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## Between The Acts: THE DEMIURGE MADE FLESH

By Harold Fromm

After the misdirections of *The Waves* and *The Years*, with their Procrustean engineering—the former dessicated by its relentless grid of “vision” and the latter suffocated by its overplus of “fact”—it is a revelation of Virginia Woolf’s real strengths that *Between the Acts* should emerge with such brilliant conviction, sweeping the reader along in its vortices. For in *Between the Acts*, despite Leonard Woolf’s misleading warning about the novel’s “unfinished” quality, what Virginia Woolf sought so desperately to achieve in the two earlier essays—to “explain” the intensity of the moment in terms of time and eternity, the individual and the race, and similar antinomies—has here been remarkably accomplished. The scope of *To the Lighthouse* was more limited and therefore easier to encompass, but it produced Woolf’s first complete success, avoiding the fragmentation, shifting tones and unevenly weighted sectionalization of *Mrs. Dalloway*. In *To the Lighthouse*, the author asks: What is that jar on the nerves before it becomes something? And she answers: The “idea” of the novel itself, the vision that Lily Briscoe finally has at the end, these are that jar on the nerves, and the reader experiences it as the particular intensity of reading that novel, an extended metaphor which recreates the original “jar” that produced it. But in *The Waves*, the author asks more desperately: “‘Like’ and ‘like’ and ‘like’—but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing?”<sup>1</sup> The novel is unable to answer this question, even by offering itself as a metaphorical answer. Instead, Bernard raves on. The jar on the nerves has not been caught. Instead of *To the Lighthouse*’s musically pleasing resolution, in which the work of art is the answer to the question it poses, we encounter frustration: our own, Bernard’s, the author’s. Again, *The Years* asks, pathetically, Is there some pattern behind the flux? The answer is clearly, No.

*Between the Acts* does not suffer from these problems. The jar on the nerves has again been sought, but whereas in *To the Lighthouse* that jar involved an intense awareness of one’s own ecstatic aliveness and sentience, in *Between the Acts* the point of view has shifted: that jar is not the subject’s sense of his own vitality, it is the force of the object, it is process, system itself—materiality. The complex system of process, made up of the innumerable particulars of existence, is reality. That is, appearance itself is reality.

This view of totality as reality, of the All as Prime Matter, is reality as constituted through objects rather than subjects. In *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, "being" (as that force which animates "becoming") is focused upon as reality, and that "being" is associated by the novelist with the creative cognitions of the subject. Clarissa's vitality, Mrs. Ramsay's sympathy, are instances of that "being," that demiurge, which produces a world, a world constituted by the cognizing subject. In the last three novels, however, but successfully only in *Between the Acts*, "becoming" is the reality: the multiple forms of existent things. Measured against *The Waves* and *The Years*, this last novel would appear to have accomplished its ends very adequately indeed. Of all the earlier works, only *To the Lighthouse* achieves such a degree of organic realization. But in keeping with its "objective" point of view, *Between the Acts* focuses much more on the seen and the spoken, on the externalized, than on the interior. The stream of consciousness, so central from *Jacob's Room* through *The Waves*, is held to a minimum, reserved mainly for the "interior" characters, Isa and Lucy. Like *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Between the Acts* is for life, for sheer vitality, for plenitude, but whereas in the earlier work "life" is seen as a psychological function of Clarissa, as ecstasy and private illumination (Why has not someone turned its final scenes into an opera, like Strauss's *Capriccio*?), as what I have called the creative cognition of the subject, in this last work life is seen as spectacle, as public events, as a fullness of created forms perpetuating themselves through their own vitality. Life is not here the perceiver, but the perceived, and the perceiver is himself an object of perception. A forecast of this shift in focus is seen in the often quoted passage on *The Years* (then called *The Pargiters*) from the diary entry of November 2, 1932:

What has happened of course is that after abstaining from the novel of fact all these years—since 1919—and N. & D. is dead—I find myself infinitely delighting in facts for a change, and in possession of quantities beyond counting: though I feel now and then the tug to vision, but resist it. This is the true line, I am sure, after *The Waves*—*The Pargiters*—this is what leads naturally on to the next stages—the essay-novel.<sup>2</sup>

This resisting of vision, as it turned out, was not such a good idea, but in *Between the Acts* Virginia Woolf was able to fuse a very well disciplined and checked "vision" with a "novel of fact," and the result is a world of fact or becoming, animated by vision or being. It was just this animation, this inner vitality, that *The Years* so sadly lacked.

The great complexity of *Between the Acts* does not, however, prevent us from seeing that its structure, far from being unique, bears considerable resemblance to that of *The Waves*: concurrent streams, running their own independent courses, but nevertheless interacting through the counterpoint of the novelist's presentation. But the problems of this counterpointing, so mechanical in *The Waves* that the reader is always too conscious of being worked upon, too sensible of artifice, too aware of the puppeteer

pulling the strings, now of "world," now of "psyche"—these problems have effectively been eliminated. Not only has the author, with startling virtuosity, engineered a complex simultaneity, she has contrived to maintain the integrity of the distinct currents while blending and blurring them into each other. Instead of the cold alternation of world and psyche that we found in *The Waves*, the author is now able to keep everything going at once. Even the most clear-cut of these currents, the pageant, is not starkly separated from the others but threads its way through them, interrupted by its associations with people, animals, history and world. The structure represents, in its very execution, what can plausibly be taken as the novel's central awareness: that everything plays its part in one vast, stupendous whole.<sup>3</sup>

As for the nature of these currents, we find a wider range of characters in *Between the Acts* than we are accustomed to find in Woolf's novels. These characters, admittedly, are not completely unfamiliar, but the variety and scope are greater, ranging from the townfolk, at one end, through Mrs. Manresa and Giles, to Dodge, Isa and Lucy at the other end. These townfolk, the villagers who weave in and out during the pageant like the peasants in Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, are the indistinguished actors of the eternal recurrence, the background against which the more individualized characters act. They are only a bit less primordial than the rhododendrons that once inhabited Piccadilly, of which Lucy has a recurrent vision. Mrs. Manresa, the wild child of nature, is alone unashamed when the mirrors are turned upon the audience at the end of the pageant. For a moment she restores Bart Oliver to youth, she flirts with Giles, and she is quite at home with Dodge. She is the unpretentious, spontaneous spokeswoman for the "natural man." Giles, more a part of repressive civilization, a stockbroker, is also a sensual person, a heroic type who gets blood on his shoes while stomping a snake. He serves as a bridge between nature and socialized man. Bart Oliver is Reason, with its wit, its insight, and its limitations, making fun of his superstitious sister. Dodge is a would-be artist, seemingly ineffectual and, as homosexual, caught between the more positive worlds of the nature and the mind characters. Isa is a dreamy romantic spouting impressionistic verse, torn between the roles of wife and would-be liberated woman. And if there are main characters, they are the two women at the "mind" end of this spectrum of personages: Miss La Trobe and Lucy: Art and Intuition. Miss La Trobe is the alienated artist figure, "apart from her kind,"<sup>4</sup> outside of conventional society, probably lesbian, and, like Bernard of *The Waves*, trying to encompass life in art while realizing that no final statement is possible. "But what had she given? A cloud that melted into the other clouds on the horizon. It was in the giving that the triumph was. And the triumph fades" (209).

The most interesting character and the one coming closest to speaking for a novel that has no spokesman, is Lucy. Lucy is Faith or Intuition. It is she who has the most comprehensive and cosmic vision. She is in touch with the past through her "Outline of History," and she is in touch with all of the present world as well as the world of eternity. "Mrs. Swithin caressed her cross. . . . Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves—all are one. If discordant, producing harmony—if not to us, to a gigantic ear attached to a gigantic head. And thus—she was smiling benignly—the agony of the particular sheep, cow, or human being is necessary; and so,—she was beaming seraphically at the gilt vane in the distance—we reach the conclusion that *all* is harmony, could we hear it" (175). It is not the case that Virginia Woolf has here regressed to some sort of simplistic Miltonic arcadian Christianity. For despite the amusing tone (Woolf as a modern is taking no chances, and her husband may make her a bit nervous), Lucy's faith, albeit Christian and "batty," is an "objective" version of Mrs. Dalloway's "subjective" vision on the bus on Shaftesbury Avenue.

Lucy's encompassing vision is not, to use a convenient phrase, of the world as Will but of the world as Idea. Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves—all are one, that is, a projection onto an "objective" screen of the reality seen years earlier as Mrs. Dalloway's ego: "But she said, sitting on the bus going up Shaftesbury Avenue, she felt herself everywhere; not 'here, here, here'; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere."<sup>5</sup> It is Lucy who completes the spectrum of the novel's somewhat allegorical characters: nature, society, reason, art, faith. Faith is ecstasy, the ecstasy arising from the awareness that the world of appearances constitutes reality. No wonder Old Flimsy seems a bit dotty, transcending as she does the antinomy of appearance vs. reality.

This multiplicity of characters—one of the major streams or currents in the novel—appears against a background of time or change. Lucy's reflections upon the "Outline of History," the history of English literature and of England itself as seen in Miss La Trobe's play, the portraits in Pointz Hall from earlier centuries, the new bungalows, motorcars and movies that invade the peaceful rural village, the changes in the weather during the performance of the play: all of these signs of change culminate in the final scene of the novel when the family are gathered back in their house:

The clock ticked. The house gave little cracks as if it were very brittle, very dry. Isa's hand on the window felt suddenly cold. Shadow had obliterated the garden. Roses had withdrawn for the night. . . .

"This year, last year, next year, never," Isa murmured (217).

What characterizes change is ceaseless activity and the assumption of new forms by old things. Piccadilly is changed from rhododendrons to the

heart of a metropolis, the chapel of Pointz Hall "had become a larder, changing, like the cat's name, as religion changed" (32). And as religion changed, the church lost its vision and had to be "illuminated" by means of the funds collected at the pageant to provide electric lights. The audience at the pageant includes the multiplicity of human life, changing while remaining the same. "Some were old; some were in the prime of life. There were children among them." Besides the old timers, "there were newcomers, the Manresas, bringing the old houses up to date, adding bathrooms" (74). The audience, after all, is mankind.

And when the starlings attack a tree, "The tree became a rhapsody, a quivering cacophany, a whizz and vibrant rapture, branches, leaves, birds syllabbling discordantly life, life, life, without measure, without stop devouring the tree" (209). While the family sits in the house, "There in that hollow of the sun-baked field were congregated the grasshopper, the ant, and the beetle, rolling pebbles of sun-baked earth through the glistening stubble. In that rosy corner of the sun-baked field Bartholomew, Giles and Lucy polished and nibbled and broke off crumbs. Isa watched them" (216). Change, and the multiple forms of life, are intimately connected, and in front of our very eyes the immanent history of the major characters reveals their identification with insects and primitive forms of life. And the clock ticked, like the waves beating against the shore.

Behind all of this change, however, there *is* stability, or perhaps more properly, there is *also* stability, for stability is not to be taken as an ultimate reality in contradistinction to appearance and change. Stability itself is another appearance: Pointz Hall had been around for centuries, the barn, "the Noble Barn," was over seven hundred years old, the villagers remained the same, "digging and delving," and "the earth is always the same, summer and winter and spring" (125). And we ourselves, " 'D'you think people change? Their clothes, of course. . . . But I mean ourselves. . . . Clearing out a cupboard, I found my father's old top hat. . . . But ourselves—do we change?' " (120-1).

Nature, emotions, society, reason, faith; past, present, future; time, change, eternity: all these are accepted in their own terms in *Between the Acts*, but beyond all of them and reconciling and focusing all of their rays is Art. It is Art that is given the center of the stage, for the play and what takes place during its intermissions form the substance of the novel. Within the play can be seen the same elements that appear in the world between the acts. The review of English literature is a review of history, a review of manners and a pageant of change. Art both *provides* stability and *reflects* what is permanent amidst change. The costumes, for example, are made up of trivial and transitory items from daily life: "her cape was made

of cloth of silver—in fact swabs used to scour saucepans” (83). But trivial items are used as signs and symbols of permanent values (just as everyday words become the materials of exalted poems).

Art reveals the valued in the unvalued, the enduring in the fleeting: “‘I’d no notion we looked so nice,’ Mrs. Swithin whispered to William. Hadn’t she? The children; the pilgrims; behind the pilgrims the trees, and behind them the fields—the beauty of the visible world took his breath away. Tick, tick, tick the machine continued” (82). Through the illusions of art, the mundane becomes the beautiful, the much-loved earth becomes more lovely. All of the townspeople are transformed by their roles in the play, like the swabs and dishcloths they wear, and Lucy says to Miss La Trobe: “‘But you’ve made me feel I could have played . . . Cleopatra!’” which Miss La Trobe understands to mean “‘You’ve stirred in me my unacted part’” (153). Lucy, with her intimations of immortality, her kinship with the fish in the fishpond, senses intuitively through the pageant the mysteries of being and becoming, appearance and reality, the latency of everything in everything. The audience, less aware than she, is caught nonetheless in the spell of the performance, with their own sense of immortality and their own insight into the unity of all things. A chattering and disjointed body of people, they are brought together into unity and into a new entity at the play.

Art focuses diversity into unity in the “objective” world as ego focuses the elements of personality into “personhood” in the “subjective” world. As the illusion of the performance takes over, “Miss La Trobe watched them sink down peacefully into the nursery rhyme. She watched them fold their hands and compose their faces” (122). And when the illusion fails or when the intermissions arrive, unity ceases and the audience is dispersed. “Dispersed are we” (95), the gramophone chants, as the audience breaks up. Indeed, the gramophone appears in this novel as the archetype of the methods of art: a chuffing noise in the bushes, purely mechanical, which creates a new reality out of its mundane machinery, like cloth of silver out of swabs. Recalling to the reader’s mind the famous string quintet in Huxley’s *Antic Hay*—horsehairs scraping against catgut and producing Mozart—the needle of the gramophone chuffs the audience into eternity. If reality is the focusing of diversity into unity by acts of perception, then anything can indeed be anything. Art performs this focusing with even greater order and intensity than mundane acts of perception and cognition.

The responses of the audience to the play are as varied as man’s responses to the universe, each response an aspect of reality. But Lucy’s view that there never were such creatures as Victorians—that it is dress that

changes—is one of the profounder interpretations of the play, although the novel necessarily refrains from taking a stand. When the modern age takes its turn upon the stage, Miss La Trobe holds up mirrors to the audience, but their bafflement makes it clear to her that disorganized reality is too strong, that mankind cannot bear very much of it. Without the conventions, whether of life or art, which establish perspectives, there is chaos, not insight (except for the artist, perhaps). "All shifted, preened, minced; hands were raised, legs shifted. Even Bart, even Lucy, turned away. All evaded or shaded themselves—save Mrs. Manresa. . . . Alone she preserved unashamed her identity, and faced without blinking herself" (186).

What finally is the meaning of the play? " 'Did you understand the meaning? Well, he said she meant we all act all parts. . . . He said, too, if I caught his meaning, Nature takes part. . . . Then there was the idiot' " (197). The clergyman, Mr. Streatfield, observing the same townspeople playing the various roles in the pageant from act to act, concludes: " 'We act different parts; but are the same' " (192). Although the final meaning of the play is left in dispute, the achievement of art is not:

Like quicksilver sliding, filings magnetized, the distracted united. The tune began; the first note meant a second; the second a third. Then down beneath a force was born in opposition; then another. On different levels they diverged. On different levels ourselves went forward; flower gathering some on the surface; others descending to wrestle with the meaning; but all comprehending; all enlisted. The whole population of the mind's immeasurable profundity came flocking; from the unprotected, the unskinned; and dawn rose; and azure; from chaos and cacophony measure; but not the melody of surface sound alone controlled it; but also the warring battle-plumed warriors straining asunder: To part? No. Compelled from the ends of the horizon; recalled from the edge of appalling crevasses; they crashed; solved; united. And some relaxed their fingers; and others crossed their legs (189).

The combination of the audience, the play and the cows mooing in the background leaves us with the impression of one vast panharmonic symphony in which everything and everybody plays a part. Art accomplishes for the social universe what organic Nature accomplishes for the cosmic.

A considerable distance has been traversed from *The Waves* to *Between the Acts*. In *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf went as far as she could go in her explorations of the psyche. The outside world had contracted into a regular and mechanical backdrop to the introspections of her characters who, willy-nilly, were a part of the backdrop and thus partially "objective," that is, phenomena. After *The Waves*, the author wanted to return to the public world, to "fact," as she called it, and away from "vision." This produced *The Years*, a novel with plenty of fact but not enough soul to hold it all together. What is missing in *The Years* is indeed the unifying power of art. *Between the Acts*, however, celebrates a public world held together by mind. The constantly shifting shapes of raw materials of the universe (and everything is simultaneously raw material and finished product) are here seen

as ordered by Point of View, as indeed being made into what they are by the individual ego, the social ego, and of course by art. But everything is "real." There is no conflict between appearance and reality, for whatever is real *appears*.

Nor is there any conflict between the structure of *Between the Acts* and its "content." The novel weaves together nature, geography, characters, pageant, history, and so forth, into a unified whole. The structure presents as interior what is presented on the surface as the "themes." The reader unconsciously takes in the whole without jolts of consciousness that might inform him of the gearshiftings required by a "plan" on the part of the author. Woolf's diary description of what happened as she composed Bernard's soliloquy in *The Waves* is worth quoting, for it reveals the perils of too much "plan":

What interests me in the last stage was the freedom and boldness with which my imagination picked up, used and tossed aside all the images, symbols which I had prepared. I am sure that this is the right way of using them—not in set pieces, as I had tried at first, coherently, but simply as images, never making them work out; only suggest. Thus I hope to have kept the sound of the sea and the birds, dawn and garden subconsciously present, doing their work under ground.<sup>6</sup>

In *Between the Acts* the subterranean forces are working well. As the novel draws to a close, their mythic power provides a final web of "appearances":

Isa let her sewing drop. The great hooded chairs had become enormous. And Giles too. And Isa too against the window. The window was all sky without colour. The house had lost its shelter. It was night before the 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).

Isa, Giles, the chairs, the house, and time itself, continue to change. After a day of hostility the couple will make love. The particular forms of things are temporary and not final, but they are quite real. Nevertheless, the unchanging and stable things apprehended underneath the forms are also quite real. The characters in each century of the pageant are really the same present-day townspeople in different dress saying different (but not entirely different) lines. The actual flesh and blood people from age to age of history are more or less the same people in different clothes. The furniture and people in the house change their appearances as the day progresses, and their natures as well, and even a day in 1939 seems to be a day in pre-history when rhododendrons were growing in Piccadilly.

But this shifting panorama which has filled up one day is by no means the end, nor by the same token is it the preface to the real meaning of things. What happens is that once again the curtain rises. Everything will take place all over again, slightly varied to be sure, but essentially the

same. Lucy, standing by the lily pond, has an epiphanal moment of insight into the fluidity of reality. "Above, the air rushed; beneath was water. She stood between two fluidities, caressing her cross. . . . Now the jagged leaf in the corner suggested, by its contours, Europe. There were other leaves. She fluttered her eye over the surface, naming the leaves India, Africa, America." Leaves become continents in this vision of fluid reality. Then she gazes into the pond to see the fishes gliding by, including "the great carp himself, who came to the surface so very seldom. They slid on, in and out between the stalks, silver; pink; gold; splashed; streaked; pied. 'Ourselves,' she murmured" (204-5).

This capture of simultaneous fluidities—of time and change, of human history, of the vagaries of personality, of social manners, of the history of England and its literature, of art and esthetic response, of nature—this capture of fluidities without freezing them into a distorted, final, private unity, this revelation of the transitory as the real (because it is all there is), constitutes Virginia Woolf's last and most impressive achievement.

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#### NOTES

1. Virginia Woolf, *The Waves in Jacob's Room and The Waves* (New York: Harvest Books, n.d.), p. 288.
2. Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1954), p. 184.
3. This unity achieved through diversity is sharply discerned by Avrom Fleishman in *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Reading*. Speaking of *Between the Acts*, Fleishman remarks: "In other Woolf fictions, a dinner party or the apparition of an old woman can fuse disparate characters into a unitary consciousness; here, an ongoing work of art performs that function." Even "the wayward mooning of the cows is thrust into the highly patterned forms of the pageant." (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1975), pp. 208, 214.
- James Naremore, too, after his censure of *The Waves*, where Bernard merely talks about the stream of consciousness, concludes that in *Between the Acts* "the stream is not simply talked about but rendered—it is plain that it exists neither in an individual consciousness nor in any objective situation: it is made of the whole context of a given scene, and developed into a kind of harmony by the author. Perhaps here, for the first time, Virginia Woolf was able to make her technique evoke the sense of unity that concerned her all along." *The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973), pp. 224-5.
4. *Between the Acts* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1969), p. 211. Subsequent page numbers from this novel will appear in parentheses following the quoted passages in the body of the text.
5. *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1925), p. 231.
6. *Writer's Diary*, p. 165.