



## “This odd mix up”:

Intersectional Spaces in Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*



*Alina Oboza*

*Masteroppgave i engelsk litteratur  
Fakultet for humaniora, samfunnsvitenskap og lærerutdanning  
Universitetet i Tromsø  
Høsten 2010*

John Piper *Derelict Cottage*, 1941

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Anka Ryall, my supervisor, for her careful guidance and excellent advice. Her extensive expertise and passionate interest in Virginia Woolf's writing have been a great inspiration to me. Her encouragement, positive response and kindness made it a pleasure to discuss successive drafts of this thesis.

I am infinitely grateful to Ida Kjeilen Thuv for reading the whole manuscript and offering her insightful opinion, but most of all, for always believing in the author and supporting her on a daily basis.

Last but not least, I am forever indebted to my mum, Maria Oboza. All my enterprises, present and future, are always dedicated to her.

## List of Abbreviations

- BA*            *Between the Acts*, ed. Frank Kermode (2008)
- Diary III*      *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. III: 1925–1930*, ed. Anne Oliver Bell (1980)
- Diary V*        *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. V: 1936–1941*, ed. Anne Oliver Bell (1984)
- Essays*        *Selected Essays*, ed. David Bradshaw (2008)
- JR*             *Jacob’s Room*, ed. Kate Flint (2008)
- Letters V*      *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. V: 1932–1935*, ed. Nigel Nicolson (1979)
- Letters VI*     *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. VI: 1936–1941*, ed. Nigel Nicolson (1980)
- LS*             *The London Scene: Five Essays by Virginia Woolf* (1975)
- MB*             *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (1985)
- OED*           *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989)
- PH*             *Pointz Hall: The Earlier and Later Typescripts of Between the Acts*, ed.  
Mitchell A. Leaska (1983)
- ROO*           *A Room of One’s Own*, in *A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas*, ed.  
Morag Shiach (2008)
- TG*             *Three Guineas*, in *A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas*, ed. Morag  
Shiach (2008)
- TL*             *To the Lighthouse*, ed. David Bradshaw (2008)

## Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	iii
<i>List of Abbreviations</i> .....	iv
<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Chapter 1: Physical Space of Pointz Hall</b> .....	13
Pointz Hall, the Olivers and the view.....	13
Transformations of Pointz Hall.....	21
Rooms like shells: interiors of emptiness and silence.....	25
<b>Chapter 2: Reimagining Domestic Space</b> .....	34
Bloomsbury’s architecture of domesticity.....	34
We live in things—the poetics of objects.....	37
Women on the threshold – negotiation of space.....	44
Philomela and the aesthetic of silence.....	50
<b>Chapter 3: “This odd mix up of public and private” and Spatial Form</b> .....	55
“This odd mix up of public and private.....	56
“Not all claptrap” – Woolf’s changing attitude towards the war.....	59
Pointz Hall: a centre.....	63
Miss La Trobe and her pageant.....	65
Spatiality of form.....	72
The meaning of spatial form.....	78
<i>Between the Acts</i> as a Cubist canvas.....	81
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	85
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	90



## Introduction

*Between the Acts* is Virginia Woolf's last novel, published shortly after her death in March 1941. When Woolf started writing "Pointz Hall" (the novel's working title) in April 1938, she still had a vivid memory of the five-year long, exhausting struggle with her previous novel *The Years* (1937), a process which she described as "a long childbirth" (*Diary V* 31). She was still in the process of correcting the proofs of her feminist essay *Three Guineas* (1938), and had just begun working on a biography of the late painter, art critic and her close friend, Roger Fry, which she felt to be both a great responsibility and an extremely laborious task. Thus, when she first came up with the idea for a new work of fiction which would later become *Between the Acts* ("Summers night: a complete whole"), Woolf wrote apprehensively: "only dont please impose that huge burden on me again, I implore. Let it be random & tentative; something I can blow of a morning, to relieve myself of Roger: dont, I implore, lay down a scheme; call in all the cosmic immensities; & force my tired & diffident brain to embrace another whole" (*Diary V* 133, 135).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, writing the novel was for Woolf a "holiday from Roger" – a relief from the "long pressure of Fry facts", and, as she noted, "No book ever slid from me so secretly & smoothly" (*Diary V* 205, 193, 149). In July 1940 *Roger Fry: a Biography* was published, and already by 23 November 1940 Woolf finished *Between the Acts*. "I am a little triumphant about the book", she noted, "I think its more quintessential than the others. More milk skimmed off. A richer pat, certainly a fresher

---

<sup>1</sup> Woolf often omitted apostrophes, and extensively used abbreviations and ampersands in her diary. I follow the practice of the editors of the published version who transcribed Woolf's rapidly written pages as closely as possible.

than that misery *The Years*. I've enjoyed writing almost every page. This book was only (I must note) written at intervals when the pressure was at its highest, during the drudgery of Roger" (*Diary V* 340).

As her nephew and biographer Quentin Bell has noted, "Never had a novel of hers flowed so rapidly, so effortlessly, from her pen; there were no checks, doubts, despairs, struggles or revisions." But "the ending of a novel", as Bell rightly points out, "was always a period of danger for her" (qtd. Kermode 2008: xiii). Her initial feeling of achievement was quickly dampened by growing doubts and a deepening depression. She wrote to her publisher John Lehmann at the Hogarth Press to tell him that she was having second thoughts about publishing *Between the Acts*. She feared that it was "much too slight and sketchy" (*Letters VI* 482). Lehmann praised the novel and had also already announced it as forthcoming in the *New Statesman & Nation*. But on 27 March Woolf wrote once more to say that the novel was "too silly & trivial" to be published in the present form, and that the Hogarth Press should therefore postpone publication until autumn (*Letters VI* 486). Her husband Leonard Woolf enclosed a note saying that "she is on the verge of a complete nervous breakdown", and asked Lehmann to write to her that they would delay publication (qtd. Lee 1997: 759). The letter reached the publisher too late. The following morning, on 28 March 1941, Virginia Woolf drowned herself in the river Ouse. The novel was published in July 1941 with an editorial note by Leonard Woolf saying that the manuscript "had not been finally revised for the printer", adding that his wife probably would not "have made any large or material alterations in it, though she would probably have made a good many small corrections or revisions before passing the final proofs" (Kermode 2008: xxxv).

*Between the Acts* represents an ending in many ways. Almost throughout the whole 1930s Woolf was preoccupied with the social and educational disadvantages women suffered in patriarchal Britain as well as the rise and growing threat of fascism in Europe. In *The*



*Years*, she examines the changing social and economic position of women, from the oppressive model of the Victorian home of the 1880s (note that Woolf herself was born in 1882) to the freer and more democratic domestic structure of the ‘present day’ of the mid-1930s. In *Three Guineas*, her most radical feminist and pacifist essay, Woolf views the oppression of women by the patriarchy in Britain as equivalent to that of the fascist dictators abroad. Significantly, both texts emphasise the interrelation between the organisation of domestic and national space: the oppression present in the public sphere is closely linked to that of the private, and vice versa.

By the time Woolf began working on *Between the Acts*, the international conflict had exacerbated and war seemed imminent. In fact, most of the novel was written after the fall of France (May 1940), when Britain was under heavy attack from the air and the Nazi conquest of Europe seemed to be a foregone conclusion. On 27 June 1940, Woolf wrote in her diary: “We pour to the edge of a precipice ... & then? I cant conceive that there will be a 27th June 1941” (*Diary V* 299). As Kermode suggests, perhaps at the same time as she tried to imagine the following year, Woolf was looking back to June 1939, which is when she placed the action of *Between the Acts*. The last summer before the outbreak of the war might be considered as the true moment of crisis: Hitler had already annexed Austria and Czechoslovakia to Nazi Germany, Franco had won the Spanish Civil War, and Poland faced an immediate threat of invasion. The war was imminent and these summer days were “the last moments of the old world”—the lull before the storm which Woolf never lived to see abate (Kermode 2008: xiv).

It is not particularly surprising that *Between the Acts* did not receive much attention when it was published, or that it was not fully appreciated in the turmoil of the war years. But with its stylistic and structural peculiarities, the novel was often dismissed as ‘unfinished’ even long after the war. In 1955 Melvin Friedman for example, viewed *Between the Acts* as

an unsuccessful attempt to “[transplant] the devices of the early novels” (qtd. Stewart 1985: 67–68). Other misconceptions arise from the fact that some critics wanted to see Woolf’s novel as a definitive answer to war, or even as an explicit, unequivocal pacifist statement evocative of *Three Guineas*. Having read Woolf’s early comment on *Between the Acts* – “‘I’ rejected: ‘we’ substituted” – Madeline Moore in 1984 assumed that Woolf had set out to write “a novel where all humanity could vicariously transcend its class barriers” (*Diary V* 135). Since Woolf fails to depict a “collective whole”, “the aesthetic/political Utopia”, and portrays the middle-class “I” instead, Moore considers the novel a failure, an ultimate submission to patriarchal power (qtd. Snaith 2000: 147). Anna Snaith rightly objects that Moore does not understand that Woolf never intended to portray a “collective whole”. But, in my opinion, Snaith is also mistaken in saying that “Woolf is lamenting the diversity brought about by war” (Snaith 2008: 147). Firstly, Woolf acknowledges and foregrounds (without lamenting) the heterogeneity of the village community. Secondly, the diversity is hardly a product of the war – the novel takes place before the war. Variety is inherent in any collective ‘we’, and if it results from anything in the novel, it is the modernisation of the village Woolf points to: “there were the new-comers, the Manresas [Mrs Manresa was presumably born in Tasmania, while her husband Ralph is Jewish], bringing the old houses up to date, adding bathrooms. [...] The building of a car factory and of an aerodrome in the neighbourhood had attracted a number of unattached floating residents” (*BA* 68–69).

Much of the scholarship on *Between the Acts* can be divided into two major categories: on the one hand, scholars who interpret the novel as predominantly tragic, such as Alex Zwerdling (1977) and Sallie Sears (1983); and on the other, those who like Marilyn Zorn (1956) and Melba Cuddy-Keane (1990) emphasise the comic traits. Zwerdling reads Woolf’s novel as a portrait of social disintegration and collapse: “It traces English culture through its historical stages to emphasize the gradual but persistent decay of the sense of community”

(Zwerdling 1977: 232). Cuddy-Keane argues that by presenting a “distinctive choric voice” in her novel, Woolf creates a new, subversive comic mode which not only serves as a critique of patriarchal politics, but also suggests a new, fluid model of community defined as the “dynamic inhabiting of mutual space” (Cuddy-Keane 1990: 276, 284).

Some scholars, notably David McWhirter (1993), oppose that “either/or logic” and argue for an intergeneric form similar to tragicomedy and Bakhtin’s “seriocomic” genres (McWhirter 1993: 802, 791). According to McWhirter, Woolf, like Bakhtin, “wants a form that apprehends wholeness without imposing ideological closure, a fiction that can encompass tragedy’s empathetic vision without succumbing to ‘the cramp and confinement of personality,’ that can see the world through comedy’s detached perspective without perpetuating a ‘settled code of morals’” (McWhirter 1993: 791).<sup>2</sup> He notes that both comedy and tragedy reduce history to a master narrative – a tragic or comic plot, while tragicomedy “resists any such totalizing narrative” (McWhirter 1993: 802). But in his view, Woolf pushes modernist tragicomedy further – towards postmodernism – in that *Between the Acts* embodies what Avrom Fleishman (1971) terms a “post-theoretical idea” of history, “for it grasps history as an ideological process that produces and includes everything: not only the forces of capitalism, fascism and patriarchy, but also the forms, perspectives, and languages through which we represent history, and which keep open the possibility of rewriting it” (McWhirter 1993: 808). Thus, as Alan Wilde (1984) notes, *Between the Acts* is a novel which “accepts the contingent and the unresolved”, but also one which “affirms [...] the possibility of engendering from the diversity, facticity, and openness of experience new modes both of expressing and of being in the world” (qtd. McWhirter 1993: 808).

Apart from the comic/tragic dichotomy, Woolf’s ideas about fascism and group psychology are among other aspects which have received significant critical attention,

---

<sup>2</sup> B. H. Fussell (1980) also interprets *Between the Acts* as a tragicomedy, “in which detachment counters involvement, laughter counters tears” (qtd. McWhirter 1993: 792).

especially from feminist scholars. As far as fascism is concerned, a number of critics have interpreted different characters in *Between the Acts* as dictators. Patricia Klindienst Joplin has remarked that when “the power of her artistic illusions fails”, Miss La Trobe, the author of the village pageant, resembles a “petty dictator in her will to re-impose unity on her fragile, dispersed, uncontrollable work of art”. For her Woolf’s novel consequently becomes “a meditation on the proximity of artist to dictator—of author to authoritarian ruler” (Joplin 1989: 88, 89). Anna Snaith, who argues that in *Between the Acts*, as in *Three Guineas*, the tyrannies of the private home are linked with those of the public realm, not only writes that Old Oliver and his son Giles are depicted as “‘private’ dictators”, but also goes as far as to assert that Giles *is* “the tyrant or dictator who must be resisted in *Three Guineas*” (Snaith 2000: 144).<sup>3</sup>

As regards notions about group psychology, Sigmund Freud’s influence on *Between the Acts* has been discussed at length, for example by Elizabeth Abel (1989). It is known that while writing her last novel, Woolf was reading Freud’s works on social psychology, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) and *The Future of an Illusion* (1927); a fact which points to her particular interest in group psychology at that time. But as Patricia Cramer points out in her important article, “Virginia Woolf’s Matriarchal Family of Origins in *Between the Acts*”, although both Woolf and Freud considered the “family as key to the origins of civilization and public acts and history as collective reenactments of family roles”, Woolf – in contrast to Freud – did not accept the patriarchal model of society as the only possible one (Cramer 1993: 167). Cramer views Jane Harrison’s matriarchal theories and Ruth Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture* (1934) as much more important influences on Woolf’s ideas about group psychology in the novel. She argues that Woolf adopts Benedict’s configurational approach to cultural studies to examine the process of group formation in the novel. By identifying the

---

<sup>3</sup> I will come back to this issue in Chapter Three.

values and emotions which draw Bart Oliver and Mrs Manresa toward Giles (Bart's son), the "quintessential man", Woolf depicts how the warlike patriarchal groups are sustained, while Mrs Swithin (Bart's sister) and the characters bound to her – Isa (Giles's wife) and William Dodge – form the matriarchal group, "a model for an alternative 'family of origins' – centred on women's values rather than on violent, dominating men" (Cramer 1993: 167). In Cramer's view, Harrison's research on "prepatriarchal mythological and social systems" served Woolf as a framework for her experiments with the matriarchal groups in *Between the Acts* (Cramer 1993: 170). According to Harrison, matriarchal cultures "center on the goddess in her dual form as mother and maid, and the son is a later addition", while patriarchal societies are centred on "the father-son relation and are bolstered by male-created images of women like the virgin, whore, mother, and muse". Cramer suggests that in *Between the Acts*, Woolf links "the worship of 'heroes' like Giles" with the worship of dictators and military leaders in the public realm. In contrast, "by highlighting the capacity for empathy, vision, and song which draw Dodge, Lucy [Mrs Swithin], and Isa together, Woolf urges our nurturing and creative capacities as a basis for social cohesion rather than the fascination with destruction and domination which connect Bart, Giles, and Manresa" (Cramer 1993: 171). The novel, Cramer concludes, portrays how people take sides "in this war between destructive and creative world views" (Cramer 1993: 181).

While I consider all the aspects mentioned above, including tragic/comic dichotomy, fascism and group psychology, as highly relevant to the study of *Between the Acts*, my approach will be different. As indicated by its title, the main focus of this thesis will be on the discourse of space in the novel. More specifically, my primary concern will be with the novel's setting – Pointz Hall, its objects and spaces, and their significance for the domestic and national space in the novel. In other words, I will try to show that Woolf's representation of the physical space straddles the intersection of private and public spaces, and examine the

interrelationships between those spaces. While some of the scholars discussed above deal with aspects of public or/and private space, they do so indirectly, without emphasising the spatial theme.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in contrast to my study, traditional scholarship has not acknowledged the connections between the material spaces and the abstract categories of private and public spaces. To my mind, those interrelations and intersections – what I call intersectional spaces – are crucial to the apprehension of both the novel’s content and form.

In general terms, although the concept of space – including both material/physical space and the abstract private, public and textual spaces – is central to Woolf’s oeuvre, it was long overlooked by critics. In their introduction to *Locating Woolf: The Politics of Space and Place* (2007), a collection of essays on different aspects of space in selected Woolf’s texts, Anna Snaith and Michael H. Whitworth trace the slow recovery of Woolf’s interest in space. They note that early Woolf scholars remained oblivious to new ideas about space developed by mathematicians and philosophers in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, which laid foundations for the study of space in the humanities and social sciences (Snaith and Whitworth 2007: 5).<sup>5</sup> If scholars and reviewers commented on Woolf’s representation of space at all, they merely acknowledged her ability to “capture the atmosphere of particular places” (Snaith and Whitworth 2007: 6). Surprisingly, even Joseph Frank does not mention Woolf in his important essay on spatialisation of form in modern poetry and novel published in 1945.

Critical interest in Woolf’s conception of space, Snaith and Whitworth point out, was generated by “the rediscovery of space as a category in the social sciences and cultural studies, following the work of Lefebvre, de Certeau, Harvey, Massey, and Soja”, as well as by

---

<sup>4</sup> Anna Snaith is an exception here, but despite the pertinence of its assertion, her study of the tense relationship between private and public space in *Between the Acts* misinterprets the nature of this very relation.

<sup>5</sup> Developments in analytical geometry challenged the assumption that physical space is Euclidean and continuous, and Leslie Stephen, Woolf’s father, even edited W. K. Clifford’s essay on the subject. Moreover, Henri Bergson’s realisation that “our conceptualization of time involved a mental spatialization” further increased the interest in the notion of space as a conceptual category (Snaith and Whitworth 2007: 5).

the emergence of postcolonial studies (Snaith and Whitworth 2007: 7). However, although the anthology edited by Snaith and Whitworth is a milestone in the study of Woolf and space, it is still only a selection of essays by various authors on selected works, rather than an in-depth analysis of given aspects of space throughout the writer's oeuvre, or in several of her texts. However, the collection does include some interesting contributions, most notably Helen Southworth's essay "Women and Interruption in *Between the Acts*", in which she argues that Woolf's use of the figure of interruption, and her manipulation of space in the novel, empower the female characters.

The purpose of my thesis is twofold. First, I set out to investigate how Woolf represents physical space and how it extends to and defines the abstract categories of domestic and public space. Second, I attempt to analyse the nature of the interplay between the private and public, past and present, real and fictional spaces in the novel. I suggest that the complex interrelationships between the various spaces and levels of action in *Between the Acts* are evocative of interactions of the interlocking planes on a Cubist canvas. The fragmentation of the narrative structure and the constant movement between different spaces and planes encourage a spatial/simultaneous apprehension of Woolf's novel. In order to describe the "rambling capricious" structure of *Between the Acts*, I adopt Joseph Frank's concept of spatial form (*Diary V* 135).

My method involves a gradual broadening of the perspective. I begin by studying the representation and symbolism of physical objects and spaces, before moving on to a discussion of domestic objects and architecture, and their implications for the family and domestic sphere. Finally, I investigate the tense relationship between private and public space in the novel – "this odd mix up", which results from the invasion of the private space by the public on the brink of war (*Diary V* 110). Since *Between the Acts* is Woolf's last novel, I consider it crucial to place it in a wider context of her oeuvre. Hence, at different points, I

compare chosen aspects or themes of several novels and essays with corresponding elements in *Between the Acts*. Further, I also use Woolf's diary to retrieve both the successive stages of the novel's composition and the context of the Second World War, in the turmoils of which the book was written.

A few critics have recently written about domestic and/or national space in *Between the Acts*, most notably Helen Southworth (see above), Anna Snaith (2000) and Marina MacKay (2005 & 2008). But while I draw from their interpretations at some points, my perspective is different. The guiding spirit of my study is Victoria Rosner's *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (2005), which views the spaces of private life as a generative site for modernist literature, contrary to the popular belief that domesticity is the antithesis of modernist art. For Rosner, the home becomes a "workshop for interior design and social change", and from this perspective she reinstates materiality – material culture and history – as one of the bases of modernist literary experimentation; even if modernist literature portrays itself as independent of its material environs (Rosner 2005: 13).<sup>6</sup>

While Rosner is concerned with the emergence of modernism in the private sphere, my study arose from my amazement – when reading the novel for the first time – at the antiquity of Pointz Hall, with its Victorian interiors and signs of architectural transformations (e.g. the larder, which used to be a chapel, with an arch evocative of Norman architecture). Why would an experimentalist like Woolf decide to place her late-modernist novel in an old country cottage – a symbol of Englishness and tradition – is the question that inspired me to write this thesis, although I did not make it the central one in the end. In *Between the Acts* Woolf not only brings her modernist experimentation with private space to the English village, making the novel, as Alexandra Harris argues in a newly published study, an example

---

<sup>6</sup> Bill Brown's article "The Secret Life of Things (Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism)" (1999) is noteworthy too, as, to my knowledge, he was the first to consider the relationship between materiality and modernism: "human subjects and material objects constitute one another, and what remains outside the regularities of that constitution that can disrupt the cultural memory of modernity and modernism" (Brown 1999: 5).



of romantic modernism in its “intense celebration of her countryside” (Harris 2010: 113). By setting her novel in an old country house on the day of the village pageant, shortly before the war, she extends the scope of her experimentation to public/national space.

I open the first chapter of my thesis, “Physical Spaces of Pointz Hall”, with an introductory discussion of the novel’s setting – Pointz Hall and the surrounding landscape – by means of which I introduce the Oliver family and briefly set *Between the Acts* in its literary, biographical and historical context. Then I proceed to examine the representation and symbolism of the interiors of Pointz Hall. The house and its interiors are palimpsests of sorts, in that although many of the interior spaces have been transformed over the years, the past experiences – the old layers of architecture and decor – still shine through. Further, the interior spaces of the house are represented as empty shells full of hollow sounds, which on the one hand are timeless, as they promise continuity, and on the other ominous, because this continuity seems to exclude humans. This chapter ends with a comparison between the shell imagery in *Between the Acts* and in Woolf’s earlier novels, *Jacob’s Room* and *To the Lighthouse*, which leads me to conclude that even Woolf’s last novel may be interpreted as an elegy.

Chapter Two, “Reimagining Domestic Space”, focuses on the domestic architecture of Pointz Hall. Domestic objects and elements of architecture will be shown to perpetuate some Victorian divisions and norms, and to reveal the gendered hierarchy in the house. Woolf’s use of thresholds and her representation of masculine spaces in the house, I argue, serve to break gender divisions and bring women out of the peripheral and liminal spaces. Since the representation of domestic space in the novel is reminiscent of Woolf’s evocation of her childhood home at Hyde Park Gate (even though it is a distant echo rather than explicit similarities), I think it pertinent to refer to the Victorian world of her childhood. Hence, the chapter begins with a short discussion of Woolf and her circle’s peculiar attitude towards the

homes of their childhood and Woolf's account of her parents' house in *Moments of Being*, a collection of memoirs published for the first time in 1976.

The aim of Chapter Three, "'This odd mix up of public and private' and Spatial Form", is twofold. Firstly, it sets out to study the ways in which public space enters the private at Pointz Hall, as well as the nature of this interaction. By way of introduction, I present Woolf's expressions of a growing sense of the invasion into her private sphere by the public event of war as reflected in her wartime diary. This is followed by an examination of elements of public space in the novel. First, in order to explain why Woolf depicts Pointz Hall as Englishness itself, I shortly discuss how her attitude towards the Second World War changed towards the end of her life. Then I examine the village pageant and its audience, with its constant movement from community/unity to dispersity/fragmentation; and the presence of war in the novel. Secondly, I argue that the rather rapid rhythm of the interaction between the private and public, and between other opposites (e.g. past and present, and reality and art) influences the novel's form. I propose that the form of *Between the Acts* is spatial (a fact which, to my knowledge, has gone unremarked by critics), and acknowledge the presence of the Cubist element in the novel.

As a whole, the thesis will hopefully contribute to a deeper understanding of Woolf's conception of space in the novel.

Finally, as a personal digression, I would like to note that writing about Woolf's prose is an extremely challenging task, partly due to the immense body of scholarship which it has inspired and which must be taken into account, but mostly because of its multidimensional character. Much of Woolf's writing has a palimpsest quality – apart from the fact that the multiple planes and meanings refuse "to lie flat", layered one on top of another (*BA* 55). Instead, they rise to interact and form new meanings and patterns. I hope neither to simplify, nor over-interpret Woolf's intricate designs, but rather to be their careful observer.

## Chapter One: Physical Spaces of Pointz Hall

For one inhabited shell, how many are empty!

—Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

In my view, the significance of Pointz Hall and its interior spaces for both the content and form of *Between the Acts* goes far beyond the traditional role of setting, which is to provide the background for the plot and environment for the characters of a literary work. Examining the implications the house carries for the domestic and national spaces, and the novel as a whole, requires an understanding of how its architecture and interiors are represented. In her novel, Woolf explores various ways in which the architectural spaces and its inhabitants, with their histories and interior lives, influence or even complement each other. At the same time, by insisting on depicting the interiors of Pointz Hall as empty shells, the narrator seems to inscribe human absence at the centre of the house and the narrative.

Taking the physical spaces of Pointz Hall and the adjacent landscape as a starting point, I begin with an introductory presentation of both the family which inhabits the house, and the historical and biographical context of *Between the Acts*.

### **Pointz Hall, the Olivers and the view**

Pointz Hall, the setting of *Between the Acts*, is a middle-sized country house. The “whitish cottage with the grey roof” is too small and “homely” to figure among the country estates catalogued in guide books. Although a stretch of high ground had been available nearby, the house was built low in the meadow, “with a fringe of trees on the bank above it”, so as to

provide shelter from nature (BA 6). However, the location has proved unfortunate and the building has been continually exposed to the destructive workings of damp and humidity. As the narrator observes, “nature had provided a site for a house; man had built his house in a hollow” (BA 10). Yet in the Earlier Typescript Pointz Hall is described as “seductive; suggestive; a house to desire” (PH 41).<sup>7</sup> “Driving past, people said to each other: ‘I wonder if that’ll ever come into the market?’ And to the chauffeur: ‘Who lives there?’” (BA 6).

The chauffeur, however, would not know. The Olivers – the elderly Bartholomew Oliver, his sister Lucy Swithin, and the middle-aged couple Isa and Giles Oliver – are not prominent inhabitants of the county: they are neither indigenous to the area nor rich. The novel’s narrator seems to be uncertain about how long the family have been in the house. The Olivers are first said to have bought Pointz Hall “only something over a century ago”, that is, around the year 1839 as the action of the novel takes place during a single day in June 1939. In the following paragraph, in turn, the narrator tells the reader that the family have inhabited Pointz Hall for “only something over a hundred and twenty years”.<sup>8</sup> Further, we learn that the Olivers “had no connection with the Warings, the Elveys, the Mannerings or the Burnets; the old families who had all inter-married” (BA 6).

The account of the chosen features of the interior is presented with a similar degree of curiosity, rather than certain knowledge. The elements of the interior that are brought out emphasise the dubiousness of the Olivers’ descent. The ancestress whose portrait hangs at the top of the principal staircase is fake – “a small powdered face, a great head-dress slung with pearls” – merely “an ancestress of sorts” (BA 6, 7). The watch that stopped a bullet at Waterloo does not commemorate a heroic ancestor either. It belonged to the butler who had

---

<sup>7</sup> There are not many major differences in the representation of the physical spaces of Pointz Hall in the Earlier, Later and Final Typescripts of *Between the Acts*. However, the earlier typescripts often tend to include more detailed descriptions of the house and its interiors, the final version being more elliptical and condensed. Therefore, I use the Earlier Typescript as supplementary to the spatial representation of Pointz Hall in *Between the Acts*.

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly enough, in the Earlier Typescript the Olivers are more ancient – they have lived at Pointz Hall since 1710. Note also that the narration of “Pointz Hall” lacks the ambiguity present in *Between the Acts* at this point.

been a soldier and “had married a lady’s maid”, as the gossipy narrator throws in (BA 7). Only much later in the text do we get to know that the Olivers actually have a picture of an ancestor in the dining room. “He had a name. He held the rein in his hand,” the narrator explains. But he is remembered primarily for the love of his dog, Colin. He would say his painter:

‘If you want my likeness, dang it sir, take it when the leaves are on the trees.’  
There were leaves on the trees. He had said: ‘Ain’t there room for Colin as well as Buster [his horse]?’ Colin was his famous hound. But there was only room for Buster. It was, he seemed to say, addressing the company not the painter, a damned shame to leave out Colin whom he wished buried at his feet, in the same grave, about 1750; but that skunk the Reverend Whatshisname wouldn’t allow it.  
(BA 33)

What is more, his likeness is displayed next to the picture of a lady which Mr Oliver bought because he liked it: “He was a talk producer, that ancestor. But the lady was a picture. In her yellow robe, leaning, with a pillar to support her, a silver arrow in her hand, and a feather in her hair” (BA 33).

In the Earlier Typescript the identities of the portrayed are obliterated. Nobody apart from the narrator remembers who hung the pictures up or whom they depict. They are thought to have been born in the middle of the eighteenth century and assumed to have been married: “Indeed during awkward pauses in the conversation, fanciful diners would sketch imaginary dialogues; invent reasons why he had married her and she him” (PH 60). Thus, in the earlier version of the novel the pictures stir the diners’ imagination and stimulate conventional conversations about “the forced marriages of the eighteen century” (PH 60).

By placing the paintings of the ancestor and an unknown lady side by side in *Between the Acts*, Woolf further diminishes the status of both the ancestor and the whole family. But, more importantly, she also suggests that at Pointz Hall, the real and fictional spaces are both

inseparable and equally significant. The realistic representation of the ancestor is juxtaposed with the symbolism of the picture of the anonymous lady (with “a silver arrow in her hand, and a feather in her hair”), which seems to point to the timeless world of myth. As opposed to the pictures in the Earlier Typescript, in *Between the Acts* only the portrait of the ancestor produces talk (Lucy always feels that he is saying: “Paint my dog”) – the picture of the lady, in contrast, “drew them down the paths of silence” (McWhirter 1993: 806; BA 42, 45). While the conversations about the ancestor reproduce and perpetuate his identity and history, the silence and symbolism of the lady appeal to the imaginative faculty, which will be shown in Chapter Two to characterise the female characters in the novel.

Further, the Olivers are denied the splendour of an aristocratic family also in that the money used to keep up their country house is not inherited. It is middle-class money made by Giles Oliver who works as a stockbroker in the City, although if he had a choice, he would rather be a farmer. That the family is not well-off is reflected in the furniture of Pointz Hall, which is one hundred years old, “bought at Maples, perhaps, in the forties”, together with the house (BA 65). As Marina MacKay has noted, in this way Woolf distances herself from the theme of inheritance and lineage central to some of the most canonical novels of the first half of the twentieth century, for example E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* (1910) or D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928) (MacKay 2005: 229). Similarly, Woolf avoids dealing with the modernisation and the concomitant vulgarisation of the landscape, which brings much anxiety in the country-house novels of E. M. Forster or Evelyn Waugh. The countryside in *Between the Acts* is by no means free from the pressures of modernity such as “the motor bike, the motor bus, and the movies”, or “the building of a car factory and of an aerodrome in the neighbourhood” (BA 68–69). Yet, if all those changes take place, they receive only a casual mention, and do not create anxiety or pose a threat as in Waugh’s

fiction. In its representation of the countryside, the novel's emphasis is on continuity rather than change (MacKay 2005: 245–46):

The ground sloped up, so that to quote Figgis's Guide Book (1833), 'it commanded a fine view over the surrounding country ... The spire of Bolney Minster, Rough Norton woods, and on an eminence rather to the left, Hogben's Folly, so called because ...'

The Guide Book still told the truth. 1833 was true in 1939. No house had been built; no town had sprung up. Hogben's Folly was still eminent; the very flat, field-parcelled land had changed only in this—the tractor had to some extent superseded the plough. The horse had gone; but the cow remained. If Figgis were here now, Figgis would have said the same. (*BA* 48)

But while the village may be represented as unchanged, the landscape does not imply the same in 1833 as in 1939. The view spanning from Pointz Hall, which was not out of the ordinary in 1833, becomes unique over a century later, and that is precisely why the house is "desirable" and attracts much attention on the part of the people passing by (*BA* 6). Woolf's representation of the village as unchanged seems to reflect the growing concern about preserving rural England and its domestic architectural heritage in the first half of the twentieth century, which led to the foundation of a few important organisations, most notably National Trust (1895) and the Council for the Protection of Rural England (1926). But especially the 1930s faced an increasing anxiety about the future of the country estate, as a result of the unprecedented pace of sales and the break-up of major collections during the 1920s and 1930s (Hall 1994: 10, 11).

When in 1919 the Woolfs bought the cottage Monk's House in Rodmell (East Sussex) as a retreat from their London life, Virginia Woolf disliked the village. With time, however, she had grown increasingly fond of it, and as the war approached in the late 1930s, the Woolfs spent more and more time in Rodmell. In September 1940, when the Battle of Britain raged

and the Blitz began, they moved from their London home at 37 Mecklenburgh Square to Monk's House for good.<sup>9</sup> They became involved in the village life: Virginia not only helped with writing and rehearsals of a play at the Rodmell Women's Institute, but also became its treasurer, and Leonard was the manager of the village school. Woolf reflects on her changing attitude towards the country and expresses her concern about the derelict condition of houses and estates in a diary entry from November 1940, written after the Woolfs' visit at Claverham – the farm house Angelica Bell (the daughter of Woolf's sister Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant) and Bunny (David Garnett, Angelica's partner whom she married in 1942) rented at the time:

I, of course, at once saw the country as something I envied. We lost our way. Up a lane we went to a tree shadowed house, with a pond; & a swan; & a curious thatched barn, with small Gothic windows. [...] *Such antiquity all gone to pieces.* Some old farm wagons, some ploughs; a battered car in the yard. [...] C[laverham]. farm house is in the fields. It has a pond. Long tracks of grass. Red plumed woods in the distance. And four hollow trees. [...] When I think of Monks House when we took it—when I think of the E[arth] C[loset] in the garden; & the cane chair over a bucket, & the dogs barking; & *how I hated the village*—which has now become familiar & even friendly—arent I on the Cttee [Committee] of the WI [Women's Institute]—dnt I go to a meeting on Monday?—then *I wd have given my eyes to live in Claverham, with the fields, & the green paths, & the farm horses ploughing.* (*Diary V* 341; emphasis mine)

Although she had developed affection for the English village, Woolf's attitude towards England and Englishness had always been ambivalent. Woolf had been a pacifist and a committed internationalist who strongly disapproved of Britain's imperialist politics and war-enforced nationalism. She hated the ubiquitous propaganda of both the First and Second World War. On 3 June 1940, she notes:

---

<sup>9</sup> 37 Mecklenburgh Square was bombed in September 1940. In October, the Woolfs went to see the ruins of their previous house at 52 Tavistock Square, also destroyed by bombs.



We have now been hard at it hero-making. The laughing, heroic, Tommy—how can we be worthy of such men?—every paper, every BBC rises to that dreary false cheery hero-making strain. Will they be grinding organs in 6 months? Its the emotional falsity; not all false; yet inspired with some eye to the main chance. So the politicians mate guns & tanks. No. Its the myth making stage of the war we're in. (*Diary V* 292)

Woolf felt that writing was the only means of using her “faculties patriotically”: “And for the 100th time I repeat—any idea is more real than any amount of war misery. [...] And the only contribution one can make—This little pitter patter of ideas is my whiff of shot in the cause of freedom” (*Diary V* 237, 235).

What Woolf seemed to hate even more than the “false cheery hero-making” was that Englishness and the English pastoral had become a cliché used for propaganda purposes. She cherished the English language and literature, and the countryside they are inextricably linked with, as much as she deplored nationalism. As Julia Briggs rightly observes, Woolf “celebrated those aspects of Englishness that brought back a sense of the past”. She would repeatedly turn to the English countryside in her work, but, in one way or another, all the portrayed landscapes belong to the past (Briggs 2006: 191). *To the Lighthouse* (1927) is set in a summer house in the Hebrides, modelled on Talland House – the Stephens’ Cornish house where the family used to spend every summer until Julia Stephen’s death in 1895. Woolf later recalled these holidays as “the best beginning of life conceivable”: “to have [...] our own garden; to have the Bay; the sea; the moors [...] to hear the waves breaking” (*MB* 127–28). In *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), Clarissa and her friends also dwell on the youthful memories of the time they spent together in the country estate at Bourton, with its garden, lake and park. In *Orlando* (1928), Woolf reconstructs Knole – the ancestral country estate of the Sackvilles – the family home lost to her friend Vita Sackville-West, and inherited by her uncle after her father died leaving no male heir. The enormous estate, with its courts, chapel, 365 rooms,

ancient oak and cedar trees, is at the centre of the narrative which depicts the life of Orlando (a character based on Vita) over three centuries. In *The Waves* (1931), the mythic image of the lady writing between the long windows and the gardeners sweeping aside the leaves at Elvedon is conjured by Bernard when he still is a child, and recurs as a memory throughout his narrative.

In *Between the Acts*, the depicted countryside is not yet lost in the past but the spectre of war looms large over it. When one considers that Woolf began composing the novel in the face of the escalating international conflict of 1938, and continued working on it through 1939 and 1940, her choice and representation of setting takes on another dimension. The antiquity of the landscape and the house in Woolf's final work seems to convey a sense of nostalgia for the whole old world that could disappear at any moment, a fear for "such antiquity all gone to pieces" (*Diary V* 341). But the novel is far from a simple celebration of England and Englishness. Like *To the Lighthouse*, it contains criticism of the pre-war quasi-idyll. Many characters in the novel remain oblivious to the imminent catastrophe. Hence, old Mrs Swithin is saddened by the view that had remained unchanged for a century: "That's what makes a view so sad' [...]. 'And so beautiful. It'll be there' [...] 'when we're not.'" Only her nephew Giles Oliver seems to be aware of the brooding danger and cannot hide his rage at "old fogies who sat and looked at views over coffee and cream while the whole Europe—over there—was bristling like ... He had no command of metaphor. Only the ineffective word 'hedgehog' illustrated his vision of Europe, bristling with guns, poised with planes." He realises that "[a]t any moment guns would rake that land into furrows; planes splinter Bolney Minster into smithereens and blast the Folly. He, too, loved the view and blamed Aunt Lucy, looking at views, instead of—doing what?" (*BA* 49). Moreover, the tranquillity of the English countryside seems to be threatened even from the inside, disturbed by signs of suppressed violence and tension from within the family and community.

## **Transformations of Pointz Hall**

*Between the Acts* is organised spatially, with Pointz Hall at the core of the narrative. The ancient house in the country is certainly among Woolf's most traditional settings. Nevertheless, this thesis argues that Pointz Hall is a highly innovative space where the private/domestic and public/national realm coexist, and the past and present intermingle in most curious ways; as a location it constantly re-establishes its own centre and periphery. Thus, the spatial configurations of the novel seem negotiable and open to change. In such fluid and undetermined reality, the old spaces of Pointz Hall seem to ensure some degree of stability and continuity. The narrator's representation of these spaces as empty and hollow forms a kind of scaffolding which provides a background for and connects the otherwise fragmented text of the novel. As will be shown below, this scaffolding will prove shaky, like the reality it is trying to bind together. I begin my discussion with the physical space of Pointz Hall, its curious transformations and silent sounds of the past.

Pointz Hall with its mid-Victorian interiors and ancient view seems to be lifted out of time and highly resistant to change. But, in fact, the architecture of Pointz Hall is constantly being rewritten in the course of the narrative, and its spaces often suggest some other spaces. The barn, which is "as old as the church, and built of the same stone", resembles a Greek temple to all those who have been to Greece. "[A]nd inside it was a *hollow* hall, sun-shafted, brown, smelling of corn, dark when the doors were shut, but splendidly illuminated when the doors at the end stood open", the narrator comments (*BA* 24; emphasis mine). Further, the larder had been a chapel before the Reformation. Mr Oliver would often show the gentlemen "the cellar that opened out of the larder and its carved arch. If you tapped—one gentleman had a hammer—there was a *hollow* sound; a reverberation; undoubtedly, he said, a concealed passage where somebody had hid" (*BA* 29–30; emphasis mine). The trees on the terrace,

where the village pageant is enacted, “suggest columns in a church; in a church without a roof; in an open-air cathedral” (*BA* 59).

In “A Sketch of the Past”, a memoir Woolf wrote simultaneously with *Between the Acts* (from April 1939 till November 1940), she refers to her childhood as “that great Cathedral space”, and a “great hall [...] with windows letting strange lights; and murmurs and spaces of deep silence” (*MB* 81, 79). In order to evoke her memories, Woolf writes, “Instead of remembering here a scene and there a sound, I shall fit a plug into the wall; and listen in to the past” (*MB* 67). It seems that by suggesting elements of ecclesiastical architecture at Pointz Hall, Woolf wanted to achieve a similar effect. The barn, the larder and the terrace are associated with a Greek temple, the chapel and a cathedral respectively. They suggest ancient, hollow spaces “letting strange lights” and sounds. By extension, Pointz Hall becomes a “cathedral space”, or a “hall” where one can hear the hollow sound of the past.

The past contained within the walls of Pointz Hall includes the memories of the characters that inhabit the house, and traces of old times imprinted on the interiors and material objects. Being the oldest inhabitants of the house, both Bart Oliver and Lucy Swithin are strongly attached to their pasts. Both of them brood on the memories of their childhood at Pointz Hall, or rather the interiors of the house bring them back. Already in the first scene, Mr Oliver remembers the drawing room as the very room where his mother gave him a copy of Byron over sixty years ago. Mrs Swithin also recalls a memory connected with the room she inhabits: “she remembered her mother—her mother in that very room rebuking her” (*BA* 9). Further, during a house tour she gives to William Dodge, who visits Pointz Hall with Mrs Manresa, different spaces and objects of the house evoke childhood memories and family history: “‘Here’ she said, ‘yes, here,’ she tapped the counterpane, ‘I was born. In this bed’” (*BA* 64). Finally, Mrs Swithin draws Dodge’s attention to the worn-out mid-Victorian furnishings of Pointz Hall bearing numerous traces of the past, for example a white circle on

the carpet which marks the place where the slop pail used to stand by the washstand. “‘We have other lives, I think, I hope,’ she murmured. [...] ‘We live in things’”, she explains (*BA* 64). Thus, as Woolf writes in her essay “Street Haunting: A London Adventure”, in our rooms “we sit surrounded by objects which perpetually express the oddity of our own temperaments and enforce the memories of our own experience” (*Essays* 177).

In *Between the Acts*, as in modernist literature in general, the opposite is also true. The characters impose their own experience upon the rooms of Pointz Hall—their inner selves are projected onto the domestic interior and architecture. The word “interior” denotes both one’s inner being and the inside of a particular space. Like Victoria Rosner, in a discussion of interiors in modernist fiction, I suggest that these two senses of the word are interdependent. But as Rosner points out, while the former definition is central to literary modernism, the latter has long been regarded as irrelevant to it (Rosner 2005: 129). However, in Walter Benjamin’s view, an increasing correspondence between the two senses of the interior is a part of the advent of modern life, and the origin of what he calls “the phantasmagorias of the interior”. “For the private individual”, Benjamin notes, “the private environment represents the universe. In it he gathers remote places and the past. His drawing room is a box in the world theatre” (qtd. Rosner 2005: 129). Thus, as the place of work is separated from the private environment, the inner life becomes associated with the domestic space. As Rosner remarks, “the phantasmagoria is both a play of optical illusions in an enclosed space and the life of the mind. The phantasmagoria is the modernist experience of reality and the theatre for its performance is the private home” (Rosner 2005: 129–30).

Mr Oliver’s and Mrs Swithin’s reveries turn the domestic architecture of Pointz Hall into remote places of the past. The library is vividly transformed into India by Mr Oliver’s dream of his youth:

Drowsily, seeing as in a glass, its lustre spotted, himself, a young man helmeted; and a cascade falling. But no water; and the hills, like grey stuff pleated; and in the sand a hoop of ribs; a bullock maggot-eaten in the sun; and in the shadow of the rock, savages; and in his hand a gun. The dream hand clenched; the real hand lay on the chair arm, the veins swollen but only with a brownish fluid now. (BA 16)

Immersed in “an Outline of History”, her favourite book, Mrs Swithin turns the space of her bedroom into a primeval forest, with rhododendrons, and “elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging, slowly writhing, and, she supposed, barking monsters; the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon”.<sup>10</sup> When Grace, the maid, comes in to serve tea, for about five seconds Mrs Swithin cannot separate her from “the leather-covered grunting monster who was about, as the door opened, to demolish a whole tree in the green steaming undergrowth of the primeval forest” (BA 8).

Such superimposition of the characters’ dreams and imagination upon the present moment reflects the mind’s ability to experience simultaneously, to increase “the bounds of the moment by flights into past or future; or sidelong down corridors and alleys” (BA 8). Since these simultaneous time planes are projected upon the domestic interiors, Pointz Hall becomes a place where different spaces, past and present, coexist and complement each other.

Towards the end of the novel, however, Mrs Swithin’s projection of the prehistoric upon the present moment ceases to be merely an expression of her creative faculties. Rather, Pointz Hall itself becomes a prehistoric space “in the heart of darkness, in the fields of the night”: “The house had lost its shelter. 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” (BA 197).

---

<sup>10</sup> As Gillian Beer notes, H. G. Wells’ *The Outline of History: Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind* (1920), is merged with G. M. Trevelyan’s *History of England* (1926) in the book Mrs Swithin reads (Beer 2000: 131).

### **Rooms like shells: interiors of emptiness and silence**

At the end of *Between the Acts*, Pointz Hall “had lost its shelter”, and in the Earlier Typescript Woolf develops this sentence by adding an explanatory “<it had crumpled>” in the margin (*PH* 188).<sup>11</sup> The house had thus crushed together, fallen down. But, in a way, this collapse is anticipated throughout the novel by the narrator’s insistence on representing the interiors of Pointz Hall as empty and silent. The emptiness seems to foreshadow a looming catastrophe because by imagining the forlorn spaces, Woolf implies absence or death. Significantly, the emptiness and silence of the portrayed rooms are connected throughout the novel with the figure of a shell. The dining room is depicted as an empty shell: “Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell, singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence” (*BA* 33–34). To my mind, even the vase placed at the very centre of Pointz Hall is evocative of an urn, and thus serves as a *memento mori*, a reminder or warning of death. Further, the empty nursery is compared to a ship deserted by its crew, and when Lucy Swithin is about to show it to Dodge, she murmurs the words of an old nursery rhyme: “Come and see my sea weeds, come and see my *sea shells*, come and see my dicky bird hop upon its perch” (*BA* 65; emphasis mine). Towards the end of the novel, when the family return to the drawing room after the pageant, they are depicted as sitting within the shell of the room, with “the usual sounds” reverberating “throughout the shell; Sands [the cook] making up the fire; Candish [the butler] stoking the boiler. Isa had done with her bills. Sitting in the shell of the room she watched the pageant fade” (*BA* 194–95).

The figure of the shell is an important and recurrent one in Woolf’s oeuvre, particularly in two of her earlier novels, *Jacob’s Room* (1922) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), which, in my opinion, cast important light on *Between the Acts*. Both novels have been

---

<sup>11</sup> In *Pointz Hall: The Earlier and Later Typescripts of Between the Acts*, the editorial symbol <word> denotes an insertion made by the author either above the word or in the margin.

interpreted as elegies by critics. Laura Marcus, who emphasises the biographical elements, writes that *Jacob's Room*, though indirectly, addresses the death of Thoby Stephen – Woolf's brother, whereas in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf lays “the ghosts of her parents to rest” (Marcus 2004: 84). In spite of the clearly biographical elements evident especially in *To the Lighthouse*, both novels have been read, for example by Tammy Clewell (2009), as more universal war elegies for the war dead and the whole pre-war world of Woolf's youth gone to pieces. Regardless of interpretation, however, it is notable that in both novels Woolf combines the figure of the shell with that of the skull to prefigure death, and thus both figures constitute central elegiac images in the narratives.

*Jacob's Room* opens with a scene of mourning on the beach where Betty Flanders is writing a tear-stained letter about the death of her husband Seabrook who is now “enclosed in three shells”, that is, buried in three coffins (*JR* 15). At the same time, her younger son Jacob is running across the sandy beach with its “limpet shells” (emphasis mine) and seaweed, until he suddenly discovers “a whole skull – perhaps a cow's skull, a skull, perhaps, with the teeth in it. Sobbing but absent-mindedly, he ran further and further away until he held the skull in his arms” (*JR* 6, 7). Although Mrs Flanders tells him to drop it, little Jacob not only refuses to give it up, but also sleeps with it at the foot of the bed. The whole novel is centred on Jacob's absence, which, just like his name, anticipates his death in the fields of Flanders in the First World War. In this light, the skull becomes a *memento mori*, and the boy's attachment to it might even be seen as his ‘choice’ of death. As Julia Briggs has noted in her essay on images of emptiness in *Jacob's Room* and *To the Lighthouse*, when Jacob reaches for the skull, it is as if he “is reaching out for his own death” (Briggs 2006: 142–43).

Throughout the novel, Jacob is metonymically reduced to the spaces he inhabited and objects he possessed, both of which are conceptualised as containers imprinted with the life they used to hold. The same description of his empty room is repeated verbatim two times in



the novel – in Cambridge, when he is still alive, and in London, after he dies. The two rooms seem to be filled with Jacob's lingering presence suggested by the creaking armchair: "Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there" (*JR* 49, 247). The quintessential questions are what survives us, and what one should do with the spaces and objects that remain. In the novel's final lines, Betty Flanders holds out a pair of Jacob's old shoes and asks: "'What am I to do with these?'" (*JR* 247).

Similarly to Mrs Flanders who urges Jacob to give up the sheep's skull, Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* uses her cashmere shawl to protect her children from the threat of death implicit in the boar's skull nailed to the nursery's wall. This attempt, however, will prove vain as Andrew, one of her sons, will die in the war, hit by a shell in France. The tripartite structure of the novel progresses from the fullness of life in the first section, "The Window", to the emptiness of death in "Time Passes", and returns to life in the final part, "To the Lighthouse" (Briggs 2006: 145). As mentioned above, the Ramsay's house is modelled on the Stephens' Talland House in St Ives. But whereas in Woolf's memory of the childhood summers in "A Sketch of the Past" it represents an idyllic and pastoral image of "the purest ecstasy", *To the Lighthouse* suggests the possibility of death and destruction from the very beginning (*MB* 65).

The Ramsay's house is rendered as senile and decrepit, decorated with 'ghost' furniture: "Mats, camp-beds, crazy ghosts of chairs and tables whose London life of service was done" (*TL* 25). Moreover, different objects and spaces in the house suggest absence, the "phantom kitchen table" being the most striking example. When Andrew explains his father's philosophical work to Lily, he asks her to "think of the kitchen table [...] when you're not there". Mr Ramsay's "Subject and object and the nature of reality" is a study of the British empiricists – Locke, Hume and Berkeley (*TL* 22). As Briggs explains, the main question Berkeley raised was whether a thing exists when there is no one to see it (Briggs 2006: 146).

Similarly, Woolf often tried to envisage things that exist when one is not there. “Time Passes” is her first attempt at depicting “an empty house, no people’s characters, the passage of time, all eyeless and featureless” (although the description of Jacob’s empty rooms is based on a similar idea) (*Diary III* 76).

The decrepit house anticipates not only its own annihilation, but also the concurrent collapse of the Ramsays’ way of life which Mrs Ramsay (a character based on Julia Stephen, Virginia Woolf’s mother) struggles hard to sustain. Just like Julia Stephen in “A Sketch of the Past”, Mrs Ramsay is presented as “the centre” of the family life, the keeper of “the panoply of life”, the Victorian ‘Angel in the House’ (*MB* 83, 84).<sup>12</sup> In order to soothe the shattered nerves of her husband, “confident, upright, she created drawing-room and kitchen, set them all aglow [...] she assured him [...] (as a nurse carrying a light across a dark room assures a fractious child), that it was real; the house was full; the garden blowing” (*TL* 33–34). Yet “so boasting of her capacity to surround and protect, there was scarcely a *shell* of herself left for her to know herself by; all was so lavished and spent” (*TL* 34; emphasis mine). When Mr Ramsay leaves to watch the children playing cricket, Mrs Ramsay collapses and “the whole fabric fell in exhaustion upon itself” (*TL* 34). She does her utmost to protect her family and becomes an empty shell, which prefigures her death in the “Time Passes” section of the novel.

But as Briggs observes, the shell also signifies plenitude in the novel, “in the form of a cornucopia (literally, a horn of plenty)”, the dish of fruit that stands in the centre of the dinner table (Briggs 2006: 147). Using a “horny pink-lined *shell*”, grapes, pears and bananas, Rose, one of Mrs Ramsay’s daughters, has created an arrangement which makes her mother “think of a trophy fetched from the bottom of the sea, of Neptune’s banquet, of the bunch that hangs

---

<sup>12</sup> The term “Angel in the house” refers to the Victorian feminine ideal: pure, sympathetic, submissive to her husband and devoted to her family, self-sacrificing, pious, tender and graceful. It derives from Coventry Patmore’s sequence of poems (1854 – 1862), in which he depicts his first wife Emily as the perfect woman. For Woolf, this repressive ideal of a woman proved so powerful that she claimed that in order to become a writer, she had to kill her “shadow” or “phantom”. “Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer”, she notes in the essay “Professions for Women” (*Essays* 142).

with vine leaves over the shoulder of Bacchus” (*TL* 79; emphasis mine). Thus, as Briggs has aptly noted, the image of the shell in the first section of the novel “combines life and plenitude – the fruitfulness of Mrs Ramsay as the eternal mother, pink-lined, birth-giving – with fragility and, ultimately, emptiness” (Briggs 2006: 147).

“Time Passes” is the narrative of the mysterious decay of the house which takes place during the years the family are absent. Like Mrs Ramsay, once filled with life, the house becomes an empty shell: “The house was left; the house was deserted. It was left like a *shell* on a sand-hill” (*TL* 112; emphasis mine). At first, the domestic interiors are surrendered to the workings of the darkness: “Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness.” “Certain airs, detached from the body of the wind” enter the house and start wandering around, “questioning and wondering, toying with the flap of hanging wallpaper, asking, would it hang much longer, when would it fall? [...] asking the red and yellow roses on the wallpaper whether they would fade”. At the end of their tour around the house, the airs give off “an aimless gust of lamentation”, which mourns the anticipated fall of the household and the life it accommodates (*TL* 103–04). Indeed, in the next movement of “Time Passes” Mrs Ramsay dies (as we learn from an aside) and the disintegration of the house begins for good: “those stray airs, advance guards of great armies, blustered in, brushed bare boards, nibbled and fanned” (*TL* 105). The house loses its shelter and is gradually taken over by nature: “A thistle thrust itself between the tiles in the larder. The swallows nested in the drawing-room; the floor was strewn with straw [...] rats carried off this and that to gnaw behind the wainscots” (*TL* 112–13).

As Rosner explains, the substitution of the story of the house for the story of the family serves to emphasise the interrelation between the domestic space and its inhabitants (Rosner 2005: 167). As the dilapidation of the house progresses, the family life is shattered further. Again, as we only learn from asides, Prue, the Ramsays’ daughter, dies in childbirth;

and Andrew is killed by a shell: “[A *shell* exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous]” (*TL* 109; emphasis mine). Thus, the shell acquires one more meaning: a metal case containing an explosive charge. While the previous figures of the shell signify either the fecundity of life (the cornucopia) or containers emptied out of the life they once held (both Mrs Ramsay and the house), the shell in its military meaning carries death and destruction associated with the battlefield.

Yet despite all the damage the house sustains, it is saved from total destruction by some force which takes over towards the end of “Time Passes”: “something not highly conscious; something that leered, something that lurched” (*TL* 103). “The extraordinary stimulus to range hither and thither in search of some absolute good, some crystal of intensity, remote from the known pleasures and familiar virtues, something alien to the process of domestic life, single, hard, bright, like a diamond in the sand” (*TL* 98). As Victoria Rosner has rightly noted, “with its hints of exile, spiritual questing, reinvention of tradition, and anti-domesticity, the new stimulus sounds a great deal like modernity knocking at the door” (Rosner 2005: 167). When cleaning ladies come to clean the house for the Ramsays towards the end of “Time Passes”, they agree that “They’d find it changed”; changed, not in ruins (*TL* 104).

As in *Jacob’s Room*, those who are left have to deal with the emptiness filled with the lingering presence of the deceased. The imagery, too, is evocative of *Jacob’s Room*: “There were boots and shoes; and a brush and comb left on the dressing-table, for all the world as if she [Mrs Ramsay] expected to come back to-morrow” (*TL* 111). However, in *To the Lighthouse*, the Victorian system of values Mrs Ramsay represented lingers together with the objects she left behind. It is the artist Lily Briscoe who is left to deal with her legacy. She does that by finishing the abstract painting of Mrs Ramsay and her son which she started

working on in the first part of the novel. But it is not until Lily frees herself from the lingering presence of Mrs Ramsay and the social norms she propagated that she can finish the picture. It is only when she sees the stairs empty that she draws the final line.

Unlike *Jacob's Room* and *To the Lighthouse*, where the shell and skull anticipate the death of one or more characters in the First World War, the portrayal of the interiors of Pointz Hall as empty shells is only *suggestive* of the possibility of death and destruction. However, it needs to be emphasised that *Between the Acts* was being written during the Dunkirk evacuation (May 1940), the Battle of Britain (the summer and autumn of 1940) and the London Blitz (September 1940 – May 1941). During this time, the Woolfs lost both of their London homes in bombing, and regularly heard the ominous planes overhead at Monks House. In this context, the metaphor of an empty shell which had lost its shelter becomes stronger than ever before. As Marina MacKay writes, “Woolf knew at first hand that modernist homelessness could become much more than a metaphor” (MacKay 2005: 247).

Thus, even if precipitate, *Between the Acts* – like *Jacob's Room* or *To the Lighthouse* – might be read as an elegy. Although Marina MacKay (2005) has also suggested that, she does not point to the prevalence and significance of the shell imagery in both Woolf's earlier elegies and *Between the Acts*. The empty spaces of Pointz Hall seem to anticipate death and mourn the loss of its inhabitants and the whole way of life contained within its walls. The representation of Pointz Hall as an empty shell echoes Woolf's poetic vision of the Ramsays' house in “Time Passes”, although *Between the Acts* is much more elliptical and the vision of destruction is never realised in the text. Apart from the shell imagery, the two novels also share the figure of the tortoiseshell butterfly that signifies the fragility and transience of life. They “burst from the chrysalis and pattered their life out on the window-pane” of the Ramsays' deserted house, and reappear in the empty library of Pointz Hall: “The fire greyed, then glowed, and the tortoiseshell butterfly beat on the lower pane of the window: beat, beat,

beat; repeating that if no human being ever came, never, never, never, the books would be mouldy, the fire out and the tortoiseshell butterfly dead on the pane” (*TL* 113; *BA* 15–16). As MacKay has pointed out, whereas in *To the Lighthouse* the narrator survives to record and mourn the death of the deceased characters, there is no such guarantee for the inhabitants of Pointz Hall. “Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent” is “Woolf’s narrative nonvision of Pointz Hall beyond the human, and beyond rehabilitation”, she concludes (*BA* 33; MacKay 2005: 247).

But although at the end of this narrative “nonvision” the house loses its function as shelter and crumples, Woolf’s work is reopened with the rise of the curtain in the last sentence of the novel: “Then the curtain rose. They spoke” (*BA* 197). This next act begins during the night before roads and houses were built, but the prehistory is also the future, and in this way Woolf implies continuance rather than total annihilation. Continuity of time is also emphasised in the representation of the dining room as a timeless shell, “singing of what was before time was”, even though this song is beyond the reach of the human ear (*BA* 33). Similarly, the emptiness of the barn during the pageant is shown to be filled with life, if unrecorded by the human eye:

The Barn was empty. Mice slid in and out of holes or stood upright, nibbling. Swallows were busy with straw in pockets of earth in the rafters. Countless beetles and insects of various sorts burrowed in the dry wood. A stray bitch had made the dark corner where the sacks stood a lying-in ground for her puppies. All these eyes, expanding and narrowing, some adapted to light, others to darkness, looked from different angles and edges. (*BA* 90)

Therefore, the images of empty shells in *Between the Acts* not only seem to foreshadow death and destruction in Woolf’s work, but they also hold promise of the continuance of life, in its abundant and diverse forms.

## Chapter Two: Reimagining Domestic Space

*La porte me flaire, elle hésite.*

(The door scents me, it hesitates.)

—Jean Pellerin, *La Romance du Retour*

In “A Sketch of the Past”, Woolf looks back on her room at 22 Hyde Park Gate – her childhood home, and wonders what the present residents (the house was a boarding house when she wrote the memoir) might think of it, and how they might relate it to her work. “I suppose that”, she concluded, “if one of them had read *To the Lighthouse*, or *A Room of One’s Own*, or *The Common Reader*, he or she might say: ‘This room explains a great deal’” (*MB* 124). To my mind, those words apply equally to *Between the Acts*, which, as mentioned, Woolf wrote at the same time as the memoir. Though in different ways, in both texts Woolf recalls the Victorian past in spatial and architectural terms. In the novel, she treats the objects and interiors of Pointz Hall as signs and reminders of old times, which her memoir helps to interpret. A historical understanding of how the architecture of a Victorian house organised people’s lives and a biographical insight into how Woolf experienced those spaces are prerequisite for discerning the subtle way in which she as a novelist uses domestic objects and architecture in order to re-envision the domestic space of Pointz Hall.

### **Bloomsbury's architecture of domesticity**

The notion of domesticity is inseparable from that of physical space. The plan of a house and its interior design organise our living space, and, in this way, determine our lives. This influence of houses held a lifelong fascination for Woolf and other members of her circle – the so-called Bloomsbury Group. They would especially dwell on their childhood homes, trying to reanimate the life that went on within their walls. Although they rejected the Victorian conventions that governed those spaces, like most people, they were never able to leave their pasts behind. In 1920 some of the group's members formed the Memoir Club, which gathered a couple of times a year to dine together and read aloud for each other personal memoirs. Lytton Strachey's "Lancaster Gate" – one of the essays read out to the club – illustrates Bloomsbury's ambivalent attitude towards their childhood homes. Strachey recounts in the memoir a recurrent dream in which he and his family mysteriously come back to re-inhabit their house. In the dream, Strachey is "positively delighted" with his return although, in reality, he finds the very thought repulsive: "I can imagine nothing which would disgust me more," he writes. "So, when I wake up, [...] I have the odd sensation of a tremendous relief at finding that my happiness of one second before was a delusion" (qtd. Rosner 2005: 59). Even though his essay was written years after the family had moved, his response to 69 Lancaster Gate is still very intense and highly ambiguous as it combines attraction with repulsion. Interestingly enough, Strachey ascribes the power of his childhood house primarily to its architecture and furnishings: "Those curious contraptions of stones and bricks, with all their peculiar adjuncts, trimmings, and furniture, their specific immutable shapes, their intense and inspissated atmosphere, in which our lives are entangled completely as our souls in our bodies—what do they wield over us, what subtle and pervasive effects upon the whole substance of our existence may not be theirs?" (qtd. Rosner 2005: 59–60).



In her memoirs, Woolf too considers the profound impact the childhood home exerted on her life. She recounts the old household in three memoirs: “22 Hyde Park Gate”, “Old Bloomsbury” (both written for the Memoir Club in the early 1920s) and “A Sketch of the Past”. Like Strachey’s essay, Woolf’s account of her family’s house has an architectural focus. She reconstructs the plan of the house and describes its interiors in order to expose the mechanisms governing the Victorian world. Woolf depicts Hyde Park Gate as a dark, confined space carefully divided along class and gender lines, in accordance with the Victorian vision of social order. The principles organising the house were supposed to allocate an appropriate level of space, privacy and convenience to different inhabitants of the house depending on their social standing and gender (Rosner 2005: 63). What Woolf felt had affected her life as a girl in the most significant way, was that she did not have a space of her own.

The Victorian gendering of space manifested itself in the designation of particular zones and rooms for males or females. While the masculine zones (such as the study or the gentleman’s room) ensured men privacy and seclusion, feminine rooms (for example the drawing room or breakfast room) had a more social and open character (Rosner 2005: 64). Woolf’s representation of Hyde Park Gate also reflects this gendered differentiation: while Leslie Stephen, Woolf’s father, has a study and the freedom from interruption it guaranteed, the women of the house are relegated to the drawing room and its stifling conventions. However, it is noteworthy that Leslie Stephen’s ownership of the study is sanctioned by the fact that he was a professional writer who worked at home to support his family, which Woolf’s memoir seems to disregard. When compared to a human body, his “great study” on the top floor is described as “the brain of the house”, while the tea table constitutes its “centre, the heart”, “the heart(h) whose fire was tended by the mother, pouring out tea” (*MB* 118,

119). Thus, in Woolf's account, the father governed the house, while the mother brought it to life and embodied it like a proper 'Angel in the House'.

Another crucial principle organising the Victorian domestic space was the spatial separation of the public and private zones. In Woolf's account of 22 Hyde Park Gate, the superiority of the more public part of the house is reflected in its interior design (Rosner 2005: 71). The richest furnishings and decorative schemes (red velvet upholstery, oak carved furniture, the famous painter George Frederic Watts' portrait of Leslie Stephen) were reserved for the lower, more public floors, while the higher floors were "rather shabby" (worn-out carpets and pictures, the dripping brown filter, the "pinched and bare" top landing, the shabby servants' bedrooms) (*MB* 117–19). But more importantly, the dominance of the public zone is reflected in the amount of time Virginia as a young girl had to spend downstairs, carrying out her familial duties: she recounts that she could devote herself to reading and writing only for three hours a day, from ten to one. After that, the engine of the social machine was started – her father had to be given his tea and guests had to be received. In the evening, "the pressure of the machine became emphatic": "Necks and arms had to be scrubbed, for we had to enter the drawing room at eight with bare arms and low neck, in evening dress." Victorian society and convention, or in Woolf's words, "hair and dress", overcame the intellect – "paint and Greek grammar" (*MB* 150).

After Leslie Stephen's death in 1904, Virginia's older sister Vanessa, taking along her siblings – Virginia, Thoby and Adrian – decided to abandon the family home in order to set up a new household in Bloomsbury. Woolf recalls how her sister dismantled the old house: "Vanessa had wound up Hyde Park Gate once and for all. She had sold; she had burnt; she had sorted; she had torn up" (*MB* 184). "46 Gordon Square could never have meant what it did had not 22 Hyde Park Gate preceded it," Woolf writes (*MB* 182). Indeed, Vanessa and Virginia sought to create a household that would be the very antithesis of the old house. The

domestic reforms included liberation from Victorian conventions, changes in daily routine as well as projects in redecoration.

By far, the greatest advantage of the new space was that it granted its female inhabitants rooms of their own. As Vanessa Bell writes: “All that seemed to matter was that at last we were free, had rooms of our own and space in which to be alone or to work or to see our friends” (qtd. Reed 2004: 21). Similarly, Woolf recalls her excitement with “the extraordinary increase of space”. As she recounts: “At Hyde Park Gate one had only a bedroom in which to read or see one’s friends. Here Vanessa and I each had a sitting room; there was a large double drawing room; and a study on the ground floor” (*MB* 185).

Yet, as Woolf wrote in “Old Bloomsbury”, “though Hyde Park seems now so distant from Bloomsbury, its shadow falls across it” (*MB* 182). This shadow proved crucial for the development of Bloomsbury’s identity as an avant-garde group: it was against the Victorian world of their fathers that the group could define themselves as modernists. For many Bloomsbury members the shadow never faded. Woolf remained under the powerful influence of Hyde Park Gate throughout her life, which is clearly reflected in her literary oeuvre. She evokes the Victorian domestic space again and again in a way that combines fascination with criticism (Rosner 2005: 61). Not unlike in the memoirs sketched above, Woolf repeatedly depicts domesticity in terms of physical space – the material environs that shape and determine the characters’ lives. Finally, she often manipulates the spaces and objects that fill them in order to suggest new conditions of domesticity, beyond the rigid divisions and conventions represented by Hyde Park Gate.

### **We live in things—the poetics of objects**

The Bloomsbury Group’s approach to interior design reflects the view that, to quote Reed’s words, “the objects of daily life reveal and perpetuate the social and moral conditions of their

creation”, a conviction which has its roots in the ideas of the Arts and Crafts, a design movement started by William Morris in the second half of the nineteenth century (Reed, qtd. Rosner 2005: 134). Although the two groups used this idea to achieve different ends, both of them aimed at transforming the look of the traditional British home. As a writer, Woolf did not actively participate in the Omega Workshop, Bloomsbury’s project in interior design started by Roger Fry, assisted by his artist associates Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell (Rosner 2005: 134). Nevertheless, the Omega’s interest in the role and function of objects and domestic spaces, resulting in bold experiments in redecoration, had a powerful influence on Woolf’s literary output. In an essay “Great Men’s Houses”, she writes that “writers stamp themselves upon their possessions more indelibly than other people. [...] making the table, the chair, the curtain, the carpet into their own image” (*LS* 23). Woolf’s representation of domestic objects frequently reveals the truth about social and moral aspects of the culture they belong to.

As indicated in the first chapter of this thesis, household objects in *Between the Acts* form and narrate the family history. Woolf substitutes the narrator’s presentation of the ‘familial mementoes’ (the portraits of the “ancestress of sorts” and the unnamed ancestor, the butler’s watch to mention just a few) for the story of the Olivers (*BA* 7). Similarly, the Victorian furniture and elements of architecture stand metonymically (or synecdochically to be precise) for the conventions and aesthetics which produced them. For example, the “mere ladder” for the servants at the back of the principal staircase of Pointz Hall secures and reinforces the spatial division between the family and servants, which Robert Kerr, one of the most influential authorities on domestic architecture in the mid-nineteenth century, considers an overriding rule of the Victorian house planning.<sup>13</sup> Further, the “white circle” marking the

---

<sup>13</sup> In his treatise on the Victorian domestic architecture, *The Gentleman’s House* (1871), Kerr notes: “It is a first principle with the better classes of English people that the Family Rooms shall be essentially private, and as much as possible the Family Thoroughfares. It becomes the foremost of all maxims, therefore, however small the

place where the slop pail used to stand by the washstand evokes the Victorian obsession with dirt and the constant struggle for cleanliness described by Woolf in “A Sketch of the Past”. Before the advent of flush toilets and running water, slop pails were used to receive waste water from washstands or chamber pots, and thus bodily dirt was visibly present in the household. What is more, as Woolf recalls, bathing without running water could become a very unpleasant experience: “However cold or foggy, we slipped off our day clothes and stood shivering in front of washing basins.” Interestingly, this washing was often limited to the parts of the body on visible display (“Neck and arms had to be scrubbed”) as the family wished to see clean and pure female bodies on the outside, irrespective of whether some evidence of dirt was still concealed under the clothes (*MB* 150; Rosner 2005: 72). It seems that if Woolf brings out the white mark on the carpet at Pointz Hall, she implicitly alludes to the Victorian preoccupation with concealing dirt in its various forms remembered from her childhood home (bodily ablutions, socially inappropriate emotions, or dirty family secrets like the unwelcome intimacy initiated by her half-brothers, Gerald and George Duckworth; all of which Woolf recounts in her memoirs).

But Woolf’s representation of domestic objects in *Between the Acts* also serves to strengthen her argument about the role and position of women and men in the middle-class family of the interwar period. The domestic objects and the characters’ possessions are consistently associated in the novel with female creativity and confinement, and male violence. As the narrator of Woolf’s feminist essay *A Room of One’s Own* asserts, “one has only to go into any room of any street” to find evidence of women’s creative faculty: “For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force” (*ROO* 114). In this respect, the domestic space and objects of Pointz Hall are no exception.

---

establishment, that the Servants’ Department shall be separated from the Main House [...] a separate Staircase becomes necessary for the servants’ use” (Kerr 1972: 67–68).

As has been previously mentioned Mrs Swithin, who is engrossed in her creative reconstruction of the past, vividly transforms her bedroom into a prehistoric space. As far as her possessions are concerned, the “cross gleaming gold on her breast”, a recurring figure in the novel, symbolises her faith and courage to stand by her beliefs, despite her brother’s derisive attitude towards her (*BA* 9). But it seems that Lucy’s cross also brings out creativity and imagination in Woolf’s novel. After the pageant, she is portrayed by the lily pond, “the deep centre”, “the black heart” of Pointz Hall, which stands for fecundity of life and creativity. Gazing at the water in search of fish (a symbol of Christian faith), she contemplates the way faith opens her up to creative vision:

Above, the air rushed; beneath was water. She stood between the two fluidities, caressing her cross. Faith required hours of kneeling in the early morning. Often the delight of the roaming eye seduced her—a sunbeam, a shadow. Now the jagged leaf at the corner suggested, by its contours, Europe. There were other leaves. She fluttered her eye over the surface, naming leaves India, Africa, America. (*BA* 184)

When the fish come to the surface, including “the great carp himself” who appears very rarely, she sees in them an epiphanic confirmation of her own faith: “‘Ourselves,’ she murmured. And retrieving some glint of faith from the grey waters [...] she followed the fish [...] seeing in that vision beauty, power, and glory in ourselves (*BA* 184–85). The cross on her breast both expresses and protects “her private vision; of beauty which is goodness” (*BA* 185).

Similarly, Isa is invariably impelled by her creative faculty. Torn between household duties and her poetic sensibility, she imposes a creative order on her domestic life. While dealing with household issues, she constantly hums poetic phrases, and writes some of them in a “book bound like an account book in case Giles suspected” (*BA* 14). Thus, just as Mrs Swithin, Isa lets her creativity be suppressed by a male member of the family, and hence it

remains a private vision symbolised by the secret poetry book. Further, Isa's domestic confinement is materialised in the novel by objects of daily life. In a scene evocative of Picasso's famous painting *Girl before a Mirror* (1932), standing in front of the three-folded mirror in her bedroom, Isa sees three different versions of her face, and, beyond the mirror frame, a strip of the terrace and garden.



Pablo Picasso *Girl before a Mirror*, 1932

While her eyes express her infatuation with the gentleman farmer, the domestic objects surrounding her symbolise the love for her husband and the family obligations it implies:

‘In love,’ was in her eyes. But outside, on the washstand, on the dressing-table, among the silver boxes and tooth-brushes, was the outer love; love for her husband, the stockbroker—‘The father of my children’ [...] Inner love was in the eyes; outer love on the dressing-table. (*BA* 13)

Meanwhile, the picture is further complicated by the movement beyond the mirror frame: “But what feeling was it that stirred in her now when above the looking-glass, out of doors, she saw coming across the lawn the perambulator; two nurses; and her little boy George, lagging behind?” (*BA* 13). Isa’s mediation between the different planes in this scene – the mirror image reflecting her inner self and the domestic environs, the interior of her bedroom and the outside world – reflects both her role in the family and the novel as a whole. Her poetic sensibility sets her apart from the Olivers, yet the domestic loyalties hold her back from becoming a real outsider.

If Woolf uses the objects associated with the women at Pointz Hall to express their stifled creativity, she associates the men and their possessions with aggression and violence. Bart and Giles Oliver are representatives of the same patriarchal ideal – authoritarian, aggressive and dominating. As has already been intimated, Bart continually bullies Lucy verbally and emotionally. Most strikingly, however, Woolf suggests violence in the scene in which Bart, wishing to play with his grandson, transforms into a sinister beast by rolling his newspaper up into a snout. However, George is deeply engrossed in his vision of wholeness suggestive of Woolf’s own memory of a moment of being she experienced as a child in the garden at St Ives, and he gets terrified of his granddad and his dog Sohrab (cf. *MB* 71):

George grubbed. The flower blazed between the angles of the roots. Membrane after membrane was torn. It blazed a soft yellow, a lambent light under a film of velvet; it filled the caverns behind the eyes with light. All that inner darkness became a hall, leaf smelling, earth smelling of yellow light. And the tree was beyond the flower; the grass, the flower and the tree were entire. Down on his



knees grubbing he held the flower complete. Then there was a roar and a hot breath and a stream of coarse grey hair rushed between him and the flower. Up he leapt, toppling in his fright, and saw coming towards him a terrible peaked eyeless monster moving on legs, brandishing arms.

‘Good morning, sir,’ a hollow voice boomed at him from a beak of paper.

The old man had sprung upon him from his hiding-place behind a tree.

‘Say good morning, George; say “Good morning, Grandpa,”’ Mabel [one of the nurses] urged him [...] But George stood gaping. George stood gazing.

(*BA* 10–11)

After that old Oliver brings the “wild beast” to heel “as if he were commanding a regiment”. When George bursts into tears at the sight of the dog with its “hairy flanks” sucked in and out and “blob of foam” on its nostrils, Bart gets furious, “his veins swollen, his cheeks flushed”, and mocks the little coward: “‘A cry-baby—a cry-baby’” (*BA* 11, 12). As Gillian Beer remarks, the British Empire “similarly saw itself as disciplining, or subjugating, other ‘wild’ breeds, or more ‘primitive’ peoples, justifying imperialism by the metaphor of cultural development in which ‘other races’ were viewed as children” (Beer 2000: xxv).

Furthermore, Bart’s hammer also acquires connotations of aggression and violence in the novel. In the same newspaper which has transformed old Oliver into an intimidating monster, Isa comes across a report on the rape of a girl in the barrack room at Whitehall: “‘The troopers told her the horse had a green tail; but she found it was just an ordinary horse. And then they dragged her up to the barrack room where she was thrown upon a bed. Then one of the troopers removed part of her clothing, and she screamed and hit him about the face ...’” (*BA* 18).<sup>14</sup> The piece of news is so ‘real’ and shocking to Isa that she vividly reconstructs the whole scene and projects it onto the mahogany door of the library. When Mrs Swithin suddenly comes in to replace Bart’s hammer, which she has borrowed to nail a poster for the

---

<sup>14</sup> As Stuart N. Clarke has pointed out, the rape at Whitehall was a real event. A girl of fourteen was raped by guardsmen on 27 April 1938. As a result, she became pregnant and a London surgeon carried out an abortion, for which he was later tried and acquitted on the grounds that the pregnancy was a threat to the girl’s health (Froula 2005: 293).

pageant, the real object is superimposed on Isa's image and gets incorporated into her reverie: she now has the girl hit the rapist with the hammer instead of her fists. Thus, old Oliver's tool is associated with acts of violence against women and their desperate attempts at self-defence. Moreover, the violent potential of the hammer is further strengthened by Mrs Swithin's childhood memory of "a sudden violent shock" (to use a phrase from "A Sketch of the Past") that she experienced when her brother, having caught a fish, made her take it off the hook herself: "The blood had shocked her—'Oh!' she had cried—for the gills were full of blood. And he had growled: 'Cindy!' The ghost of that morning in the meadow was in her mind as she replaced the hammer where it belonged on the shelf" (*MB* 71; *BA* 19).

Whereas Woolf only suggests violence in the objects associated with old Oliver, she literally stains Giles's shoes with blood. When he comes back from his work in the city, Giles is enraged by the news he has read: "Had he not read, in the morning paper, in the train, that sixteen men had been shot, others prisoned, just over there, across the gulf, in the flat land which divided them from the continent?" (*BA* 42–43). In response to the news, he kills a snake "choked with a toad in its mouth". Since "the snake was unable to swallow" and "the toad was unable to die", Giles's act of violence shortens the suffering of both. At the same time, however, stamping on the animals also relieves his own pain, which is a consequence of his growing awareness of the "indescribable horror" of the impending war (*BA* 55). As the narrator comments: "The white canvass on his tennis shoes was bloodstained and sticky. But it was action. Action relieved him" (*BA* 89).

### **Women on the threshold—negotiation of space**

If material objects form a metonymic register which serves to imply vestiges of the Victorian age as well as place the characters within the hierarchy and architecture of Pointz Hall, thresholds are Woolf's main figure for unsettling the domestic space and familial structure. In

a middle- and upper-class Victorian household, walls – the physical boundaries between the different rooms – were of paramount importance since they acted as material realisations of social divisions. Accordingly, transition spaces (thresholds, doors, corridors or stairs) formed points of intersection or intersectional spaces that posed the threat of disturbing the domestic order. The anxiety such junctures created is evident in Kerr’s criticism of what he terms “intercommunication” between the rooms: not only does it weaken the distinct character of individual rooms, but it also threatens privacy, in Kerr’s view, an essential principle of domesticity (Rosner 2005: 64–65). Woolf was well aware of the Victorian anxiety about thresholds, which is evident for instance in Mrs Ramsay’s determined efforts to secure the spatial structure of the house in *To the Lighthouse*: “it was the doors that annoyed her; every door was left open. She listened. The drawing-room door was open; the hall door was open; it sounded as if the bedroom doors were open [...]. *That windows should be open, and doors shut – simple as it was, could none of them remember it?*” (TL 26; emphasis mine). Since none of the inhabitants seems to respect the meticulous divisions of the domestic space, the figure of the threshold implies here the imminent decay of the Victorian world Mrs Ramsay strives so hard to sustain.

Throughout her work, Woolf portrays her female characters on thresholds: physical and textual; literal and figurative/symbolic. In her writing, a literal crossing of the threshold often takes on a symbolic meaning. For instance, in *A Room of One’s Own*, the narrator imagines what happens when a woman crosses the threshold: of a room, and that of the English language as soon as she resolves to describe the literal action of entering the room. Both thresholds are demarcated in the textual space by the use of the em dash:

One goes into the room—but the resources of the English language would be much put to stretch, and whole flights of words would need to wing their way *illegitimately* into existence before a woman could say what happens when she

goes into a room. The rooms differ so completely; they are calm or thunderous; open on to the sea, or, on the contrary, give on to a prison yard; are hung with washing; or alive with opals and silks; are hard as horsehair or soft as feathers—one has only to go into any room in any street for the whole of that extremely complex force of femininity to fly into one's face. (*ROO* 113–14; emphasis mine)

The resources of the English language are insufficient because they are, in Jane Marcus's terms, "the private property of the patriarchs" which the narrator not only has to "trespass", but also adjust or redesign so as to make it capable of representing the "complex force of femininity" *she* encounters (Marcus 1981: 1). The diversity of the rooms is described at length, but the question of what happens when a woman enters the room remains unanswered. Indeed, it seems that the central argument of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* is that, as Tracy Seeley has aptly encapsulated, "patriarchy [...] enacts its power spatially", which becomes clear when the narrator recounts in Chapter 1 how she has been denied access to the male territory at Oxbridge (Seeley 2007: 33). First, as she walks across the turf, the beadle instantly directs her onto the path as "only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed" on the grass (*ROO* 7). After that, standing at the library door, she is barred out by a "guardian angel" since "ladies are only admitted [...] if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction" (*ROO* 9). Since patriarchy's domination is enacted and reinforced spatially, crossing of the threshold (of a room and the English language) in the quotation above seems to be a way of undermining this power, if only symbolically.

In *Between the Acts*, women are repeatedly portrayed on the threshold of the library at Pointz Hall. Upon entering the library, Isa interrupts Mr Oliver's dream about his youth in India (see Chapter One, pp. 23–24):

The door opened.

‘Am I’, Isa apologized, ‘interrupting?’

Of course she was—destroying youth and India. It was his fault, since she persisted in stretching his thread of life so fine, so far. Indeed he was grateful to her, for continuing.

Many old men had only their India—old men in clubs, old men in rooms off Jermyn Street. She in her striped dress continued him, murmuring, in front of the book cases: ‘The moor is dark beneath the moon, rapid clouds have drunk the last pale beams of even ... I have ordered the fish,’ she said aloud, turning, ‘though whether it’ll be fresh or not I can’t promise. But veal is dear, and everybody in the house is sick of beef and mutton ... Sohrab,’ she said, coming to a standstill in front of them, ‘What’s he been doing?’ (BA 16)

In this scene, Isa’s (physical and verbal) intrusion into the library disrupts Mr Oliver’s physical and mental space. As to the former, the library – like the study – traditionally belonged to the male zone of the house associated with male privacy and retreat (although the library was devoted to reading, while the study served primarily as a writing room). As architectural historian Mark Girouard points out, by the end of the eighteenth century libraries assumed a communal character and became “essential adjuncts to the entertainment of a house party” (Girouard 1980: 180). Nevertheless, in smaller houses that lacked studies, the library remained a private space of reading and writing. Robert Kerr generally criticises such limiting of the character of the library to that of a mere study. He considers the library as “a sort of Morning-room for gentlemen rather than anything else. Their correspondence is done here, their reading, and, in some measure, their lounging [...]” (Kerr 1972: 116). By contrast with the study, defined by Kerr as “a place of reading and writing for one person alone”, he allows for admission of women to the library, if reluctantly: “At the same time the ladies are not exactly excluded”, he writes (Kerr 1972: 123, 116). Thus, they are not exactly welcome either. Although Woolf wrote her novel half a century later, Pointz Hall is faintly suggestive

of the Victorian gender-differentiated, patriarchal space in that Isa still figures on the threshold of the library as an outsider and intruder.

As regards the mental space Isa destroys by entering the library, significantly, it is Mr Oliver's memory of his colonial exploits she shatters: "in the shadow of the rock, savages; and in his hand a gun. The dream hand clenched; the real hand lay on the chair arm" (*BA* 16). In addition, right before this scene the reader learns that Isa is Irish: "Sir Richard's daughter; and niece of two old ladies at Wimbledon who were so proud, being O'Neils, of their descent from the Kings of Ireland" (*BA* 15). In this light, Isa's interruption is not only an intrusion of a woman on the patriarchal and masculine space at Pointz Hall, but also an encroachment by an Irishwoman on the imperial space evoked by Bart Oliver (though unwittingly on Isa's part). But as he admits himself, "it was his fault" that she destroyed his India because he keeps on living in his colonial past (*BA* 16). In reality, Isa's presence at Pointz Hall conditions the continuation of old Oliver's name, even if, considered "a cry-baby" and "a coward" by his grandfather and described as "lagging behind" both by the narrator and Isa, George hardly seems a worthy heir in the male line, an inheritor of the patriarchal ideals represented by Bart and Giles (*BA* 13, 17). On the contrary, the imaginative and sensitive boy seems to take after his mother, herself described as "abortive" and trapped in the domestic plot "like a captive balloon": "she loathed the domestic, the possessive; the maternal" (*BA* 14, 17). Both seem, therefore, equally unsuccessful in fulfilling their expected roles in the patriarchal family of the Olivers.

The section of the novel which contains the scene in question opens with a memory of "a foolish, flattering lady" at the threshold of the library, which "she once called 'the heart of the house'". According to the unnamed lady, whose clichéd remarks are also quoted by Isa later on, "Next to the kitchen, the library's always the nicest room in the house," and

“‘[b]ooks are the mirrors of the soul’” (BA 15). But the seemingly unquestionable status of the library is immediately undermined by the narrator:

In this case a tarnished, a spotted soul. For as the train took over three hours to reach this *remote* village in the very *heart* of England, no one ventured so long a journey without staving off possible mind-hunger without buying a book on a bookstall. Thus the mirror that reflected the soul sublime, reflected also the soul bored. Nobody could pretend, as they looked at the shuffle of shilling shockers that weekenders had dropped, that the looking-glass always reflected the anguish of a Queen or the heroism of King Harry. (BA 15; emphasis mine)

As Helen Southworth aptly remarks in her article on the figure of interruption in *Between the Acts*, “The narrator’s interjection [...] pushes the door open from the inside, puncturing holes in the walls of the airtight cliché” (Southworth 2007: 52). Indeed, it seems that the narrator de-romanticises the “sacred” space of the library, and exposes the real character of the place. In Southworth’s view, the library is “characterised as transitional, as flawed”, and the books on the shelves “do not perpetuate patriarchal notions of the superiority of one gender or one class over another” (Southworth 2007: 52). But the library is not exclusively filled with “shilling shockers”. On the contrary, it expresses the patriarchal dominance quite clearly as the collection of old Oliver’s “country gentleman’s library” comprises such works as: *The Faerie Queene* and Kinglake’s *Crimea*; Keats, Shelley, Yeats and Donne; lives of Garibaldi and Lord Palmerston; *The Antiquities of Durham* and *The Proceedings of the Archaeological Society of Nottingham*; Eddington, Darwin and Jeans (BA 104; 18). Therefore, I suggest that the library is represented as an antithetical (rather than “transitional”) space, one which juxtaposes contrasting ideas: manifestations of both high and low culture, “soul sublime” and “soul bored”; not unlike the village located “in the very *heart* of England”, yet “*remote*” (BA

15; 104).<sup>15</sup> Finally, as it is also in this scene that Isa chances on the report of the Whitehall rape, the space of the library comes to be associated not only with patriarchy's superiority, but also with the abuse of its power and privilege. All in all, Woolf's representation of the library undermines the integrity and significance of its threshold, and thereby paves the way for women's admission into its 'sacred', masculine space.<sup>16</sup>

### **Philomela and the aesthetic of silence**

Nevertheless, it is still with hesitation and anxiety that Mrs Swithin crosses the threshold of the library later in the novel: "The door trembled and stood half open. That was Lucy's way of coming in—as if she did not know what she would find. Really! It was her brother! And his dog! She seemed to see him for the first time" (BA 105).<sup>17</sup> Significantly, shortly before she comes in, Bart repeats the reworked opening lines of Swinburne's "Itylus", a poem based on the myth of Philomela and Procne (Beer 2000: xxvi):

'O sister swallow, O sister swallow,  
How can thy heart be full of spring?' (BA 104)

In the myth, Philomela is raped by her brother-in-law, King Tereus of Thrace, in a cabin in the forest. Her daring speech leads the king to cut out her tongue so as to keep her silent. Nevertheless, she manages to reveal the crime to her sister Procne by weaving the dreadful scene into a tapestry. To avenge Philomela's fate, Procne sacrifices her son by Tereus, Itys,

---

<sup>15</sup> Antithesis seems to be the underlying principle of *Between the Acts*. Examples of antithesis permeate the whole text, from the very first paragraph: "The country council had promised to bring water to the village, but they hadn't" (BA 3); "she [Mrs Haines] had never feared cows, only horses" (BA 3); Pointz Hall is located in a hollow though it might have been built on the hill; one cow in the pageant moves forward, the other stands still; will the weather be fine or wet?

<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in *Sido* (1929), Colette de-romanticises the study in which her father used to spend the days of his retirement writing his memoirs in different volumes, such as *My Campaigns* or *The Lessons of '70*. Only after her father's death did the family discover that all the books were empty, rendering him intellectually impotent. By revealing his secret, Colette seems to open the door of the study from the inside and lay claim to the masculine space (Rosner 2005: 91–92).

<sup>17</sup> Note that the name Swithin could suggest hesitation (according to *OED*, *to swither* "to be or become uncertain; to hesitate" in Scottish English and some dialects).



and serves him to the father. When the king gets to know what he has eaten, he tries to kill both sisters, but the gods intervene and change all three into birds. Philomela turns into a swallow incapable of song, Procne into a nightingale mourning her son with her song, and Tereus into a hoopoe. In the Roman version of the myth (which is generally preferred by the English poets), the names of the birds are transposed so that Philomela turns into a nightingale, and hence her melancholy song expresses her own pain (Walker 1982: 21–22). However, Woolf alludes in the novel to the original Greek version of the myth in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

In *Between the Acts*, swallows, which, as Mrs Swithin remarks, come every year all the way from Africa, constantly sweep across the barn and sky, making “a pattern, dancing, like Russians, only not to music, but to the unheard rhythm of their own wild hearts” (BA 60). Lucy feels intimately connected with the birds and is compared to them both by the narrator and Bart. In the discussed scene, after entering the library, she perches “on the edge of the chair like a bird on a telegraph wire before starting for Africa”, and her brother cites the first line of “Itylus” once more (this time accurately): “Swallow, my sister, O sister swallow ...” (BA 105). But in *Between the Acts*, like in Swinburne's poem, swallows are not paired with nightingales. Already on the first page of the novel, when Mrs Haines, the wife of Isa's gentleman farmer, asks whether the bird that chuckles outside is a nightingale, we learn that “nightingales didn't come so far north” (BA 3).

Thus, it seems that the women in Woolf's novel are associated with “the aesthetic of silence” and “communicating through symbolic forms” (to use the terms in which Cheryl Walker describes the American women poets of the nineteenth century) evocative of Philomela/the swallow (Walker 1982: 21). As has been discussed earlier in this chapter, both Lucy and Isa are silenced by Bart and Giles, or, in other words, the presence of patriarchy acts as a kind of a censorship on what they say. The women's suppressed speech and stifled

creativity are symbolised by their possessions – by Lucy’s cross and Isa’s poetry book bound like an account book.

The Whitehall rape, suggestive of Tereus’ crime in that it also occurs at the centre of patriarchal power/civilisation and, in that the girl – like Philomela – offers fierce resistance, is crucial especially to Isa’s development as the girl’s cries challenge her habitual passivity and silence. Throughout the whole novel, Isa resorts to clichés such as “the father of my children” in order to explain to herself the sense of her marriage and suppress her rage at her husband’s infidelity, which “made no difference” while “hers did” (*BA* 13, 100). As Christine Froula aptly writes, “Isa practices a furtive, symptomatic speech, murmuring escapist, even suicidal, prose poems in lyric antiphony to her ‘strained’ marriage” (Froula 2005: 295; *BA* 95). The news report is so shocking that Isa internalises the event and makes the girl’s shouts part of her own anger: “Every summer, for seven summers now, Isa heard the same words [...]. The same chime followed the same chime, only this year beneath the chime she heard: ‘The girl screamed and hit him about the face with a hammer’” (*BA* 20). The girl’s resistance and Miss La Trobe’s pageant makes Isa realise that it is “time someone invented a new plot” – one that places women outside the domestic and calls their speech out from secret poetry books and other silent forms (*BA* 194).

It seems that domesticity is presented in the novel as a problem of space and plot. Woolf depicts life shaped within and by its material environs—the spaces of private life and the things that fill them. The objects of everyday life, such as Isa’s account book or old Oliver’s newspaper crumpled into a monstrous beak, as well as the elements of domestic architecture, for example the threshold and the ladder for the servants, serve as signs that characterise the culture and people to which they belong. As has been shown, thresholds are especially important for the spaces of Pointz Hall because as places of intersection and difference, they disturb domestic order and hierarchy. By highlighting the architectural

transitions at Pointz Hall, Woolf directs the reader's attention to the space in-between, with all the possibilities of change it bears. Those possibilities are offered to women as they are the ones who repeatedly figure on the threshold of the library, and frequently occupy other liminal spaces in the novel. For example, Mrs Swithin, immersed in her "imaginative reconstruction of the past", "was given to increasing the bounds of the moment by flights into the past; or *sidelong* down corridors and alleys" (BA 8–9; emphasis mine). As Southworth points out, Lucy "moves laterally": "She advances, *sidling*, as if the floor were fluid under her shabby garden shoes, and, advancing, pursed her lips and smiled, *sidelong*, at her brother" (Southworth 2005: 56; BA 19; emphasis mine). When she waits for the fish to come to the surface, she stands "between two fluidities [air and water], caressing her cross" (BA 184). Isa is also presented as a 'border' figure caught between the inside and outside of the mirror-glass – the inner and outer love. Finally, Miss La Trobe, marginalised not only by her artistic sensibility, but also by her sexual orientation and allegedly foreign origin, is the true outsider in the novel. Her sexuality excludes her not only from the domestic space and plot, but also from the village community. Woolf's narrator emphasises her peripheral position by consequently portraying her in the trees and bushes during and after the pageant.<sup>18</sup>

In Southworth's words, women "occupy murkier realms at the edges of the text" since they figure on the spatial and textual borders (Southworth 2005: 55). However, *Between the Acts* constantly reworks the notions of centre and periphery and, thereby, rejects the binary distinction between the two: Woolf downgrades the status of the library by revealing its partially dubious contents; Whitehall – the centre of patriarchal power – comes to be associated with barbarism and violence; the picture of the ancestress of sorts at the top of the staircase exposes the dubiousness of the Olivers' origin; the chapel has been transformed into the larder, while the barn bears a resemblance to a Greek Temple; the liminal/peripheral

---

<sup>18</sup> I will come back to La Trobe and her pageant in the next chapter.

spaces are highlighted: the dressing room in the bushes behind the lily pool, the ladder at the back of the stairs, or Pointz Hall itself – a house in a hollow with emptiness at its very centre. In one way or another, all those examples strip spaces of privilege of their power, and open up their doors from inside. By exploding those thresholds, Woolf brings women out from the murky margins of Pointz Hall and the novel: the secret volumes and silence as well as the constrictions of the domestic space and plot; even if the door still trembles and is only half-open.

## Chapter Three: “This odd mix up of public and private” and Spatial Form

Look thy last on all things lovely,  
Every hour  
—Walter de la Mare, *Fare Well*

The advent of the Second World War created a mounting tension between the public and private space in Woolf’s life and writing. As the war escalated, the news and concerns related to it impinged on her privacy, and caused a significant shift in her attitude towards both the raging war itself and the public concepts of nationalism and patriotism. In *Between the Acts*, private and public are conjunct. The country house setting, the historical pageant and its audience, as well as the oncoming war, are some of the ways in which the public space enters the private and domestic in the novel. It seems to me that the “rocketing” between the public and private realms, which Woolf experienced and depicted in her wartime diary, is reflected in the somewhat abrupt, staccato rhythm of *Between the Acts*. The fragmentation of action and the oscillation between private and public spaces and the other parallel levels of action, as I will term them, call for a spatial apprehension of the pageant scene. In this chapter I turn to Joseph Frank’s theory of spatial form to interpret the novel’s structure, and suggest that the interlocking planes fit in mosaic patterns evocative of Cubist art.

### **“This odd mix up of public and private”**

In her biography of Woolf, Hermione Lee has noted that “the conflict between private and public [was] one of the main subjects in her writing life” (Lee 1997: 19). But while the relationship between the two realms can indeed be traced throughout her oeuvre, from the mid-1930s onwards it is construed as increasingly complex and tense. The boundary between private and public space becomes blurred as world events impinge on Monk’s House – the Woolfs’ private retreat, and make their way into Woolf’s writing more forcefully than ever before. Her diary, probably the most private type of writing, is infiltrated by news of the successive stages of the Second World War, Woolf’s continuous fear of the anticipated invasion, as well as her own experiences of the war. When Hitler incorporated Austria into the Third Reich (March 1938), Woolf wrote about the *Anschluss* in terms of a metaphorical invasion of the public space upon the private: “The public world very notably invaded the private at MH. [Monk’s House]” (*Diary V* 131). The sacrifice of Czechoslovakia to the Reich in the Munich Agreement (September 1938), Hitler’s invasion of Poland and England’s declaration of war (September 1939) further intensified Woolf’s feeling of being intruded upon.

However, following the events of May and June 1940 – the Belgian surrender, the French defeat and the evacuation of French and British troops from Dunkirk – England urgently prepared for a German invasion, expected to begin within few weeks. The fear was probably greatest on the south coast of England as it was thought that the Germans would most probably land their troops there. In her diary, Woolf recorded her constant anxiety and fear of the imminent invasion. The Battle of Britain, which began in July and lasted until October 1940, was thought to be only a ‘prelude’ to the invasion proper.<sup>19</sup> On 28 August,

---

<sup>19</sup> The Battle of Britain was an air campaign conducted by the Luftwaffe (the German Air Force) in order to weaken the Royal Air Force, and thereby prepare the ground for a full-scale amphibious and airborne invasion of the south coast of England, known as Operation Sea Lion. However, the failure of Germany to achieve air superiority over England caused Hitler to postpone, and eventually cancel, his plans of invasion. Instead, he

Woolf wrote: “the air raids are now at their prelude. Invasion, if it comes, must come within 3 weeks” (*Diary V* 313). Throughout the whole of September, her diary records “a strong feeling of invasion in the air”, an apprehension of what was then considered inevitable (*Diary V* 318). “The feeling of pressure, danger horror” was heightened by the Woolfs’ decision to commit suicide in case Hitler’s army should cross the English Channel (*Diary V* 313; Snaith 2000: 131).

Meanwhile, Woolf recorded how the wartime events influenced her private life. Since Rodmell is situated between London and the Channel, German and British bombers regularly pierced the sky over Monk’s House; some planes crashed in the nearby fields. Once, while talking to Vita Sackville-West on the phone, Woolf heard bombs fall near Sissinghurst (where Sackville-West lived). An air raid surprised the Woolfs playing bowls on the terrace. The bombs falling on London destroyed their houses at Mecklenburgh and Tavistock Square, and the Woolfs came to see the ruins: “rubble where I wrote so many books”, Woolf writes, “[o]pen air where we sat so many nights, gave so many parties” (*Diary V* 331).

As Anna Snaith has observed, the more Woolf’s privacy was invaded by the public, the harder she tried to keep the two realms separate, hence the recurrent use of the words “private” and “public” (which reflects her obsessive need to categorise each event) and transitions marking the shift from one sphere to the other. The transitions usually take the form of a sentence, but at times the mere word “privately” is used: “When the tiger, ie Hitler, has digested his dinner he will pounce again. And *privately*, I have no letters” (*Diary V* 132; emphasis mine).<sup>20</sup> But despite attempts to distinguish between public and private, and mark the transitions between them, the prevalence and abruptness of these shifts give a sense of how inseparable and entwined the two realms have become:

---

decided to destroy London and other cities by night bombings (the campaign came to be known as the Blitz) (*BBC History*).

<sup>20</sup> Note that whereas before the war Woolf used the word “public” mainly to refer to her social life, as opposed to the private writing space, in her wartime diary “public” generally pertains to war events and “private” comes to encompass also social life (Snaith 2000: 136).

Private peace is not accessible. Miss Robins tomorrow [...] Maynard [Keynes], even Maynard, cant find much that's hopeful now that Italy has nipped off Albania save that theres a unity of hatred. The men women children dogs &c. are solid for war if war comes. *But privately—how one rockets between private & public—his eyes are bluer, his skin pinker, & he can walk without pain.* (*Diary V* 213; emphasis mine)

The war had deprived Woolf of the private space which she had written about earlier in her diaries. In the short passage cited above, Woolf juxtaposes her social plans, her friend's Maynard's health, Mussolini's incorporation of Albania and the public's preparations for the coming of war (Snaith 2000: 132, 135–36). Snaith has rightly noted that this rocketing between private and public in the space of just a few sentences forms “a microcosm for the larger part of this volume of diaries” (Snaith 2000: 136). Woolf is acutely self-conscious about this rapid alternation between the realms: “With this odd mix up of public & private I left off”, she notes (*Diary V* 110).

The curious mix-up, a result of the distraction and anxiety the war has brought to Woolf's private life and writing, is present in almost all her works of the wartime period. In “A Sketch of the Past” (in its present form a private text, although Woolf thought about reworking it into an autobiography which might be published), for instance, the present serves as “a platform to stand upon”, from which she turns to the past (*MB* 75). The memoir consists of several dated sections which begin with short comments on the current public events, most notably those concerning the war:

The present. June 19th 1940. [...] Today the dictators dictate their terms to France. Meanwhile, on this very hot morning, with a blue bottle buzzing and a toothless organ grinding and the men calling strawberries in the Square, I sit in my room at 37 M[ecklenburgh] S[quare] and turn to my father. (*MB* 107)



Woolf wrote the memoir as a relief from working on the biography on Roger Fry, but also “partly in order to recover my sense of the present by getting the past to shadow this broken surface”, as she writes (*MB* 98).

As far as such a haven was at hand, *Between the Acts* also offered Woolf a kind of private space – a distraction from the war and the biography of Roger. As I have shown in previous chapters, in her last novel, as in the memoir, Woolf turns towards the past. But by inscribing that imagined past in the architecture and interiors of Pointz Hall, she also opens her novel up for public/national space, as even if she strips the masculine space of the library of its privilege, the country house setting still is a potent symbol of patriarchal power and Englishness. Finally, by placing the action of the novel on the day the annual village pageant is held on the terrace of Pointz Hall (or in the Barn in case it rains), and shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, Woolf evokes national history and literature in the spaces of Pointz Hall.

### **“Not all claptrap” – Woolf’s changing attitude towards the war**

Although Woolf modifies the pastoral patriotism with the critique of English society and imperialism, the representation of Pointz Hall as Englishness itself still seems striking. As has been noted in Chapter One, Woolf had always been a pacifist and hated war-induced patriotic and nationalist sentiments. In 1938, she published *Three Guineas* – a feminist and pacifist essay against fascism written during the Spanish Civil War, in which she includes her most radical critique of patriarchy and patriotism (note the etymological relatedness of the two words), and the concomitant militarism. She argues that since English women have long been excluded from the public sphere, education, professions, possession and legal protection, they are outsiders in the society and should therefore remain indifferent to any patriotic sentiment justifying war: “When he says, as history proves that he has said, and may say again, ‘I am

fighting to protect our country' and thus seeks to rouse her patriotic emotion, she will ask herself, 'What does "our country" mean to me as an outsider?'" (*TG* 311). Woolf's outsider goes on to make the often quoted assertion: "'in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world'" (*TG* 313). Yet fewer critics have noted that this statement of indifference is immediately followed by "some obstinate emotion", "some love of England dropped into a child's ears by the cawing of rooks in an elm tree, by the splash of waves on the beach, or by English voices murmuring nursery rhymes" (*TG* 313). Hence, even her most radical feminist statement is complicated by the love for the English countryside and language.

As the international conflict escalated and "England's island fastness" (as Briggs aptly captures it) faced an increasing threat of invasion, Englishness in the sense of the English countryside, language and literature had clearly become one of Woolf's major concerns (Briggs 2006: 200). But in my opinion, this change of focus, caused by the overwhelming reality of war, signals the beginning of a further-reaching shift in Woolf's attitude towards the military and the raging war.<sup>21</sup> In *Three Guineas*, Woolf compares the feminist fight against "the tyranny of the patriarchal state" with that against "the tyranny of the Fascist state" (*TG* 303). She generalises about "the whole iniquity of dictatorship, whether in Oxford or Cambridge, in Whitehall or Downing Street, against Jews or against women, in England, or in Germany, in Italy or in Spain [...]" (*TG* 304). However, it seems that as the Second World War progressed, Woolf realised that Hitler's 'dictatorship' against Jews was *not* equivalent to that of the British institutions against women: "capitulation will mean all Jews to be given up. Concentration camps. So to our garage" (*Diary V* 292–93). The Woolfs stored petrol in the garage for the suicide they planned in case Hitler invaded Britain. In addition, Adrian Stephen supplied them with fatal doses of morphia in June 1940 (Froula 2005: 288, 403).<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> My reading of Woolf's changing attitude towards the war approximates Marina MacKay's (2008).

<sup>22</sup> Froula has noted that the Woolfs' names indeed figured on the Nazis' secret arrest list (Froula 2005: 287).

As of the summer of 1940, Woolf's diary entries record a shift in her attitude towards the war. They begin to echo the fiery and heroic rhetoric of Churchill's speeches: "Ch[urchi]ll broadcasts. Reassuring about defence of England; not all claptrap. *Now we're fighting alone with our back to the wall*" (*Diary V* 297; emphasis mine); "The bombing of London of course preparatory to the invasion. *Our majestic city—&c.* which touches me, for I feel London majestic. *Our courage &c.*" (*Diary V* 317; emphasis mine). Similarly, in a letter to her close friend the composer Ethel Smyth in September 1940, she writes:

London looked merry and hopeful, *wearing her wounds like stars*; why do I dramatise London perpetually? When I see a great smash like a crushed match box where an old house stood *I wave my hand to London*. What *I'm finding odd and agreeable and unwonted is the admiration this war creates* – for every sort of person: chars, shopkeepers, even much more remarkably, for politicians – Winston at least, and the tweed wearing sterling dull women here, with their grim good sense: organising First aid, putting out bombs for practise, and jumping out of windows to show us how. (*Letters VI* 434; emphasis mine)

The surge of patriotic feeling evident in the quotations above is clearly a consequence of Woolf's realisation of the fact that the war against the Nazis was not just "a perfunctory slaughter", as she had written earlier (*Diary V* 235). However, the change of Woolf's approach is by no means tantamount to her legitimating war as such. Rather, it indicates that Woolf accepted the war against Nazi Germany as a dire necessity – a fight for democracy.

Therefore, not unlike MacKay (2008), I find it impossible to agree with critics who insist that her adherence to pacifism was uncompromising and unconditional. In Snaith's view, "Woolf's commitment to pacifism [...] allowed no oscillation. This is the one issue on which Woolf did not waver; here, her reaction was not contingent, but constant" (Snaith 2000: 145). Similarly, Zwerdling writes that Woolf's pacifism was "the closest thing to a religion her secular scepticism permitted" (Zwerdling 1986: 274). Such readings turn to the pacifist

discourse of *Three Guineas* to interpret *Between the Acts*, and typically see “hirsute, handsome, virile” Giles (*BA* 95) as “Man himself, the quintessence of virility” (*TG* 364) – “the tyrant or dictator who must be resisted in *Three Guineas*” (Snaith 2000: 144). In my opinion, when Snaith notes that Woolf represents Giles and Old Bart as “‘private’ dictators”, she not only fails to acknowledge the novel’s ambiguity and complexity, but also misreads the nature of the relation between private and public – the very aspect she sets out to study (Snaith 2000: 144).<sup>23</sup>

Marina MacKay argues that Woolf depicts Giles as “a victim of the caricatured versions of masculinity”, which the “sensitive” female characters impose on him (MacKay 2008: 30). “Expressing her amazement, her amusement, at men who spent their lives buying and selling,” Lucy Swithin fails to acknowledge that if he had a choice, “he would have chosen to farm” (*BA* 43). She does not understand that “he was not given his choice [...] for he had no special gift, no capital, and had been furiously in love with his wife” (*BA* 43). Further, nobody recognises his sensitivity and love for the English countryside: “At any moment guns would rake that land into furrows; planes splinter Bolney Minster into smithereens and blast the Folly. He, too, loved the view” (MacKay 2008: 30; *BA* 49). Thus, as MacKay rightly concludes, “the presentation of Giles, with all his frustration, his inarticulate sensitivity and his thwarted uxorious love, does not convincingly support the equations of English masculinity and the European dictatorships that seem rhetorically so powerful in *Three Guineas*” (MacKay 2008: 30).

Although I agree with MacKay, I would go even further and conclude that in her last novel, unlike in *Three Guineas*, Woolf recognises not only women, but also *men* as victims of the gender roles imposed on them by the patriarchal structure of society. Those roles confine women to domestic environs, “[t]his daily round; this going up and down stairs [...]”, as

---

<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Zwerdling has noted that Giles’s “aggressive masculinity and Nordic looks remind one of the Master Race” (Zwerdling 1986: 308).

Lucy Swithin claims, but they also often leave men with little choice but to take up unwanted careers to support their families (*BA* 136–37). Last but not least, the powerful influence of public events upon the characters cannot be overlooked. It is the morning newspaper, with its news of the war and rape, that haunts Giles and Isa throughout the entire day, and that makes Mr Oliver and Giles turn to violence (the former terrorises his grandson with the paper, while the latter stamps on the snake and the toad).

In the light of Woolf's changing attitude towards the Second World War, her decision to set her last novel in the country cottage – a symbol of Englishness – becomes less surprising. This final turn towards the past embodied by the spaces of Pointz Hall and the scraps of history and literature presented in the pageant, seems to be a nostalgic last glance at “all things lovely”, to cite Walter de la Mare's words, to which Woolf referred in her diary – at the English way of life and landscapes whose future was seriously threatened (*Diary V* 351).

### **Pointz Hall: a centre**

When in April 1938 Woolf sketched her idea for a new book, she clearly envisioned Pointz Hall as a centre – a single point in space and time holding together “all literature”, life with its mundane routines and discontinuous patterns; the “scraps, orts and fragments” featured in the pageant (*BA* 169, 170, 173):

But to amuse myself, let me note: why not Poyntzet Hall: a centre: all lit. discussed in connection with real little incongruous living humour; & anything that comes into my head; but “I” rejected: ‘We’ substituted: to whom at the end there shall be an invocation? “We” ... composed of many different things ... we all life, all art, all waifs & strays—a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole—the present state of my mind? And English country; & a scenic old house—& a terrace where nursemaids walk? & people passing—& a perpetual

variety & change from intensity to prose. & facts—& notes; &—but eno'. (*Diary* V 135)

Nevertheless, the status of Pointz Hall as central to the narrative changed during the process of the creation of the novel. In February 1941, Woolf self-consciously notes: "Finished Pointz Hall, the Pageant: the Play—finally *Between the Acts* this morning" (*Diary* V 356). The changes of the novel's title – from *Pointz Hall* (May 1938) to the *Pageant* (the late 1940), and finally to *Between the Acts* (the beginning of 1941) – point to the shifting focus of Woolf's attention; first from place to performance, or from domestic to historical drama; then to the space *between*: the domestic/private and historical/public, the acts of the pageant, the real and imagined, the present and past.

Thus, although the house remains a centre in the sense that the whole action of Woolf's novel takes place at Pointz Hall, the house remains "obliterated" for the duration of the pageant which is played out on its outskirts (i.e. on the terrace). It is not until the play has ended and the audience have departed that Pointz Hall comes into sight again: "The line of the roof, the upright chimneys, rose hard and red against the blue of the evening. The house emerged; the house that had been obliterated" (*BA* 183). At the very end of the novel, as darkness falls, Pointz Hall gives way to a prehistoric cave and the curtain rises yet again to open another 'act'.

Just as Pointz Hall – the centre – emerges and becomes obliterated, the sense of community in the novel ("I' rejected: 'We' substituted") is achieved momentarily, only to disperse again. In September 1938, Woolf writes in her notes for *Pointz Hall*: "The private feeling: the public", which shows that the private/public divide as well as the oscillation between the two spaces were crucial to the conception of the novel; just as they were for Woolf when the war approached: "the common feeling covers the private, then recedes" (qtd. Snaith 2000: 146; *Diary* V 231). In *Between the Acts*, it is Miss La Trobe's aim to unite her

audience and elicit a public or communal feeling by means of her art. The collective ‘we’, which comprises multiple voices, is heterogeneous, but Woolf is not – as Snaith argues – “lamenting the diversity brought about by war” (Snaith 2000: 147). Rather, she represents a microcosm of English society as she saw it: diverse, acutely conscious of its insider/outsider divide, prejudiced, yet “all caught and caged; prisoners” of both La Trobe’s play and what the future has in store for them (*BA* 158). But before I turn my attention to the alternation between the public and private in the pageant scene, I will briefly present Miss La Trobe and her play.

### **Miss La Trobe and her pageant**

As Julia Briggs has noted, during the 1930s numerous English villages and towns staged their local histories and stories in pageants, typically performed on Empire Day (24 May). When Woolf joined the Women’s Institute in 1940, she was asked to write and produce “a play for the villagers to act”, which, she noted: “I should like to if I could” (*Letters VI* 391). Although in the end she did not contribute a pageant for the village, by the time she wrote those words, she had already incorporated Miss La Trobe’s play into her novel (Briggs 2006: 200).

As I mentioned towards the end of Chapter Two, Miss La Trobe is the main outsider in the village community and the novel – an artist and perhaps a foreigner, for “with that name she wasn’t presumably English”. Since “very little was actually known about her”, the narrator and the villagers speculate on her origin and sexual orientation: she may have come from the Channel Islands, or maybe Mrs Bingham rightly suspects that La Trobe “had Russian blood in her” (““Those deep-set eyes; that very square jaw’ reminded her—not that she had been to Russia—of the Tartars”); and “rumour said” that she shared a cottage with an actress, “but they had quarrelled” (*BA* 53). What the villagers know for a fact, however, is that Miss La Trobe is not “altogether a lady” – dressed in a smock frock, often carrying a whip,

rather foul-mouthed, a smoker and a drinker, she flaunts her disregard of the norms of respectable femininity. Yet the narrator admits that she has a “passion for getting things up”, even if she is not a successful artist (BA 53).

Miss La Trobe has got used to “voices talking” about Bossy (as the villagers call her) in the village pub and old ladies cutting her on the streets. It does not matter to her anymore: she knows that “[n]ature had somehow set her apart from her kind” and she is not willing to try to adjust to the social ‘laws’ of the village. On the contrary, she wants to free herself from them: “One of these days she would break—which of the village laws? Sobriety? Chastity? Or take something that did not properly belong to her?” (BA 190). However, as an artist, La Trobe is “a slave to her audience” in the sense that she has to compromise on her own artistic vision in order to cater for the needs and tastes of the spectators: ““Curse! Blast! Damn ’em!’ [...] Here was her downfall; here was the Interval. Writing this skimble-skamble stuff in her cottage, she had agreed to cut the play here; a slave to her audience,—to Mrs Sands’s grumble—about tea; about dinner [...] Just as she had brewed emotion, she split it” (BA 85).

The provincial artist’s fear of failing her audience (“She hadn’t made them see. It was a failure, another damned failure!”) corresponds to some extent to Woolf’s growing fear of losing her public, which she thought increasingly distracted by the war: “Its odd to feel one’s writing in a vacuum – no-one will read it. I feel the audience is gone” (BA 88; *Letters VI* 430, qtd. Snaith 2000: 133). The audience at Pointz Hall is similarly portrayed as a newspaper reading one: “What remedy was there for her age – the age of the century, thirty-nine – in books?” Isa wonders. “For her generation the newspaper was a book” (BA 18). Thus, not unlike Woolf’s diary of the wartime period, La Trobe’s pageant raises questions about the position of an artist and relevance of art in times of war or approaching war.

Although in *Between the Acts*, not unlike in *Three Guineas*, the critique of the empire and patriarchy comes from the outside, I do not agree with Snaith who has noted that “Miss



La Trobe parallels Woolf's Society of Outsiders, who are aiming to prevent the war through their experience of difference" (Snaith 2000: 150). Although the novel is certainly much more political than Woolf originally envisioned it (as "an impression not an argument"), the pacifist polemic of the Society of Outsiders is absent from it (*Letters V* 91). The novel echoes Woolf's own realisation that the war made it impossible for the artist to remain an outsider. Like "the trees tossing and the birds swirling", which the audience see 'perform' during the pageant, *everyone* is "called out of their private lives, out of their separate avocations, and made to take part" (*BA* 105). All of them are in it together, and, as Isa realises after the pageant, it is time the outsiders joined in: "Surely it was time someone invented a new plot, or that the author came out from the bushes ..." (*BA* 194). In other words, it is high time the artist, but also women, acknowledged that they have a country, came out from the margins and periphery, and joined the public debate.

La Trobe's pageant spans the whole history of England – from prehistory to the present moment. At the very beginning of the first act, Mrs Manresa provides the first, off-the-cuff summary of the play: "'Scenes from English history,' Mrs Manresa explained to Mrs Swithin. [...] 'Merry England'" (*BA* 74). As Mrs Swithin rightly observes, given the wide time span of the pageant, the choice of dramatic scenes/narratives becomes a crucial question: "Of course, there's the whole of English literature to choose from. But how can one choose?" (*BA* 54).

Subversive La Trobe refuses to join in the patriotic celebration of the church, state and armed forces, typical of the Empire Day pageant (Beer 2000: xxxi). Therefore, to the bafflement and irritation of some spectators, she cuts out scenes with the army and the Grand Ensemble: "'Why leave out the British Army? What's history without the Army, eh?'" (*BA* 141):

‘What’s she keeping us waiting for?’ Colonel Mayhew asked irritably. [...] Mrs. Mayhew agreed. Unless of course she was going to end with a Grand Ensemble. Army; Navy; Union Jack; and behind them perhaps—Mrs Mayhew sketched what she would have done had it been her pageant—the Church. In cardboard. (BA 160–61)

Further, the Victorian act of La Trobe’s pageant is a biting satire and a critique of the British Empire and the “imperial jingoism”, as MacKay aptly terms it (MacKay 2008: 27). MacKay points out that the comic policeman Budge (“*It’s a Christian country, our Empire; under the White Queen Victoria. Over thought and religion; drink; dress; manners; marriage too, I wield my truncheon. [...] Purity our watchward; prosperity and respectability. [...] Let ’em sweat at the mines; cough at the looms; rightly endure their lot. That’s the price of Empire; that’s the white man’s burden*”) and the play his speech precedes (“*a lifetime in the African desert among the heathens would be— [...] Perfect happiness!*”) reveal how the official discourse of the government and the literary language suppress the means by which the domestic, national and imperial order is imposed (MacKay 2008: 27; BA 145–46, 149).

But above all and for the most part, Miss La Trobe’s selection of scenes points to the universal and repetitive patterns of history, based on human nature and emotions – love, hate, desire and greed. The trivial and formulaic domestic plot of the pageant revolves mainly around the motifs of matchmaking and marriage. Lost heirs discovered, elopement of parted lovers, picnics with a purpose, comic exposure of Victorian domesticity – none of these events seem to matter in La Trobe’s scheme (Beer 2000: xxix). Isa sees through it: “The plot was only there to beget emotion. There were only two emotions: love; and hate,” and a bit later she identifies the third one: “Love. Hate. Peace. Three emotions made the ply of human life.” “Don’t bother about the plot; the plot’s nothing,” she concludes (BA 82, 83).

Indeed, the pageant arouses emotion. As a parallel to “the static drama of the pageant”, an “inward, dynamic drama of the audience’s thoughts and feelings” unfolds (Beer 2000:

xxix). In this way, Woolf depicts the interplay or oscillation between the public event of the village pageant, as well as the private and communal experience of it. As for the “inward drama”, Beer has rightly noted that the pageant makes each of the spectators discover some “unacted part” of themselves (Beer 2000: xxix; *BA* 186). Mrs Swithin feels that she “might have been—Cleopatra”, and in the novel’s final scene “for a moment she looked like a tragic figure from another play” (*BA* 137, 193). Isa is burning with desire for Rupert Haines whom she barely knows. Homosexual William Dodge becomes secretly infatuated with Giles, who, in turn, is consumed with lust for Mrs Manresa.

But by making the spectators get in touch with their feelings, La Trobe’s play heightens their inner sense of anxiety and distress:

He [Giles] said (without words) ‘I’m damnably unhappy.’

‘So am I,’ Dodge echoed.

‘And I too,’ Isa thought.

They were all caught and caged; prisoners; watching a spectacle. (*BA* 158)

The spectacle the audience watches is not only La Trobe’s pageant, but also the approaching war, and thus, the distress of the characters is caused not only by private problems, but also by the ‘public’ news about the escalating conflict on the continent and the rape at Whitehall:

‘We remain seated’—‘We are the audience.’ Words this afternoon ceased to lie flat in the sentence. They rose, became menacing and shook their fists at you. This afternoon he wasn’t Giles Oliver come to see the villagers act their annual pageant; manacled to a rock he was, and forced passively to behold *the indescribable horror*. (*BA* 55; emphasis mine)

The imminent reality of war permeates not only the private thoughts of particular characters (as in the quotations above), but it is also a part of the communal experience as comments on

the current events keep running through scraps of conversations during the play and the reception party: “That’s one good the war brought us—longer days ...” (BA 108); “And my daughter, just back from Rome, she says the common people, in the cafes, hate Dictators ...” (BA 109); “And what about the Jews? The refugees ... the Jews ... People like ourselves [...]” (BA 109). As the pageant progresses, the comments on and allusions to war become more and more gloomy: “It all looks very black.’ ‘No one wants it—save those damned Germans” (BA 135–36); “[...] I agree—things look worse than ever on the continent. And what’s the channel come to think of it, if they mean to invade us?” (BA 179).

Moments of unity within the audience (or “the common feeling” to which Woolf referred in her diary) are evoked by means of both the content of the pageant and the interruptions of nature/reality (*Diary V* 231). As regards the play itself, it lifts the audience out of time and place, uniting them in some space between reality and the world of the pageant: “They were neither one thing nor the other; neither Victorians nor themselves. They were suspended, without being, in limbo” (BA 159). Additionally, the feeling of unity is triggered and sustained by the hypnotic ticking, tunes and voice of the gramophone, which seems to “hold them together, tranced” (BA 75). But unity, or the emotion connecting the audience, is also repeatedly achieved or upheld by nature: by the bellowing of the cows and by the sudden rain – “all people’s tears, weeping for all people” (BA 162). By taking the risk of staging the pageant outdoors, La Trobe inscribes contingency and chance into her scheme. And by letting nature take her part in it, she adds another dimension to her play – prehistory, which is also the present: “It was the primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment” (BA 126).

Prehistory plays an important role in both in La Trobe’s pageant and Woolf’s novel as a whole: Mrs Swithin envisages the times when rhododendron forests grew in Piccadilly and Britain and the continent were not yet divided by the channel; nature is represented as

prehistory (the primeval cows, the “barbaric”, “pre-historic” stone Giles kicks and the swallows, to mention just a few) (*BA* 89); ancestry and tradition is also viewed as prehistory (“The old lady, the indigenous, the prehistoric, was being wheeled away by a footman”); the novel ends/re-opens in the prehistoric times (*BA* 183). The recurrent theme takes on a symbolic meaning when considered in the context of war. Firstly, it is noteworthy that Woolf viewed the war as a return to prehistory/barbarism, which is evident in the description of wartime London in her diary:

Very few buses. Tubes closed. No children. No loitering. Everyone humped with a gas mask. Strain and grimness. At night its so verdurous and gloomy that one expects a badger or a fox to prowl along the pavement. A reversion to the middle ages with all the space & silence of the country set in the forest of black houses [...] People grope their way to each others lairs [...] Great caterpillars dug up the square. (*Diary V* 242–43)

Secondly, the threat of invasion brings back prehistory also in the sense that the English Channel becomes but a symbolic boundary between the island and the continent where the war was imminent; for as one of the spectators realises after the twelve aeroplanes cross the skies, “what’s the channel [...] if they mean to invade us?” (*BA* 179). As Marina MacKay has aptly put it, at any moment “a reversion to the original unity may be made forcibly by a Nazi occupation and bring a return to the desolate landscape of marshes and monsters that existed ‘when the entire continent, not then [...] divided by a channel, was all one’” (MacKay 2008: 42; *BA* 8). MacKay has also pointed out that Woolf’s novel represents the history of the relationship between Britain and the continent as “one of attempted invasion or successful conquest” (MacKay 2008: 42). Already in the first scene of the novel Mr Oliver remarks on “the scars” imprinted on the English landscape: “From an aeroplane [...] you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor

house; and by the plough, when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic wars” (BA 3–4).

Coming back to the oscillation between the public feeling and the private during the pageant, unity is fleeting and elusive, and naturally gives way to the plethora of individual voices inherent in the collective ‘we’. The rhythm of the fluctuation between unity and dispersal is partially determined by the voice issuing from the gramophone before each interval and at the end of the pageant: “*Dispersed are we; who have come together*” (BA 176); “*Unity—Dispersity. It gurgled Un ... dis ... And ceased*” (BA 181).

Woolf’s alternation between the action of the pageant and the audience’s private and communal response to it require a simultaneous apprehension of more than one level of action on the part of the reader. And in fact, this rocketing between public and private among the audience is not the only movement back and forth *between* different planes (of action) in the pageant scene. In my opinion, due to its fragmented structure and the constant oscillation between the various threads, the scene is an example of what Joseph Frank termed “spatialization of form” (Frank 1991: 17).

### **Spatiality of form**

In his essay “Spatial Form in Modern Literature”, Joseph Frank argues that modern poets and writers “ideally intend the reader to apprehend their work spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence” and “as juxtaposed in space rather than unrolling in time” (Frank 1991: 10, 12). In order to explain the notion of spatial form in the modern novel, Frank discusses the county-fair scene in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. He distinguishes three planes on which the action is set: on the lowest level, there is “the surging, jostling mob in the street”; slightly higher, on a platform, are “the speechmaking officials, bombastically reeling off platitudes to the attentive multitudes”; whereas on the highest level, standing at a window

overlooking the whole scene, Emma and Rodolphe are watching the spectacle and “carrying out their amorous conversation” (Frank 1991: 16). In his commentary on the scene, Flaubert wrote: “Everything should sound simultaneously”; “one should hear the bellowing of the cattle, the whispering of the lovers, and the rhetoric of the officials all at the same time” (qtd. Frank 1991: 16–17). But since language is governed by a temporal logic, simultaneity can only be achieved by breaking up the time-flow of the narrative. Flaubert disrupts the sequence by cutting back and forth between the different levels of action. As the scene progresses, the segments become shorter and shorter (at the end single sentences are juxtaposed) until – at the climax of the scene – Rodolphe declares his love for Emma the very moment the awards for raising the best pigs are given. As Frank argues, “for the duration of the scene, at least, the time-flow of the narrative is halted; attention is fixed on the interplay of relationships within the immobilized time-area” and “the full significance of the scene is given only by the reflexive relations among the units of meaning” (Frank 1991: 17). In other words, in order to be able to understand the scene properly, the particular levels of action (i.e. the units of meaning) have to be perceived reflexively, simultaneously.

As I have indicated above, in the pageant scene Woolf cuts back and forth between multiple planes of action. Already at the very beginning, Woolf disrupts the progression of the play with at least six different voices: Mrs Carter, the narrator, the puffing sound of the gramophone, (some of) the audience, an old man and Miss La Trobe:

‘What luck!’ [1] Mrs Carter was saying [2]. ‘Last year ...’ Then the play began. Was it, or was it not, the play? Chuff, chuff, chuff [3] sounded from the bushes. It was the noise a machine makes when something has gone wrong. Some sat down hastily; others stopped talking guiltily. All looked at the bushes. For the stage was empty. Chuff, chuff, chuff the machine buzzed in the bushes. While they looked apprehensively and some finished their sentences, a small girl, like a rosebud in

pink, advanced; took her stand on a mat, behind a conch, hung with leaves and piped:

*Gentles and simples, I address you all ...*

So it was the play then. Or was it the prologue?

*Come hither for our festival* (she continued)

*This is a pageant, all may see*

*Drawn from our island history.*

*England am I ...*

‘She’s England,’ [4] they whispered. ‘It’s begun.’ ‘The prologue,’ they added, looking down on the programme.

‘England am I,’ she piped again; and stopped.

She had forgotten her lines.

‘Hear! Hear!’ [5] said an old man in white waistcoat briskly. ‘Bravo! Bravo!’

‘Blast ’em!’ [6] cursed Miss La Trobe, hidden behind the tree. She looked at the front row. They glared as if they were exposed to a frost that nipped them and fixed them all at the same level. Only Bond the cowman looked fluid and natural.

‘Music!’ she signalled. ‘Music!’ But the machine continued: Chuff, chuff, chuff.

‘*A child new born ...*’ she prompted.

‘*A child new born,*’ Phyllis Jones continued,

*Sprung from the sea*

*Whose billows blown by mighty storm*

*Cut off from France and Germany*

*This isle.*

She glanced back over her shoulder. Chuff, chuff, chuff, the machine buzzed. A long line of villagers in shirts made of sacking began passing in and out in single file behind her between the trees. They were singing, but not a word reached the audience. (BA 70–71)

The narrator explains a bit further that half of the villagers’ words were “blown away”, deafened by the wind (BA 72). Thus, already in the prologue, Woolf introduces all the levels



of action: the play; the thoughts and commentaries of the narrator, the audience and Miss La Trobe; nature; and the gramophone.

There are a few ways in which Woolf weaves the various planes in the pageant. Firstly, she fills the numerous breaks, gaps and silences in La Trobe's play with other voices. Thus, Phyllis' forgetting her lines prompts both the old man's and Miss La Trobe's comments. The words of the choir are lost in the wind and "the rustle of the leaves", but the bellowing cows "annihilated the gap; bridged the distance; filled the emptiness and continued the emotion" (BA 125, 126). The stage is repeatedly portrayed as empty, which, again, opens the pageant up for other planes. Secondly, the figure of interruption is frequently used in order to break up the temporal sequence of the scene. Right after the prologue cited above, when a tune has finally blared out from the gramophone and Miss La Trobe has managed to hold the audience for the first time, Mrs Swithin enters:

The pompous popular tune brayed and blared. Miss La Trobe watched from behind the tree. Muscles loosened; ice cracked. The stout lady in the middle began to beat time with her hand on the chair. Mrs Manresa was humming [...] She was afloat on the stream of the melody [...] The play had begun.

But there was an interruption. 'O,' Miss La Trobe growled behind her tree, 'the torture of these interruptions!'

'Sorry I'm late,' said Mrs Swithin. She pushed her way through the chairs to a seat beside her brother.

'What's it all about? I've missed the prologue. England? The little girl? Now she's gone ...'

Phyllis had slipped off her mat.

'And who's this?' asked Mrs Swithin.

It was Hilda, the carpenter's daughter. She now stood where England had stood.

'O, *England's grown ...*' Miss La Trobe prompted her.

'O, *England's grown a girl now,*' Hilda sang out

('What a lovely voice!' someone exclaimed)

*With roses in her hair,  
Wild roses, red roses,  
She roams the lanes and chooses  
A garland for her hair.*

‘A cushion? Thank you very much,’ said Mrs Swithin, stuffing the cushion behind her back. Then she leant forward. (BA 72–73)

Mrs Swithin’s disruption is both physical (she pushes her way to her seat) and verbal (she apologises for being late and asks questions about the play). All in all, both the text of La Trobe’s play as well as that of Woolf’s pageant scene are composed of “orts, scraps and fragments”; ellipses and interruptions (BA 169).

The play is interwoven with ‘reality’ – it is disrupted and complemented with the voices of ‘real’ spectators and ‘real’ nature. But the converse is also true of La Trobe’s pageant: ‘reality’ is also permeated with art, which becomes apparent especially in the intervals. Despite the artist’s concern, the emotion her play evokes continues throughout the breaks, during which the audience internalises and re-enacts different parts: “‘Hail, sweet Carinthia. My love. My life’”, Dodge greets Isa, echoing the Elizabethan scene of the pageant, “‘My lord, my liege,’ she bowed ironically” (BA 94–95). Arguably due to the universality of La Trobe’s plot, the audience is suspended between reality and illusion – between themselves and the various epochs presented on the stage. The question raised by one of the spectators after the Elizabethan act of the pageant recurs throughout the intervals: “‘D’you think people change? Their clothes, of course ... But I mean ourselves ...’” (BA 108). After the Victorian scene, which is particularly close to her heart, Mrs Swithin has no doubt that people remain the same: “‘The Victorians,’ Mrs Swithin mused. ‘I don’t believe [...] that there ever were such people. Only you and me and William dressed differently’” (BA 156). Thus, as the

different voices of the pageant, audience and nature intersect and complement one another, the boundary between reality and illusion is partially dissolved.

The fragmentation of action reaches a crescendo in the last scene of the pageant, entitled “The present time. Ourselves” (BA 160). After confronting the audience with “present-time reality” – silence, swallows and, unexpectedly, rain (“Nature once more had taken her part”), La Trobe suddenly changes the tune – from a nursery rhyme to jazz – and, consequently, the rhythm of the performance (BA 161, 162):

The tune changed; snapped; broke; jagged. Foxtrot was it? Jazz? Anyhow the rhythm kicked, reared, snapped short. What a jangle and a jingle! [...] What a cackle, in a cacophony! Nothing ended. So abrupt. And corrupt [...] What is her game? To disrupt? Jog and trot? Jerk and smirk? Put the finger to the nose? Squint and pry? Peak and spy? [...] The young, who can't make, but only break; shiver into splinters the old vision; smash to atoms what was a whole. (BA 164)

The fierce and frenzied rhythms chopping the old vision into pieces, reflected above in a series of parallel verbs, exclamations, interrogatives, onomatopoeia and rhyme, are followed by a visual fragmentation (Stewart 1985: 80). “Children? Imps—elves—demons” enter the stage with mirrors, tin cans, jars – “anything that’s bright enough to reflect, presumably, ourselves?”:

Out they leapt, jerked, skipped. Flashing, dazzling, dancing, jumping. Now old Bart ... he was caught. Now Manresa. Here a nose ... There a skirt ... Then trousers only ... Now perhaps a face ... Ourselves? But that’s cruel. To snap us as we are, before we’ve had time to assume ... And only, too, in parts ... That’s what’s so distorting and upsetting and utterly unfair.

Mopping, mowing, whisking, frisking, the looking glasses darted, flashed, exposed. (BA 165)

The kaleidoscopic display of the distorted images of different body parts agitates the spectators because by disrupting their usual perspective, it manages to expose their real flawed, fragmented selves before they have managed to “assume”. With their images flashing on the stage, the audience finally become actors in La Trobe’s pageant, although, as we have seen, the novel’s narrator makes them a part of the play right from the start. Meanwhile, at the scene’s climax, all the voices and planes which recur throughout the whole pageant join in: the audience, nature (“The very cows joined in. Walloping, tail lashing, the reticence of nature was undone, and the barriers which should divide Man and Master from the Brute were dissolved. Then the dogs joined in”), and the actors, each reciting “some phrase or fragment from their parts” (BA 165, 166). In this grand finale, all the actors are gathered on the terrace of Pointz Hall and all the voices sound simultaneously: “It was now. Ourselves”, an anonymous voice explains (BA 167).

### **The meaning of spatial form**

In order to account for the predominance of spatial form in modern arts and literature, Frank turns to Wilhelm Worringer and his *Abstraction and Empathy* published in 1908. The problem Worringer sets out to discuss is the “continual alternation between naturalistic and nonnaturalistic styles” in the history of plastic arts (Frank 1991: 54). In Worringer’s view, during periods of naturalism, such as the art of ancient Greece or that of Western Europe till the end of the nineteenth century, artists tried to reproduce the world and nature objectively and “faithfully” because the relationship between humans and the cosmos in these periods was one of equilibrium. In contrast, periods of nonnaturalism, for example Byzantine art or the major art styles of the twentieth century, reject the projection of space and turn to the plane, reducing “organic nature to linear-geometric forms” as a result of the lack of harmony between man and the cosmos (Frank 1991: 54–57). According to Frank, “Depth, the

projection of three-dimensional space, gives objects a time-value because it places them in the real world in which events occur.” Since “time is the very condition of that flux and change from which [...] man wishes to escape when he is in a relation of disequilibrium with the cosmos”, plastic arts representing nonnaturalistic styles strive “to remove all traces of time-value” (Frank 1991: 60).

Frank argues that just as visual arts reject the dimension of depth, modern literature turns away from the dimension of historical depth. In his analysis of Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, Allen Tate writes that the juxtaposition of past and present in the poem forms “an unhistorical miscellany, timeless and without origin” (qtd. Frank 1991: 62). In Frank’s view, in all the major works of modern literature “past and present are apprehended spatially, locked in a timeless unity”; and historical imagination, that is the ability to locate events in chronological time, is substituted by myth: “an imagination for which historical time does not exist and which sees the actions and event of a particular time only as the bodying forth of eternal prototypes” (Frank 1991: 63–64).

In *Between the Acts*, present and past are repeatedly juxtaposed only to undermine the meaning of history. As I have pointed out above, La Trobe’s pageant is based on recurrent underlying motifs and themes, which make its plot a universal one, despite the apparent changes of social conventions throughout time. Further, the juxtaposition of fragments recited by all the actors at the pageant’s climax removes all traces of sequence and clear differences between past and present. But it also needs to be mentioned that, as Froula points out, throughout the whole play the spectators see ‘double’: everyday objects serve as props, for example dish cloths are silken turbans and the soap box Queen Elizabeth stands on probably represents a rock. The villagers also remain themselves in spite of costume changes and stylised speech: “From behind the bushes issued Queen Elizabeth—Eliza Clark, licensed to sell tobacco. Could she be Mrs Clark of the village shop?” (Froula 2005: 306; *BA* 76). The

audience and actors are lifted out of the present, yet they are not entirely in the past (“They were neither one thing nor the other; neither Victorians nor themselves”), hence I agree with Lyons in that it is “a movement out of time”, rather than “back in time” (*BA* 159; Lyons 1977: 153). Finally, the language of the pageant is one of parody and pastiche, which further undermines the meaning of history.

Superimpositions of the past upon the present, which recur throughout the whole novel, suggest simultaneity of past and present and blur the boundaries between them. The prehistoric fantasies Mrs Swithin projects onto the interiors of Pointz Hall and her tendency to increase “the bounds of the moment by flights into past or future; or sidelong down corridors and alleys” represent a leap out of time (*BA* 8). The spaces of the house form palimpsests in which layers of past experiences show through, and thus, past and present are juxtaposed and simultaneous. The recurrent portrayal of the empty spaces of the house, with the silence and emptiness of the vase forever “singing of what was before time was”, turns Pointz Hall into a timeless, ahistorical space (*BA* 33). The novel ends, or rather, reopens in prehistory, and the next act is based on the ancient plot of love and hate, and procreation. After Mrs Swithin goes to bed, Isa and Giles are left alone for the first time in the novel:

Alone, enmity was bared; also love. Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night. [...] Then the curtain rose. They spoke. (*BA* 197)

Prehistory, which is represented as past and present throughout the whole novel, becomes also the future towards the end. In other words, the new narrative will unfold in the future which will at the same time be present and prehistory. Hence, it is timeless.

### ***Between the Acts* as a Cubist canvas**

The style of *Between the Acts* is disjunctive, disrupted and fragmentary. Woolf envisioned the novel as “a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole—the present state of my mind?” (*Diary V* 135). Indeed, the continuous flow of consciousness characteristic of her earlier novels could not represent the turmoils of the war. In order to capture the frantic and tumultuous reality, Woolf adopted a new style akin to Cubism in plastic arts. Jack Stewart has rightly remarked that although “it would be a rash to call *Between the Acts* a ‘Cubist novel’, in the sense that Apollinaire’s or Stein’s experiments are consciously Cubist, recognition of Cubist elements is essential to appreciation of the novel’s form” (Stewart 1985: 67).

As Stewart explains, the Cubists were interested in penetrating “the ‘skin’ of objects” and showing their “inner reality. The retinal image was split into a multiplicity of views, as what was seen was replaced by what was *known* or *found*. Cubist dissonance substituted a multi-faceted view of the object for the illusion of oneness” (Stewart 1985: 66). For example, in Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (see below), a painting regarded as a prototype of the style that later developed into Cubism, virtual space is divided into a number of segments intertwining on a two-dimensional picture plane. Since perspective is abandoned, the distinction between front and back, figure and background disappears (Stewart 1985: 67).

As Stewart observes, “Separate facets of an object, that could only be seen one at a time from different angles, are now ‘cut out’ and recombined to give a jagged, distorted, but intensified image of reality” (Stewart 1985: 67). The image in Picasso’s painting was first broken up (the process is known as *analysis*), only to have its facets reassembled in a new aesthetic entity (*synthesis*). Thus, Stewart writes, “the limited temporality of perception” was substituted by “a so-called ‘fourth dimension,’ in which successive views of an object would appear simultaneously” (Stewart 1985: 67).



Pablo Picasso *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*, 1911

In *Between the Acts*, “all lit.,” “all life, all art, all waifs & strays” are juxtaposed at Pointz Hall, fusing the everyday and the momentous, background and foreground, central and peripheral in a dynamic picture of reality (*Diary V* 135) (Stewart 1985: 68). As in Cubism, “the desire to view multiple aspects of a thing in the same space, or the need to connect or bridge objects nominally separate, exhilarates all transitions” (Kozloff, qtd. in Stewart 1985: 68). As I have suggested above, the multiple elements and planes (past and present, public and private, real and imagined) are not merged in Woolf’s novel, nor are the transitions between them smooth. On the contrary, as the rhythm of the switches between different planes turns “obsessive”, the boundaries between them become pronounced, and thus the scenes and images “fit edge to edge in a mosaic pattern that recalls Cubist dismemberment and resynthesis” (Stewart 1985: 68, 69). The constant movement from unity to dispersity as well as the dissolution of the narrative and image into “scraps, orts and fragments” force the audience and the reader to reassemble and recombine different parts into new wholes (*BA*



169). Miss La Trobe is “one who seethes wandering bodies and floating voices in a cauldron, and makes rise up from its amorphous mass a recreated world” (*BA* 137). In the pageant’s finale, she smashes the old vision (a naturalist mode of representation) into splinters and synthesises the disparate (body) parts in her kaleidoscopic image of ‘here and now’, complemented by the simultaneous recitation of fragments of the pageant by all performers.

As John Berger writes, “the content of [Cubist] art consists of various modes of interaction: the interaction between different aspects of the same event, between empty space and filled space, between structure and movement, between seer and the thing seen” (qtd. in Stewart 1985: 74). All these types of interplay are also present in Woolf’s novel. I have already discussed the various interactions between the different planes in the pageant: the play itself, its author and audience; art and reality; art and nature; past and present; emptiness filled with nature’s intervention and different scraps of conversations. I have also considered the structure of the pageant scene, dependent upon the movement and interaction between the various planes. As regards the relation between seer and the viewed object, the mirror scene, which has been briefly discussed in Chapter Two, serves as an excellent example. Isa is standing in front of her three-folded mirror, which allows her to view three different versions of her own face and a slip of the garden outside interlocking simultaneously on a single picture plane. While she is projecting her feelings onto the image she sees in front of her (“Inner love was in the eyes; outer love on the dressing-table”), her son suddenly appears in the ‘outside plane’, which triggers another surge of emotions (*BA* 13) (Stewart 1985: 72). Thus, multiple interactions between seer and the thing seen are explored in the novel.

In fact, the form of *Between the Acts* is spatial, based on the interaction of a number of opposites: most notably public and private, national and domestic, past and present, prehistory and present, art and reality, unity and dispersity, love and hate, speech and silence. By showing the complex interplay between those binary categories at work, Woolf emphasises

the simultaneity of disparate experiences and the co-existence of opposites in the mind, evocative of the curious mix-up of private and public in Woolf's diary. As the novel progresses, and as Woolf's experience of war continues, the rhythm of those interactions becomes more and more rapid, and the intersections get more and more sinister (for example the ironic images in the mirror scene, the ominous planes flying overhead towards the end of the pageant or the superimposition of the desolate prehistoric landscape upon the present/future at the end of the novel). The final fall into the Conradian "heart of darkness" represents the novel's ultimate turn towards dispersity and dismemberment (*BA* 197).

## Conclusion

In this thesis I have explored aspects of material, private and public space in *Between the Acts*. The main aim of my analysis has been to study those concrete and abstract spaces as well as the relations and intersections between them.

In the first chapter I examined the representation of physical spaces in the novel. The architecture and interiors of Pointz Hall, just as the landscape surrounding the house, are depicted in the novel as spaces adaptable to change, but at the same time, capable of retaining their old character or previous layers of experience and identity. Parts of the household have been rebuilt to serve a different purpose, as for example the chapel which became a larder after the Reformation, but the Norman arch and the hollow sounds reverberating through it reveal the original identity of the place. Further, some parts of Pointz Hall resemble other places, for instance the barn is said to bear a similarity to a Greek temple and the trees on the terrace suggest columns in a cathedral. I proposed that the narrator of the novel imagines elements of church architecture to open the spaces of Pointz Hall up to the sounds of the past, not unlike what Woolf did in her memoir, where she construed her past and memories in spatial terms (as the spaces of a cathedral and a hall).

The material objects and interiors of the house serve the novel's narrator as a point of departure for introducing the Oliver family, their dubious ancestry and status in the village. But more importantly, the private spaces of Pointz Hall are imprinted with marks of the Olivers' experiences and familial history as well as phantasmagorias of their inner selves – their dreams and imagination. Most importantly, however, at Pointz Hall all those layers, past

and present, and real and imagined are depicted as simultaneous, inseparable and equally significant.

The past contained and imagined within the walls of Pointz Hall is represented as ancient, reaching back to ‘time immemorial’. Mrs Swithin’s creative ‘reconstruction’ of pre-historical times, and, above all, the narrator’s representation of different rooms as empty shells, most notably the dining room with its eternal song and the ancient vase holding the essence of silence and emptiness, inscribe timelessness at the centre of Pointz Hall. At the same time, the emptiness of the portrayed interiors ominously excludes the inhabitants of the house from ‘the hearth and home’. The prevalence of the shell imagery, which relates *Between the Acts* to Woolf’s earlier novels, *Jacob’s Room* and *To the Lighthouse*, as well as the context of war (or impending war) common to all three, and the final metaphorical vision of the collapse of Pointz Hall as a shelter, led me to conclude that *Between the Acts* like the earlier books might also be read as a war elegy, though precipitate. It certainly has elegiac resonances. Yet the adaptability of the house in the novel to change, its timelessness and the narrator’s emphasis on the life that goes on despite human absence (for example the tortoiseshell butterfly in the empty library) point to the continuity of life.

In the second chapter of this thesis I considered the domestic space of the Olivers’ household. I showed how the vestiges of the Victorian organisation of the household may be seen in the light of Woolf’s account of her parental home recorded in her memoirs, especially “A Sketch of the Past”, which parallels the novel in many ways. But I also referred to Kerr’s ‘textbook’ on Victorian home planning in order to identify those remnants suggested and perpetuated in the novel by the architecture and interiors of Pointz Hall. Domestic objects and personal belongings were shown to act as signs or synecdoches standing for the values, qualities and status associated with male and female characters at Pointz Hall. Men’s things express violence, which on the one hand seems to be inherent in the patriarchal ideal, but on

the other, it is clearly represented as a reaction to the overwhelming reality of the impending war. Women's possessions, in contrast, not only indicate their creativity and silent vision, which seem to be suppressed by the male members of the family, but they are also associated with their confinement to the domestic space and plot.

However, Woolf as an experimental novelist was shown to redesign or rewrite domesticity at Pointz Hall. I argued that the narrator's subversive representation of the threshold of the library is Woolf's main tool of redefining the traditionally male-gendered space, and, by extension, of reorganising the domestic architecture in the novel. By persistently depicting the female characters in the act of crossing the threshold, and by questioning its coherence and integrity, Woolf grants female admission to the masculine zone. In more general terms, the narrator's portrayal of the female characters on spatial borders, and the accentuation of those peripheral spaces seem to pave the way for women's emancipation.

In the third chapter I investigated how the public space permeates the private in Woolf's wartime diary and *Between the Acts*, as well as the nature of this interaction. I suggested that her feeling of having her private space intruded upon by the public events, and the constant rocketing between the two realms depicted in the diary are reflected in the novel, particularly in its pageant scene. The incessant and somewhat rapid movement between the public events of the village play and the oncoming war, as well as the public and private experience of both of them were shown to invite a spatial reading of the scene. As a conceptual framework I here used Joseph Frank's essay on spatialisation of form in modern literature and interpreted the constant alternation between the various levels of action and binary categories, as well as the consequent fragmentation of the narrative, as an indication of Woolf's deliberate attempt to convey the simultaneity of all the depicted planes. I argued that, not unlike in much of modernist literature, the past and present are juxtaposed to render history as timeless. On the single day of the annual village pageant all of history – familial

and national, immediate and ancient/prehistoric, factual and imagined/literary – is simultaneous, inseparable and “locked in a timeless unity”, to repeat Frank’s words. The interplay of the various planes and binary oppositions – the “scraps, orts and fragments” of the pageant – was shown to resemble interactions of segments on a Cubist canvas, where different facets of an object are ‘cut out’ and reassembled in a new image. To my mind, the rapid rocketing between the multiple planes in the novel seems to be evocative of the curious mix-up of public and private in Woolf’s wartime diary.

All in all, the intersectional spaces – the architectural junctures and the points where the different planes of the novel cross each other – are of crucial importance in Woolf’s novel. The spaces in-between are represented as transitions, with all the possibility of change they carry for domestic and national space. As mentioned, the threshold of the library may be viewed as the possibility opened up to women for entering the patriarchal, public space. At the same time, however, the Nazis’ expected crossing of the English Channel – the threshold between Continental Europe and The British Isles, as well as that between peace and war – poses a dire threat.

Even though La Trobe’s pageant and Woolf’s novel are unsparingly critical of the British Empire and the traps of the patriarchal society and gender roles, *Between the Acts* is more pastoral and nostalgic than any other of Woolf’s novels. By including elements of national space, such as Pointz Hall – the country house situated in the very heart of England, with walls that remember the times before the Reformation, with its ancient view and the most remote history of England enacted on its terrace, Woolf seems to summon up all she cared about – her beloved country, landscape, literature and language. In her recently published book, Alexandra Harris calls “this turn towards home” prompted by the war an “imaginative claiming of England” (Harris 2010: 10). In order to be able “to record the last of England” (to use Harris’s words), Woolf created a spatial form in which the quotidian and the

poetic, the past and present, the real and imagined are all simultaneously present (Harris 2010: 113). The old country house with its multi-layered spaces constitutes the most important plane in the novel in that it provides scaffolding, a simultaneous space always present in the reader's mind.

## Bibliography

### Primary sources (in chronological order of publication)

*Jacob's Room*. (1922). Ed. Kate Flint. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

*To the Lighthouse*. (1927). Ed. David Bradshaw. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

*A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*. (1929, 1938). Ed. Morag Shiach. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

*Between the Acts*. (1941). Ed. Frank Kermode. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

*The London Scene: Five Essays by Virginia Woolf*. New York: Frank Hallman, 1975.

*The Sickie Side of the Moon: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. V: 1932–1935*. Ed. Nigel Nicolson. London: The Hogarth Press, 1979.

*The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. III: 1925–1930*. Ed. Anne Oliver Bell. London: The Hogarth Press, 1980.

*Leave the Letters till We're Dead: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. VI: 1936–1941*. Ed. Nigel Nicolson. London: The Hogarth Press, 1980.

*Pointz Hall: The Earlier and Later Typescripts of Between the Acts*. Ed. Mitchell A. Leaska. New York: University Publications, 1983.

*The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. V: 1936–1941*. Ed. Anne Oliver Bell. London: The Hogarth Press, 1984.

*Moments of Being*. Ed. Jeanne Schulkind. London: The Hogarth Press, 1985.



*Selected Essays*. Ed. David Bradshaw. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

## Secondary sources

Abel, Elizabeth 1989. *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bachelard, Gaston 1994. *The Poetics of Space*. (1958). Trans. Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press.

*BBC History*. ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/battle\\_of\\_britain](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/battle_of_britain)).

Beer, Gillian 2000. "Introduction" and "Notes". In *Between the Acts*. Ed. Stella McNichol. London: Penguin Books. ix–xxxv; 131–45.

Briggs, Julia 2006. *Reading Virginia Woolf*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Brown, Bill 1999. "The Secret Life of Things (Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism)". *Modernism/Modernity* 6.2: 1–28.

Clewell, Tammy 2009. *Mourning, Modernism, Postmodernism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Cramer, Patricia 1993. "Virginia Woolf's Matriarchal Family of Origins in *Between the Acts*". *Twentieth Century Literature* 39: 166–84.

Cuddy-Keane, Melba 1990. "The Politics of Comic Modes in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*". *PMLA* 105.2: 273–85.

Fleishman Avrom 1971. *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Frank, Joseph 1991. *The Idea of Spatial Form*. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press.

- Friedman, Melvin 1955. *Stream of Consciousness: A Study in Literary Method*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Froula, Christine 2005. *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-garde: War, Civilization, Modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fussell, B. H. 1980. "Woolf's Peculiar Comic World: *Between the Acts*". In *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity*. Ed. Ralph Freedman. Berkeley: University of California Press. 263–83.
- Girouard, Mark 1980. *Life in the English Country House: a Social and Architectural History*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Hall, Michael 1994. *The English Country House: From the Archives of "Country Life," 1897-1939*. London: Mitchell Beazley.
- Harris, Alexandra 2010. *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Joplin, Patricia Klindienst 1989. "The Authority of Illusion: Feminism and Fascism in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*". *South Central Review* 6.2: 88–104.
- Kermode, Frank 2008. "Introduction". In *Between the Acts*. Ed. Frank Kermode. Oxford: Oxford University Press. xii–xxxiv.
- Kerr, Robert 1972. *The Gentleman's House*. (1871). New York: Johnson Reprint Company Limited.
- Lee, Hermione 1997. *Virginia Woolf*. London: Vintage Books.
- Lyons, Richard S. 1977. "The Intellectual Structure of Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*". *Modern Language Quarterly* 38: 149–66.
- MacKay, Marina 2005. "Putting the House in Order: Virginia Woolf and Blitz Modernism". *Modern Language Quarterly* 66: 227–52.

- MacKay, Marina 2008. *Modernism and World War II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Marcus, Jane 1981. "Thinking Back Through Our Mothers". In *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Jane Marcus. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Marcus, Laura 2004. *Virginia Woolf*. Horndon: Northcote House.
- McWhirter, David 1993. "The Novel, the Play, and the Book: *Between the Acts* and the Tragicomedy of History". *ELH* 60.3: 787–812.
- Moore, Madeline 1984. *The Short Season Between Two Silences: The Mystical and the Political in the Novels of Virginia Woolf*. Boston: Allen & Unwin.
- Oxford English Dictionary* 1989. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (<http://www.oed.com/>).
- Reed, Christopher 2004. *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture, and Domesticity*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press.
- Rosner, Victoria 2005. *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Seeley, Tracy 2007. "Flights of Fancy: Spatial Digression and Storytelling in *A Room of One's Own*". In *Locating Woolf: The Politics of Space and Place*. Ed. Anna Snaith and Michael H. Whitworth. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan. 31–45.
- Snaith, Anna 2000. *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Snaith, Anna and Michael H. Whitworth 2007. "Introduction: Approaches to Space and Place in Woolf". In *Locating Woolf: The Politics of Space and Place*. Ed. Anna Snaith and Michael H. Whitworth. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan. 1–28.
- Southworth, Helen 2007. "Women and Interruption in *Between the Acts*". In *Locating*

- Woolf: *The Politics of Space and Place*. Ed. Anna Snaith and Michael H. Whitworth. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 46–61.
- Stewart, Jack F. 1985. “Cubist elements in *Between the Acts*”. *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 18.2: 65–89.
- Walker, Cheryl 1982. *The Nightingale’s Burden: Women Poets and American Culture before 1900*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Wilde Alan 1984. “Touching Earth: Virginia Woolf and the Prose of the World”. In *Philosophical Approaches to Literature: New Essays on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Texts*. Ed. William E. Cain. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press. 140–64.
- Zwerdling, Alex 1977. “*Between the Acts* and the Coming of War”. *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 10.3: 220–36.
- Zwerdling, Alex 1986. *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*. Berkley: University of California Press.

### **Sources of illustrations**

- Mallen, Enrique (ed.) 2010. *Online Picasso Project*. (<http://picasso.shsu.edu/>).
- The Museum of Modern Art* 2010. (<http://www.moma.org/collection/>).
- John Piper* 2004. (<http://www.johnpiper.org.uk/Home-Page.htm>).