

Prehistory, Community, and Femininity: A Reflection on the Feminist-Pacifist Reading of *Between the Acts*¹

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It must have been adventurous beyond imagination to publish a kind of minority report like *Three Guineas*, in the time the menace of Fascism was materialising into a second war, and public opinion, including that of former pacifists, was inclining towards a War of defence, or a War to end all Wars. How controversial Woolf's project in *Three Guineas* was even for Bloomsbury pacifists is expressed in Quentin Bell's judgement on the book:

What really seemed wrong with the book . . . was the attempt to involve a discussion of women's rights with the far more agonising and immediate question of what we were to do in order to meet the ever-growing menace of Fascism and war. The connection between the two questions seemed tenuous and the positive suggestions wholly inadequate. (Bell 205)

Bell's strong negation reveals how easily feminist voices could be silenced under such a situation, and at the same time how deeply radical Woolf's dissenting voice was. In a word, Woolf tried to "hyphenate" her feminism and pacifism, and that was, in Bell's eyes, an impossible hyphenation between opposing terms. But when it comes to the relation between *Three Guineas* and her last novel *Between the Acts*, there seems to be no apparent (nor even profound) connection in the politics the two works express. It is possible, as Alex Zwerding and Patricia Laurence do, to point out in this novel some apocalyptic undertones of the impending Second World War, but by no means easy to find a moment in which Woolf's pacifism and her feminism come in accord with each other.

On the contrary, the juxtaposition of the unchanged and unchanging English rural landscape "in the very heart of England" (*BTA* 10)—whose ideological construction has been unravelled by Raymond Williams—and the suggestions of the war which infiltrate here and there in this novel—that is, the juxtaposition of "Merrie England" and "the menace of Fascism" in the novel tempts one to read this novel as contributing to the very pro-war climate that Woolf herself abhorred so much.

To put this temptation another way, it is the temptation of the "We," which Woolf referred to in her diary when she conceived the first idea of *Between the Acts*:

. . . why not Poyntzet Hall: a centre: all lit. discussed in connection with real little incongruous living humour; & 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 & strays—a

rambling capricious but somehow unified whole. . . (Woolf, *Diary V* 135)

Bearing in mind the fact that, in *A Room of One's Own*, the rejection of "I" was at the same stroke the rejection of patriarchal ideology and by extension of anything that has a hegemonic centre, what Woolf suggests here turns out to be a "We" as a liberal (if not liberalist) and utopian communality, which is not governed by state power nor patriarchy. But a glance at history will allow us to see that such kind of utopianism can quite easily be contained by the fascist ideology of racial utopia, and in that sense, despite E. M. Forster's criticism that Woolf's radical—"cantankerous"—feminism is "something old-fashioned," (Forster 123) it is not her radicalism that is at stake in *Three Guineas* but her liberalism, the liberalism of the "We," in which both *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts* seem to be embedded. Or, is it possible, in quite the other way round, to read that "We," or the "outsiders' society" in *Three Guineas* not as some positive category—which Bell thought it was—but as a sheer, radical negativity, as some impossible communality?

With these speculations in mind, this essay will ultimately attempt to evaluate the political possibility and limitation of that "We," some alternative communality that Woolf tried to express in *Between the Acts*. In doing this, however, it will be necessary to take a brief look at some types of historical representation in Woolf's other works, and then we will focus on La Trobe's pageant and its feminist readings, reconsider their relation to the anthropologist Jane Harrison, and show how the use of a pageant in the novel, which seems at first sight a (neo-)traditionalist return to an unalienated art form, was a sort of middle ground between Woolf's feminism and the larger pre-war situation.

I

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Guber's now classical observation that in Woolf's works the juxtaposition of the official history and the private one is a basic motif of her historical representation, taken in a very wide sense, can be applied to Woolf's whole corpus. I have recast this opposition by the terms "modernist" and "postmodernist" moments of historical representation, though the dichotomy may sound a little too schematic.³ I agree with Gilbert and Guber in that the point of departure for such a view on history can be traced back to Woolf's early and posthumously published short story "[The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn]." But let us take up here *Mrs. Dalloway*, a novel in which those two modes of representation are realised in a most sophisticated form.

The modernist representation of history focuses on the moment in which history as the pre-discursive, the Real, or history as trauma comes to the surface. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, we can see such moments in Clarissa Dalloway's past memory and Septimus Smith's literal trauma. Almost always presented in opposition to such untold or untellable histories is official history, or discursively established history or temporality, in some cases with the tone of parodic irony. This last could be named the postmodernist moment, in which myth, or ideology, is traced, and the discursivity of discourse is foregrounded. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the eruption of Clarissa's and Septimus's supposedly non-linguistic memories into the present is set against the sound of Big

Ben striking the hours. Paul Ricœur, after Nietzsche, called the temporality represented by the sound of Big Ben "monumental time," discussing how this temporality and the one experienced by Septimus and Clarissa are set beside each other.

What is the ideological thrust of such structure? It is possible, as the first stage of interpretation, to read it as a modernist element intruding critically, and as a noise, into the ideology delineated in the postmodernist moment. Here the two notions of temporality Benedict Anderson appropriated from Walter Benjamin would be useful; that is, "Messianic time" and "homogeneous, empty time." According to Anderson, Messianic time is basically a pre-modern or pre-nation-state temporality, which is "a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present" (Anderson 24), and on the other hand in homogeneous, empty time, simultaneity is secularised and becomes a deep-lying basis for the imagination of nation-states, materially presented and sustained not only by clocks and calendars but by the novel and newspapers.⁴ Read in this light, the two kinds of temporality picked up from *Mrs. Dalloway* turn out to be analogous to Anderson's two temporalities. As I pointed out elsewhere (Kono, "Between Two Deaths."), the sound of Big Ben has a web of associations with such figures as the psychiatrists who cause Septimus's death, or the politicians and aristocrats at the party scene who reduce his death to one of the deplorable cases deserving political consideration. If the temporality of Big Ben can thus be read as symbolising the patriarchal and the nation-state based on patriarchy, the party scene, in which Clarissa and Septimus go through a mystical identification as common victims of that same institution, can be seen as "Messianic time," in which the past as a noise becomes an immediate presence, and accordingly the novel can be read as a criticism on what Woolf later will call fascism in England in *Three Guineas*, on the compound of patriarchal and nation-state ideologies.

As previously mentioned, it is the first stage of reading which needs a further reinterpretation. For, if Messianic time is by definition something that evades representation in the modern form of narrative, how can such temporality be represented, or, presented in the text of *Mrs. Dalloway*? To solve this representational paradox, what we need is an allegorical reading of the novel, which J. Hillis Miller has done. According to Miller, Clarissa's attempt in the form of the party, an attempt to reconcile the antinomy between life and death, the present and the past and so on is the allegory of the omniscient narrator trying to capture such temporal plenitude into her narrative. Feeling that her party was a failure, and informed of Septimus's death, Clarissa tries to enclose the past including that of Septimus's in the word "death." Miller's point is that Clarissa's attempt, read allegorically, can be put beside the narrator's attempt to present all the past in the temporality of the novel. In the context of this essay, Miller's argument can be recast like this: so far as this allegory is sustainable, the text of *Mrs. Dalloway* itself succeeds in boring a hole called Messianic time in homogeneous, empty time.

Whether the allegory is really successful, or whether there is a critical leap between the allegory and what is allegorically narrated, is a question that requires further discussion.⁵ Here it would be enough to see that there are many strands in Woolf's works which incite such allegorical readings.

II

Given this perspective, what can we find in *Between the Acts*? Let us begin by pointing out that in *Between the Acts* oppositional figurations of history and prehistory can be discerned. Besides, from the very beginning, this opposition is layered over the contrast between Bartholomew Oliver and Lucy Swithin; one of the oppositional figures which form the plot of this novel, the opposition of man and woman. Bartholomew sees in the rural landscape around Pointz Hall an accumulation of human history, a history centring around wars and conquests:

The old man in the arm-chair—Mr. Oliver, of the Indian Civil Service, retired—said that the site they had chosen for the cesspool was, if he had heard aright, on the Roman road. From an aeroplane, he said, you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house; and by the plough, when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic wars. (BTA 3)

On the other hand, Lucy Swithin, reading H. G. Wells's *The Outline of History*, wanders into a flight of imagination about a world without human beings:

Forced to listen, she[Lucy] had stretched for her favourite book—an Outline of History—and had spent the hours between three and five thinking of rhododendron forests in Piccadilly; when the entire continent, not then, she understood, divided by a channel, was all one; populated, she understood, by elephant-bodied, barking monsters; the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon; from whom presumably, she thought, jerking the window open, we descend. (BTA 6)

Note that in Lucy's prehistory, there were no boundaries that divided the continent, but Bart's landscape is marked with ancient and old "scars" which divide, and enclose territories. This difference between Lucy and Bart is reinforced by the difference in their ancestry: "The Olivers couldn't trace their descent for more than two or three hundred years. But the Swithins could. The Swithins were there before the conquest"(BTA 17) . It might be too careless to leap from these descriptions to such a scheme as history as the masculine and prehistory as the feminine, but it is indeed on such a paradigm that a large number of the feminist readings of *Between the Acts* stand.

Take Gillian Beer's study on the function of prehistory in *Between the Acts*, for instance. Beer argues that the prehistorical in this work is presented not as a past, but as something that is present. In her argument, the presence of prehistory is something like "Messianic time" which was, or at least was supposed to be, designated by the word "death" in the party of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Beer uses the word prehistory not only to refer to what is represented in the work, but she extends its meaning as follows:

But there is a further sense of the term [prehistory] which seems particularly apt to Virginia Woolf's work: prehistory implies a pre-narrative domain which will not

buckle to plot. Just as Freud said that the unconscious knows no narrative, so prehistory tells no story. (Beer 9)

Although Beer herself never uses this term, it would require only one step further to deduce from this argument *the semiotic* represented by prehistoric figures. If history is marked with delimitation and symbolic articulation, prehistory is the primordial pre-symbolic, in which there is a subversive possibility against the fundamentally masculine symbolic. In this light, the following passage will gain additional weight, as well as rather intractable ambiguity:

Tick, tick, tick the machine continued.

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

"Which don't exist for us," Lucy murmured. "We've only the present." (BTA 45)

Time, which for Bart is represented by the noise of the gramophone, doesn't exist at least for Lucy, who should, grammatically, be one of "us." But who are included in that "us," or rather who are the "us" excluded from the temporality marked by the gramophone? Such questions emerge as a very crucial point that conditions the whole reading of *Between the Acts*.

One of the works which established a critical tendency to discern the semiotic in Woolf's works is Jane Marcus's *Virginia Woolf and the Language of Patriarchy* (1987). Here it should be noted that Marcus discusses this point in connection with the anthropologist Jane Harrison.

[T]his text [Marcus's book] also has a heroine, the classical anthropologist Jane Ellen Harrison, whose cross-disciplinary and specifically *anti-textual* work on the origins Greek art in ancient ritual laid the basis for Lévi-Strauss and modern structuralism. Under her influence Woolf continually reached back deep in the subconscious to the primeval mud of "semiotic" origins in art, pre-symbolic discourse, the Mother Tongue. (Marcus 16; italics original)

Jane Ellen Harrison (1850–1928) was one of the first women who graduated from Newnham College, the second oldest women's college of Cambridge. Woolf's library included her *Ancient Art and Ritual* (1913) with the author's autograph, and some of her works were published from the Hogarth Press (See the entry for Harrison in Hussey). Though it is impossible to prove her direct influence on *Between the Acts*, it is well known that Woolf had a personal acquaintance with her (*Letters* 30, 32), and named her in the draft of *A Room of One's Own* (*Women & Fiction* 23). There have been many studies on the relation between Woolf and Harrison and her works, and what is interesting is that studies concerning Harrison's influence on *Between the Acts*, especially those from feminist perspectives, centre around the year 1987, the year Marcus's book was published. Patricia Maika dedicated a whole book to this subject, and Eileen Barret's, Sandra D. Shattuck's and Bonnie Kime Scott's essays, though by different approaches and terminologies, tried to tie Woolf and Harrison in terms of the notion of femininity, matriarchal myth, or the semiotic. It seems very likely that around that year, a certain paradigm of the feminist criticism, what Fuhito Endo calls the "feminist idea of alienation" was established. And

rather surprisingly, comparatively recent articles on *Between the Acts* still adopt such notions as the semiotic or abjection uncritically, as if no criticism had been made upon those troubled notions of Kristeva's (See Mimplitsch).⁶

Is it possible, in line with such kind of argument, to read Lucy's "us" as "women" or "outsiders," to regard the figure of prehistory as a modernist and critical moment which subverts homogeneous time, the time which patriarchal Mr. Oliver reads in the sound of gramophone? To consider this point, we need to focus again on the allegory written in this work; that is, on Miss La Trobe's pageant, and in this, in relation to Jane Harrison again, another form of "alienation" will emerge.

III

If *Orlando*, which is a parodic representation of English history, can be taken as an instance of the postmodernist mode explained above, La Trobe's pageant seems at first sight very similar to what Woolf herself attempted in *Orlando*, in that the pageant represents the whole history of England through symbolistic, and sometimes very ironic means. Such a dialectical move, such transcendence of the former works by another work is crucial in reading Woolf's works. In this respect, it is tempting to take Miss La Trobe's words at their face value: "another play always lay behind the play she had just written" (BTA 35). More importantly, they both end literally in the present time, *Orlando* by a little hoax of its publication date facing its reader with the impossible conflation of narrative time and real time, the pageant by letting the audience see themselves in mirrors shattering down the boundaries between the seen and the seer, and each subverting its basic frame as a work of art, the former as a novel and the latter as a drama.⁷

If the pageant can be seen in that way, that is, as Woolf's own historiographical-novelistic effort written into a work of fiction, it is not difficult to point out its allegorical aspect: the relation between the text of *Between the Acts* and its reader allegorically figured into the relation between the pageant and its audience. Compared with Woolf's earlier works, this allegory is, as it were, a completely inverted allegory. For while what we found in the allegorical reading of *Mrs. Dalloway* was the relation between extra-textual reality and the person who textualises that reality, or the author herself, here the text becomes the object of figuration, and those who receive that text are juxtaposed to this. Here the Real, or an unrepresentable X, designated by this allegory isn't untellable history, but the reader, and the scene of the reception of the text.⁸ For clarity's sake, this hypothesis can be schematically represented as follows:

Textual level	:	pageant	audience
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Allegorical level	:	<i>Between the Acts</i>	(reader)=X

As is often the case with such figures, this may seem too simplistic to express the deep-lying representational paradox that requires such means as allegory at all, nor to explain somewhat ironic tension clearly present in the authorial-authoritative figure of Miss La Trobe or in the apparent failure of her pageant. In order to assess the true ideological meaning of this

figure, we need to explore the relation of Jane Harrison to this novel, but before that, we have to take a look at the cultural and political configuration in which La Trobe's pageant is situated.

IV

In a broad cultural context, as Patricia Klindienst Joplin argues, the pageant should be considered in relation to Fascism on the one hand, and on the other, to the Popular Front. As Benjamin said, it was Fascism that succeeded in mobilising then newly created proletariat by "the introduction of aesthetics into political life" (Benjamin 241). In response to this, Communism was desperately seeking to secure back the lost social function of the aesthetic, ranging from the agitprop theatre to Brecht's "epic" theatre. To complete the cultural map of the time, we should add the nationalist vogue of pageantry in England at the time, the relation of which to *Between the Acts* has been detailed by Joshua D. Esty and Ayako Yoshino.⁹ And as Esty admits, English modern pageantry was itself a nationalistic response to rising Fascism and Communism (Esty 247). That La Trobe's village pageant was a response to such complex situation can be argued, as Pridmore-Brown does for example, by pointing out that the theatrical effect of the gramophone had much to do with how Fascism was making use of the same machine. But such kind of argument tends to treat La Trobe's pageant as an independent piece of work, missing the allegorical status of the pageant in a larger work of fiction, *Between the Acts*. One way to assess the status of the pageant adequately is to analyse La Trobe as an author figure, but in my view it is in this point that Harrison's influence to *Between the Acts* should be measured.

The main argument in Harrison's *Ancient Art and Ritual* is that ancient art, especially the chorus in the Greek theatre, sprang directly from rituals wishing for the end of winter and the coming of spring. Above all, the following passage is worth noting, for it summarises her argument and at the same time suggests its bearing upon *Between the Acts*.

In the sixth century B.C., at Athens, came the great innovation. Instead of the old plot, the life-history of the life-spirit, with its deadly monotony, *new plots* [my italics] were introduced, not of life-spirits but of human individual heroes. In a word, Homer came to Athens, and out of Homeric stories playwrights began to make their plots. This innovation was the death of ritual monotony and the *dromenon*. It is not so much the old that dies as the new that kills. (Harrison 145)

The *dromenon* means the ritual, and Harrison repeatedly draws our attention to the fact that its original meaning was "doing," which indicates that in a ritual, there was no distinction between the doer and the seer, or the performer and the audience. And the drama, or the Greek theatre, was something that the *dromenon*, or the ritual as sheer "doing," had transformed into, and therefore had an organically social origin. That Harrison's book goes beyond the Greek theatre and aims at criticising contemporary literature indicates that her true concern was to retrieve the social function of art, which it originally had but now is alienated from, and bring art back into the political sphere. In this light, the significance of Isa's thought after the pageant was over for

the whole novel becomes clear:

Surely it was time someone invented *a new plot*, or that the author came out from the bushes. . . (BTA 115; italics mine)

If we don't try deliberately to read *Between the Acts* against the grain of *Three Guineas*, "a new plot" for Woolf should be the one invented neither by Fascism nor by Communism. For Woolf was, as Alex Zwerdling describes, increasingly sceptical about male-dominated pacifist movements, and Hobsbawm's "antifascist nationalism" (Hobsbawm 146ff.) would be an adequate term to describe what Woolf might have found in such movements. The new plot should be neither of them, but it should be some third (or fourth) way. Then, if the hypothesis of the allegory above is sustainable and the pageant can be seen as an allegorical figure which is supposed to represent an unalienated communal art form, *Between the Acts* itself should be that new plot. Here we can see in another form Woolf's rejection of the "isms" of politics and her utopian vision of art expressed in "The Leaning Tower": "The novel of a classless people and towerless world should be a better novel than the old novel." ("The Leaning Tower" 179). And it is here that another form of alienation emerges: it is the same form of alienation hypothesis as Brecht's when he postulated the epic theatre against the ordinary theatre, and as Lukács's and Bakhtin's when they posited the epic against the novel.

One of the critics who read *Between the Acts* in line with the view of alienated art is Melba Cuddy-Keane. She points out the western assumption of a community or a group as leader-centred and belief-centred, and see Freud's explanation of society centring around the lost father as a typical one, and argues that "in the leaderless and fragmented community of *Between the Acts*, Woolf was offering a direct challenge to the powerful, leader-centered group postulated by Freud" (Cuddy-Keane 274). As is explained above, the problem of community amid the complex cultural forces of the time cannot be explained away by such dichotomy of a leader-centred group and a group without a centre, but what is important is that Cuddy-Keane resorts to Jane Harrison's discussion about the Greek chorus to suggest as follows:

[T]he title *Between the Acts* implies that everything in the novel is chorus. Miss La Trobe's pageant includes an actual chorus; anonymous voices in the audience extend the chorus into the world outside the play. (Cuddy-Keane 280)

Cuddy-Keane rather unconsciously and carelessly recognises the allegorical nature of La Trobe's pageant, and regards *Between the Acts* itself as chorus, a residue, according to Harrison, of unalienated communal art form. Her reading, however, is not strictly an allegorical one, but she directly equates the pageant and the novel, which leads Cuddy-Keane to a helplessly liberal view of the pluralistic community positively presented in *Between the Acts*. In my view, however, that is not only Cuddy-Keane's fault, but also a consequence of a certain temptation put before the reader of *Between the Acts*, the temptation to find some positive and alternative communality in the novel.

The most important writing by Woolf that reinforces this view of the pageant in a rather

striking way is "Anon," the unfinished history of English literature Woolf was working on just before her death.¹⁰ In this essay, which begins with Trevelyan's description of "English" prehistory—a typical case of the invention of tradition, for how could there be England in prehistory?—, Woolf tried to restore the "prehistory" of English literary history: "Behind the English lay ages of toil and love. That is the world beneath our consciousness; the anonymous world to which we can still return" (Silver 384–85). Here, "the anonymous world," the prehistory of English literature, imagined to be present in the unconscious not in a Freudian sense, but rather as the Jungian collective subconscious, is postulated as something which was, and something from which "we" are alienated, but to which "we can still return." Thus, what Woolf basically drew was the history of alienation from such anonymity, and in Esty's words, Woolf was "turning fears of historical regression into a vision of restored contact between artist and audience, moving beyond the 'direct beauty' of international modernist style to recover the traditions of a knowable community" (Esty 268). In this unfinished history, Woolf's yearning towards organic art comes closest to a patriotic—not to say nationalistic—vision of history. But what we should not miss is the feminist thrust present in the word "anon." For by the word "anon" Woolf refers not only to the ideal state of a writer but to the women writers erased—or omitted—from history: "Indeed, I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without singing them, was often a woman" (*A Room of One's Own*, 46). What differentiates Woolf's vision from the other cultural forces outlined above, from Fascism, Communism, and nationalistic fervour of pageantry, is this gendered aspect of "anon."

Thus, in order to answer the question I first posed, the question of finding a critical point where Woolf's feminism and pacifism converge, two kinds of "alienation theory" need to be valid at the same time. This is also a postulation of two kinds of "prehistory": one is the prehistory of alienated femininity, the other that of alienated art. Marcus's "Mother Tongue," something that is at once an original language and the origin of verbal art, is based on such double postulation of alienation. Then, does this novel succeed in crossing such a narrow bridge, as some of the critics discussed above think it does? To answer this final question, the last few pages of the novel, in which prehistoric images abound after the pageant is over, should be examined.

V

After the pageant, prehistory appears in two ways. One is La Trobe's "first words," which surely seem to conjure up "the semiotic."

Words of one syllable sank down into the mud. She drowsed; she nodded. The mud became fertile. Words rose above the intolerably laden dumb oxen plodding through the mud. Words without meaning—wonderful words. . . . She set down her glass. She heard the first words. (BTA 113)

Lucy resumes her reading of *The Outline of History* and proceeds till "Prehistoric man" (BTA

117) rises, and then, Isa and Giles, “in the heart of darkness” (*BTA* 117), begin to speak, and supposedly will fight with and embrace each other. Much discussed “open ending” of *Between the Acts*, with such prehistoric imagery and its function in the allegorical structure in view, turns out not to be so *securely* opened. Miss La Trobe might have heard “the first words” and they might have been “wonderful”; Isa and Giles—the final figures to represent the opposition between man and woman in this novel—might have embraced each other after “the curtain rose” (*BTA* 117). But of course, we, the reader, can never know what these first words were nor what Isa and Giles “spoke” after the curtain rose, and after *Between the Acts* closed. Or rather, such an operation, such ousting of those words out of the text and keeping of the new plot as an X in a kind of subjunctive mood, is the only way to preserve the allegorical character of this novel. This is the same operation as that in the last pages of *Mrs. Dalloway*, in which the excessive symbolical function of the word “death” acts as the final leap which preserves in unrealised possibility the identification of Clarissa and Septimus, the integration of the narrator as an X who narrates and presents impossible temporality, or Messianic time. The leap in the case of *Between the Acts* is the leap towards the “We” Woolf referred to in her diary, towards the community La Trobe tried to create before her pageant, and finally, towards the “We” as an X Woolf tried to create before her own work. The gramophone’s “anonymous” voice announces such a speculative attempt:

Dispersed are we; who have come together. But, the gramophone asserted, let us retain whatever made that harmony.

O let us, the audience echoed (stooping, peering, fumbling), keep together. For there is joy, sweet joy, in company. (*BTA* 105)

This is one of the most unironic moments in the novel and seems to present *positively* the alternative, pluralistic community barely realized among the audience, but such vision of communality is not without its disillusion, when the audience see “the flaming windows” and see through them “perhaps a crack in the boiler; perhaps a hole in the carpet” and hear “the daily drop of the daily bill” (*BTA* 105). What is more, this sense of community is not what La Trobe intended, but created out of contingencies and the audience’s misreading of—or inability to interpret—La Trobe’s work; that is, out of La Trobe’s failure as an author to convey a certain intention. Rather, what La Trobe intended by her “little game” by means of “present time” and mirrors was not strictly to create a community, but to estrange or defamiliarise the pageant itself as a form of art, and deconstruct or “embarrass” (a word repeatedly employed to describe the audience) the communality which the pageant presupposes and creates. The rain after the embarrassing ten minutes of “present time” (*BTA* 95–7) does not really help La Trobe as she herself thinks it does, but—inciting as it does a liberal and banal interpretation like the one given by Mr. Page, the reporter (*BTA* 97)—ruins her real design to create a modern epic, a new plot. It is through this failure that she manages to create anything at all.

Thus, *Between the Acts* is a clear record of how, in Loretta Stec’s words, “a dystopian depiction of modernity and utopian impulses of feminism were often complexly entangled, and

most often at odds" (Stec 179). What we should do, however, is not to echo the gramophone as the audience do in the novel; that is, not to accede to the temptation of *Between the Acts*, but to read against the grain of the text and see the prehistoric in the text as an ideological screen, whose function is precisely to represent—or, for that matter, to fail to represent—Woolf's utopian community, which seems regrettably fragile compared with the strong cultural forces outlined above. Woolf's radical and difference-based feminist utopia inevitably slides into a liberal utopia of community, which can barely be presented in an allegorical and negative way, and which is, so long as it is secured by an allegorical leap, born dead. And it is, finally, this stillbirth, which is allegorically shown in La Trobe's failure, that poses the most actual problem to "us," the reader of *Between the Acts*.

Notes

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² To see how these questions have been central in the contemporary feminist debate, see some valuable essays in *Feminists Theorize the Political* (Butler and Scott 1992) and the polemic between Judith Butler and Seyla Benhabib in *Feminist Contentions*. The question of how to (or how not to) retain the category of "woman" that has been challenged by "postmodernism"—though Butler may call this a misnomer—should have much to do with Woolf criticism, but it would not be a misjudgement to say that such theoretical tendency has not fully been incorporated into it so far.

³ See my "[The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn]' and the Spectres of History" and "Between Two Deaths: Communities Imagined in *Mrs. Dalloway*" for a more detailed definition of these terms and their bearing upon the reading of Woolf's works. Here it should be stressed that those moments can coexist in a work and are in a dialectical relation. As will be shown in the case of *Orlando* and *Between the Acts*, this dialectics is both intra- and inter-textual.

⁴ Anderson's use of Benjamin's concepts can be read in two, and crucially opposed ways. Anthony Easthope, for instance, criticises Anderson for his assumption of the "real" community that precedes "imagined" modern nation-states (Easthope 9). Read in this way, "Messianic time" would be something positive, something that assumes the existence of organic society before the nation-state. Or conversely, it is possible to "deconstruct" these binary notions, and see "Messianic time" as something always-already lost and as something that supplements "homogenous, empty time." In that case, it will be necessary to survey such notions as organic society or Messianic time as modern inventions, as something retrospectively constructed, and most importantly as the constitutive "other" to what Anderson claims to be purely modern temporality, "homogeneous, empty time." I will not further this point here as it will partly be expatiated in this essay.

⁵ See my "Between Two Deaths." Miller's main purpose is to show how even in Modernism the omniscient narrator is employed as a hinge to bind the text, and as I criticised in the article, he supplements such allegorical leap and neglects precisely the impossibility of the "omniscience" of the narrator, which Miller himself brilliantly demonstrates in his essay. See also note 8.

⁶ One of the most eminent critics of Kristeva is, of course, Judith Butler. See her *Gender Trouble*, especially chapter 3.

⁷ Pageantry was in Woolf's time a very wide cultural and at the same time political phenomenon, and according to Mick Wallis, making "the present a part of the history it was celebrating" (Wallis 52) was

a common operation. While it is important to see La Trobe's pageant in a wider cultural context, I want to focus here on that context's internal meanings for Woolf's works.

⁸ Here some notions put forth by the reception theory or the reader-response criticism, especially Wolfgang Iser's "implied reader" and Stanley Fish's "interpretive communities" are quite relevant, and more importantly, these notions also have much to do with Anderson's theory of the novel as an apparatus that makes it possible to "imagine" that we are embedded in homogeneous, empty time. Anderson argues "[t]hat all these acts[in the novel] are performed at the same clocked, calendrical time, but by actors who may be largely unaware of one another, shows the novelty of this imagined world conjured up by the author in his reader's minds" (Anderson 26). "[T]he author in his reader's minds" can be renamed, on the one hand, as "the omniscient narrator," and conversely, but at the same time, as "the implied reader." For what Anderson means by these words is that the novel presupposes a kind of modern God's view which can see at once all the actions taking place simultaneously in homogeneous, empty time, and this view is the narrator's and the reader's at the same time. But what is paradoxical about this is shown in Iser's definition of the term "implied reader":

This term incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text, and the reader's actualization of this potential through the reading process. It refers to the active nature of this process—which will vary historically from one age to another—and not to a typology of possible readers. (Iser xii)

This passage is subject to a familiar deconstruction of "potentiality" and "actuality": the potential meaning is not the pre-given, but created retrospectively through the act of its actualisation. If, as Iser states, "the implied reader" means such an act, such a process of actualisation, it is logically impossible to describe it in a metalanguage, as Iser's stress on its historical specificity shows. This paradox is also that of "the omniscient narrator" and Anderson's "author in his reader's minds," and both should be regarded as a hypothetical X, potentiality in the sense explained above. Miller's reading referred to in note 5 indeed actualises this potentiality, neglecting this paradox which could be a productive core of Woolf's texts.

⁹ Modern pageantry was "invented" just before the First World War, and how this project was successful can be seen from the example of the York pageant in 1909: it attracted 16,000 participants and half a million spectators (Yoshino 2).

¹⁰ Another writing to be noted is "Notes on an Elizabethan Play," in which Woolf's emphasis is on the audience's creative participation in the Elizabethan drama.

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