

Between the Acts of *Eros*:

Nature and History in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*

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So we answer to the infernal, agelong and eternal order
issued from on high. And obey.

Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 1941.

Between the Acts (1941), Virginia Woolf's final novel and first posthumous publication, dramatises the crisis of modernity through an annual village pageant taking place at Pointz Hall, the ageing country residence of the Oliver family, just before the Second World War. The pageant brings people of all classes together into a communal experience, reflecting the simultaneous unity and diversity of life. Through the trifling disputes of the Olivers (Isabella and Giles, Bart and his widowed sister, Lucy Swithin) and through the preparation and performance of the pageant, a fundraiser for the local church, the story imparts a pervasive yet unacknowledged discordance within individual and everyday life. The crisis of the individual thus runs parallel to the crisis of the age. The rivalry between the natural inclination for free expression, to live as one desires, and the restraint placed on this by the order of polite society which initially takes place on an individual and family level gradually manifests itself on a social and transnational level. Taking *Between the Acts* as Woolf's final reflection on the problematic character of modernity, I suggest that beneath the veneer of mundane village life, Woolf comes to illustrate suppressed bodily desire – which I refer to as *Eros*, the hidden irrational drive of nature on which rational, serene society is based – as the nexus of both private tension and transnational conflict. Just as the modern individual, taking every effort to assume the social conventions of human rationality, cannot be fully honest about his/her heart's desire, the villagers, whose concentration is focused entirely on the success of the pageant, deliberately ignore the burgeoning warfare on the continent. Along with this tension, Pointz Hall and its isolated enclosure is taken to stand ironically but revealingly both as the embodiment of the lost Arcadia (the ancient idyllic vision of nature untouched by

the perversion of human technology) and as the citadel of modern techno-scientific civilisation, upholding the civil propriety which is at present challenged by the madness of *polemos* (war and strife).

According to Harriet Blodgett, *Between the Acts* offers “a vision of nature which constitutes an affirmation of life,”¹ contradicting Jean Wyatt’s speculation that “*Between the Acts*, because it stresses diversity rather than unity, does not reveal the neat pattern of allusion and symbol that structures [Woolf’s previous works such as *Mrs. Dalloway*].”² Resorting to the style of a Grecian tragedy – with its “three unities” of time, place and action – *Between the Acts*, read in the light of Jan Patočka’s “heretical” philosophy of history, is an extensive reflection on the mutuality between humanity and nature, and thus conceives war and peace as two sides of the same coin, pertaining to the natural desire for life. “Nature” here refers to that primary physical ground from which life is generated and on which all lives are located and conjoined. But as life, by nature, strives for its own self-preservation, differences and conflicts of interest commence. *Polemos* is inherently embedded within the nature of life itself, and *Between the Acts* ingenuously addresses this duality as a way to comprehend the re-ignition of European warfare.

The novel opens with an evening discussion in the drawing room between Bart Oliver and Mr. and Mrs. Haines when Isa unintentionally intrudes in her dressing gown. In this exchange between the central characters, the conflict between love and desire, social duty and personal interest, is already surfacing and will eventually lead to a final outburst of confrontation between Giles and his wife Isa. Isa, the young mistress of Pointz Hall, is spiritually unfaithful to her husband. She feels trapped between her physical desire toward the gentleman farmer Mr. Haines³ and her social role as Mrs. Giles Oliver, a distinction that she later distinguishes as “inner love” that is “in the eyes” and “outer love on the dressing table” (13). The desire Isa feels circling Mr. Haines and herself throughout the drawing-room conversation fuels Mrs. Haines’s jealousy: “She would destroy it, as a thrush pecks the wings off a butterfly” (5). Already, a dissatisfied *Eros* is on display, triggering thoughts of elemental violence.

The basic emotional strains of frustrated love and denial, though rarely pronounced, thread through the entire novel. The anger of Giles, the frustration of William Dodge, the poetic sadness of Isa, the creativity of Miss La Trobe, and the wildness of Mrs. Manresa are all signs of a personal struggle with *Eros*. Individual

love and hate are often obscured by the grand procession of history; they are trivial incidents between the acts of great events. Yet, as the outdoor pageant performance of “scenes from English history” (74) demonstrates, history is directed and punctuated by nature, especially primal human nature, which humans have sought to conceal through social protocols. Therefore, taking in the fragmented performance whose plot line is continuously disturbed by the natural surroundings, Isa intuits, “Did the plot matter? [...] The plot was only there to beget emotion. There were only two emotions: love; and hate” (82).

Contemplating the historical turn of the early twentieth century, *Between the Acts*, as an impeccable sequel to *The Years* (1937), comprises the perfect endgame to Woolf’s inquiry into the correlation and conflict between body and mind and how such a fundamental paradox of life is projected outward into worldwide warfare. At the height of the crisis in Europe, when rational order and scientific progress are applied to human destruction rather than advancement, Woolf grapples with the fatal fallacy of the rational mind to believe in its independence from the body. Perhaps it is through her own nervous breakdown that Woolf comes to understand how the ferocity and irrationality of the two world wars are in fact hidden faces of the peace and progress that reason and modernity advocate. Humans, though essentially part of nature, strive most strenuously for a clear division from it, resulting in more than two thousand years of philosophical debate over dualism and monism. The advocacy of reason, the partiality for systems and the disapproval of anarchy, though they have all evolved from the human proclivity for self-preservation, are fortified to ensure the dissimilitude between humans and their more natural counterparts – other animal species and the natural world in general. Appropriately, the unresolved metaphysical paradox between the subjective and the objective prompted the new philosophical movement of phenomenology at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, lead by Edmund Husserl. However, as Patočka observes, Husserl’s phenomenology still failed to break from Cartesian dualism – described by Erazim Kohák, a leading scholar on Patočka, as “the temptation to treat transcendental subjectivity as a new, higher-level objectivity that would provide an external warrant for the reality of both the cosmos and the meaning of being human within it. With that, all the old problems of objectivism return.”⁴ Coming from a phenomenological tradition, Patočka, according to Kohák, “tak[es] the cue from Aristotle’s conception of three basic functions of the soul (*psychē*), the vegetative, the animate, and the rational.”⁵

Further, he argues for a “lived corporeity,”⁶ as Irena Martínková has noted, and places a renewed emphasis on the process of interaction between the body and the “life-world” (*Lebenswelt*).⁷ It is this same assertion of the body and its living instincts that makes Patočka’s phenomenological approach to history proximate to Woolf’s comprehension of human history in terms of nature in *Between the Acts*.

Like Woolf, Patočka “transfer[s] from the individual to the whole of European society the meditation on the relation between meaning, nonmeaning, and searching.”⁸ If Patočka, as Ricoeur has construed, takes “the end of politics” to be “nothing other than life for the sake of freedom, not life for the sake of survival or even for well being”⁹ and if “history is to witness the realisation of freedom in a public space,”¹⁰ then conflict already exists in the sociopolitical realm itself and war is the inevitable historical outcome. The greed that modern industrialisation has nurtured and grown is nothing other than this self-concerned, self-preserving *Eros*. *Eros* is the primal drive of the body to preserve and extend itself, or as Iris Murdoch puts it (coming from the Platonian tradition), “the Will to Live ensuring the continuation of the species.”¹¹ To insure the survival of self, *Eros* knows neither moderation nor compromise. Therefore, for a society that demands cooperation and agreement, *Eros* is by nature subversive. In recognition of the latent energy of *Eros*, Patočka argues that peace is only an illusory visage of modernity and progress. Or, as Woolf has also raised in *Three Guineas* (1938), the highly organised British society, under the rule of various laws, that sees itself as justice and peacemaker, nonetheless does share various qualities with the Fascist dictators. Furthermore, progress is never brought about by peace. Thus, the two world wars, which are typically perceived as a disruption of progress and a reversal of science and reason, are now understood as a release of energy, a mobilising force, an essential part of progress and the generation of life. For Patočka, war, under the guise of a technological improvement of everyday life, is an essential part of modernity. In the intensity of the battlefield, the “technical intelligentsia”¹² is made aware of its own contribution, not to peace and everyday life, but to war. Thereupon, Patočka recasts Heidegger’s notions of concealment and phenomena into his argument for the dark, orgiastic power that coincides with light, rational peace, and takes the two world wars as the disclosure (the “unconcealment”) of what once was hidden.

A precursor to post-structuralism, Patočka takes meaning as a constitutive act rather than an absolute idea. It is the ongoing inner dialogue of a sentient being as

it reflects on its surrounding objects and seeks to accommodate them in its own subjective history. Kohák argues that, for Patočka, “meaning can be truly asubjective only when subjectivity does not appropriate it as its object, but dialectically, in an interaction which recognizes meaning as genuinely, irreducibly other yet as profoundly involved with subjectivity in a struggle that unites rather than separates.”¹³ Therefore, meaning is not embodied by an external object, nor is it simply in the mind. It is engendered through the interaction between the “lived corporeity”¹⁴ and its “life-world.”¹⁵ Thus, Patočka relinks consciousness and the process of meaning-making with the body. Woolf’s fictional narratives have often been examined from a phenomenological standpoint, usually that of either Husserl or Heidegger. However, in order to understand *Between the Acts* and its models of being and reality, Patočka’s emphasis on “what role the body plays in our coming to terms with our surrounding world”¹⁶ and his speculation on the concealment within modernity are more fitting. This shifting of focus from the rational visage of modernity to the latent dark energy of *Eros* and *polemos*, from the transcendental, subjective consciousness to a consciousness irreducibly subjected to the material body, exposes Woolf’s and Patočka’s Nietzschean influences. Both argue for what Ricoeur calls “the rootedness of all theoretical knowledge in a ‘life-world’”¹⁷ and share a tendency to return to aesthetics as a philosophical discipline. Both take art and artistic experience as moments of being, when one is fully receptive of reality in a state of openness, which in terms of Patočka is what “designates the possibility of being human.”¹⁸ In a diary entry, Woolf notes her discovery of a “new combination in psychology and body” – the “I and the not I” – which she will incorporate into *Between the Acts*¹⁹ Woolf’s experimental writing, which reveals the modern subject in crisis, nevertheless coheres to Patočka’s thematic questioning of “the historical character of man and, in particular, the question of meaning.”²⁰

Passing through the superstitious and religious Mrs. Swithin, the rational and militaristic Mr. Oliver and the artistic Isa, nature, history and politics are brought into a new union in Miss La Trobe’s pageant and subjected to the uncertain British weather. It literally presents human history and cultural achievement as striving against nature, constantly fearing disruption. Offering Pointz Hall as the venue for the pageant, the Olivers repeatedly ask of the weather, “Will it be fine?” – revealing the human impotence towards natural phenomena. This question, expressing a frustrated demand for control, according to Frank Kermode, draws out the general mood of the summer of 1939, “a true moment of crisis.”²¹ The

Olivers' concern over the weather projects a deep sense of uncertainty over the immediate future, which is threatened rather than improved or insured by scientific and technological advancement. Weather forecasts in the newspapers, predict "variable winds; fair average temperature; rains at times" (21). It is significant that the forecast, drawn out by diligent meteorological studies, lapses into imprecision and reserved ambiguity. The uncertainty of the weather is a portent of the contingency and dissymmetry of life, which science seeks to interrogate and resolve in vain with technology. Year after year, the trivial issue of whether it will rain or not predominates this idyllic English country life. Kermode takes concern over the weather as another recurrent chime in Woolf's oeuvre,²² resonating with the uncertain "political weather."²³ In terms of the natural weather, one can either "pray" or "provide umbrellas" (21), but what about that which humans have brought about themselves? The concern over the weather is seemingly the outward projection of an inner discomposure over the muffled and distant war in Europe, which deeply corrodes the internal tranquility of society.

The pageant, conceals all military action involved in the making of a shared history, causing Giles, poignantly aware of the war in Europe, feel as if he is "manacled to a rock [...] and forced passively to behold indescribable horror" (55). *Polemos* hides behind the domestic, social and historical scenes of Britannia, whose history and culture is commemorated and celebrated by the pageant. When the Olivers and the villagers devote themselves to the pageant for the good of their community, Europe is "bristling with guns, poised with planes. At any moment guns would rake that land into furrows; planes splinter Bolney Minster into smithereens and blast the Folly" (49). But apart from Giles, the Olivers seem completely oblivious to the political and social climate. The sounds of war – much like the gramophone hidden in the bush, only heard intermittently through the wind – appeal to the senses and stir the emotions. On this day, with reports of firebombing and butchery filling the newspaper, nothing is more important than the success of the performance. As the annual pageant brings together people of all classes in a spirit of communion, celebrating life and collective cultural achievement, Europe is suffering from the destructive power of technology. And yet, war is nothing but another communal experience that evinces the shared similarity concealed within phenomenal differences.

According to Renée Watkins, *Between the Acts* aims at what lies perennially in different disguises throughout each historical era: "a psychology, a philosophy of

history, and an ethic are implicit in it.”²⁴ For Watkins, the community is united by the impending threat of war. The chorus of the play, made up of chanting villagers and a gramophone, effects the communal experience, suggesting a “unified world view” and “a hypothetical group-conscious[ness]”²⁵ among the scraps and fragments of a desultory life presented onstage. Woolf writes of the collective and the communal in her diary: “‘I’ rejected: ‘We’ substituted: to whom at the end there shall be an invocation.”²⁶ The “We,” or the human collective consciousness, is present throughout Woolf’s works, though never as prominent as in *Between the Acts*. Woolf’s modernist psychological realism aims, as David McWhirter comments, “to represent the self in mental and historical process.”²⁷ But, when contingency (in its most natural state before human interference) is conceived as a universal trait of life and history, Woolf traverses the frontier of postmodernism. The scientific understanding of the physical world, which relies on the linear progression of cause and effect, could be another wishful human illusion. Hence, in Miss La Trobe’s selective scenes from English history, the immediate connection that history generally connotes is broken down, reflecting Woolf’s purpose to present “a perpetual variety & change [...] with real little incongruous living humour,”²⁸ all connected to one center, symbolised by Pointz Hall and its surrounding community.

Illusion serves a paradoxical role in *Between the Acts*, exemplifying the duality of vision. Against the negative connotations of the Enlightenment – that illusion is the unattested perception or conception of the mind – illusion becomes that which frees the self from the separatist perspective of analytical knowledge. It is what enables the final arrival at a vision of unification. As a “unifier,” as Bart deems her to be, Mrs. Swithin, according to William Dodge, is not a believer in history (156). She repeatedly alludes to the nonlinear, cyclical character of history, evoking prehistorical “rhododendron forests in Piccadilly” (8) and her belief that the same birds return each year (91). It is nature (as well as the emotions and desires it begets) rather than man-made design that upholds the illusion and, in the end, builds the whole. The pageant relies on these emotions to “annihilate the gaps” between the acts, to “bridg[e] the distance” and bring each fragmented epoch of human history into a whole (126). Thereby, what is the true illusion: the modern belief in human intelligence or the natural mystery intuited by the imagination of the poet? Literal words, demanded by the precision of science and reason,

separate, adulterate and corrupt the fullness of feeling and the wholeness of vision, just as “the view laid bare by the sun was flattened, silenced, stilled” (60).

Throughout *Between the Acts*, Woolf uses fragmented quotations to reflect the apparent disconnect of human action to physical feelings and emotions. Flowing from one fragment to another, these poetic fractions ironically serve as unifiers, which reduce literal meaning while stressing rhythms and sounds that resonate with repressed emotional streams and thereby reinstate nature. The conventional formality of social norms separate and divide, whereas the casual mumbling of poetic phrases conjoin. For example, the evening chatter of the opening scene leads Bart to remember a book of poetry by Byron that his mother had given him. The poetic lines, “She walks in beauty like the night” (5) and “So we’ll go no more a-roving by the light of the moon” (5) stir the buried passion and desire that Isa feels toward Mr. Haines and engenders the “emotion circling them” (5). In another scene after lunch on the day of the pageant, Bart ponders the English preference of poetry over painting and insists that even Mrs. Manresa would have “her Shakespeare by heart” (50). Prompted by Bart, Mrs. Manresa in protesting is nevertheless able to bring herself to recite a line: “To be, or not to be, that is the question. Whether ‘tis nobler ... ” (50). The rolling of poetical fragments is first upheld by Isa: “Fade far away and quite forget what thou amongst the leaves hast never known” (50) and then by William: “The weariness, the torture, and the fret” (50). With this constant rolling of words, literal meanings are thinned into transparency, and the “secondary world,”²⁹ mediated through and corrupted by words, begins to break down, making the natural world more accessible. Poetic words, “[giving] off pink, green, and sweetness,” become the perfect unifier of senses and sensibility (9). In fragments, the rhythm of words effuses meaning beyond the words themselves. Even as a bossy and militant scriptwriter who resents the imprecision of the amateur actors, Miss La Trobe aspires to “words without meaning – wonderful words” (191). The “blown away” words from the play, the broken tune of the gramophone that reflects “the scraps and fragments” of life, actually encourage harmony: “Music wakes us. Music makes us see the hidden, join the broken” (108). In the broken refrain “dispersed are we” (86), a profound “unity” is brought forth (181).

As a modernist standing at a historical and cultural crossroad, Woolf used history and the making of history as the primary *leitmotif* of her oeuvre. For Rosenberg, Woolf’s

writing of history is political and is always infused with ideology and intent. [...] There are not only many historical narratives in which to place Woolf, [...] Woolf herself wrote different kinds of histories.³⁰

Her political criticism, embodied in her historical narratives and narrative history (*Orlando* (1928) and *The Years* for example) is an appeal for a re-examination of the existing evaluative criteria of our society, correlative to human consciousness, which is first and foremost a concern over the self and the survival of the self. In accord with Woolf's own aspiration to examine "an ordinary mind on an ordinary day" as "the mind receives a myriad impression,"³¹ Woolf examines the human consciousness' interrelations with nature, culture and history. Though philosophical questions about the self and reality permeate Woolf's works, Woolf would profess an experience of reality in itself, and yet such an experience should be critical of the patriarchal language that is used to express and understand such experience. Therefore, by invoking the fragmentation of everyday social interaction and its language, *Between the Acts* is, as Karen Schneider puts it, "an affirmation of [Woolf's] feminist resistance to the cultural centrality of masculinity," or "an admission of the inefficacy of language and literature, especially in time of war."³²

Through language, Woolf touches upon an unsolved human paradox created by the mutuality of nature and culture, and thus *Eros* and history. As she implores her readers, "Tolerate the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure. [...] We are trembling on the verge of one of the greatest ages of English literature." We are working at "life itself."³³ True, one can say that Woolf's literary project "is ultimately concerned with the processes of reading and writing."³⁴ Yet, as I will demonstrate through Patočka's account, Woolf's literary project is more specifically concerned with reading and writing about the self as it grows conscious of its own being, through a living body interacting with its external world and attempting to derive meaning in terms of this dialectic negotiation between what is of the self and what is of others.

In *Between the Acts*, arguably as in history, *Eros* does not elicit tranquil happiness but instead produces violent feelings. Giles, strained with *Eros*, there is only anger, hatred and "indescribable horror" (55); and Isa, sensing the conspiracy between Giles and Mrs. Manresa, – in a reversal of the former scene between Mr. and Mrs. Haines and herself – twitches with rage: "Jealousy, anger pierced her skin" (52). From *Eros*, there arises *Polemos*. Ferocity is an essential part of nature

and Woolf links the violence in nature with the violence of human action: the birds attack the dawn “like so many choir boys attacking an iced cake” (7); little George Oliver, though being merciless to the flowers, is greatly frightened by Sohrab the Afghan hound, who is also bouncing among the blossoms (11). Throughout the novel, bloodshed is a common business of humanity: Lucy’s childhood memory of the blood in the fish gill (19); the sixteen men shot in the morning paper (42); and Giles stamping on a snake and staining his white tennis shoes with blood (89). The attempt to correct and hide these abject realities are met with protestation - under Bart’s command, the wildness in Sohrab is curbed by the collar of human social order. Despite the effort, Sohrab refuses to be completely domesticated, echoing Isa’s resentment of “the domestic, the possessive; the maternal” (17).

However, though each person expresses resentment of duty and desire for freedom of expression, they cannot escape social institutions: “Given his choice, he would have chosen to farm. But he was not given his choice,” thinks Giles, filing secret complaints against the cultural conventions, personified for him in his aunt Lucy (43). Though Giles egotistically carries himself as one who “bears the burden of the world’s woe, making money for [Isa] to spend” (100), it is Isa who minds the bills and watches over house expenses (194), hiding her poetic talents in accounting books (46). “*Absolute freedom*”³⁵ is not found in human society, for absolute freedom, in the words of Patočka, is “freedom from all the interests of peace, of life, of the day,” and it is in this sense that Patočka takes the battlefield as the ultimate manifestation of such freedom.³⁶ In company, one forsakes one’s beliefs and impulses in order to adhere to social etiquette, just as William Dodge, Mrs. Manresa, Giles and Isa must enshroud their sexuality. Therefore, sitting in waiting for the performance to begin, Mrs. Manresa feels the tension of “remaining silent, doing nothing, in company” (60). Silence makes room for privacies, but in making such private realms apparent, silence also calls attention to the similarity of their common nature as well as the differences between individuals that cannot be freely acknowledged: “Their minds and bodies were too close, yet not close enough. We aren’t free, each of them felt separately, to feel or think separately, nor yet to fall asleep” (60). And though everyone is affected by the heat, they restrain themselves from being overcome by drowsiness, from yielding completely to nature (61).

Ironically, it is Bart, the most vigorous rationalist, not “Old Flimsy” (Mrs. Swithin), who finally gives in to nature (24). In spite of this, the propensity for

freedom undergoes a rational negotiation and seeks relief in social abjection and scapegoating. Without the courage to defy society and be what one truly is, one makes judgments on those that do. Thereby, unable to realize her own bodily desire, Isa feels jealous of Mrs. Manresa's liberation from all social propriety: "Vulgar she was in her gestures, in her whole person" (37). Similarly, Giles Oliver reproaches his aunt, Mrs. Swithin, for being "foolish, free" (43) and sees William Dodge as "a toady; a lickspittle; not a downright plain man of his senses" (55).

History is chopped into "orts, scraps and fragments" (169) by the discontinuous scenes of the pageant performance, by the audience's late arrival, by the intervals and by the natural surroundings. When the stage of human play is empty, the natural beauty and stillness of the background becomes overwhelming (75). One starts to fidget in anticipation of the illusionary future fostered by *Eros*, and under the influence of this embryonic bodily drive for the movement of history, the command of the present is not enough. One is constantly anticipating the future, and therefore "the future" pervades "the present," disturbing its serenity (75). The play, enacting human progress and the promise of human intelligence in science, provides solace to human consciousness and society. When the illusion of the play fails and the human stage empties out, one is left in direct confrontation with unveiled nature, both within oneself and without: "As the illusion petered out, the cows took up the burden. One had lost her calf. In the very nick of time she lifted her great moon-eyed head and bellowed" (126). This "dumb yearning," which fills "the gap" and "the emptiness" left by human acts, awakens deep echoes within the human heart (126). Such is the moment where there is no escape from the stark naked truth of perennial and its ineradicable role in human life. At once, one is confronted with a world unmediated through the abstraction of words or of human art. In these moments, human mortality, "human pain" (162), and the weariness of life becomes most apparent. And yet, this temporary breach in the movement of history, provoking emotions and feelings of and for life, is ironically that which continues history. Discontinuity is merely a phenomenon in which nature evokes a profound unity. And this is suggested by the very title of *Between the Acts*: the narrative of history, either as pageant or German invasion, highlights the space cleaved by modern science and technology. The intervals push the scenes of English history toward the final revelation of "ourselves," in which "the reticence of nature [is] undone, and the barriers which should divide Man the Master from the Brute [are] dissolved" (165).

Historical progress is conceived by Patočka

as the realisation that life hitherto had been a life in decadence and that there is or that there are possibilities of living differently than by toiling for a full stomach in misery and need, ingeniously tamed by human technologies – or, on the other hand, by striving for private and public orgiastic moments, sexuality and cult.³⁷

The self, estranged from its primitive status and primal needs, struggles continually to assume responsibility over its own actions. As such, as Patočka argues, the immortality of the soul under Platonic doctrine is “the result of the confrontation of the orgiastic with responsibility.”³⁸ Accordingly, orgiastic nature, rather than being removed, “is disciplined and made subservient.”³⁹ Insofar as the meaning of humanity and history is concerned, the irreconcilable yet correlative energy between reason and emotion are bound up in a word – *Eros*. Mocking the fatal conceit of humans, Reason, as personified in the play, ends with an enigmatic epigram:

The God of love is full of tricks;
Into the foot his dart he sticks,
But the way of the will is plain to see;
Let holy virgins hymn perpetually:
“Where there’s a will there’s a way.” (80)

This ending accentuates a cosmic irony through the ideology of the age of reason, which undercuts a more truthful understanding of nature and life. In spite of all the plotting and designing, emotion prevails; contingent and unforeseeable events intercede, goaded by *Eros*, the will of love and nature, or by the unknowable “will of God.” The stirring of the once subordinated *Eros* and its unaccountable orgiastic power reawakens a persistent fear of that which is as irrational and unpredictable as the weather.

The final scene of the pageant attempts at representing “the present time. Ourselves” (160). To achieve a genuine reflection, Miss La Trobe resorts to the most conventional idea of *mimesis*, a pure objective reflection, by holding up mirrors. The array of mirrors held up to the audience forces them to look upon the most genuine aspect of themselves, long masked by manners and proprieties. It is an aesthetic reconfiguration of what the two world wars have achieved: breaking up the composed outward form of modern society and laying bare the true nature that humans shy away from. The peaceful face of polite society, which always appeals

to absolute rationality and self-detachment, is draining the vitality of modern society. Caught between the belief in human rationality and the historical proof of the human propensity to war, modern audiences are “suspended [...] in limbo” (95), unable to determine who they are – rational human being or irrational animal – as the world turns toward another dark chapter of human history. Each is paralyzed by this incongruity, and yet still incapable of an outright concession to the inherent, volatile *Eros*. Withheld to the end, the strained emotion eventually demands to be unleashed. Therefore, once social restraint is no longer available, enmity comes to the fore (197). Being left alone, Isa and Giles are forced to resolve their antagonism in the most primitive fashion: “Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night” (197). Comparably, the warfare in Europe is another struggle “in the heart of darkness” (197), an attempt at a continuity of life.

Between the Acts ambiguously ends with the rising of the curtain, when Isa and Giles finally break their silence toward each other as if only then could there be real action, and what we have been reading is literally “between the acts” – the largely unregistered events of history. If history simply depends on reportable events and accountable causalities, then historicity is only a fraction of what truly occurs. In *Between the Acts*, emotions simmer and steam in non-action. Characters contribute their part in silence. Without uttering a word, each addresses and replies to one another: “‘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” (36). Correspondingly, the pageant, shredded further to pieces by the natural outdoor stage, squarely presents the “scraps, orts and fragments” (169) of history – of our understanding of history and therefore of ourselves. The “scraps, orts and fragments” depend on the audience and nature to play their part – to provide the transition and the link – and it is through the offstage events that unity is formed and meaning engendered. And just as in Greek tragedy, the offstage events conceal actions that are often physically violent and emotionally effective: the outburst of *Eros* when it can no longer be contained or withheld by social rationale. Miss La Trobe’s choice of scenes from English history baffles Colonel Mayhew, who asks, “why leave out the British Army? What’s history without the Army, eh?” (141). But, conflict and *Polemos*, though often rejected as “inhuman,” are embedded in the

very nature of life itself. Both the progress and the greed of modern society are, as Patočka has argued, set in an infinite, mutual, generative and enhancing procedure. As every life prompted by *Eros* struggles for its own survival, *Polemos* is invoked. And therefore, Colonel Mayhew's criticism, albeit belligerent, turns out to be an accurate critique of human evasion from an essential part of natural life.

The war in Europe, seemingly an offstage interlude that disturbs the regular procession of history, is in fact the covert momentum of the historical plot. This is precisely what *Between the Acts* achieves through a synthetic rendering of Greek tragedy and Shakespearean comedy. With what David McWhirter has described as "hybrid and contrapuntal"⁴⁰ comedy and tragedy, prose and poetry, *Between the Acts* dramatizes the internal dialectic process between reason and emotion and thus reveals the deepest irony of man as a historical being in the face of death, of a destructive power that nonetheless arises from the nature of life itself. Bringing to light the human interaction of modern society in silence, miscommunication and treachery, *Between the Acts* intentionally offsets the importance of the well-planned, staged action with improvised intervals and natural phenomena, attesting to the stubborn contrivances of social protocol and envisioning a more inclusive wholeness of human history among its disconnected scenes.⁴¹ The deliberate obliteration of military action, in contrast to the occasional zoom of planes overhead, "in perfect formation like a flight of wild duck" (174), reflects the ongoing warfare that the community pageant has itself muffled and screened. Despite the effort, anxiety is voiced through the fragmented conversation after the play: "And what's the channel, come to think of it, if they mean to invade us? The aeroplanes, I didn't like to say it, made one think ..." (179). Relying mostly on the unaccountable, offstage events for a continuation and reinforcement of emotions, *Between the Acts* manifests a new understanding of the warfare that threatens the continuity of human history and unsettles the linear configuration of history. Although ironic, it is through enacting this dissension and fragmentation that *Between the Acts* re-evokes the pastoral organic unity that modern science and technology have greatly encumbered. In *Eros*, Woolf has found her answer to the apparent incongruity between the destructive and progressive natures of science and reason in war. War is but another interval that enables the release of *Eros* energy. As the last scene of *Between the Acts* suggests, it is only after such a release that a new chapter of history can be envisioned and attained.

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- ¹ Harriet Blodgett, "The Nature of *Between the Acts*," *Modern Language Studies* 13.13 (1983), 27.
- ² Jean Wyatt, "Art and Allusion in *Between the Acts*," *Mosaic* 11.4 (1978), 91.
- ³ Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, ed. and intro. Frank Kermode (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 5 (hereafter cited parenthetically in the text).
- ⁴ Erazim Kohák, *Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 7.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.
- ⁶ Irena Martínková, "Jan Patočka's Three Movements of Human Life with Respect to Physical Education and Sport Practice," *Gymn* 36.2 (2006), 60.
- ⁷ Kohák, *Jan Patočka*, 33. See also Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, ed. James Dodd (Chicago: Open Court-Carus Publishing, 1996), 1-11.
- ⁸ Paul Ricoeur, preface to *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, ed. James Dodd (Chicago: Open Court-Carus Publishing, 1996), xiv.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, viii.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, viii.
- ¹¹ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Vintage/Random House, 1992), 67.
- ¹² Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 136.
- ¹³ Kohák, *Jan Patočka*, 7.
- ¹⁴ See note 6.
- ¹⁵ See note 7.
- ¹⁶ Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 3.
- ¹⁷ Paul Ricoeur, "Jan Patočka: A Philosopher of Resistance," *Crane Bag* 7.1 (1983), 116.
- ¹⁸ Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 6.
- ¹⁹ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Oliver Bell (London: Penguin, 1985), 18 November 1935.
- ²⁰ Daniel Vojtech, "Jan Patočka: On Art and Philosophy," *A Decade of Transformation, IWM Junior Visiting Fellows Conferences Proceeding* 8.7 (1999), 6.
- ²¹ Frank Kermode, Introduction, *Between the Acts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), xiv.
- ²² *Ibid.*, xix.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, xxxiv.
- ²⁴ Renée Watkins, "Survival in Discontinuity: Virginia Woolf and *Between the Acts*," *The Massachusetts Review* 10.2 (1969), 356.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 356-8
- ²⁶ Woolf, *Diary*, 26 April 1938.
- ²⁷ David McWhirter, "The Novel, the Play, and the Book: *Between the Acts* and the Tragicomedy of History," *ELH* 60.3 (1993), 788.
- ²⁸ Woolf, *Diary*, 13 April 1938.
- ²⁹ Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 13: "On the foundation of written texts it becomes possible to construct works of language which are like a secondary world, relating itself to the primary one."
- ³⁰ Beth Carole Rosenberg, "Virginia Woolf's Postmodern Literary History," *MLN* 115.5 (2000), 1112.
- ³¹ Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," *Collected Essays by Virginia Woolf*, vol. 2 (London: Hogarth, 1966), 106.
- ³² Karen Schneider, "Of Two Minds: Woolf, the War and *Between the Acts*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 16.1 (1989), 94.
- ³³ Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," *A Woman's Essays*, ed. and intro. Rachel Bowlby (London: Penguin, 1992), 87.
- ³⁴ Emily Dalgarno, "Virginia Woolf: Translation and 'Iterability'," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 36.1 (2006), 145.
- ³⁵ Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 130.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 102-3.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 105.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.
- ⁴⁰ McWhirter, "The Novel, the Play, and the Book," 790.
- ⁴¹ Melba Cuddy-Keane, "The Politics of Comic Modes in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*," *PMLA* 105.2 (1990), 282.