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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?”¹ 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.