sustain illusion in the production of art. The artist was for Virginia Woolf a special figure, someone whose visionary powers could both perceive and synthesise perceptions into a new whole. As early as 1919, she realised:

It seems to me more and more clear that the only honest people are the artists, and that these social reformers and philanthropists get so out of hand and harbour so many discreditable desires under the disguise of loving their kind, that in the end there's more to find fault with in them than in us. 17

Virginia Woolf's faith in the artists crystallises in *Between the Acts* and centres in Miss La Trobe, more particularly in her vision. If, as we read in the novel, the future shadows the present and makes no pattern, the pattern exists nonetheless in the vision of Miss La Trobe, who makes the pattern, who is always the creator.

We have already seen the artistic impulse assert itself in the imagination of Clarissa Dalloway, whose party-giving is analogous to the work of the artist in his attempt to bring together, to combine, and create an offering. In *To the Lighthouse*, the whole reality of Mrs.Ramsay finally rests on the artistic skill of Lily Briscoe, who enjoys one moment of triumph over Mrs.Ramsay in her realisation that the latter is at her mercy. Earlier, she had praised
Mrs. Ramsay for her capacity to bring together various elements which will survive complete. The novelist Bernard in *The Waves*, is committed to the permanence of art as a result of his realisation that "disorder, sordidity and corruption surround us" (252).

Just as the theme of effort in Virginia Woolf's work culminates in the intense energy and example of Miss La Trobe in *Between the Acts*, so does she represent the most complete figure of the artist. Mrs. Swithin comments how "Miss La Trobe is a lady of wonderful energy" (45) and Isa adds "She makes everyone do something" (45). When Bartholomew Oliver observes that "Our part... is to be the audience. And a very important part too" (45), he echoes the culminating theme in this posthumous novel of the relationship between the artist and the society. One of the most moving scenes in this novel appears after the pageant when Miss La Trobe sits alone and exhausted in the local inn, and drinks. We are told how the actress who had shared her bed and her purse had left her. Then we read:

And the horror and the terror of being alone. One of these days she would break— which of the village laws? Sobriety? Chastity? Or take something that did not properly belong to her?

At the corner she ran into old Mrs. Chalmers returning from the grave. The old woman looked down at the dead flowers she was carrying and cut her... She was an outcast. Nature had somehow set her apart from her kind. Yet she had scribbled in the margin of her manuscript: 'I am the slave of my audience'(146-147).

Miss La Trobe finds herself actually enslaved by her audience, an audience where so many members do not understand her effort and feel insulted and hostile as a result of it. Here is a painful dilemma. Miss La Trobe's
identity and sustenance of illusion and vision in her pageant depend on the moment-to-moment response of her audience. More obviously we need to stress the fact that art is a gift and, therefore, demands a recipient as well as a giver. Miss La Trobe is well aware of this as the pageant is concluded:

At last, Miss La Trobe could raise herself from her stooping position. It had been prolonged to avoid attention. The bells had stopped; the audience had gone; also the actors. She could straighten her back. She could open her arms. She could say to the world, You have taken my gift! Glory possessed her - for one moment. But what had she given? A cloud that melted into the other clouds on the horizon. It was in the giving that the triumph was (145).

Personal crisis and pain are transcended, and identity rests on the giving of one's total self through the medium of art. At the same time, the art of the socially outcast Miss La Trobe joins her in a meaningful union to her society. Rejection and cruelty are metamorphosed and returned in the form of caritas and art. The comparison between Miss La Trobe and Shakespeare's Prospero is evident to any critic of Between the Acts. Miss La Trobe too is a creator, a creator of whatever world she wishes. Indeed, so great is her magic and power that only she can disenchant, as it were, her creatures - the actors. When the pageant is over we read:

Each still acted the unacted part conferred on them by their clothes. Beauty was on them. Beauty revealed them (136).

The third and the final movement which takes place exclusively through suggestions presents a synthesis of the first and the second: the actors, still in their costumes, mingle with the audience and the artifice of
the mirrors integrates the real image of the audience with the final scene. The novel closes with the line: "Then the curtain rose. They spoke" (152). This, while reducing the solidity of Pointz Hall to a mere play-acting, also adds the future to the present.

Immediately after the pageant is over, Miss La Trobe also leaves the place. She goes into the garden, and imagines a scene for her next play:

'I should group them', she murmured, 'here'; it would be midnight; there would be two figures, half concealed by a rock. The curtain would rise. What would the first words be? The words escaped her (146).

The artist here assumes the god of creation. From here she goes to the public house where she expects to find "shelter; voices; oblivion" (147). She drinks, and in her fantasy hears: "Words of one syllable... Words without meaning - wonderful words" (147). The hearing of such words by her suggests that Miss La Trobe is totally tired of a rational quest.

The scene again shifts to Pointz Hall showing the family at dessert and discussing the pageant, each drawing something different from it. An element of boredom has, however, now entered Pointz Hall which is symbolically broken by Giles stubbing "his match on the plate" (148). The imagination of others too is ignited. Mrs.Swithin is stirred by the great picture of Venice School of Canelletto. Isa surveys the summer night and "sitting in the shell of the room she watched the pageant fade" (150). She also watches the bright flowers flash before they fade.
Mrs. Swithin again takes up her Outline of History, finds the page where she had stopped, and before going to bed, ends the chapter:

"Prehistoric man... half-human, half-ape, roused himself from his semi-crouching position and raised great stones' (152).

Her own rising from the chair is quite symbolic of this progress of man. The penultimate paragraph also includes references back to the beginning, bringing with it the images of primeval times and primitive man. The old people had gone up to bed leaving Isa and Giles alone in the room who:

Before they slept... must fight; after they had fought ... 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 (152).

Reconciliation between husband and wife is achieved not on human but natural level. The room itself turns into a cave. Isa and Giles become two enormous stony figures. The conclusion offers the suggestion of ultimate synthesis of the fragmented selves with the universal whole. The problem of the artist has also reached solution: if the past or the present evades him, the future certainly is within the range of his shaping imagination, and he can always pin his hope on it. The scene also depicts simultaneously the fusion as well as the separateness both of the tenses and the human personalities.

To sum up, the burden of Between the Acts is the continuity of time, the continuity of history in which change and evolution can take place, for all the flux of
time, the seasons, and the weather, the earth abides, and the view from Pointz Hall remains the same. Virginia Woolf's vision in the novel, in a way, contains awe and wonder before the fact of life and she seems to think that the factors of time, death, infidelity end the fragility and vulnerability of all things good and beautiful.

Attention may also be drawn to the fact that the last scene has been executed in Cezanne's style. Impetuosity and abandon have been partly replaced by reflection, calculation and restraint. The peculiar sense of desolation that seems suggested by the scene is as much a function of the Cezanne technique - the muffled colours, the isolation of forms in space - as it is of the things depicted. In this respect, the picture is a prefiguration of the great act of creation to come.

The novel also shows that there is neither birth nor death nor time nor beginnings nor endings nor mutability. These are just bubbles on the crust of time. But there is nothing cyclical about Virginia Woolf's notion of history. Things do come back to their starting point but only to move further. The paragraph: "She (Mrs. Swithin) slipped the letter from Scarborough between the pages to mark the end of the chapter, rose, smiled, and tiptoed silently out of the room" (152), and the cataclytic line: "The curtain rose. They spoke" (152), are indicative of the progress registered by the characters after they had returned to their previous positions.
In structure and style, like other works discussed by us, *Between the Acts* is akin to painting and music. We have already said that juxtaposing two opposing tendencies, in this case, past and present, and light and shade, is a feature of Post-Impressionism. *Between the Acts* also draws attention to Virginia Woolf's thematic use of light and darkness; and the play of light on colour in this novel is considerable. Apart from *Between the Acts*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, and *The Years* demonstrate Virginia Woolf's peculiarly sensitive eye for the elements of light and darkness, and her richly imaginative use of these elements in these novels is vastly evident. The association of light with time, in both the brief striking of a match in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, and the fleeting, however steady, and regular strokes of the lighthouse in the latter novel, is carried forward in *The Waves*.

Colours, likewise, do not appear all at once but rather in delicate succession. The final scene in *The Years* describes the passing of a long night which corresponds so much to the mood of the major female character, Eleanor. As she tries desperately to believe that there is another life and acknowledges that she and her friends are only beginning to know anything about themselves, she holds her hands hollowed and feels she wants to enclose the present moment; to make it stay; to fill it fuller and fuller, with the past, the present and the future, until it shone, whole, bright, deep with understanding(344).

Overcome by dejection, she opens her hands and concludes:
It must drop. It must fall. And then? she thought. For her too there would be the endless night; the endless dark. She looked ahead of her as though she saw opening in front of her a very long dark tunnel. But, thinking of the dark, something baffled her; in fact it was growing light. The blinds were white (344).

In *Between the Acts*, the sun itself is personified and its powers in the heavens evoke the great thematic problems in this novel of order and pattern versus chaos and wilderness:

Here came the sun - an illimitable rapture of joy, embracing every flower, every leaf. Then in compassion it withdrew, covering its face, as if it forebore to look on human suffering. There was a feebleness, a lack of symmetry and order in the clouds, as they thinned and thickened. Was it their own law, or no law, they obeyed? (20)

When the sun comes out later, the description of colour in nature and of the evanescent, delicate play of light on colour recall Bernard's observations on the eclipse in *The Waves* and the constant relating of light to Virginia Woolf's perennial theme of time. *Between the Acts* is full of light and colour description:

The clothes were strewn on the grass. Cardboard crowns, swords made of silver paper, turbans that were sixpenny dish cloths, lay on the grass or were flung on the bushes. There were pools of red and purple in the shade; flashes of silver in the sun. The dresses attracted the butterflies. Red and silver, blue and yellow gave off warmth and sweetness. Red Admirals glutonously absorbed richness from dish cloths, cabbage whites drank icy coolness from silver paper. Flitting, tasting, returning, they sampled the colours (48).

Virginia Woolf goes to considerable lengths to record the most particular details of streams of light and shadows of darkness. At the same time, her purpose in painting her exquisite pictures in this novel seems to be not only to emulate Cezanne or Seurat but also to relate light imagery directly to the theme. It appears in the pageant as the age of Reason is heralded:
Young Damon said to Cynthia
Come out now with the dawn
And don your azure tippet
And cast your cares adown
For peace has come to England,
And reason now holds sway
What pleasure lies in dreaming
When blue and green's the day?
Now cast your cares behind you.
Night passes: here is Day.

(89)

There is in Between the Acts, Joan Bennett writes, a "structural severity (resembling) a musical composition." The return of the first movement to the third suggests the ABA pattern followed by Virginia Woolf in The Waves. The power of music over human beings is immense. Virginia Woolf acknowledges that music reveals the beauties of nature and the aesthetic urges that lie dormant in the human soul. For her, even the faculties of seeing and hearing are identical. The audiences in Between the Acts say: "For I hear music, they were saying. Music wakes us. Music makes us see the hidden, join the broken. Look and listen" (86).

At the same time, both Virginia Woolf and Miss La Trobe present a purely formalistic theory of beauty - completely divorced from the world of everyday cognitive and practical reality. Their principles of organisation are, therefore, entirely different. The world of beauty is autonomous, because it is completely independent of the everyday world and its concerns. Moreover, while organising their work, Virginia Woolf and La Trobe no longer draw upon the common experience of the community. This imparts to it a uniqueness and a formidableness of its own.

REFERENCES
1. Diary, p.365.

3. Ibid, p.357.


8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.


