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In these essays, the object of inquiry is the multifaceted interplay of part and whole, especially with reference to the individual's relationship to society. The first section, on Algernon Charles Swinburne, is centered on Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject, which is concerned with boundaries, the intolerable which cannot be ignored, the criminal who flaunts his crimes, the repetitive obsessions that can turn into fascination and masochism. In Swinburne's world, love is not generative, although passion exists in excess. Along with the sexual deviations (sado-masochism, lesbianism, incest, necrophilia) that are a hallmark of Swinburne's poetry, sterility and infertility mark the erotic relationships that he presents in his earliest and most famous collection, *Poems and Ballads* (1866). This focus on sterility challenges Victorian ideology in its refusal to endorse values of family and reproduction. This interest is further involved in Swinburne's oeuvre through its presence in his two "Greek" dramas, *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865) and *Erechtheus* (1876). In these works, rather than the central drama of sterility being played out in erotic relationships, it is embodied in the relationship between parent and child. Here, cannibalism and child-murder find a place in the tensions between individual and society, subjectivity and law.

The second section, on Virginia Woolf's late novels *The Waves* (1937) and *Between the Acts* (1941), engages with recent Woolf criticism which argues that through representations of art and audience such as the village pageant written by Miss La Trobe

in *Between the Acts* Woolf envisions art as a primary mediator between the citizen and authority. The times in which these last novels were written, as well as Woolf's explicit political program in *Three Guineas* (1938) and the various draft versions of *The Years* make this position reasonable and lend it a great deal of importance. However, in these novels I argue that resistance to authority takes place in the individual mind and mostly in the everyday, quotidian interactions of life rather than in the experience of art as such. Claims to a unified community in *Between the Acts* are, I argue, overstated, as we see connections between individuals that are fleeting, but no less valuable for this fleetingness. *The Years* and *Between the Acts* have more in common than is often thought, and both identify communion in the everyday.

FOUR ESSAYS ON EXCESS AND FRAGMENTATION IN MODERNISM

By

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CHAPTER I

SEXLESS ROOT OR EPICENE: DESIRE, FERTILITY AND THE ABJECT IN SWINBURNE'S *POEMS AND BALLADS*

The various means of purifying the abject—the various catharses—make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion.

—Julia Kristeva

In Swinburne's world, erotic desire is not generative. Love does not breed love, and bodies do not easily reproduce themselves. Swinburne's insistence on sterility and fruitlessness constitutes a critical motif in his work. For some critics Swinburne's "fascination with sterility, and specifically with the 'barren mother,'" is his most interesting preoccupation (Richardson 133). For others, the tendency has been noted, but not examined in depth. For example, Allison Pease remarks in passing that the words "'barren' and 'fruitless,' ... appear in almost every poem of the 1866 volume" (53-54). In spite of the prominence of the theme, Swinburne's "barrenness" has not received as much attention as other biographic, stylistic, and aesthetic issues. I argue here that sterility is as important a part of the impact of his early work as are masochism and atheism. In fact, sterility must be regarded as indissolubly related to Swinburne's religious and erotic imagery.

Though erotic desire is not generative, space for generative forces exists symbolically. Richardson is correct to cite the sea as Swinburne's choice origin for life-producing forces and site for representations of birth (Venus, for example). Rosenberg corroborates this observation, noting, "All of Swinburne's finer love poetry is set by the sea—the cold, clean, 'mother-maid' who is more palpable than the ever-shadowy girl who refuses, or is unaware of, the poet's love" (144). This motif is well-illustrated in "The Triumph of Time." Here, humankind's origin is

located in the sea, the “mother-maid” who is “older than earth...strong for death and fruitful for birth” (l. 301, 302):¹

The loves and hours of the life of a man,
They are swift and sad, being born of the sea.
Hours that rejoice and regret for a span,
Born with a man’s breath, mortal as he;
Weeds of the wave, without fruit upon the earth. (l. 73-78)

Here, time itself is generated on the crests of waves, though it cannot produce anything. It is a weed, uncultivated, uncontrolled, appearing as if randomly, and, just as randomly, replaced. The image of flowers permeates Swinburne’s work, and here it receives a parodic twist, for the sea is “cold and clean as her faint salt flowers” (l. 68). This salt flower that grows with no root and dissolves under the wash of a wave represents birth as a process completely abstracted from mankind’s days or actions.

Not surprisingly, Swinburne’s Love is a destructive force. In being destructive, it denies the normative Victorian ideology of family life. Margot Louis has argued that Swinburne’s Proserpina, for example, “figures the rejection of life as a value in itself, she represents inter alia a rejection of the female body as a vessel of life” (“Proserpine and Pessimism” 316). Desire is, instead, turned inward toward a painful passion, and its result is the division of bodies rather than generation or even traditional physical union. If we borrow terminology from Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*, we may call Swinburne’s poetry *abject*. The abjection of erotic desire from its productive social role is often represented spatially through hidden or interstitial spaces where a lover either cannot be found or may elude the workings of a “normal” cycle of birth, regeneration, and death. Drawing on the opening chapter of Kristeva’s volume, “Approaching the Abject,” I demonstrate the use of sterility in Swinburne’s depiction of the abject—what lies beyond the

¹ Unless otherwise noted, quotations from *Poems and Ballads* come from Jerome McGann’s *Major Poems and Selected Prose* (2004).

borders of the imaginable by examining poems from his 1866 volume, *Poems and Ballads*, paying especial attention to “Hermaphroditus,” “The Leper,” and “Laus Veneris.”

Swinburne images the erotic as an uncontrollable excess. In his work an excess of pain reliably culminates in pleasure. Familial love spills into incestuous desire and murder. The face of a woman bursts forth with history, with the face of “another dead for centuries,” as he notes in his comment on “Faustine” (“Notes on Poems and Reviews” 365). The boundaries of desire are like the tides of the sea, always shifting. The satanic, vampirical Faustine, for example, is a “queen whose kingdom ebbs and shifts / Each week” (l. 11-12).

Boundaries keep what is threatening out, but an ebbing, shifting border is changeable and therefore potentially dangerous. For Kristeva, the abject is what lies outside of boundaries, it is the threat to order, it is the violation that cannot be tolerated but cannot be forgotten. The *deject* is “one by whom the abject exists... who places (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing” (*Powers of Horror* 8). The deject is obsessed with constructing borders which he cannot maintain: “A deviser of territories, languages, works, the deject never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines—for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject—constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh.” The verse of *Poems and Ballads* is to a large degree dependent on paradoxical identifications like pain and pleasure that are usually thought to be strictly demarcated. In discussing sexuality and gender, Allison Pease sees Swinburne’s poetry as working to “threaten to destabilize the socially constructed norms of male and female behavior” (43). And Thais Morgan has argued that “Swinburne uses his dramatic monologs to draw attention to the disturbing correlation between Christian society’s zealous repression of sexuality and its simultaneous indulgence in perversions behind closed doors” (“Sex and Ideology” 177). Swinburne’s interest in birching, the passivity of his male speakers, and his persistent

identification of love with death are obvious. What makes these “perversions” important is that they lead to sterile unions. This sterility cuts two ways: it denies humans the power to create life at the same time that it focuses desire firmly in raw material of life, the flesh. Focusing on love as a thing that is embodied and not transcendent while denying a “natural” function of those bodies is a paradox as fundamental to Swinburne’s work as is the marriage of pleasure and pain.

At his best, paradox and boundary-crossing operate in concert. In the poet’s view, division, which is contingent on borders, turns out to be a productive and “fruitful” concept. In “Notes on Poems and Reviews” Swinburne wrote:

The sad and subtle moral of this myth, which I have desired to indicate in verse, is that perfection once attained on all sides is a thing thenceforward barren of use or fruit; whereas the divided beauty of separate woman and man—a thing inferior and imperfect—can serve all turns of life. Ideal beauty, like ideal genius, dwells apart, as though by compulsion; supremacy is solitude. (368)

In this poem, Swinburne recreates the myth of “Hermaphroditus,” the nineteenth-century’s exemplar of dissolved boundaries, with both positive and negative valences. As Chris Snodgrass puts it, “The hermaphrodite reflects perfectly the paradoxical nature of Swinburnean sacred space: it represents both completion and sterility, unified totality and imprisoning stasis” (82). In Hermaphroditus’s possession of a kind of completion, he is different from the divided men and women of Swinburne’s oeuvre, who never do “serve life” and reproduce. “Hermaphroditus” is modeled on the sculpture of the same name, a sculpture which Swinburne described as the most beautiful in Hellenic art (“Notes on Books” 366). For Swinburne, the figure of the hermaphrodite or androgyne can be seen as “emblematic of the paralysis of overfilled space; it is representative of that ‘sacred totality’ whose centre is an absence” (Snodgrass 83). Again, an excess within given space forces a transformation. Yet, the transformation of two bodies into one is an ironic birth, a birth into sterility, into the super-human.

In “The Triumph of Time,” the speaker accuses his beloved of causing division between them and preventing them from becoming like gods. In “Laus Veneris,” Tannhauser cleaves to Venus until God might end time with this trumpet. “Hermaphroditus” is an emblem of union that is aesthetically perfect and sterile: “Sex to sweet sex with lips and limbs is wed, / Turning the fruitful feud of hers and his / To the waste wedlock of a sterile kiss” (“Hermaphroditus” l. 17-19). In these three poems, we can see the spectrum of Swinburne’s erotic relationships: the physically divided but passionate lovers (“The Triumph of Time”), the union existing out of physical time and space (“Laus Veneris”), and the sterile self-identification of lover with beloved, represented in a single hermaphroditic persona. In each case, sexual union is either not achieved, or is abstracted in such a way that sterility is its outcome. Critics such as Rosenberg have commented on the distance between lovers in Swinburne, writing that “There is much passion but little conjunction; emotion is felt but not communicated and not returned” (144). Love roots its victims in the mutable realities of the earth but at the same time divides lover from lover, just as day is defined by its division from night and the guiding virgin god of *Atalanta in Calydon*, Artemis, is divided in three. Union through love is rejected intellectually in *Poems and Ballads*, but sought out physically. Writing about “Hermaphroditus,” Swinburne praised the art of sculpture for its “belief in the body,” a belief which neither ancient ascetics nor contemporary hypocrites could understand (“Notes on Books” 366).

Thus, paradoxically “believing” in fruitless bodies, Swinburne represents incomplete and indirect physical conjunctions between his lovers. The images of blood and crushed wine in poems such as “Faustine” call to mind ravenous Dionysian maenads; yet, even in a poem depicting Venus herself, there is a dramatic disjunction between male and female. In the opening stanzas of “Laus Veneris,” Tannhauser cannot tell if Venus is sleeping or awake. He sees on her neck a “purple speck / Wherein the pained blood falters,” yet, he receives no response when he

touches her: “though my lips shut sucking on the place, / There is no vein at work upon her face” (l. 2-3, 6). She is in a sleep that resembles death.

In this image of Tannhauser, Swinburne describes the distance between the lovers; he also deploys images of the eyes and the mouth that represent their incomplete union. These two organs can be seen as equals of a kind. Both can be described as representing depths, both are spoken of as passages. The eyes and mouth breathe in and out, receive light and look outward, open and close. They can see and be seen, speak and be silenced, fill the world and be filled by it. They are porous and permeable, they are boundaries between the world outside and the body itself. The complex of images that I see here is probably best exemplified in lines from the first of the Petrarchan sonnets that constitute “Hermaphroditus”:

Two loves at either blossom of thy breast
Strive until one be under and one above.
Their breath is fire upon the amorous air,
Fire in thine eyes and where thy lips suspire. (l. 7-10)

In these lines, fire moves from the breath into the air; then it migrates to the eyes and back to the lips. This odd elliptical connection between the two “loves,” the two passions being enacted upon Hermaphroditus, is also used in “The Leper,” where eyes and lips are used to enact the erotic love between the lady and her lord. Kisses blind the lady’s vision and the tears that she cries in ecstasy flow into her lover’s mouth (l. 57-64). After her illness and death, the scribe laments the absence of her breath and is “maddened” by her “worn-off eyelids” (l. 107). The speaker of “The Triumph of Time” invokes the “eyes that weep” and “mouth that sings” (l. 224). In “Laus Veneris,” images of the eye and mouth are blended as thoroughly as the desire and despair in tension within Hermaphroditus’ breast. As Tannhauser passes by the dangerous hills on his way to Rome, we see an example:

before us rose and fell
White cursed hills, like outer skirts of hell
Seen where men's eyes look through the day to night,
Like a jagged shell's lips, harsh, untunable,

Blown in between by devils' wrangling breath. (l. 341-345)

Here, the eyes cross the border of day and night, and are described as lips. This description transforms them into a shell (lips) which is, in turn, blown into by devils. Eyes and mouths are identified and lips blow into lips; the devilish and the human are connected through the figures of the verse. Again, Swinburne constructs an elliptical image wherein movements across borders are so frequent that the integrity of the borders themselves cannot be believed in. Multiple actors partake in the figurative movement, and blur the line between those who act and those who are acted on. Finally, Swinburne also provides a more static image of the connection between eye and mouth in a description of Venus lying with the souls of old, souls that she has killed. These lovers “sleeping with her lips upon their eyes, / Heard sudden serpents hiss across her hair” (l. 115-116).

These examples of ambiguous, aestheticized physical connection share similarities with the later, less complicated, and more unified vision of Tristram and Iseult in which “their four lips became one burning mouth” (*Major Poems*, 231). Here, traditional ideas of masculine and feminine are lost in the equality of the union. But in the lyrics of *Poems and Ballads*, attempts at physical union are always set off-center, even in the elaborate figures described above.

By imaging eyes, permeable by tears, and the mouth, giving passage to breath, Swinburne describes a body that is penetrable and whose boundaries are fluid. At the same time, Swinburne insists on the body as a container for “love” or “soul”—a container that necessarily ages, falls ill, and dies. Tannhauser, for example, describes Venus as an embodiment of himself, “my soul's body” (l. 29). The transformations that take place between life and death, pleasure and pain, soul and body are also involved in Swinburne's use of the abject. The opening poem of

Poems and Ballads, “A Ballad of Life,” narrates a similar transformation of one emotion into another, all at the feet of a powerful female force:

And seeing where maidens served her on their knees
I bade one crave of these
To know the cause thereof.
Then Fear said: I am Pity that was dead.
And Shame said: I am Sorrow comforted.
And Lust said: I am Love. (*Works I* 140)

Similarly shifting identifications are described in Kristeva’s examination of the deject’s *jouissance*, which is related to masochism. Kristeva argues that with time “the sought after turns into the banished, fascination into shame.” Stylistically, Swinburne’s definition and redefinition of the holy as profane, of lust as love, represents this Kristevan transformation. We might read Swinburne directly in light of this: love (sterile perfection) turns into lust (physicality/desire); pity turns to fear; sorrow to shame. As noted above, the deject wanders in a “land of oblivion” in which he “does not cease separating” from the abject, building and deconstructing borders (8). As the deject cannot cease circling the abject, from which he is barely divided, so Swinburne’s poetics cannot speak of desire without the desiring, the frightened without the pitying. In this matrix of shifting identifications and transformations, life seems to be neither created nor destroyed. At times, as in the conclusion to “*Laus Veneris*,” the abjected lover exists outside of time itself, in a hidden locale that is not death and not life. In other cases, Swinburne’s treatment of the border between life and death is much more literal.

Kristeva’s most direct and clear examples of the abject are dung and the corpse. Death and love are never closer than in “*The Leper*.” In this poem, a scribe who loves his lady finally joins with her erotically after her disease and death. For Kristeva, “The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection” (4). The actual coupling in “*The Leper*” constitutes a rare instance in *Poems and Ballads* and, because it is necessarily fruitless, it is

ironic. If, as Kristeva posits, “refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (2), then the scribe represents a refusal to thrust aside, the essence of transgression. The borders that are violated by the speaker’s love for a corpse allies him with abject dung and the bodies of the dead.

Through the course of this poem, several displacements occur that violate strong boundaries, both social and political. The scribe, who had worked in the lady’s house, recalls their relationship before her illness: “I served her in a royal house; / I served her wine and curious meat” (l. 5-6). At this point their relationship is what we might expect from an imagined medieval society in which borders are clearly drawn: “Mere scorn God knows she had of me” says the scribe (l. 9), who treats the scorn that he imagines God holds for him and that which the lady holds in the same way. However, the lady, through her illness and death, ceases to scorn. By desiring a woman who is beyond his reach socially, the scribe imagines himself as already living outside of social bounds, and this is summarized in his belief that he is hated by God.

For Kristeva, “the criminal with a good conscience” is the emblem of abjection and its causes (4). Because of his strange innocence, the scribe of “The Leper” occupies the in-between space that Kristeva identifies as the boundary-rupturing cite of abjection. He knows that God scorns him, but does not hope to reconcile, only to enjoy the fact that in spite of his scorn, God cannot stop him, now, from enjoying his mistress. The scribe says that though God hates him, “Yet am I glad to have her dead / Here in this wretched wattled house” (l. 18-19). And he says this while doing things as innocent as “plait[ing] up her hair” (l. 16). Kristeva writes:

It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. . . . [Especially figures like] the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior. (4)

Crime is always related to the abject, but to deny the definition of crime as a violation of boundary is the most frightening form of abjection. But, for the scribe, love itself is embodied in the lady. The scribe describes her disease as a manifestation of “change,” and links that change with a God who abides, unchanging:

God, that makes time and ruins it
And alters not, abiding God,
Changed with disease her body sweet,
The body of love wherein she abode. (l. 45-48)

The opposition between mutable corruption and perfected stasis that Swinburne makes with regard to “Hermaphroditus” attains poetic expression here. The creator is really a destroyer, and love is embodied in the mutable. God has no *alter*, which, to take the word to its root, means “one (of two)”; it requires another person, requires a choice to be made, and, ultimately, requires division and differentiation.

The scribe removes his lady to the “wattled” house, where he describes her as being “hidden.” He also describes the water that they are reduced to drinking once their bread is gone as coming from a hidden well. This water, which appears in context midway through the text, gains an especial force in the poem when that context is re-inserted into the odd opening stanza:

Nothing is better, I well think,
Than love; the hidden well-water
Is not so delicate to drink:
This was well seen of me and her. (l. 1-4)

The juxtaposition of the scribe’s immediately gripping statement on the nature of love and the imagery of the well only comes into focus after multiple readings of the poem. In the context of their survival on grass and well-water, love gains definition as a mutual abjection. Love is the experience of a necessity—water—that is nevertheless a harm on its own. These four lines effect

a strikingly modern concision, and turn the hidden well and its contents into a metonymy for the couple's joint exile. Death hangs over the figures in the poem constantly, for the scribe describes himself, paradoxically, always in the process of dying. Early in the poem, he shuns food for desire of his lady (l. 7-8) and later, when he *can* kiss her forehead and plait her hair, describes himself as approaching death for joy (l. 75-76).

The scribe's definition exists in opposition to a traditional representation of love which the text ultimately rejects. Before becoming ill, the lady had a lover "inside whose grasp all night / Her fervent body leapt or lay, / Stained with sharp kisses red and white" (l. 65-67). The scribe himself had been a witness to the lady and lord together, and remembers bringing him to meet her (l. 29-32). The scribe replaces this lover, but retains the role of a servant, and describes his relationship to her as one of "service"—even to the point of the service that God forbids (l. 80)—throughout.

Not only is his desire enacted on a corpse, it also represents a rupture to the social order that is never repaired. Being "cursed" by her peers after her disease is discovered, the lady is at the mercy of the scribe. Is he, in Kristeva's phrase, a "shameless rapist"? He has doubts about his actions—"I never should have kissed her" (l. 115), he exclaims—and feels, in the end that she did not love him as he did her. He muses, "It may be all my love went wrong— / A scribe's work write awry and blurred" (l. 129-130).

And yet, in the end, the scribe asks what he calls an "old question": "Will not God do right?" (l. 140). His doubt about the lady's love leads him to this question, and, in the end, his dilemma is one of *knowledge* rather than loss of love in a romantic sense: whether his lady has sight of something clear while he goes "blind" with doubt, wondering about his own failures, real or perceived (l. 133-140). The scribe's valuation of the corrupted, sterile body and his view of

God as indifferent and aloof from “right” are the real challenges of the poem to orthodoxy.

Kristeva writes:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. (1)

By both taking up the taboo of sex with the dead and challenging the status of God as an ethical decision-maker, “The Leper” enacts the threats from both the “inside” and “outside.” The social order of the poem is ruptured, and at the same time, God is called to account for the order that he reputedly created. The scribe’s final question exemplifies Kristeva’s assertion that “from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master” (2).

Swinburne’s Tannhauser is in many ways similar to the scribe in “The Leper.” The knight of Christ who chooses Venus is left, at the end of the poem, “abiding alway out of all men’s sight” (l. 422). There is a clear division between God and embodied love that is, again, imaged spatially through landscape, and is, again, figured in terms of sterility and drought. The bed of Venus is unlike the marriage bed, writes Swinburne, because desire is never satisfied there. Instead, the bodies and souls of the dead become raw material for Venus’ work:

Their blood runs round the roots of time like rain:
She casts them forth and gathers them again;
With nerve and bone she weaves and multiplies
Exceeding pleasure out of extreme pain. (l. 117-120)

She is a weaver at a loom, an image that is also associated with a personified Love, who labors as in a dream (l. 45-48). She multiplies not new forms or new lives, but new sensations; the nerves, bones, and blood of the long-slain lovers are transformed, not remade.

The Horsel, the space separated from Christendom, and from which Tannhauser can hear the rain, picture the snowy season, and imagine knights riding as he once rode (l. 81-88) represents his abjection from society. He yearns for death, and in death yearns to reenter the cycle of generation. “Ah yet would God that stems and roots were bred / Out of my weary body and my head,” laments Tannhauser (l. 57-58). It is a state of continual languishing sterility that prompts God to break his knight’s bonds, and set Tannhauser free from the “fume of barren bowers” wherein he has no choice but to suffer “Love [to] shed fruitless flowers” (l. 325, 328). In the final third of the poem, Tannhauser, “Like a man blind and naked in strange lands” (l. 332) encounters pilgrims on the way to Rome and goes to confess his sins. During their ride, the party passes through “cursed hills, like the outer skirts of hell” (l. 342)—another representation of a land beyond the imaginable or acceptable—and into the sweet air of Rome.

In his encounters with a priest and an immediately intervening divine voice, Tannhauser gains knowledge similar to that which the scribe of “The Leper” possessed all the time: that God hates him, that he has suffered a complete abjection from the cosmology of the Christian world. Momentarily comforted by the priest’s reassuring words, Tannhauser hears a voice that tells him: “Until this dry shred staff, that hath no whit / Of leaf nor bark, bear blossom and smell sweet, / Seek thou not any mercy in God’s sight” (l. 369-371). Tannhauser, recognizing that no flower will come from his “waste wan body and shaken soul” returns to Venus (l. 380), reconciled to the realization that earlier had horrified him: flower and flame, death and desire, are identical one to another (l. 65-68). Similarly, the scribe makes no attempt to reinstitute “order,” and does not return to society, but stays six months after the death of his lady, narrating his growing doubt about her love for him.

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva writes of a tension between “summons and repulsion” that “like an inescapable boomerang...places the one haunted by [the abject] literally

beside himself” (1). In thinking about abjection in *Poems and Ballads*, it is useful to examine Swinburne’s position in Victorian society, the ways that his work intersects with rising trends in sex, politics, and religion, and the reaction that his work prompted from critics. The poet can, I think, be seen to never cease “challenging his master” in these poems. The “shocking” aspects of his work did not emerge ex nihilo, and the objections to *Poems and Ballads* can seem to be denials of culpability by the reviewers themselves.

John Morley objected to the underlying tone of *Poems and Ballads*, its refusal to renege on its claims. He complains, “The lurid clouds of lust or of fiery despair and defiance never lift to let us see the pure and peaceful and bounteous kindly aspects of the great landscape of human life” (*Critical Heritage* 29). Robert Buchanan, who is famous for his attack on the Fleshly School of Poetry, put his scorn for *Poems and Ballads* in terms both classical and spatial:

[In Swinburne there is] too open a proclivity to that garish land beyond the region of pure thinking, whither so many inferior writers have been lured for their destruction—the land where Atys became a raving and sexless maniac, and where Catullus himself would have perished had he not been drawn back to the shadier border-region by the sincerity of his one grand passion. (*Critical Heritage* 30)

In this brief passage, Buchanan imagines that there is a “land beyond” purity of thought where otherwise good men are “lured.” This land is identified with castration; it leaves its subject between gender identifications—“unmanned” yet not female. It is a land of insanity, which exists beyond a boundary which can be recognized by all who are sane. Here, it is hard to argue that Swinburne’s work is not *abjectum* (“having been throw away”) by Buchanan. Yet, we can also see the fears that define that abjection. Atys is an emblem of the insane eunuch. Buchanan also takes pains to paint Swinburne as effeminate, calling him “long-ringleted, flippant-lipped, down-cheeked, amorous-lidded” (31). Anxiety about a world absent of sex differentiation (which enables reproduction) is a key feature of the harsh reaction to Swinburne’s work. The effect of

abjection, the “haunting” experienced by the peripatetic deject turns itself outward from Swinburne, onto the critics of *Poems and Ballads* (1866). In his well-known literary biography, Georges Lafourcade remarks that in *Poems and Ballads*:

By his picture of sheer passion intense and cruel...Swinburne managed what had not been contrived perhaps since the days of Byron and Keats...he struck the emotional rock-bed of pure passion which had been buried for years and was only allowed to emerge here and there in its less rugged form....In brief Swinburne’s harmonious slogan (“we must do justice to that much misused and belied thing, the purely sensuous and outward side of love”) *created echoes in the heart of his contemporaries, and those echoes had to be stifled*, which created confusion, distress, and consequently indignation and scandal. (138, my emphasis)

In this way, points of connection between Swinburne’s work and abjection are multiple. His work engages with masochistic themes, personae, and relations; his audience is drawn closer to passion and desire than is comfortable. Most importantly, Swinburne’s insistence on sterility as an integral component of love denies the dominant ideology of sexuality as a thing geared toward reproduction and cannot be separated from his more widely examined challenges to religious and sexual orthodoxy.

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CHAPTER II

“ABJECT LIMBS THAT BREED THINGS ABJECT”: GENERATION AND DESTRUCTION IN SWINBURNE’S *ATALANTA IN CALYDON* AND *ERECHTHEUS*

I have loved overmuch in my life; when the live bud bursts with the blossom,
Bitter as ashes or tears is the fruit, and the wine thereof shame.
—A.C. Swinburne, “Hesperia”

Swinburne’s thematic treatment of infertility and sterility is not limited to erotic relationships, such as those portrayed in well-known lyrics such as “Dolores,” but also extends to familial relationships. Swinburne’s two Greek plays, *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865) and *Erechtheus* (1876), also present reproduction and generation in problematic or ironical ways.² David Riede has contended that “the hunting of the boar is... emblematic of the denial of the world of generation that Atalanta and Meleager’s love of her represents” (*Romantic Authority* 97). Some critics have remarked upon the dynamic of desire between Meleager and his mother Althaea, arguing that *Atalanta in Calydon* offers the reader “the figure of a mother who will not play by the rules and a son in love with his own death—[and thereby] a definition of masochism inseparable from a definition of family desire” (Guzynski 203).³ In addition to making a Freudian reading of the play available, the family dynamics of the play and the imagery that Swinburne uses to characterize the personae of *Atalanta in Calydon* raise questions about reproduction and fertility. Specifically, we will see that a masochistic dynamic within the works prevents

² Throughout, my citations from *Atalanta in Calydon* come from Jerome McGann’s *Major Poems and Selected Prose* (2004) while citations from *Erechtheus* come from the Bonchurch Edition of Swinburne’s collected works.

³ The role of the oedipal relationship between Althaea and Meleager is also explored by John Jordan, who reads the central conflict of the play as a struggle for power: “Meleager’s love for Atalanta and Althaea’s determined opposition become symbolic for a struggle for the liberation or the continued repression of sexual desire” (104).

productive sexuality. This dynamic is manifested not only through an emphasis on celibate female figures, but in the figure of Meleager's body, which has generative potential that is ultimately frustrated.

Adam Roberts notes that traditional criticism of the two plays has emphasized their stylistic differences⁴ and argues for the importance of an underlying similarity between the two, a connection between hunting and ritual sacrifice that was operative for the Greeks.⁵ He goes on to outline the basic developments of each play, paying attention to the structure of threat to and restoration of the safety of the city-state:

[In *Atalanta*] the Boar dies as a result of the hunt, and the city is safe; but following that death the male protagonist dies a supernatural death. In the second, Chthonia dies as a result of the sacrifice, and the city is safe; but following that death, Erechtheus himself dies a supernatural death....Both these dramas [sic] invoke the ritual hunt / sacrifice as the only mechanism by which the city can be protected. (758-759)

The metaphorical birth and regeneration of a state and a people are especially heightened in *Erechtheus*, where Chthonia, the child of Erechtheus and Praxithea, uses bridal imagery to describe her impending death as a sacrifice to the gods: "I a spouseless bride and crownless but with garlands of the dead / From the fruitful light turn silent to my dark unchilded bed" (388). Future generations of Athenians become her "children," and Athena herself appears to bring the news that as a result of the defeat of Eumolpus, Athens' fame will be unrivaled: "all fame else / Shall be to her fame as a shadow in sleep / To this wide noon at waking" (421). At the same, the cost of security seems to be the lives of both parent and child. In *Erechtheus*, the king and his daughter die just as in *Atalanta in Calydon*, Meleager perishes and Althaea is given a

⁴ For example, Ross Murfin's assertion that while *Atalanta in Calydon* exhibits "the work of an excited and exciting young poet" while *Erechtheus* presents the work of a mature mind focused on "formal symmetry, controlled diction, and coherent system of image and symbol" (205).

⁵ Swinburne's influence for the play was primarily the early Aeschylus. The *Oresteia* is often cited as a source for the play (Guzynski 216, Riede 33-34).

metaphorical death: she is described as participating in the burning death of Meleager and ends the play committing herself to silence.

Erechtheus (1876) was published a decade after the publication of *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865) and *Poems and Ballads* (1865). *Erechtheus* is most often, and perhaps most properly, read in the context of Swinburne's republicanism, which emerged in *Songs Before Sunrise* (1871) and can be related to his interest in the crusader for the Italian republic, Giuseppe Mazzini. Yet this play can also be read in the context of the themes that haunt Swinburne's early work: maternal power and incestuous threat, the affiliation of love, generation and death, the unthinkable. In both plays, parent and child die, and the "zero sum" game of sacrifice to the gods eliminates those who have done the unthinkable (murdering a child) in order to obey Fate. The same Kristevan dynamic of abjection and confusion about borders is operative, for it is here that we see the clearest definition of the abject: a wanderer without a country.

The abject is that which must be expelled and rejected, that for which borders are erected and policed, that which has the dual powers of repulsion and fascination. As in *Atalanta in Calydon*, the borders are both literal and figurative in *Erechtheus*. In her speech surrendering her daughter to sacrifice, Praxithea invokes the good of the republic, and the safety of borders as a reason for letting Chthonia go. She asks:

what hath he,
The man that hath no country? Gods nor men
Have such to friend, yoked beast-like to base life,
Vile, fruitless, groveling at the foot of death,
Landless and kinless thralls of no man's blood,
Unchilded and unmothered, abject limbs
That breed things abject. (395)

This speech by Chthonia's mother emphasizes the necessity of the sacrifice, for the result of defeat would be a literal abjection from Athens, one that entails absolute isolation from friend,

family and nation, “fruitless.” In this play, Erechtheus grapples with the “impenetrable and inhuman(e) law” that *Atalanta in Calydon* presents to the reader. He asks how he can cope with “this charge laid on me, to put out / The brief light kindled of mine own child’s life” (358). Chthonia herself makes use of the imagery of light and darkness in her reflection on the need to leave her mother for the “shadows.” She goes on to describe the paradox of her own figurative sterility and the metaphorical role she will play as “mother” to future generations of Athenians by virtue of having saved them from destruction at the hands of Eumolpus. Chthonia tells her mother that while her bed “a sterile place for all time, strewn / For my sleep only, with its void sad sheets / Shall vex thee...thy womb / Shall not want honor of me, that brought forth / For all this people freedom” (391).

The ironical presentations of birth in the play are consistent with Swinburne’s inclination to associate change with decay and love with death. He makes use of this imagery in Praxithea’s description of the oncoming war:

Now this third time his wind of wrath has blown
Right on this people a mightier wave of war,
Three times more huge a ruin; such its ridge
Foam-rimmed and hollow like the womb of heaven,
But black for shining, and with death for life
Big to birth and ripe with child, full-blown
With fear and fruit of havoc. (374)

In both plays, the threats of destruction that come from outside in the form of war or a great beast are ironically defeated by sacrifices that destroy families, neutralize children and deny reproduction for the individuals involved. The paradox of preserving the life of the city while ending the lives of its central citizens is consistent with Swinburne’s aesthetics, which are in a perpetual state of questioning limits. Adam Roberts focuses on political boundaries as a marker for order, and in his explication of the importance of the hunt and sacrifice to these plays, he

draws on traditional representations of man's domination of nature, of war, and of religious ritual as they operated in Greece (759). Speaking of the intersection of man and nature, Roberts writes, "The ancients saw hunting as a tool by which mankind could maintain civilization (with all that is politically implied by that world) in the wilderness of the natural world" (760). While Roberts focuses on the political borders, I would argue that Swinburne's interest in boundary-crossing is, as in so much of his work, reflected in his treatment of gender, sexuality, and Love as well as literal political borders. The relationships between mother and child in *Atalanta in Calydon* and *Erechtheus* can be read as a part of Swinburne's challenge to Victorian ideology, particularly the value it placed on family and reproduction. Both plays contain figures whom can be described in relation to Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection; both plays deal with the unthinkable—the murder-sacrifice of children. *Atalanta in Calydon* and *Erechtheus* both advance the discourse of infertility and sterility that marks much of Swinburne's lyric work, as can be seen in his imagery of vegetation and flowers, and his fascination with characters who are born ex nihilo: from the sea, from the air, fully formed from the head of Zeus, but always without parents.

Meleager, although described as a flower, is strictly prohibited from falling in love, sleeping with a woman, fathering his own children. Thus, the possibility romantic involvement with Atalanta leads not to resolution of the Oedipal conflict, but to the impassable, the intolerable:

If this were an ordinary tragedy of destiny, then the primary conflict would revolve around a law that Meleager must obey by disobeying it: repudiating incestuous desire and taking a wife from outside the clan. Instead, what the language of the drama presents... is a fascination with an impenetrable, inhuman(e) Law. (Guzynski 210)

In Kristeva's terms, the deject, who is always aware of the abject, circles it endlessly, unable to establish or honor the boundaries that s/he continually attempts to construe. Guzynski aligns the repetition inherent in this abject relationship to masochism, identifying it as "the most generative

name for the Swinburnean text's erotic investment, not only in painful repetition for repetition's sake but also in all reduplicative linguistic strategies" (204). Thus, in her reading, the relationship of mother and son represents "a deeply masochistic response by personifying and eroticizing the guilt toward women, thereby repeating structure of desire and the desire for punishment in an endless cycle (219).

This endless cycle is not generative of new life in a traditional way and the paradoxical nature of Swinburne's thought continually resists a single interpretation.⁶ One expression of this cyclical nature appears in the imagery employed in *Atalanta in Calydon*. In a description of her second dream, Althaea employs the figures of flower and fire that combine to characterize Meleager:

I dreamt, and saw the black brand burst on fire
As a branch bursts in flower, and saw the flame
Fade flower-wise, and Death came and with dry lips
Blew the charred ash into my breast. (l. 283-286)

This confusion of life and death—or rather, life and death treated in interchangeable terms, dominates the play. The title *Atalanta in Calydon* can seem to misrepresent its real interests, for Atalanta does not speak as much as Althaea, her foil in many ways, and the emotional center of the work. These two women are both related thematically to Artemis, the instigator of the action by way of the punishment she sent to Calydon, the boar. Artemis, particularly as the huntress Diana, is an emblem of inviolability. She is a virgin goddess and may not be seen by men. The consequences of stumbling upon her are the basis of the story of Actaeon. Mark Siegchrist has argued that Artemis, who is unseen in *Atalanta in Calydon*, nevertheless serves as its center, and that her primary thematic importance to the play is as goddess of virginity rather than of the hunt ([695]). Additionally, Artemis is "along with

⁶ Articulated by John Rosenberg in his 1967 "Swinburne." *Victorian Studies*. 11. (1967)

Dionysus, a barbarian Olympian” because she is “goddess of the margins, of borderlands” (Olverson 764). Part of her appeal is her wildness. It seems that this dual role of occupying borders while being something of a misfit among Olympians meshes with the tensions inherent in Swinburne’s sexual and literary projects. Artemis herself lives outside of political borders, and the space which she occupies clearly carries great power. The action of *Atalanta in Calydon* centers on the revenge of Artemis, enacted without sight of the goddess herself.

Artemis’s only appearance in *Atalanta in Calydon* is through a representation of her space within the woods. Artemis is addressed by the Chorus, which gives “praise / For this lightening of weather clear / And prosperities begun” after the killing of the boar (l.1441-1443).

She lives:

There in the cold remote recesses
That nor alien eyes assail,
Feet, nor imminence of wings,
Nor a wind nor any tune...
With reluctant lengthening tresses
And with sudden splendid breast
Save of maidens un beholden. (l. 1396-1399, 1402-1404)

In this passage, Swinburne’s diction resists time itself, and presents a world that is as close to utterly still and unmoving as is possible. There are no wings, wind, or song; hair is “reluctant” to grow, and the sight of eyes is aggressive, only able to “assail” and to respond to the goddess’ “sudden” breast. Atalanta is a reflection of the virginal Artemis, and she is imaged in terms of celibacy. As the hunt is about to begin, Atalanta describes herself as “a woman, yet no wife” (l. 879) and, in a defense of herself to Plexippus and Toxeus, insists that in her “iron maidenhood” she “shall have no man’s love / For ever, and [see] no face of children born” (l. 967-968). She is described by Oeneus as “not like the natural flower of things / That grows and bears and brings forth fruit and dies; / Unloveable, no light for a husband’s house” (l. 634-636).

Owing to this distance from what her perceives as Atalanta's proper role, Plexippus claims that her only use in the hunt may be as a blood sacrifice:

Let her come crowned and stretch her throat for a knife,
Bleat out her spirit and die, and so shall men
Through her too prosper and through prosperous gods,
But nowise through her living. (l. 934-937)

In his analysis of this passage Roberts points out the double meaning present: "the implication that the 'blood'...is hymenal blood, and that the ritual being suggested is not sacrifice but marriage, cannot be overlooked" (766). The significance of this double meaning is reinforced by an apparent preference by the ancients for female sacrifices. Roberts writes, "it seems that women are better suited for sacrifice than men, a function of the potential fecundity of the victim" (766); yet, as I have been arguing, the women in *Atalanta* are described as infertile. In fact, it is Meleager who is described as blooming, alive and potentially sexually productive. His male body, represented by a brand plucked from the fire, is endowed through Swinburne's imagery with a generative potential, as a flower, or as corn. In describing the slaying of the Boar, for example, the herald says that Meleager is "like a sun in the spring that strikes / Branch into leaf and bloom into the world" (37). Althaea herself describes him in such terms as "a goodly flower in fields of fight," but also a delicate thing, a "tenderer thing / Than any flower of fleshly seed alive" (l. 235, 256-257). A mythic discourse of the life cycle embodied in vegetation—corn and flowers—replaces reproductive sexuality although in the end, Meleager's generative potential is also unfulfilled for he is destined for the fire. Following a logic of "fecundity" and sacrifice, it is fitting that Meleager fulfill the sacrificial role in the tragedy, his death following that of the boar almost immediately.

This expression of balance—one that is vegetative—aligns itself with imagery of the alternation between opposites that is pervasive in Swinburne's work: the passage of time, the

movement from night to day and spring to fall, and most importantly the presence of chaos and the restoration of order. This tension produces boundaries and borders, and this facet of the play is embodied directly in Althaea's directives to Meleager to obey the Law and Fate. Kristeva's vision of abjection is expressed in part through spatial imagery as a boundary crossing, a wandering that results in the dissolution of clear borders. In this way, the deficient and the excessive become confused with one another. Because Atalanta will not marry or have children, she is figured as less-than-female by Althaea:

A woman armed makes war upon herself,
Unwomanlike, and treads down use and wont
And the sweet common honour that she hath,
Love, and the cry of children, and the hand
Trothplight and mutual mouth of marriages. (l. 477-481)

Thus living outside of conventional boundaries, Atalanta's life is presented in images of spatial wastes by both herself and Althaea. Althaea fears Atalanta's arrival, and says that she wishes the huntress had looked for love "in dens where strange beasts lurk, or fire / Or snows on the extreme hills, or iron land / Where no spring is" (l. 191-193). Atalanta describes her life in similarly abject terms. She tells Plexippus:

Far off from flowers or any bed of man,
Shall be my life for ever: me the snows
That face the first o' the morning, and cold hills
Full of the land-wind and sea-travelling storms
And many a wandering wing of noisy nights
That know the thunder and hear the thickening wolves—
Me the utmost pine and footless frost of woods...
These me allure, and know me. (l. 974-980, 985)

These descriptions also have to remind the reader of the still, empty grove where Artemis stays, where there is not even wind or song to intrude. Meleager is also implicated in the blurring of gender identification. Plexippus, arguing with Meleager about the appropriateness of a woman

on the boar hunt, suggests that if she may hunt, perhaps he should spin thread: “Why, if she ride among us for a man, / Sit thou for her and spin; a man grown girl / Is worth a woman weaponed” (l. 920-922).

Atalanta is a foreigner in Calydon, thus crossing another spatial border in order to participate in the hunt. The existence of the boar itself stems from a figurative neglect of boundaries in the form of denying Artemis a sacrifice. The result is the great boar that destroys all that grows in the spring that opens the play. The boar:

mars with tooth and tusk and fiery feet
Green pasturage and the grace of standing corn
And meadow and marsh with springs and unblown leaves,
Flocks and swift herds and all that bite sweet grass. (l. 165-168)

The season for regeneration, spring, is marred from the outset by destruction. In the first lines of the play, the stars above mimic a waste land, empty of vegetation, “the flowerless fields of heaven” (l. 2). Althaea refuses to praise Artemis, even as the penitent sacrifice is being laid out for her, and the hunt of the boar is about to begin. For Althaea, the main principle of the seasons is destruction, not creation. “I know / Spring shall be ruined with the rain,” she says, “and storm / Eat up like fire the ashen autumn days” (l. 130-132). Her eventual act of consuming Meleager’s life in the fires of her home are reflected in this imagery. Likewise, Artemis is implored by the Chief Huntsman in his invocation to “consume” the boar (l. 42). In both of these eventualities—the symbolic consumptions of the boar and Meleager by the women who gave birth to them—death comes close to being a denial of birth, as both the powerful boar and the godlike hunter are metaphorically devoured rather than simply dying.

The goddess Love herself—Venus—is described by the Chorus as marching forward between the figures of Fate and Death and is, as in the early poetry, a symbol of sterility, suffering, and decay. Althaea articulates the threat that Atalanta poses in some of the first lines of

the play in terms of love, calling it “a thwart sea-wind full of rain and foam” (l. 184). She also delivers the first developed image of a motif of flowers and fruit, deployed ironically. Althaea’s “presage” is that

fresh tears
Flower-wise upon the old root of tears brought forth,
Fruit-wise upon the old flower of tears sprung up,
Pitiful sighs, and much regrafted pain. (l. 212-215)

Here, pain is what is cultivated in a garden of love. This same figure is used in *Erechtheus* when a Messenger brings the news that Chthonia’s two sisters have killed themselves, being either “shame soul-stung / To outlive her dead” or suspecting that the gods require their lives as additional sacrifices (404). He announces that: “As flower is graffed on flower, so grief on grief / Engrafted brings forth new blossoms of strange tears, / Fresh buds and green fruits of an alien pain” (403).

Tears and sighs spring from previous tears. Along with the virginal Artemis and the patroness Athena of *Erechtheus*, who is invoked by the Chorus as “O thou not born of the womb, nor bred / In the bride-night’s warmth of a changed God’s bed” (362), Venus the goddess of Love is described in *Atalanta in Calydon* as having no parent. Rather, Swinburne uses the language of flowers and roots to describe her birth on the sea. Love is “A bitter flower from the bud, / Sprung of the sea without root, / Sprung without graft from the years” (l. 734-736). She comes flanked by “Fate and Death [and the image] looks like an iconic representation of Swinburne’s personal masochism: a fatally desirable woman in intimate congress with Death” (Guzynski 215).⁷ The

⁷ For more on this topic, see Dellamora, Richard. “Poetic Perversions of A.C. Swinburne.” *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism*. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1990. 69-85. Print. Also, Palmer, Jerry. “Fierce Midnights: Algolagniac Fantasy and the Literature of the Decadence.” *Decadence and the 1890s*. Ed. Ian Fletcher. Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies 17. General Ed. Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer. London: Edward Arnold, 1979. [60]-87. Print

description of Love follows a long disputation between Althaea and Meleager on the values of love and the law. In this exchange, Althaea warns Meleager “Love thou the law and cleave to things ordained” (l. 454). For Althaea, love threatens order because it threatens fate, and the bloom of a bud is, like the spring, doomed to marry Death: “the breath in the buds that stir is her bridal breath: / But Fate is the name of her; and his name is Death” (l. 727-728).

In the place of the image of generation succeeding generation, these plays propose a balance of life between mother and child which results in almost cannibalistic consumption of the child. In *Atalanta* this relationship results in Althaea’s jealousy toward Atalanta, and her fear of love intruding on a semi-incestual definition of family. The interchange of life between parent and child is described several times. After the deaths of Plexippus and Toxeus are revealed, the Chorus tries to console Althaea by reminding her of the interconnectedness of her life and Meleager’s:

[Meleager] Eats thee and drinks thee as who breaks bread and eats,
Treads wine and drinks, thyself, a sect of thee;
And if he feed not, shall not thy flesh faint?
Or drink not, are not thy lips dead for thirst? (l. 1679-1682)

And when Meleager begins to waste as she foresaw in her dream, she partakes in his death, saying, “I am kindled with the flames that fade in him, / I am swollen with subsiding of his veins, / I am flooded with his ebbing” (l. 1920-1922). As Guzynski has pointed out “the play literally cannot tell whether Althaea or Meleager begins to burn first” (216). In this image, the lives of mother and son are one. John Jordan reads the conclusion as “a return to the maternal womb and an absorption of his tormented flesh back into the undivided unity of Nature” (114).

Dorothea Barrett, addressing Swinburne’s use of “lesbianism, sado-masochism, incest, and death-wish,” argues that, contrary to the comfort of many critics, “the sexual deviations one has been assiduously relating to revolutionary verve prove to be...autonomous and demonstrably

stronger than any political belief” (108). Like these sexual kinks, the death of children can seem over-determined. Ross Murfin feels it necessary to ask, “What does this human sacrifice [Chthonia] have to do with a conflict between the fragile city of Athens and the malign sea which surrounds it?” (208). Both *Atalanta in Calydon* and *Erechtheus* perpetuate another fascination as deeply rooted in Swinburne as was the paradox of pleasure and pain: sterility and infertility. The republicanism, religious iconoclasm, and aesthetic classicism that are often central to discussions of *Atalanta in Calydon* and *Erechtheus* operate in tandem with the sterility and tendency for stasis that appears in Swinburne: cycles of obsessive repetition, birth and reabsorption into a mother, and irresolvable binaries of night and day, earth and sea. These works present, however obliquely, city-states absent of birth. Death, Love, and Fate operate to deny abiding ideologies of home and family, and to present to the Victorian age an image of pessimism through his denial of generative love and sexuality. The persistent presence of figures without biological parents and of child murder from Althaea’s burning of the brand to Zeus striking down his grandson Erechtheus operate regardless of other political and aesthetic concerns because they are integral to Swinburne’s vision of the world.

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CHAPTER III

EVERYDAY COMMUNION: INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *THE YEARS* AND *BETWEEN THE ACTS*

In *The Years* Eleanor asks herself, “Oughtn’t a life to be something you can handle and produce?—a life of seventy-odd years. But I’ve only the present moment” (268). Eleanor, like many characters in Virginia Woolf’s late novels, poses the problem of the self. It seems that a life should be solid and objective; that the years should accrue to something tangible. Yet, she finds herself, at her sister Delia’s party in “the present,” left with just that, the fleeting nature of the present moment. In *The Years* (1937) and *Between the Acts* (1941), Woolf describes selves that are fractured and incomplete, but who seek to find communion with another. In this version of community, which comes unexpectedly, characters experience a feeling of wholeness, that stands in opposition to the well-known “orts, scraps, and fragments” (188) of the audience in *Between the Acts*.

Critics and scholars thinking about Woolf’s versions of community have had to wrestle with the observation that Woolf’s novels are uniformly “ambivalent and exploratory about community,” and that they even represent “community as necessarily a matter of division and misunderstanding as much as harmony” (Bowlby 147). More bluntly put, Woolf often communicates the “paradoxical” feeling that “community is both

desirable and dangerous” (DeHay 180).⁸ Perceiving that communities can at once threaten to consume the individual and enable her to connect with others, it is not surprising that Woolf’s fragmentary characters experience wholeness in brief flashes at events such as a party, a society dinner or a village pageant. These occasions provide opportunities for unexpected communion between characters, but by virtue of their utter conventionality, they raise questions about the nature of community and the role that art can play in it. I argue that in *The Years* and *Between the Acts* the everyday and the banal provide the crucible in which community is formed more than encounters with art in spite of the radical aspects of Miss La Trobe’s village pageant. Virginia Woolf’s engagement with art and aesthetics through her association with figures such as Roger Fry and Clive Bell, as well as her frequent use of art and the artist as a literary figure makes the reader want to place Art at the center of the relationships in Woolf’s writing. While it may be a bit disheartening to remove the artist from her privileged position, I argue that it is not art but mere social conventions that facilitate the tentative groupings of individuals we see in these novels. The pageant that organizes *Between the Acts* occurs every year, comes with its own sets of expectations and community goals and exists in time quite beyond any of its individual participants. *The Years* culminates in the “present day,” a sequence of dinners, social visits, and a party at Delia’s house, where the characters—and by extension the times and history which they characterize: 1880, 1891, 1907, 1908, 1910, 1911, 1913, 1914, and 1917—converge.

⁸ This sense is perhaps most clear in relation to gender, as has been noted with regard to *The Years*, in particular. *Three Guineas*, of course, delves deliberately into the engagement of women with politically dominant communities.

Recent scholarship on *Between the Acts* (1941) has taken up questions of authority and community by focusing on two major points: 1) the novel's stake in creating communities that stand *contra* fascism, and 2) the creation of community through the experience of art. This point is usually made with reference to the scene, taken to be the crux of the novel, wherein the actors of the pageant run out toward the audience, holding all sort of reflective surfaces to their faces, showing the audience its own broken semblance. This artistic moment is currently understood to possess a political (anti-paternalistic, anti-fascist) valence. In this paper I argue that these two useful points should not be considered as the end of the novel's interest for readers and scholars. While not denying the importance of Woolf's anti-fascism to the composition of *Between the Acts*, I look to Woolf's previous novels of the 1930s, *The Waves* (1931) and, especially, *The Years* (1937), (a novel that has more in common with *Between the Acts* than is usually thought), to contextualize her depiction of communities rather than to the immediate exigencies of Nazism. I also challenge the position that Woolf represents Art and artists *through personages in her novels* as having the power to forge communities. Woolf's theories of art and life as a politically engaged writer are not necessarily the same thing as the relationship of art to life *as depicted in her novels*. As has been argued before, Woolf "represents British daily life as social text" and "focus[es] on the rituals of public life—family dinners, garden parties, court trials, and family reunions" (Cramer 207). By returning to the texts, I argue that moments of communion between individuals happen within the context of social convention, often unexpectedly. In order to focus on the less-studied text *The Years* and moments in *Between the Acts* which are rarely

considered, I will not substantively address works such as *A Room of One's Own* (1926) or *Three Guineas* (1938) that can be seen to have an integral relationship to these novels.

Undoubtedly, Woolf's work in the 1930s can be seen partially as a response to the rise of Mussolini in Italy, Hitler in Germany, and English fascists such as Oswald Mosley.⁹ Much recent scholarship on Woolf's final novel has seen an oppositional response to fascism through the decentered narration of the novel, the fragmentation of language, and the multiplicity of images presented against the unitary and ordered face of repressive ideologies. The pageant presented in *Between the Acts*, because it breaks down the roles of actor and audience, has been interpreted as a reimagination of community that resists not only fascism, but the imperialism and paternalism that Woolf identified as the domestic face of fascism in *Three Guineas*.¹⁰ Melba Cuddy-Keane has argued that "it is surely possible 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" (274). Emily Hinnov asserts that Woolf's "later work evinces a politico-aesthetics particularly concerned with the threat posed by fascism as a totalitarian ideology...implicit in the British public and private life as well as abroad" (7). She further argues that the fragmentation that is fundamental to the stylistics of *Between the Acts* is a response to fascism, which upheld ideals of unity and conformity. For Hinnov,

⁹ Political currents do appear explicitly, though they are rarely brooded on in the novels. For example, As they prepare to leave for Delia's party near the end of *The Years*, Eleanor glances a picture on the front page of the paper and stops cold. She cries "What a face!...Damned—...bully!" The picture as described by Peggy, who is "short-sighted," depicts "a fat man [probably Mussolini] gesticulating" (242).

¹⁰ Near the end of the essay, in an analysis of the fear of working women, Woolf connects the private and public spheres explicitly: "Such then is the conclusion to which our enquiry into the nature of fear has brought us—the fear which forbids freedom in the private house. That fear, small, insignificant and private as it is, is connected with the other fear, the public fear, which is neither small nor insignificant" (141-142).

Woolf is “concerned with artwork composed of fragmentary materials as a response to the seeming whole of the fascist threat” (7).

Fragmentation, of a kind, also becomes a tool to resist fascism in the view of Michele Pridmore-Brown, whose analysis of technology, sound waves, and Miss La Trobe’s gramophone leads her to the conclusion that the difficulties of communication caused by static interference during the pageant are a way to privilege the listener and create space for anti-fascist participation in an audience. Thus, “[w]hereas fascism suppresses the mind and its will to interpretation, Woolf emphasizes the particularities of the auditor or receiver as an information-processing system differentially positioned in a domestic and global field” (416). The message of Miss La Trobe, an ineffectual tyrant and in Cuddy-Keane’s view, a comic figure, contains gaps which can be used to read against the victory marches and national anthems typical to such a village performance.¹¹

During the show:

[T]he gramophone at first acts as a tool for controlling the audience gathered at Pointz Hall. Through this device, Woolf explores fascism’s emphasis on acoustic communion...Ultimately, however, La Trobe deliberately uses her gramophone to adulterate the messages of authority, thus interrupting what can be considered the imperialism of perfect communication. (411)

Pridmore-Brown’s thesis turns the most ready assumption, that fragmentation is a negative and a mark of entropy, upside down by positing the need for perfect communication in a system like that which existed in Hitler’s Germany (411). “Perfect

¹¹ For Cuddy-Keane “La Trobe is not a satiric portrait judged against the norm of traditional notions of successful leadership but is instead an amiable comic figure who functions to extend and redefine those very assumptions” (278).

communication” may also seem to be a structured and premeditated form of imperialism because speech between characters in novels, as in life, is never so rhetorically forceful, unambiguous, or complete as one of Hitler’s speeches. Pridmore-Brown notes that the rise of Hitler coincided with the proliferation of the radio as a form of mass communication, a form which one cannot talk back to, and which broadcasts rehearsed, crafted communications. The relative imperfection of everyday speech is emphasized in *The Years* and *Between the Acts*. It has been pointed out many times that fragmented sentences, thoughts, and quotations constitute a major stylistic feature of these works.

The sense of lack on the part of the individual and the fleeting apperception of wholeness are important to Woolf’s late work because, unlike novels such as *To the Lighthouse*, in which Lily Briscoe must defend herself against institutions such as marriage and dominant forces such as Mr. Ramsay, whose pacing on the lawn disturbs her concentration, and popular taste, represented by the landscape painter Paunceforte. Lily Briscoe, looking at her painting,

could have wept. It was bad, it was bad, it was infinitely bad! She could have done it differently of course; the colour could have been thinned and faded; the shapes etherealized; that was how Paunceforte would have seen it. But then she did not see it like that. (35)

Lily’s point of view, were it to be discovered, would be co-opted, altered, or otherwise perverted by the Charles Tansleys of the world, men who say “Women can’t paint,

women can't write" (62).¹² By contrast, *The Years*, and *Between the Acts* downplay the isolated vision of the artist and present characters who reach outward in order to find wholeness. Communion always stands forward from a dark background of fragmentation. We can see an example of this change in emphasis—the move from defense to communion—on a small scale through a brief comparison of the attitudes of Lily Briscoe and Miss La Trobe toward their audiences. The word most often used to describe Lily's conception of the painting that she is working on is "vision."¹³ It is personal, fragile, impossible to describe in words. When describing Miss La Trobe's response to her creation, Woolf often uses the word "glory." At the conclusion of the pageant, La Trobe is described as ecstatic: "She could say to the world, You have taken my gift! Glory possessed her" (209). If we can imagine Lily's term "vision" meaning something like artistic inspiration, then Miss La Trobe's "glory" might be the communication of that spark. As the first portion of the pageant comes to an end, Miss La Trobe basks, for a moment, in what she achieves:

Now Miss La Trobe stepped from her hiding. Flowing, and streaming, on the grass, on the gravel, still for one moment she held them together—the dispersing company. Hadn't she, for twenty-five minutes, made them see? A vision imparted was relief from agony. (98)

¹² Woolf adopts a similar attitude in *A Room of One's Own* (1926), asserting that women writers must craft their own sentence, for the sentence that lay behind Johnson and Gibbon is "unsuited for a woman's use" (83).

¹³ For example in the novel's conclusion, wherein Lily completes the painting: "With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the center. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue. I have had my vision" (154).

By the end of the 1930s, Woolf's art has become engaged with the world. Her artists, and her characters in general, ask questions about connection with others rather than the development of their isolated selves. At the same time, the individual remains the foundation of her novels.

The question, then, becomes how do characters find wholeness in one another? *The Waves* (1931) presents a community of individuals who relate to one another in many different ways, but whose primary connection is through their mutual friend Percival. The novel is structured around the repetitions of waves on a beach, and makes use of both the rhythm of the day and its analogy, the life of the individual rising and setting as the sun. The major plot points are dinners, one to say farewell to Percival as he leaves for India, the next to bring the group back together years after Percival has died, uselessly, in an accident. Describing this second dinner at Hampton Court, Bernard characterizes the six speaking characters by saying: "We saw for a moment laid out among us the body of the complete human being whom we have failed to be, but at the same time, cannot forget" (205). Here Bernard invokes the ideal of community. Individually, he, Neville, Louis, Rhoda, Jinny, and Susan are described as incomplete. The metaphorical body—whether it be a vision of Percival's corpse, or the incorporation of their six subjectivities—is the image of wholeness that has been sundered. *The Waves* emphasizes the characters' isolation through use of the monologue as its frame. There is only one aside, a conversation between Rhoda and Louis, that deviates from the sense of a character talking to him/herself. Woolf's subsequent novels return to a more vivid, detailed world, but continue to ask the questions that the speakers of *The Waves* ask.

Although it was the only novel by Virginia Woolf to appear on the *New York Times* bestseller list, *The Years* has generally been considered an aesthetic failure, and the long history of the text in its different manifestations has been examined in depth. Nevertheless, some critics have argued that *The Years* “succeeds beautifully” in its attempt to “combine the real and the visionary, the political and the spiritual” (Cramer 203). There are important similarities in the structures of this novel and *Between the Acts*, particularly in their conclusions. In both novels, the reader can see an increasing tendency toward partial and misunderstood communication that culminates in a moment of heightened confusion, chaos, static, and nonsense. At the same time, these novels both include moments of unexpected community, on the level of the group or audience, and of unexpected communion on the level of the individual. The groups themselves are non-hierarchical and inclusive, as is Woolf’s style, “giving [*The Years*] a fluidity... which moves from character to character, never actually giving us one main character” (DeHay 183).

In the final section of *The Years*, “Present Day”—between 1931 and 1933—the characters of North, Sara, and Peggy are all used to explore the nature of the “whole” self and the role of art in community.¹⁴ *The Years* emphasizes social interactions and political relationships whether the context is Irish independence or women’s suffrage. North comments on this to everyone he meets; the fact that all people in England talk about is money and politics becomes his “stock phrase” (293). The exception, in his view, is

¹⁴ “Present Day: we can date the chapter from Peggy’s age: according to Eleanor, in 1922 Peggy is ‘sixteen or seventeen’ (150), and in ‘Present Day’ she is ‘thirty-seven, thirty-eight?’ (288), which makes it sometime between 1931 and 1933” (*Notes*, “Present Day.” 1. 351)

Edward, who has the habit of leaving “half of his sentences unfinished” (298). North attributes this characteristic to Edward being a literary man and interprets the behavior as a signifier of Edward’s “freedom” from the tyranny of “money and politics”; however, the reverse side of Edward’s habit of leaving sentences unfinished may be that he is unwilling to finish the sentences of others and thereby make connections with them (299). North expresses this difficulty in terms of fear, and implicates both Edward and himself. Looking across the room at a young literary man, North reflects “He’s afraid of me because I’m a farmer....And I’m afraid of him because he’s clever” (303). By contrast, Eleanor reaches out directly, looking for Nicholas Pomjalovsky to finish her thought: “She wanted him...to take her thought and carry it out into the open unbroken; to make it whole, beautiful, entire” (271). Indeed, looking back on life, Eleanor says, “My life’s been other people’s lives...my father’s; Morris’s; my friends’ lives” (269).

One of the ironies of Woolf’s style in these late novels is that the reader can see where characters *might* reach toward communion even though the characters themselves do not. This particular brand of dramatic irony is employed most bluntly in *Between the Acts*, when the reader hears, through the changing perspective of the discourse, three silent lamentations from Giles, William and Isa: “I’m damnably unhappy,” “So am I,” “And I too” (176). In both *The Years* and *Between the Acts* Woolf suggests that fear is part of the reason that people do not communicate. Inability to overcome this fear becomes an important impasse in the novels, which present communion as a necessity even though sex, gender, and class work to prohibit it. Nicholas’ question—“If we do not

know ourselves, how can we know other people?”—often takes on a political significance and articulates the greatest obstacle to community in *The Years*.

During a dinner before the final party, North—just back from Africa—and Sarah try to reconstruct their relationship. Sara quotes from memory North’s letters about being a young man farming in Africa, “sitting on the verandah...looking at the stars” (231). They recall the past without difficulty, but the present day gives them more trouble. In the middle of a recitation of Andrew Marvell’s “The Garden” Sara holds up a hand to stop North speaking. The noise that stops Sara is “The Jew having a bath” (248). His presence sets Sara off on a rhetorically high-flown mock-adventure which takes her from the “slum” where she lives, to the dirty streets of London, to a newspaper office seeking employment. The story takes on the character of a quest at times—“I had a talisman, a glowing gem, a lucent emerald...a letter of introduction” (250)—and is driven on by a manic urgency that causes her to enter the city, “a river’s bank, when the tide’s out.”

In her story North hears the circumstances of poverty, for it is a story of working-class alienation. It is an anti-Semitic story of disadvantage that turns on a mundane detail—a Jew in the bath, the proposed cause of Sara’s troubles. North thinks, “The actual words...meant that she was poor; that she must earn her living” (250). The story is a rare break from polite conversation, a moment of unguarded and unrehearsed communication between North and Sara that causes him to wonder about his cousin. North is not taken aback by the content of her story, but by the way she tells it: “the excitement with which she had spoken...had created yet another person; another semblance, which one must solidify into one whole” (251).

In this section of the novel, Peggy also asks questions about identity. Like North, Peggy dabbles as a writer. This type of character is not unusual in Woolf. In *The Waves*, Bernard forever collects “phrases” in *The Waves* for a novel that will never be written. Peggy and North are uncomfortable, however, inhabiting the role of the artist. Peggy herself accuses North of the intention of marrying and writing “little books” instead of living “differently” (286). Both characters are aware of their limitations—as is Lily Briscoe. North “wanted to make other sentences. But how can I, he thought...unless I know what’s solid, what’s true; in my life, in other people’s lives?” (300). Peggy makes her family into her subject, encouraging Eleanor to recount her youth so that she can reconstruct the older woman for a coworker at the hospital. But even in her personal assessment of her “note-taking,” which continues through the party at Delia’s, Peggy recognizes her limitations: “I’m good, she thought, at fact-collecting. But what makes up a person—, (she hollowed her hand), the circumference,—no, I’m not good at that” (258).¹⁵

Peggy initially “takes notes” as a way of coping with a party that she does not want to attend. She looks to this detail-oriented art for help, but does not feel relief and spends much of the party sitting on the floor, wondering how a person can be happy when “On every placard at every street corner was Death; or worse—tyranny; brutality; torture; the fall of civilization; the end of freedom” (284). Eleanor feels that progress has been made because Renny and Maggie are happy but Peggy cannot separate the world at large from the lives of individuals. Yet Woolf offers little in the way of a solution to the

¹⁵ Nicholas, when describing the soul, likewise uses his hands. Discussing the soul with Eleanor, he “hollowed his hands as if to enclose a circle” (216).

political problems of the outside world besides Eleanor's giddy recourse to the personal moment of communion. In a scene where Renny, Maggie, Eleanor and North play a game that produces a composite drawing of Queen Alexandra, a bird, a tiger, and an elephant, Peggy's high-mindedness is undercut. Peggy, who had been worried over the fall of civilization paragraphs earlier, experiences a change: "She felt, or rather she saw, not a place, but a state of being, in which there was real laughter, real happiness, and this fractured world was whole; whole, and free. But how could she say it?" (285). In fact, she does try to say it and fails. In her attempt to verbalize her own subjective feeling, Peggy "had broken off only a little fragment of what she meant to say," but ends by insulting North. Woolf thus leaves the reader to a paradoxical set of claims: Peggy felt wholeness during a "silly" game not while thinking about public problems, and when she tried to communicate her feeling she failed, but felt relieved anyway.

As another character enters, Peggy notes the group breaking up. She thinks, "Directly something got together, it broke. She had a feeling of desolation" (287). There are several moments in the late novels that mark just this kind of dissolution—moments where a character feels that something has ended, often something that had never been formally defined. In *The Waves*, the moment of Bernard's engagement is such an instance. Louis describes this moment as the breaking of a chain, the return of disorder: "For one moment only...see us fixed, see us displayed....But now the circle breaks" (103). The fixity of the group has been damaged, and must thenceforth exist in a new combination. In *The Years* Nicholas argues that this is what the soul wants to do: "to expand; to adventure; to form—new combinations" (216). In Peggy's scene, a small

community had been formed that was an important moment of community for Peggy, because it represented an opportunity to attempt to speak about her vision of life—the importance of living “differently.” Even though the result is socially embarrassing, she feels relief because “She had not said it, but she had tried to say it. Now she could rest” (286).

Like *The Years*, which Woolf described as an attempt to “give the whole of the present society—nothing less: facts, as well as vision” (*Diary IV* 151) *Between the Acts* does not have a traditional protagonist. Galia Benziman has identified the “protagonist” of *Between the Acts* as “society as a whole” in a time of national crisis (53-54). Woolf described *Between the Acts* as a work that would be at once collective and individual, “‘We’...composed of many different things...we all life, all art, all waifs & strays—a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole—the present state of my mind?” (*Diary V* 135 Woolf’s ellipses). Woolf favored the “we” over “I” in the book, leveling privilege to create a democratic set of relations that calls the idea of authority into question. I argue that the dynamics of individual communion among social conventions that are potentially threatening holds sway over *Between the Acts* just as in *The Years*.

With regard to *Between the Acts* recent scholars have proposed that art is the medium through which relations can be changed. Galia Benziman has argued that Miss La Trobe’s pageant acts as a medium for forging a new English identity that can withstand the threat of Nazi invasion. Benziman views Miss La Trobe as a symbolic mother, an artist through whom the community can “see” itself. She writes “Miss La Trobe is the agent through whom this communal being can constitute itself as a separate

being. La Trobe is the medium that supplies this body of people with a shared narrative, which is to serve them as their memory, a foundation for identity” (63). By ascribing such a central role to Miss La Trobe, Benziman raises art itself up as “the agent that mediates between the internal, subjective self-perception of the individual and the enveloping, collective image of the social unit” (63). It is possible to overstate the success of the pageant, and the role of art as an agent of change in general. The pageant is intended by Miss La Trobe to be a work of art, but at the same time, it is a conventional exercise, a chance to reinscribe social relationships between the gentry and villagers, an opportunity to raise money for the electrification of the parish church. The pageant is abandoned by Miss La Trobe in favor of a new play, one that rises to the surface of her mind in the pub immediately after the conclusion of the village show (211-212).

Taken in this vein, as a conventional presentation that cannot overturn history itself, we might agree with Liesl Olson that “everyday actions sometimes have the power to resist or subvert the history that preceded them, albeit in very small ways” (65). The marginalized status of artists in Woolf’s late novels is interesting because of the way it stands in contrast to the aesthetic theories of Woolf herself. While it may be true that “For Woolf, art transforms our behavior in the world by reconfiguring our relations to both the artwork and its audience,” art itself plays a limited role in forming community between characters in her texts (Hinnov 16). The audience of *Between the Acts* largely resists Miss La Trobe’s question: How can we build civilization if we are only orts, scraps and fragments. The final scene turns us not toward a new approach, but returns us

to an ancient moment, with Giles and Isa Oliver beginning their fight “as the dog fox fights with the vixen” (219).

Both conclude with dispersals, and both conclusions are plagued by failure of communication between “authority” and group. In *The Years*, the end of Delia’s party is structured around the speech from Nicholas that never occurs, and the coming sunrise. As in *The Waves*, where natural rhythm is a driving force, *The Years* concludes with an image of natural order coinciding with the sunrise. Eleanor, always optimistic, asks a question complementary to Nicholas’s “If we do not know ourselves, how can we know others?” Her question, which she answers in the affirmative during Delia’s party, is “Can we improve ourselves?” (231). The final image of the text is a young couple unlocking a door and standing on their threshold for a moment (318). This ending assumes an ameliorative attitude toward time and progress, certainly. Whether this is an aesthetic failure of the novel is a separate question to the concerns at hand. This conclusion is consistent with the majority of Woolf’s representations of wholeness because it takes place in the perception of a single character and it happens by chance—it could not be prescribed or arranged.

The inability of conventional actions to mark beginnings and endings finds its expression in Nicholas’ attempt at making a speech as the morning approaches. Nicholas initiates the speech, standing spontaneously and beating the table with his fork. His lack of authority over the group—perhaps authority to speak for the group—is emphasized by Woolf’s presentation of him as “A large man sitting at a table in the corner” rather than as “Nicholas” or “Brown” (303). His relative anonymity—in a room that includes faces

and names from all wings of the Pargiter family—is emphasized by the question asked by Edward, who does not know Brown: “What, a speech?” The party is described as “buzzing,” and a girl falls, distracting the audience. After this incident, “a buzz of talk had risen like the buzz of flies over sugar” and the audience loses interest. Brown sits down. Rose beats on the table, calling again for attention, but now Brown himself says “Let’s talk about pink frocks” rather than giving his toast. This continues for about five pages of text. As Brown is about to begin his speech, an interruption cuts him short. During the interludes, the conversation is dominated by the Pargiter children: Rose, Martin, Delia, Eleanor, and their cousin Kitty. They return to the past, recalling childhood at Abercorn Terrace. In this way, Woolf delivers what a reader might expect from a speech at a family reunion: childhood recollections, family jokes (Rose looks like Uncle Pargiter of Pargiter’s Horse), choices made in youth (“That’s why I didn’t marry you, Kitty said to herself”), and the pain of youth (Delia says of Abercorn Terrace, “It was Hell!”). While Brown’s ideas and his presence inform our reading of Woolf’s construction of community in the novel, he is not the authority to make a speech. Instead, Woolf uses the space during which his toast is at issue to indirectly deliver a retrospective summation of the principal ensemble: the children whose lives the novel has tracked since 1880.

Like Brown, Miss La Trobe is an outsider. Brown is not related to any character in *The Years*. He is a Pole and he is gay. Miss La Trobe is similarly ascribed a kind of foreignness, and is lesbian. Whereas Brown hardly insists on giving his speech (Kitty Lasswade is more invested than he), Miss La Trobe, a writer, wants to communicate her

vision, to receive her “glory,” if only for a moment. Yet, she has similar difficulties with her audience. From the beginning, the audience inserts itself into the play. Lucy Swithin is late and Miss La Trobe cries, “the torture of these interruptions!” (79). The villagers sing, but “half their words were blown away” (78). As the play moves closer to the present, the audience becomes more uncomfortable until, finally, the pageant reaches “The Present Time. Ourselves,” for which Miss La Trobe has scripted ten minutes of silence, actual time in the present day (179). The audience, misunderstanding Miss La Trobe’s intention, begins to get restless. Jazz music comes on the gramophone, and the players, in the most famous scene in the novel, rush out, holding “Anything that’s bright enough to reflect, presumably, ourselves” (183). At first, it is only “the riff-raff. Children?” who hold up the mirrors. When the actors on stage descend, the audience is not sure whether they have done so on Miss La Trobe’s orders or not:

Then once more, in the uproar which by this time has passed quite beyond control, behold Miss Whatsername behind the tree summoned from the bushes—or was it *they* who broke away—Queen Bess; Queen Anne; and the girl in the Mall; and the Age of Reason; and Budge the policeman. Here they came. (184-185)

Miss La Trobe even loses her name, becoming the anonymous voice from the bushes which will speak its Jeremiad to the audience. The aleatory fragmentation of the words blown away on the wind throughout the play finds an aesthetic complement in this scene, for as the stage players hold up their improvised mirrors, the players “declaimed some phrase or fragment from their parts” (185) and created the kind of fragmentary cross-talk

that marks the dispersal of the actual audience, which comes, in the end, to include the actors, each “still act[ing] the unacted part conferred on them by their clothes” (195).

The question posed by the voice of the loudspeaker, “*How’s this wall, the great wall, which we call, perhaps miscall, civilization, to be built by...orts, scraps, and fragments like ourselves?*” (188) is a cousin to Nicholas’ question: “how can we make laws, religions, that fit, that fit, when we don’t know ourselves?” (231). The democracy of the family reunion, and the impossibility of a single speaker presiding over the end of the party resulted in Nicholas’ failure to produce a speech in *The Years*. The family intervened, and the Pargiter children offered their own ad hoc toasts, and reflected indirectly on the past in their conversation. In *Between the Acts*, the “buzz” of Delia’s party finds its companion in a formally composed audience, and we hear that buzz more extensively as the novels come to their close. What unity the party of “Present Day” and the audience of Miss La Trobe’s pageant achieve is achieved largely counter to any singular authority—speechmaker or playwright. The role that nature plays in these group settings displaces any potential social organization, and in each case, the final image of the text strips away the aesthetic as well as the political scaffolds of life, and presents images of the most fundamental interactions—an emblem of the moments of wholeness already presented in the novel.

Communion happens in the passages of these novels where the text turns away from nature, time, and society. For example, in spite of the enormous gender and class differences between Lucy Swithin and William Dodge, *Old Flimsy* gives the young homosexual city clerk a moment of healing. He wants to tell her “At school they held me

under a bucket of dirty water, Mrs. Swithin; when I looked up, the world was dirty, Mrs. Swithin...but you've healed me" (73). In this encounter, Woolf's desire to create community clashes with the deep divisions between generations. As a solution to this problem of communication, Woolf presents communion as a phenomenon experienced in the present moment. Social engagements, while a necessity, are generally treated as a burden by her characters; and yet, at these unwelcome functions—dinners, parties, pageants—individuals experience unsought for and unexpected moments of communion with others and, in two significant cases, with large groups. The need that motivates characters to seek in chance meetings a kind of wholeness is the recognition of the fracturing of personality that is so common a feature of modernist writing. Characters struggle to broaden experience, but underpinning Woolf's novels is the certainty that only in communion can the individual become whole.

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CHAPTER IV

BART OLIVER'S "ITYLUS": ALLUSION AND METONYMY IN *BETWEEN THE ACTS*

"Here are the poets from whom we descend by way of the mind, Mr..." she murmured. She had forgotten his name. Yet she had singled him out.

—Virginia Woolf

Recent criticism of *Between the Acts* has emphasized the innovations of Miss La Trobe's pageant and their effect on the audience, and has generally related Woolf's play-within-a-play to her anti-fascism. In spite of the obvious centrality of the pageant and the reactions of the audience, *Between the Acts* remains a novel of the country-house and the lives of its characters are no less shaped by convention than they are in *The Years*. Memory, especially by way of its failures, brings the literary tradition into contact with the everyday through characters' quotations. Isa, Giles, and Bart produce further speech from their remembered or misremembered quotes through metonymic and synecdochic associations that ultimately reinforce the social-familial context. This reinforcement may answer the questions posed about the value of literature in *Three Guineas* (1938). I argue that Woolf's defense of the value of art should be looked for not only in the pageant, which is largely resisted and rejected by its audience, but in whose own uses of art and literature to connect to one another and to know themselves. This use of literature is embedded in the text from its beginning.

In the early pages of the novel, Woolf parallels the sound of pealing bells with well-worn conversation. One thing that Isa Giles knew, as she saw her aunt Lucy Swithin crossing the room with a hammer, was that “words were like the first peal of a chime of bells. As the first peals, you hear the second; as the second peals, you hear the third” (*Between the Acts* 21). The repetition of the bells is like the conversation about the village pageant at the center of Woolf’s final novel. Each year Lucy and her brother Bart Oliver wonder if it will be “wet or fine”: “Every summer, for seven summers now, Isa had heard the same words; about the hammer and the nails; the pageant and the weather. Every year they said, would it be wet or fine; and every year it was—one or the other” (22). This expectation of Isa’s—that she can anticipate the remainder of a conversation based on past experience—is one of the themes explored in *Between the Acts*. The expectations that the audience has for the pageant, the expectations of Miss La Trobe for her audience, the expectations of Woolf’s characters for one another: these are all challenged through the day’s action. In the paragraph quoted above, Woolf offers not only the expected result (Lucy carrying the hammer means that it is pageant day), but proposes a counterexample that challenges the logic of one peal following another. Isa associates the hammer that Lucy carries with a newspaper article that she had read in the morning paper: she thinks, “The girl screamed and hit him about the face with a hammer,” recalling the story of a woman who was raped by a group of “troopers” (20). This passage, in the earliest pages of *Between the Acts*, illuminates the tension between convention and innovation that defines the allusive language of Woolf’s final novel. In the last phase of her career, Woolf explored fragmentation and the making of a “whole” in various ways. Her use of this question serves not only to critique, as in the example of Miss La Trobe accusing her audience of being “orts, scraps, and fragments.” Woolf’s concern with

fragmentation and wholeness as expressed in *Between the Acts* is also a final statement about the use of art in daily life, and part of her response to the rise of fascism and war in Europe.

Though it is usually assumed that characters in *Between the Acts* find “the rescue of language and the imagination” through Miss La Trobe, I want to assert that the use made of language by characters such as Isa mirror (and exist prior to) Miss La Trobe’s pageant (Barrett 20). The most important expression of the power of art in *Between the Acts* is manifested through the characters’ thoughts, associations, and reactions to not only the pageant, but also everyday interactions. These reactions, modified by memory and conditioned by social convention, use allusions to create analogous, metaphorical relationships. But even as the manipulations of Isa, Giles, and Bart Oliver make use of metaphorical substitutions, Woolf’s novel is propelled by the contiguous relationships between conversation and poetic allusion, audience and performer, internal thought and expressed speech. This novel can be seen as an attack on authority in varied forms, from that of the patriarchy to the individual “führer.” Woolf does not spare Miss La Trobe’s from this attack. Instead of controlling the audience as she would like, Miss La Trobe finds herself writing “I am the slave of my audience” in the margin of her script (211). Woolf’s characters assemble their lives out of their memories in spite of the artist’s intentions, and this fact stands as a counter-force to Miss La Trobe’s artistic practice.¹⁶ In this way, Woolf denies the strength of the group and emphasizes the individual consciousness as the site where “wholeness” can exist. The allusive practice Woolf uses in *Between the Acts* represents a way for the characters to assemble the fragments of their experience into a whole. In this way, Woolf’s final novel can be seen to emphasize everyday moments in a way that it is not usually considered to

¹⁶ On La Trobe: “Though she is in many ways a self-reflexive figure for Woolf, she is also made to resemble a führer in the beginning of the play” (Pridmore-Brown 413)

do. The hammer that Lucy Swithin carries and that Isa recalls in the context of the newspaper article embodies at once conventional uses of language—preparations for the pageant—and innovative connections and uses—the daily paper, the military, Daladier and the *franc*, the looming war.

In “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances” (1956), Roman Jakobson articulated his paradigm of the poles of language—metaphor and metonymy. His point of departure was extreme cases of speech aphasia, but he also applied his terms to the literary arts. In making use of this frame, I do not mean to imply that Woolf composed with these concepts in mind; nor do I imply that her use of fragments and allusive “scraps” was owing to anything but her own aesthetic choices. Instead, I see Jakobson’s paradigm as a useful way to treat the distinct types of language in *Between the Acts*. The poetic, dramatic, and novelistic discourses that make up this work are removed from an original context and reassembled in another, giving the line of poetry a new meaning, the misquotation a new subject. This reassembling and modification of quotations puts otherwise discrete fragments of language into a contiguous relationship that values the present over the past and the lived over the canonical. To make this argument, it seems necessary to analyze the language itself closely in order to demonstrate that *Between the Acts* is a defense of literature that is more subtle and more allied with daily life than is typically acknowledged.

For Jakobson, “Any linguistic sign involves two modes of arrangement,” combination and selection (“Two Aspects of Language” 119). Combination refers to the placement of linguistic units in a context, such as a word or a sentence. Thus “any linguistic unit at one and the same time serves as a context for simpler units and/or finds its own context in a more complex linguistic unit.” This is referred to as “contiguity” and is allied with the literary figure metonymy. Selection refers to the choice of alternatives, and the “possibility of substituting one for the other,

equivalent in one respect and different in another.” This is referred to as similarity and is allied with metaphor. Jakobson theorized that metaphor/similarity predominates in poetry and that contiguity/metonymy predominates in prose fiction. Thus, in poetic metaphor, *a* is described in terms of *b*—a substitution. In fiction, *a* is developed through its relation to things nearby in time or space: a worker has old boots, a homemade table, yet the curtains are meticulously cleaned, and the rooms neat, etc.

I argue that Woolf’s citations, while accessing metaphorical meaning in individual cases, are related through contiguity, and that this contiguity is a key structural device of the novel. Only when characters see the elements that conjoin to make their experiences can they think metaphorically, because metaphor is the act of describing X by imagining it otherwise. Isa could not imagine the hammer her aunt carries as a bludgeon against rapists and, by extension, patriarchal authority, without the ever-flowing contiguous relationship between the newspaper, the pageant, her family, and her poetry. The juxtaposition of allusion, thought, and speech modifies the “meaning” of the original material such that each fragment of allusion, therefore, has two potential meanings: 1) its original sense in the literary work from which it derives, and 2) a “new” meaning that emerges as the allusion is reconstituted in the context of *Between the Acts*. These two potential meanings constantly influence and inform one another. For this reason, Jakobson’s citation of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce is operative here:

There are two references which serve to interpret the sign—one to the code and the other to the context, whether coded or free, and in each of these ways the sign is related to another set of linguistic signs, through an *alternation* in the former case and through an *alignment* in the latter. A given significative unit may be replaced by other, more explicit signs of the same code, whereby its general meaning is revealed, while its contextual meaning is determined by its connection with other signs within the same sequence. (Qtd. In “Two Aspects of Language” 120)

Peirce's "alternation" and "alignment" roughly correspond to the concepts of substitution and contiguity that Jakobson defines. But Peirce also makes explicit the interplay between the two terms: from a linguistic code a "general" meaning may be accessed through different interchangeable words, but in any specific case meaning depends on context. Many fragments of language may be substituted for *a*, and at the same time, these substitutions will constitute a new meaning through "connection with other signs" related through contiguity.

By taking Peirce's view into consideration, we do not have to make an either/or choice between metaphor/code/alternation and metonymy/context/alignment, but can see both perspectives as operative. These paradigms make sense in the context of *Between the Acts* because of the diverse discourses that are used and the obvious grounding of the work in England's literary and social history. If we treat fragmented allusions as the signs Peirce describes, then we see the divergence of meaning that produces ironies and resonances in Woolf's novels as well as in allusive literary works in general. In *Between the Acts*, allusions and bits of pastiche from literary history are certainly altered in Miss La Trobe's pageant, but the same process goes on in the perceiving of each character, and the literary arts are part of that perceiving. The "new" contextual meaning of Woolf's allusions will vary, but in each case, I argue, it represents not a degradation of language, or a kind of entropy wherein an "original" is lost, but rather a positive instance of generation that furthers the characters vision of their lives as a "whole."

Allusion itself is one of the defining characteristics of modernism, and is often seen as a facet of the difficulty of modernist works. *Between the Acts* is, of course, highly allusive. It also enacts much of what Woolf identified as "modern" in her essay "Modern Fiction" (1919). Here, Woolf wrote that for the modern novelist, the crucial "point of interest[,] lies very likely in the dark places of psychology" and that this makes the emphasis of the modern novel "difficult for us

to grasp, incomprehensible to our predecessors” (*Collected Essays II* 108). Woolf pursued the problem of the contemporary writer and the literary tradition in “How it Strikes a Contemporary” (1923). In this essay, she went further in her analysis of the present’s relationship to the past, emphasizing the crisis of “belief” that she saw was a hallmark of the modern: “To believe that your impressions hold good for others is to be released from the cramp and confinement of personality. . . . So, then, our contemporaries afflict us because they have ceased to believe” (“How it Strikes” 358). For Woolf, writers such as Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott communicate clear beliefs which they believed to resonate across their readership. Woolf sees the novelist of 1923 as unable to generalize, and forced to “renounce his hope of making that complete statement which we call a masterpiece. He must be content to be a taker of notes” (359).¹⁷ Many of the artists in Woolf’s novels are explicitly “takers of notes,” and none comes near production of an acknowledged masterpiece.

In spite of this criticism of the age, Woolf admits that “no one would seriously choose to go back a hundred years” (356). Additionally, she begins “Modern Fiction” with the statement, “it is difficult not to take it for granted that the modern practice of the art [of fiction] is somehow an improvement upon the old” (30). In this essay, Woolf rejects much of what had traditionally been considered integral to fiction: plot, comedy, tragedy, love interest (106). Woolf praises Chekov’s story “Gusev” for its indeterminacy with regard to genre, thus its “difficulty”:

Tchekov has chosen this, that, and the other, and placed them together to compose something new. But it is impossible to say ‘this is comic,’ or ‘this is tragic,’ nor are we certain, since short stories, we have been taught, should be brief and conclusive, whether this, which is vague and inconclusive, should be called a short story at all. (109)

¹⁷ In *The Years*, Peggy consciously “takes notes” at Delia’s party: “Take notes and the pain goes” she says to herself (257).

This description could well apply to works such as *The Years* and *Between the Acts*. We might not only ask if Miss La Trobe's pageant is a "pageant," but if Woolf's novel is a "novel." The reader is denied a clear protagonist, even a clear sense of the audience, which is fractured in numerous ways. The characters often have a poor understanding of one another—William Dodge has to deny twice that he is an artist—and their efforts to forge a feeling of wholeness proceed *ad hoc* through the bits of language that are traded at Pointz Hall. Society, built out of conversation and metonymic relationships, imperfect as it is, nevertheless is presented as a necessity. North experiences a moment of minor panic as the conversation flags at Delia's party, noting that, as silence "gaped," "somebody has to say something, or human society would cease" (277).

Society is on display in *Between the Acts*, and its characters come into focus only to fade out, usually presented in pairs, or small groups. Woolf's attention to detail is not limited to "major" characters, but also illuminates those who occupy the background, such as the nurses who "roll" words on their tongues (10). Liesl Olson has argued that Woolf's interest in depicting the everyday constitutes a crucial element of her aesthetic style and influences the structure of her novels, especially *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). This technique is just what Jakobson means when he asserts that metonymy predominates in fiction—the details of the life grow out of one another so that, in a novelist such as Woolf, characters' subjectivity becomes connected to the world and each character is connected to the next. Pridmore-Brown comes to a similar conclusion in her examination of the novel when she asserts that the final impression given the reader is that "In the end, it becomes apparent that everything—the actual and the imagined, the public and the private—is interconnected by wires and waves of association radiating from the present" (409). These interconnections cumulatively draw a portrait of a society. Mrs. Manresa represents the intrusion of "new money" into a society that reckons its history in centuries rather than generations; William Dodge and Miss La Trobe are "outsiders" by virtue of their sexuality;

Dodge and Giles work in London, a contrast with the gentleman farmers and village “idiots” that populate the country.

Fragmentary allusions from and pastiche of the literary past constitute a great deal of the text, and become the operative way that characters create, out of fragments, something whole. Critics such as Melba Cuddy-Keane and Emily Hinnov look for this potential for something whole in audience’s response to the pageant. Cuddy-Keane has argued that Woolf uses comedic modes to undermine central authority, writing that Woolf “undermines all definitions of a group as a centered, unified identity and rewrites the concept of community as a fragmented, questioning, contradictory, but fully collective voice” (280). Hinnov identifies what she calls “choran community” in Woolf—a way to create an aesthetic ethics that can be used to resist fascistic versions of history, versions that are imperialist and patriarchal. The writing of counter-history is, Hinnov maintains, Woolf’s project in *The Waves*, *Three Guineas*, and *Between the Acts*. Dominant histories—embodied in the fascism of 1920s/30s Italy and Germany—are especially damaging to those on the margins of society; thus choran community, which takes place outside of the dominant historical narrative because it occurs on the level of the individual and is dependent on acceptance of difference—what Hinnov calls “convergence in spite of difference” ([1])—can create oppositional groups, communities, and histories with which to resist fascism wherever it might appear. These arguments are convincing because Woolf was certainly a more political writer than has been traditionally thought. Feminist reassessments of Woolf, as well as work that considers Woolf in the context of varying communities has been crucial to understanding her work. At the same time, there is no easy resolution to Woolf’s negotiation between public and private; community and individual. Turning to the novels as distinct from texts such as *A Room of One’s Own* (1926) and *Three Guineas* makes this clear.

Woolf certainly does work to decenter authority throughout her work; yet we have to ask how collective the voice that she posits as an alternative can be. Because the characters' use of experience and allusion tends to be idiosyncratic, and is compromised by memory, Woolf does not present an audience that shares a voice, or that can speak as one. In fact, one distinguishing characteristic of *Between the Acts* is the disjunction, visible to the reader, between characters' thoughts and their speech as expressed to others. Individual characters' substitutions and comments are productive and tend to produce further speech or thought in the context of the novel's action. Thus, the hope of renewal that critics have noted in the novel is partly generated through the ways that characters forge something complete out of their fragmentary, imperfect memories.

Bart Oliver's first set of quotations in the text demonstrates the multiple ways allusions affect the characters, and the way that poetry finds its place in the everyday world of Pointz Hall. In the first scene of the novel Oliver's citations from Byron are brought out as if in definition or confirmation of the text. He tells his guests, the farmer Rupert Haines and his wife, that "over sixty years ago...his mother had given him the works of Byron in that very room" (5). His mention of the volumes represents a reaffirmation of his history in Pointz Hall more than anything. He recites Byron's two best-known lines: "She walks in beauty like the night" and "So we'll go no more a-roving by the light of the moon," but the words are immediately taken up by his daughter-in-law Isa Giles, who is infatuated with Haines, and for whom the words change into "two rings, perfect rings, that floated them, herself and Haines, like two swans down stream." Converted into Isa's fantasy, the words indirectly enable Mrs. Haines to become "aware of the emotion circling them, excluding her" (5-6). The words lead to the Haines's departure and a moment of social friction between Isa and Mrs. Haines: "Isa, though she should have risen at the

same moment that Mrs. Haines rose, sat on. Mrs. Haines glared at her out of goose-like eyes” waiting for acknowledgement (6).

The imaginative life of literature and the irresistible pressures of social intercourse intermingle in this scene, and define the blend of art and life that remains operative through the novel. *Between the Acts* includes examples of allusions that provide chances for characters to bond with one another as well as examples that represent lack of connection. In this social novel, the invisible circles that surround Isa and Haines are repeated in different ways as relationships are drawn and redrawn. Isa and William Dodge, for example, are connected by their allusions. During the luncheon spontaneously prompted by Mrs. Manresa and William Dodge, Bart Oliver suggests that Mrs. Manresa may have her “Shakespeare by heart.” She recites the emblematic line from *Hamlet* before nudging Giles, who says nothing: “To be or not to be, that is the question. Whether ’tis nobler...Go on!” (54). Isa recites a line from Keats that William finishes. This connection holds them together even as the fantasy narrative of the knight and his lady draws a line from Miss Manresa to Giles (107).

Isa Oliver remains an example of this intermingling. She not only cites poetry, but also writes it—keeping it hidden in an account ledger, and moves between verse and domestic work early in the novel. Making herself up in front of the mirror, and thinking of Haines again, Isa “groped, in the depths of the looking-glass, for a word to fit the infinitely quick vibrations of the aeroplane propeller that she had seen once at dawn at Croydon” (15). Here, the “looking-glass “ substitutes for Isa’s eyes, and she searches within herself at the same time that she can be seen to examine her image as if from a third-party position. Isa recalls a memory of an airplane based on the feeling she has had in Haines’s presence, a feeling of “tingling, tangling, vibrating,” and from this recollection she produces her lines: “Where we know not, where we go not, neither know nor care...Flying, rushing through the ambient, incandescent, summer silent...” She breaks off to

order fish—“What fish have you this morning? Cod? Halibut? Sole? Plaice?”—then returns to the verse: “There to lose what binds us here....With a feather, a blue feather...flying mounting through the air...there to lose what binds us here.” In the final turn of her doggerel, which she does not recognize as good enough to write down, she touches on her desire to be free from the details of her life.

By contrast, Isa relies on tropes from popular fiction to maintain her love for her husband. Turning from the glass, she notes “outside, on the washstand, on the dressing-table, among the silver boxes, and tooth-brushes, was the other love: love for her husband, the stockbroker—‘The father of my children’” (*Between the Acts* 14). We might say that this love is reinforced by contiguity, for reminders of her marriage are always in proximity to her, and are reinforced, as she notes, in culture, in “the cliché conveniently provided by fiction.” Both the standard script—“the father of my children”—and the unconventional image of Isa/Haines in an airplane are present in Isa’s mind, and influence her actions through the course of the day. The tension between the two leads to what Woolf praised in Russian fiction, “the sense that there is no answer” (*Collected Essays II* 109). In both cases, Isa imagines life as something other than it is. The airplane frees one from the bindings of the earth; the trope from popular fiction keeps her imaginatively bound. Again, the political valences of these substitutions have metaphorical power, and again reinforce the importance of art—poetry and fiction—in the creation of everyday life.

I have undertaken this rather lengthy analysis of what seems to be an inconsequential moment early in the novel to emphasize that this mode of relating artistic expression to daily life pervades the novel, and is present in all of the characters’ discussions, not only in Miss La Trobe’s pastiche-pageant. Here, Isa moves by associations that are prompted by a kind of contiguity, a kind of mental proximity: the experience of the previous evening, a sense of tingling

associated with a memory, poetry about escaping into the air. Moments such as this—wherein Isa recognizes a lack in her life through her fusion of poetry and the quotidian—slip by without fanfare in *Between the Acts* and Woolf's praise of Chekov in "Modern Fiction" (1919) again becomes important. "The emphasis is laid upon such unexpected places," Woolf writes, "that at first it seems as if there were no emphasis at all" (*Collected Essays II* 108-109). Here, it is not great art that is transformative, it is art experienced in the flow of the everyday.

In *Between the Acts*, Lucy Swithin most clearly exemplifies this associative thinking. Helping Mrs. Sands, the cook, cut bread, Lucy's mind wanders: "Why's stale bread, she mused, easier to cut than fresh? And so skipped, sidelong, from yeast to alcohol; so to fermentation; so to Bacchus; and lay under purple lamps in a vineyard in Italy, as she had done, often" (34). Lucy Swithin is the "Fool" of the novel. She may also be its spiritual center. She is described as visionary in contrast to Bart's rationality: "He would carry the torch of reason till it went out in the darkness of the cave. For herself, every morning, kneeling, she protected her vision" (206). In this protection, there is an echo of Lily Briscoe defending her vision from Mr. Ramsay. Lucy is portrayed as silly and sentimental, but she is also presented as devoid of the fear and posturing that keeps so many characters separated. Moreover, she is allied with chance connections and associations, the kinds that interfere with Miss La Trobe's play and that lead her mind to wander. She is said to wake to "the random ribbons of birds' voices" (206), and in watching the lily pond, and catching sight of the fantail, the golden orfe, and the huge carp, Lucy sees "in that vision beauty, power, and glory in ourselves" (205).

She is, for Eileen Barrett an echo of pre-Christian goddesses and is "Throughout the novel...not the common audience but rather the exceptional one" (26).¹⁸ She is associated with

¹⁸ See her article "Matriarchal Myth on a Patriarchal Stage: Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*" for references to the influence of Jane Harrison's work on Woolf. Also see "The Politics of Comic Modes in

birds by way of her own comments on their migratory patterns and this association leads Bart Oliver to Swinburne's "Itylus," a poem concerned with life, death, and forgetting. The poem, from *Poems and Ballads* (1866), is based on the myth of Procne, who was turned into a swallow at Daulis after avenging her sister Philomela's rape by Tereus. Procne, the wife of Tereus and mother of Itylus, kills Itylus as revenge. In order that they might escape Tereus, Philomela is changed into a nightingale and Procne is changed into a swallow. Swinburne's poem concerns, as do many in his oeuvre, the "heart's division" that "divideth" (l. 44). "Itylus" is spoken by the nightingale, Philomela, addressing her sister Procne, the swallow. The poem's drawing of the division between the two sisters occurs spatially ("Why wilt thou fly after spring to the south?") as well as temporally (the movement from spring to summer). Moreover, the division depends on memory and forgetting. The speaker says "Thy heart is as light as a leaf of a tree; / But mine goes forth among sea-gulfs hollow / To the place of the slaying of Itylus" (l. 45-46). This noted difference between the two is given a central place in the poem, almost as if without the division and the opposition of memory and forgetfulness, the dynamic of the changing year and the passing summers could not exist. Swinburne used two birds that can also be used as an image of night and day, another opposition. Woolf draws attention to his relationship in the first pages of the book: "A bird chuckled outside. 'A nightingale?' asked Mrs. Haines. No, nightingales didn't come so far north. It was a daylight bird, chuckling over the substance and succulence of the day, over worms, snails, grit, even in sleep" (*Between the Acts* 3).

In Swinburne's poem, it is the daytime bird, the swallow, that "has heart to sing" (l. 32) and to migrate. The nightingale, by contrast, sings a song that "Feed[s] the heart of the night with fire" (l. 18) and is imaged as drowning, not migrating south: "O swallow, sister, O fleeting swallow, / My heart in me is a molten ember / And over my head the waves have met" (l. 37-39).

Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*" and the ensuing exchange between Melba Cuddy-Keane and Molly Hoff, "Virginia Woolf and the Greek Chorus" in *PMLA* 106.1 (Jan 1991): 122-124.

The contrasting, balanced roles of the sisters is in keeping with much of Swinburne's poetic design. It is also a design mirrored in *Between the Acts*. It has been argued that, for example, Lucy Swithin, represents intuition and "one-making" while her brother represents reason. Her interest in the long past—her favorite reading is *Outline of History*, particularly the time when there were "rhododendron forests in Piccadilly; when the entire continent, not then, she understood, divided by a channel, was all one" (8)—is likewise mirrored in the timelessness of the relationship between swallow and nightingale in "Itylus." The nightingale asks, "How can thine heart be full of the spring? / A thousand summers are over and dead. / What hast thou found in the spring to follow?" (l. 2-4). Here, the ancient motion of the seasons also finds its place in Woolf, with her description of the barn, seven-hundred years old, which reminds some viewers of a Greek temple (26). It also finds expression in Lucy Swithin's interest in the swallows' migration. In the Barn during the pageant's interval, she insists that the birds come from Africa every year "As they had come, she supposed, when the barn was a swamp" (103). The result of Tereus' crime, and Procne's revenge is a perpetual expression of the opposition of night and day, spring and summer, life and death. Repetition of season, migration, and return to a place of origin are represented as potentially having an end, but one that does not seem imminent or even likely. The final lines of Swinburne's poem are "Thou hast forgotten, O summer swallow, / But the world shall end when I forget" (l. 59-60).

Woolf's characters are facing the prospect of, if not the end of the world, the disruptions of war. Yet, social convention retains its power. Giles, arriving from the city is swept away by its force:

He had seen the great silver-plated car at the door with the initials R. M. twisted so as to look at a distance like a coronet, Visitors, he had concluded, as he drew up behind; and had gone to his room to change. The ghost of convention rose to the surface, as a blush or a tear rises to the surface at the pressure of emotion; so the car touched his training. And

he came into the dining-room looking like a cricketer, in flannels, wearing a blue coat with brass buttons; though he was enraged. (46)

Not only do words rise to the surface, but the strength of convention does as well. In this scene, Giles blames his aunt as a representative of an older generation without work or war. He calls her “foolish, free” and amused at “men who spent their lives, buying and selling—ploughs? glass beads was it?” (46-47). The same dynamic appears late in the text, this time Giles recalls some lines of Cowper’s:

“I fear I am not in my perfect mind,” Giles muttered to the same tune [playing in the pageant]. Words came to the surface—he remembered “a stricken deer in whose lean flank the world’s harsh scorn has struck its thorn...Exiled from its festival, the music turned ironical”...he repeated, forgetting the words, and glaring at his Aunt Lucy who sat craned forward, her mouth gaping, and her bony little hands clapping. (85-86)

He concludes with a scornful question of his own, “What were they laughing at?” that marks his separation from the crowd even as he is portrayed as a member of the audience. These versions of Giles’ perceived entrapment—changing his clothes, recalling the hunted deer, resisting his membership in the audience silently—are fulfilled when he stomps on the snake and toad that are locked together. He sees the pair, “The snake was unable to swallow; the toad was unable to die,” and calls it a “monstrous inversion,” and finds relief in the action of stomping. The action is, as Isa charges, useless, an absurd image of cutting a Gordian knot (99). Literature and convention, then, do the same work for Giles, and both become part of his associative reaction to the events of the day, one relating, by contiguity, to another. The oppositions of young and old, free and bound, visiting and nesting permeate *Between the Acts* without being resolved, as in “Itylus,” with its conditional apocalyptic ending.

Memory and forgetfulness are the fundamental modes of creating and recreating experience, the metonymies of the pageant day that touch glancingly on war, peace, and the

changing generations. Bart Oliver whistles “Itylus,” retiring to his library, expressing his own concern for his son. The libraries of Pointz Hall are themselves metonymic representations of the life lived there, a fact that is played for its comic depth early in the novel. Lucy Swithin says that “Books are the mirrors of the soul,” but the reader is informed that “the mirror that reflected the soul sublime, reflected also the soul bored” (16) for the library is full of “shilling shockers” bought to pass the train ride from London. Bart Oliver’s library can be seen as a metonymy for his character. It is a “country gentleman’s library” and includes “Garibaldi; Wellington; Irrigation Officers’ Reports; and Hibbert on the diseases of the horse” (115-116). Oliver returns to his library after the tea in the Barn, during which his sister talked about the migrating swallows. Oliver begins to recite “Itylus” then, moving from his own sister to Swinburne’s melodic “Swallow, my sister, O sister swallow.” In the library, he takes another turn, associating his own son with the poem; for, although his library is “A great harvest the mind had reaped...compared with his son, he did not care one damn” (116). He leaves the barn because he cannot find Giles, and he knows that Giles is unhappy (115). Oliver modifies the poem in such a way that it connects his sister, his son, and the swallows. He mutters some lines that might have been written by Isa for the speaker of “Itylus”: “How can my heart, how can my heart...Condemned in life’s infernal mine, condemned in solitude to pine,” he says to himself, standing in front of his library. He asks, “What’s the use, what’s the use,” he sank down into his chair muttering, “O sister swallow, O sister swallow, of singing your song?” (116). This line is not in “Itylus” but is rather a paraphrase of the question that the poem asks, a question about the value of remembering a single tragedy—a single boy—in the face of a thousand passing summers.

Bart Oliver is concerned for Giles, but has, in the end, little to offer him for his unhappiness. This poem, then, that contrasts personal loss with the endless cycle of seasons, is as unresolvable as is the final conflict of *Between the Acts*, the primal meeting of Isa and Giles, as if

on a the set of a play: “It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks” (219). This meeting can be read as another sequence of pealing bells, for action must follow action, love hate and peace must follow one another, as Isa intuited from the pageant (90-91): “Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born” (219). *Between the Acts* brings social speech, thought, and literary allusion into relationships of contiguity and treats the social nicety much as it treats lines from Keats and Swinburne. Individual uses of poems such as “Itylus” propose that literature in a time of war can serve a purpose. By contrasting the marginally successful pageant staged at Pointz Hall with the seamless way that characters make use of original and quoted poetry, Woolf presents literature as productive in an everyday context. Allusion in *Between the Acts* functions both metaphorically and metonymically, modifying the general meaning of fragments of Swinburne and Keats through an ever-flowing construction of new contexts. In this way, Woolf asserts a role for art in everyday experience that is distinct from the audience’s experience of Miss La Trobe’s pageant and emphasizes the individual soul in contrast to the group, and denies the power of central authority to unite the fragmented.

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