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DUALISM OF ORDER AND CHAOS: UR-DRAMA  
IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *BETWEEN THE ACTS*

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I

Virginia Woolf's last novel *Between the Acts* (1941) centers around the village pageant and ends with the opening of another play. Through her life, Woolf shows great interest in the theater and early in 1927, in her essay "The Narrow Bridge of Art," she writes that the novel in the future should amalgamate prose with poetry and drama.<sup>1</sup> The element of drama in this novel, however, seems to have been given rather cool treatment by earlier critics.<sup>2</sup> Such coolness may have arisen partly from the impression that drama is uncongenial to the disposition of Woolf, the writer who delves into one's mind, eliminating outer facts, dramatic actions, and role-playing from her book. Yet I would like to suggest here that such an impression may have been misleading in two senses: first, such a view of Woolf may be rather one-sided; and second, our notion of drama may be too prepossessed with that of the modern realistic play. If we see drama in a broader context, we can find in it some keys to the understanding of Woolf's concerns.

Arising from charms and primitive rites, plays in earlier communities partook of strong ritualistic aspects. Each was a common property of the community, inseparable from life of its members and closely related to its religion and myth.<sup>3</sup> The purport of such ritual plays and their descendants in later periods (here I mean various seasonal rites, festivities, etc.) is, then, deeply symbolical and cosmological. Often they reveal the mythic structure of the universe, and return the community to the time of its origin, thus

enabling its members to renew the sense of communication with its symbolic universe. Often, too, such ritual and festive occasions entail, together with the license of freedom and revelry, the suspension or the reversal of the social framework and order of everyday life. Not only is the hierarchical order abandoned, but the low in class status are exalted, the outcasts are charged with temporary prerogatives. In such reversal and disorder, the elements that are sealed and evaded in daily life—chaos, darkness, death, etc.—are disclosed and made visible, through the immersion by which is sought the rebirth and regeneration of the community. These elements of chaos and death, dominant in what Victor Turner calls the “liminal” stage, may be subversive and destructive of the order of the community, but they are the well of potentiality and regenerative energy. Without contact with these forces, civilization would lose its vitality.<sup>4</sup>

Woolf's world view was also dualistic, and with her sense of what she called “reality”—her symbolic universe beneath the ordered world—always haunting her, she was a severe critic of the monocular world view of modern society.<sup>5</sup> How she could convey her sense of “reality,” how the writer and the reader could communicate, was Woolf's chief concern from the beginning, and as she grew older, this problem seems to have held even more crucial importance.<sup>6</sup> It seems rather natural, therefore, that drama as a form of communal art had considerable appeal for Woolf late in her career.

As it is, since around 1979 when the manuscripts of “Anon” and “The Reader,” essays Woolf began to write in 1940 for her next book, were edited and published, interest in Woolf's concern about the relationships between artists and the community has grown. This tendency was also accelerated by the growing interest in Woolf's political views, and the play in this book has come to be much discussed from this viewpoint, after various models. Some critics connect the message of the pageant with the idea of “Anon,”<sup>7</sup> or find its model in the Elizabethan playhouse.<sup>8</sup> Some others see the influence of

Egyptian and Greek myths in this book.<sup>9</sup>

In this paper, however, I will not discuss the book in relation to a particular myth or model of art. Woolf's interest in myth seems to have been, as Sandra D. Shuttuck says, a kind of syncretism.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, I wonder if Woolf's interest in ritual art and play was not rather eclectic, as is my own brief survey of the "play" above.<sup>11</sup> Here, therefore, I would like temporarily to propose calling such a concept of drama as I discussed above "ur-drama," and to examine how the aspiration of Woolf toward this underlies the book. Woolf's interest in such a form of art may not be directly stated, but it can be seen, I think, looming up behind a net of key words spread through the book. And, conversely, seen in the light of the concept of ur-drama, the confined situation of the modern age and the problems which faced Woolf become clearer.

## II

The pageant of the book takes place at Pointz Hall situated in the heart of the country, the heart of England. Held annually in June, the occasion is reminiscent of the summer festival of earlier days. Though it may have lost the direct purposiveness of wishing for "the due succession of rain and sun for the crops,"<sup>12</sup> such a festive occasion is needed by people as a communal center: "What we need is a centre. Something to bring us all together" (231).

Miss La Trobe, the village playwright, is a fitting person to be the producer of the pageant. No one knows where she sprang from; there are only rumors about her past career. In her anonymity and outsiderhood, she is associated with Anon and the female artist figure prominent in Woolf's imagination. Her outsiderhood also puts her in the precise category of people among whom what Turner calls "communitas"—a kind of counter-culture, a communal state freed from social structure—emerges.<sup>13</sup> La Trobe is an outcast of society; village women usually "cut" her in streets, and villagers

talk maliciously of her as one "outside" themselves. Yet "in little troops" they appeal to her, because they need a shamanic figure to conduct and lead on such occasions.

In this seemingly peaceful, "civilized" garden of Pointz Hall, the one place which is charged with the dark, unordered energy inseparable from festivity is the lily pool. Water lay there, for hundreds of years, "four or five feet deep over a black cushion of mud." "In that deep centre, in that black heart," it is said, "the lady" drowned herself, and the servants insist that there must be a ghost, though nothing but a sheep's thigh bone was found when the pool was dredged ten years ago. This pool is one of those numinous, but indispensable, places for village people, which give them anecdotes and legends, and its mud becomes the symbol of the spiritual soil that fertilizes the imagination of the village folks, not to say of "the gentry" (54–55). The pool also becomes the symbol of the human heart, the mud being the metaphor for the unconscious, unrestrained by reason: "A spring of feeling bubbled up through her mud. They had laid theirs with blocks of marble. Sheep's bones were sheep's bones to them, not the relics of the drowned Lady Ermyntrude" (57).<sup>14</sup> It does not seem to be accidental, then, that this pool exists in the ground of Pointz Hall and that it seems to mark the place where the "change" of actors occurs. Actors dress up among the bushes in the dell beyond the lily pool, and come past it to the stage on the terrace. The audience, respecting the conventions, dare not go into their territory, but stop by the pool.

Certainly, "change" is one of the key words repeated in the book. It is first used in an important passage which brings around, with Giles's coming back from London, the dark situation in Europe in June 1939:

Giles had come. . . . and had gone to his room to change. . . . He must change. And he came into the dining-room looking like a cricketer. . . . though he was enraged. 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? Yet he changed. It was his Aunt Lucy. . . who made him change. . . . So he came for the week-end, and changed. (58-59)

Here the repetition of the word seems to stress the irksomeness of the dress convention. But such a persistent use of the word ("change" is used five times here) attracts one's attention to the word itself, and leads one to speculate about different levels of meanings of changes which appear in the book. As it is, there is another scene a little later in which the change in the expression on one's face, brought about by the stir in one's mind, is expressed by the image of changing clothes (126). Yet the most typical of changes through clothes is, of course, the dressing up of the actors in the play.

Unlike some modern dramatists who abandon "superfluous" costumes and settings, La Trobe takes pains to make the costumes as gorgeous as possible within a limited budget. This approach succeeds to a considerable extent. The narrator purposely notes that the cape of silver is in fact made of swabs used to scour saucepans, that Queen Elizabeth is Mrs. Clark of the village shop standing on the soap box, but such knowledge rather adds to the merriment of the occasion. The people are heartily delighted at their neighbors' metamorphoses and, as the play goes on, they are charmed by the spectacle on the stage, if only momentarily. Verily, "that's the great thing, dressing up" (144).

Moreover, the costumes do not turn the actors into mere fictitious characters but confer on them their "unacted parts." This seems to correspond to Woolf's idea that our lives are not single, separate ones but are composed of multiple layers of the past, of which most of us are usually unaware.<sup>15</sup> The scene at the end of the pageant in which the actors, still acting the "unacted parts," chatter and mingle with one another presents a beautiful, though fleeting, vision of our cultural inheritance living in us.

At the same time, watching the pageant, one of the audience is led to ask:

D'you think people change? Their clothes, of course. . . . But I meant ourselves . . . Clearing out a cupboard, I found my father's old top hat. . . . But ourselves—do we change? (144, Woolf's ellipses)

This is a question which reverberates through the book, not to be answered easily. Certainly, though change is inevitable in our world ("change had to come, unless things were perfect" [203]), the changelessness of nature and humanity is also repeatedly stressed in the book. The chorus of villagers sing, "All passes but we, all changes . . . but we remain forever the same . . ." (164), and Lucy says of the Victorians, "I don't believe . . . that there ever were such people. Only you and me and William dressed differently" (203). Swallows come to the Barn every year as they did before human history began (129–30). Yet, though it is attractive and consoling, Lucy's view is not absolute; in this book, one view is constantly undermined by another. Nor does the pageant allow us to reach such a consoling conclusion of harmony at a leap, as I want to discuss later.

Nor should we infer, from such an idea, that the significance of the costumes lies solely in teaching us that such change in clothes is only superficial, and therefore inessential. Considering the nature of the play, the opposite is also the case. One member of the audience, disapproving the showy dressing up of others (of the actors or of the audience?), relates it with "savages." But in the forerunner of this play, in the time of "savages," dressing up was a solemn procedure, since the actors were believed to assume certain *personae* by wearing masks and costumes. Such ritualistic features are also present in religious rites today. The Rev. G. W. Streatfield must "change" before taking the evening service. Changing his clothes to the robe for the ceremony, he is "transformed," as it were, into the mediator between the people and God.

In modern life, however, mythic elements have almost disappeared, and the church itself cannot be the center of the people's life. The festive pageant with the changes of performers should be, in this fragmented age, a device for taking people out of their limited selves in daily life and enabling them to experience another level of life.

### III

What, then, is this particular pageant of La Trobe like, and how does the audience respond to it?

Though she may be modeled after Anon, La Trobe is an artist of the modern age. Her self-image as an artist, "one who seethes wandering bodies and floating voices in a cauldron, and makes rise up from its amorphous mass a recreated world" (180), can be read as the very manifesto of a modernist. To resolve everything—bodies and voices of performers and audience, the whole universe and the frames we give to it—in a cauldron of her art into an amorphous mass, and to create from it a new vision of the world, is what she aims at. Yet her method is not so innovative or abstruse from the beginning. She wants, first of all, to entertain the audience by the spectacle and music, making them "see" and "hear" the world of illusion produced on the stage, and share the emotion brewed there.

The emotion which the play rouses also awakens the unacted parts of the audience. We all have an undeveloped possibility, other than the restricted "I" we assume in daily life, asleep within us. The play taps this unstirred well in one's mind. When the Elizabethan playlet ends, Lucy reminds her brother of the play they acted in the nursery in their childhood: "Red Indians the game was; a reed with a note wrapped up in a pebble" (116-17). Mimicry, imitating, and assuming the role of a being other than oneself is a fundamental factor of child's play, and the most elemental stage of the "play," of cultural behavior, of the human species. Most adults, like Bart, assume



that the game's over for them, and acquiesce in their allotted lives. But Lucy further goes on to say to La Trobe, "What a small part I've had to play! But you've made me feel I could have played. . . Cleopatra!" (179). La Trobe feels flattered by this remark, but she cannot be satisfied with being "merely a twitcher of individual strings" (180); in order for her aim to be achieved, the audience as a whole ought to be aroused, with the unacted part of each stimulated, and be brought to another level of heightened awareness by participating in the play.

Brought into practice, this theory proves to have been "a theory." It is only the fantastic "Batty" Lucy who responds to La Trobe's call fairly quickly. It is noteworthy, though, that the people, walking to the stage when summoned by the music after the interval, feel that the music is expressive of some inner harmony, while their labor in the office, they think, breaks them and compels disparity. Music makes them "see the hidden, join the broken" (143), and be aware of life and beauty in nature; they have become, somehow, more ready to see and enjoy themselves on this occasion. In fact, watching the play and sharing the emotion, the people are gradually drawn out of their individual selves and enter into the group-consciousness as "the audience." This is why they feel awkwardly clothes-conscious, or feel "not quite themselves," "as if what I call myself was still floating unattached, and didn't settle" (175), when the scene ends and the spell of the play is broken.

La Trobe, therefore, abhors the gap in her play when, what with the delay in the preparation of the stage or in the actors' dressing, the stage remains empty and the emotion she has brewed among the audience peters out. In order to continue the emotion in such cases, she resorts to music. Here the chorus of the villagers is designed to play an important role, just as the chorus did in Greek tragedy. But unfortunately, or rather ludicrously, sounds of the song of the chorus are blown away by the wind, and the audience only sees the villagers walking at the back of the stage with their mouths opened.

Indeed, while the motifs of the pageant trace those of its predecessors, the product itself is nothing but a mock-ur-drama. The intervention of nature, "the primeval voice" of the cows filling the gap, is half a serious call of nature as the primitive "sounding loud in the ear of the present moment" (165), and half a bantering rescue of this stumbling modern version of the "play."

Around the Victorian scenes, however, La Trobe's method changes; or rather, the aspects of the subversive artist in her, so far unnoticed by the audience, begin to surface. In the Victorian playlet, La Trobe no longer wants to enrapture the audience by the illusion, but tries to provoke it by exposing the manners and spirits of the Victorians to harsh satire and ridicule. Then, in the next interval, there is no music to fill the gap; the stage remains empty, and only the tick of the machine is heard. So far, though the scene of nature in the background may have helped the play from time to time, the stage conventions have usually bade the audience to see the illusion produced on the stage, with the background obliterated for a while. It has been during the awkward gaps that the horns of cars and the sounds of nature become painfully audible. Here La Trobe goes the other way around. She deliberately keeps the stage empty for ten minutes, exposing the people in the open space with "swallows, cows etc.," and tries to "douche them, with present-time reality" (209). This experiment reminds us of that of "happening" by John Cage, in whose piano piece titled "4' 33" the pianist appears on the stage, sits before the piano for the said time doing nothing whatever. According to Cage, the sounds audible in that time *are* the music.<sup>16</sup> La Trobe, likewise, tries to make the scene "Present Time. Ourselves" involve the whole situation, making the audience active participants in the performance. But her trick does not work. The audience, which has up to now expected the world of illusion to be presented on the stage, only feels impatient and irritated. This "death" scene is again saved, precariously, by a

sudden shower.

The innovative experiment that baffles the audience does not end here. Soon the gramophone brays jazz, and villagers holding mirrors revel on the stage, reflecting "ourselves," causing "the jangle and the din." Added to this confusion and uproar, all the characters in the previous scenes reappear and declaim the fragments from their parts. Then, finally, everybody coming to a halt, a megaphonic voice from the bushes admonishes the audience to "consider ourselves."

This is, in a sense, a challenge to the identity of the audience which usually rests on the self-satisfied assumption that the present stands at the summit of the civilizing, improving process called history. Certainly the pageant shows the change of times through the playlets, but it does not show English history as some of the audience would like it to be: it does not offer Army, Navy, Union Jack, the Church, nor does it celebrate history as the course of "civilization" to reassure the audience. Rather the play discloses, through parodying "the spirit of the age" in each playlet, how actions are the intertwinement of love, hate, greed, will for power, deceit, and self-deception. By pouring into the present scene all the characters in costumes and the fragments from their parts, the play shows the people that they are the heirs of—indeed parts of—this questionable organization called English culture; that what they miscall "civilization" is built of "orts, scraps and fragments" (219) like themselves.

In the chaotic phase of the last stage, even the idea of evolution of the human species is mocked; animals, excited by the noises, join the uproar, and "the barriers which should divide Man the Master from the Brute were dissolved" (215).<sup>17</sup> (In this book, the characters are often compared to insects, birds, animals.) The book abounds with images of the primeval world immanent in the present, and the remark of a character that savages could perform very skilful operations on the brain and had false teeth (38)

also seems to contradict the idea of cultural evolution.

What the book offers us, however, is neither the pessimistic view that considers human nature as vice and savagery (in a bad sense) nor the view which finds consolation in the fact that human nature is unchanged. Nor should one simply romanticize the time of "savages" as the Golden Age.<sup>18</sup> The point here is that no culture or civilization can be healthy or survive if it becomes rigid and stagnant in self-complacency.

#### IV

Human civilization comes into existence by giving order to amorphous nature, and order maintains itself by excluding chaos as its opposite. In every society the "marginal" area is charged with all the negative elements—chaos, death, evil, impurity, etc.—which culture wants to ward off. Yet this "marginal" being is essential for every society, not only to define and ensure the order but also, sometimes, by casting doubt on the established order, to refresh it. More than that, civilization, while excluding these negative elements, also needs to communicate through them with what they symbolize—the yet undefined cosmic power, which we call chaos, thanatos, eros, etc.—in order to get in touch with its potentiality and regenerative power. Most ancient rituals, folk customs, festivities, and carnivals were provided with this mechanism, subverting the order and revealing chaos within the liminal, marginal time and space, and thus regenerating the community.<sup>19</sup> La Trobe's art, too, can be regarded as an attempt to exert a similar effect on the civilization, in a modified way.<sup>20</sup>

Modern people, however, have long forgotten the fact that their civilization is constructed on a thin layer laid over chaos. Goaded by the male instinct to fight and conquer nature, they have come a long way simply repressing and ignoring this other side of the universe. As a result, modern civilization has gone crooked, and is now facing an unprecedented crisis.<sup>21</sup>

Suppressed in modern society, the primitive, in Nietzsche's words the "Dionysiac," power emerges only as mere destructive impulse, animality, and lust. Typical of this is Giles's action when he plays the stone-kicking game. Kicking "a barbaric stone; a pre-historic," he comes upon a snake choked with a toad. This "monstrous inversion" seems to symbolize the situation of modern humanity, choked with what they have produced, helpless, and yet unable to die. Raising his foot, Giles stamps on them, revealing the frustration and self-destructive impulse of modern life and predicting the coming catastrophe. Woolf loves her culture in her way, but cannot shut her eyes to this corruption of modern civilization.

"If they had understood her meaning; if they had known their parts" (244), La Trobe muses when the play is over. If the audience, roused by the play, had had its unacted part awakened; if, given a shock, thrown into confusion and disorder, it had got rid of its limited view and had seen itself and its situation face to face; then, the humane aspects like streaks of gold in ourselves, mentioned in the speech of the megaphonic voice, could have become a lifeline for sustaining, or rebuilding, civilization. Yet this is not the case. The audience after all cannot participate in the pageant in a true sense. Perhaps La Trobe's modern version was too feeble an attempt to rouse the audience; probably modern civilization has come too far in one direction—beyond reparation—to feel the call of the pageant.

This fact is clearly seen in the response of the audience to the village idiot in the play. In the pageant, the village idiot Albert plays the role of fool to perfection, pinching Queen Elizabeth's skirts, spoiling the Victorian father's prayer in the guise of the hindquarters of the donkey, and horrifying the "ladies" while walking around with a collecting box. As William Dodge rightly says, he is "in the tradition." He is the typical marginal being who exists in every community, upon whom dwell the images of the unconscious and the untamed as opposed to the conscious and the tamed. As such, he is

made a central figure on festive occasions, mocking the established order and threatening to subvert it. He becomes, as it were, the fissure in the world where order and chaos, the conscious and the unconscious, life and death, merge.<sup>22</sup> The respectable ladies, however, are blind to the importance of his role in the play. Mrs. Elmhurst “half covered her eyes, in case he [Albert] did do—something dreadful” (105). Mrs. Parker, complaining about the idiot, appeals to Giles:

“Surely, Mr. Oliver, we’re more civilized?”  
 “We?” said Giles. “We?” (132)

This talk sounds highly ironical when we know that Giles’s shoes are stained with the blood of the toad and the snake he has just stamped on.

That La Trobe’s play has failed to be provocative enough can be inferred also from Mr. Streatfield’s attitude to the idiot. When Mrs. Parker appeals to him “to exorcize this evil, to extend the protection of his cloth,” the good man “contemplated the idiot benignly. His faith had room, he indicated, for him too. He too, Mr. Streatfield appeared to be saying, is part of ourselves” (226). Yet we cannot help but detect a certain mockery, or at least some ambiguity, in the narrative registering this “benign” attitude. His religion, it seems, smoothes over all fissures and scars. Here the traditional fool-idiot figure is robbed of meaning, with his subversive potentiality diluted, or slurred over.

A similarly ambiguous tone tinges Streatfield’s interpretation of the play. He says, “we are members one of another. Each is part of the whole”; “We act different parts; but are the same”; “nature takes her part. Dare we . . . limit life to ourselves? May we not hold that there is a spirit that inspires, pervades. . . .” (224). These remarks, when we first hear them, sound like those of the author’s mouthpiece, for they seem to echo Woolf’s own concerns about the world, nature, and human existence in it. Now that we have seen how the pageant has presented itself, however, Streatfield’s summary sounds too

suave; it has not undergone the process of serious questioning of its world view:

It is most satirical, then, that just after the clergyman suggests that one spirit animates the whole universe, his word is cut in two by the zoom of aeroplanes flying in formation overhead, as if to say that such an "archaic" view can no longer cover the situation today. Woolf may not have abandoned her earlier ideas and values, but certainly she may have felt, in the darkest period of her lifetime, that they cannot be proved valid, or represent "the present state of her mind" without being seriously questioned. Even her belief in the power of art to bring the fragmented world into harmony and unity is, as Alex Zwerdling and J. Hillis Miller say, brought into question here.<sup>23</sup>

## V

That no one's view is given authority is true of all the main characters of the domestic play which encompasses the pageant. The words used in discussing the pageant can be used also in explaining their situation, as in a negative plate. Unable to develop their unacted parts, these characters (except, maybe, Lucy) are haunted by the sense of loss and frustration. While wanting to "act," they are the "passive" audience of the spectacle.

Having failed to become a farmer as he really wanted to do, Giles is frustrated in his role as "the stockbroker." He is furious about the situation in Europe, but does not know what to do. Really he is a cog in a gigantic wheel of the industrial, male society which, in short, is bringing war. Unable to see the root of his predicament, however, he goes on blaming others. Coming back to Pointz Hall, he changes, in his mind, not into the young master come to see the village pageant, but into a Promethean figure who, in substitute for others, is "manacled to a rock . . . and forced passively to behold indescribable horror" (74).

His wife Isa sees through this self-dramatization; she alternately tries to appease him and flatly rejects his pose. Yet she cannot be immune to a similar practice herself. She is a failed poetess, muttering to herself phrases of a never-finished poem. But her poetry-making, like her yearning for Rupert Haines, seems to be a form of escape for her. When we see the gap between Isa's own self-image and the narrator's view of her (when she imagines herself as a swan, for example, the narrator notes that her body is "like a bolster"), we know that she, too, is described at a critical distance.

Lucy is a Christian, who sometimes exerts healing power on the others. She is, according to James Hafley, the one exception in Woolf's novels who is a sympathetic character *and* Christian.<sup>24</sup> Her view, however, is not to be authenticated without qualification: her "one-making" habit is regarded by the young people with indulgence, and her brother sharply criticizes her deficiency ("How imperceptive her religion made her! . . . Skimming the surface, she ignored the battle in the mud" [237]). Bartholomew is a man of reason, standing in a position opposite visionary Lucy. Trying to communicate with his grandson in his virile way, the old man destroys the boy's "moment of being." Yet it is he who understands La Trobe's anguish and perceives the importance of the performers and the audience in the play ("'Thank the actors, not the author,' he said. 'Or ourselves, the audience'" [238]).

Here Woolf's device of dramatic presentation mixed with prose narrative is very effective. The device of presenting the character's view through another's eyes adds to the complexity of the texture of the world depicted, without labeling any view authentic or faulty. At the same time, exempt from the restriction of a realistic play in which everything must be said through dialogues, the narrator freely describes the scene and shows us the character's thoughts with certain detachment, from which comical and ironical touches come about.



Indeed, unlike most modern realistic plays, in which the main plot develops through the characters' actions and dialogues to the climax and the denouement, there is no developing plot here, nor are there actions and dialogues which may contribute to the development of such a plot. Under the shadow of the coming catastrophe, the people feel caught and helpless. Nothing is more expressive of their situation than the scene in which the main characters, sitting side by side, face the empty stage: "They were all caught and caged; prisoners; watching a spectacle. Nothing happened. The tick of the machine was maddening" (205). The desire for action, as seen in Giles's case, is thwarted, or goes askew. Nothing they do or say in this world can break through this confined situation and lead them outside; their words only echo against one another, and peter out. Hence the melancholy and sadness hovering over them. This melancholy, entwined with the comical touch brought forth by the tone of the narrative and the idiosyncratic repetitions perceived in the characters, pervades the world of this *super-modern* play in Pointz Hall.<sup>25</sup>

In this tragicomical twilight world, people gather and fall apart. La Trobe's play is vanishing, leaving few stirrings and questions in people's minds, and even they may soon fade. How, then, can civilization be saved in such a desolate situation? Cannot art, at least, offer us the saving power? The questions seem to remain open. Yet once more, at the end of the book, Woolf tries to find the way out and on to the unknown future, in the form of the reenactment of ur-drama.

## VI

When the pageant is over, Bart and Lucy stand by the lily pool, watching the actors changing clothes. The lily pool symbolizes, I repeat, the *topos* of fertilization of the rustic imagination as well as the human heart. In this book, the image of the lily pool is used to describe several characters' minds,

and now when it is applied to La Trobe's, once more the function of the mud at the bottom as the symbol of the *topos* of creativity surfaces. Dissuading Lucy from thanking La Trobe, Bart reasons: "What she [La Trobe] wanted . . . was darkness in the mud; a whisky and soda at the pub; and coarse words descending like maggots through the waters" (237–38). Corresponding to this, La Trobe drinks at the public house a little later, working over the plan of her next play.

She raised her glass to her lips. And drank. And listened. Words of one syllable sank down into the mud. She drowsed; she nodded. The mud became fertile. Words rose above the intolerably laden dumb oxen plodding through the mud. Words without meaning—wonderful words. (247–48)

An infatigable artist, La Trobe got an idea for the new play just after the pageant ended, in the growing darkness, on "land" with every human construction obliterated. The settings of the new play she envisages then somehow overlap a prehistoric scene such as Lucy muses upon reading her favorite *Outline of History* ("There was the high ground at midnight; there the rock; and two scarcely perceptible figures" [248]). Then, in the voices and the smoke of the pub, feeling them fertilizing her mud, La Trobe hears the first words of the play.

Late that evening, at Pointz Hall, Lucy once more reads in her *Outline of History* about the dawn of human civilization. Then in the last scene of the book, when Isa and Giles confront each other, the *topos* of the drama of man and woman they are going to enact is overlapped by that of La Trobe's play, and is also associated with the image of "prehistoric man" of whom Lucy read:

Left alone together for the first time that day, they were silent. 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.

Isa let her sewing drop. The great hooded chairs had become enormous. And Giles too. And Isa too against the window. The window was all sky without colour. The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks.

Then the curtain rose. They spoke. (255-56)

Having read thus far, we take it as no wonder that here Isa and Giles, transformed into enormous, mythic man and woman, begin to act the parts of a play. For one thing, this reminds us of the sacred marriage in a fertility cult, in which man and woman in the role of god and goddess act out their symbolic marriage, in the hope of fertility and rebirth.<sup>26</sup> Also we can say, conversely, that by means of acting the play, assuming the roles in the cosmic drama, they can become mythic *personae*, symbolizing fertility and continuity of human life. La Trobe's play is the ritual for their entering into "the heart of darkness," the world of chaos, to bring about regeneration and fertility.<sup>27</sup>

Here the possibility of the birth of another life is overlapped by the possibility of creation of new art and civilization. A new life is born from the embrace of man and woman in primeval night; the words that rose from La Trobe's mud should have had a similar quality, simple, one-syllabled, full of such energy and emotion as had risen from chaos at the dawn of human history. If we were to rebuild and sustain civilization, we would have to revert to such primitive energy. If we were to produce art, it should try to retrieve such a function as it originally had, exalting life through evoking chaos and death. While reflecting the author's despair at the modern situation, the book nevertheless ends in the form of the beginning of another play, charged with pathetic hope, or prayer, for such a possibility.

We must admit, however, that some doubt remains as to how convincing and promising this enactment of ur-drama can be for us and for Woolf. This question can be replaced, perhaps, with the question as to how fertile the mud of La Trobe can be. Civilization could be saved only when counterbalanced by the power of chaos, its counterpart. Yet, as we have seen in the failure of the pageant in the afternoon, the primeval mud depicted in the book does not seem to have such power. Perhaps this is why the hope for new life and art at the end seems so frail in contrast to oppressing reality. Perhaps, again, one reason for this can be sought in the nature of Woolf's spiritual soil. When, opposing the monocular world view of modern society, she turns to the mythic, the primitive, she has at her hand no more than the English soil with its folk tradition, and she stops at the entrance of the mythic world with only a gesture of calling for it. The concept of ur-drama has helped us to define Woolf's critical attitude toward modern civilization, but it reveals her own anguish. Of course, though it may be proof of her awareness and sincerity, this fact does not diminish the value of the work.

What I want to suggest here is that Woolf's interest in drama involves many problems which caught the imagination of her contemporary artists. The dualistic world view of chaos and order, the interest in drama and myth, were common themes of Modernist artists. In Woolf's case, too, these themes present themselves in the works in a way unique to her. To examine her interest in drama, therefore, is quite rewarding both in reconsidering her career and in placing her among her contemporaries.<sup>28</sup>

#### Notes

- 1 Virginia Woolf, "The Narrow Bridge of Art," *Granite and Rainbow* (London: Hogarth Press, 1958), p. 18.
- 2 R. L. Chambers thinks that the centrality of the pageant is "a major fault in construction" (*The Novels of Virginia Woolf* [London: Oliver & Boyd, 1947], pp.

- 49–50), and Jean Guiguet doubts the effect of Woolf's experiment of mixing genres (*Virginia Woolf and Her Works*, trans. Jean Stewart [1965; rpt. New York: A Harvest Book, 1976], pp. 328–29). Some others admit relevance of the pageant to the rest of the book, but their chief interests seem to lie in analyzing the motifs and the views represented by the main characters, and they find Isa's and Lucy's vision nearest to the author's own. See, for example, Josephine O'Brien Schaefer, *The Three-fold Nature of Reality in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (London: Mouton, 1965), pp. 186–99; Alice van Buren Kelley, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf: Fact and Vision* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1973), pp. 225–50.
- 3 No doubt Woolf was well-acquainted with the concept of drama arising from the ritual through reading *Ancient Art and Ritual* and other books by J. E. Harrison. E. K. Chambers' *The Medieval Stage*, another book listed in Woolf's reading at that time, also abounds in instances of folk customs surviving in various festivities and entertainments in Medieval and Renaissance England.
- 4 Cf. Barbara A. Babcock, ed. *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 13–36; Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Mataphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 231–71, 272–99; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984); Masao Yamaguchi, *Bunka to Ryogisei* (Culture and Ambivalence) (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1975); Yūjiro Nakamura, *Majo Randa Kō* (On the Witch Rangda) (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1983), pp. 7–78.
- 5 I discussed briefly Woolf's cosmology in my paper, Tae Honda, "'... In Floods Reality': Notes on Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*," *Doshisha Literature* No. 30 (1982), pp. 21–31.
- 6 As for Woolf's interest in the problem of the communication of the artist with the public, see "'Anon' and 'The Reader': Virginia Woolf's Last Essays," ed. Brenda R. Silver, *Twentieth Century Literature* XXV (1979), pp. 356–441, and the works of critics I cite below.
- 7 See, Nora Eisenberg, "Virginia Woolf's Last Words on Words: *Between the Acts* and 'Anon,'" *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jane Marcus (London: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 253–66. Ellen Bayuk Rosenman also regards the pageant as an attempt at a resurrection of Anon (*The Invisible Presence: Virginia Woolf and*

- the Mother-Daughter Relationship* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1986], pp. 114–33). Maria DiBbatista, discussing Woolf's aspiration toward anonymity, calls La Trobe "the final avator of the Woolfian artist" (*Virginia Woolf's Major Novels: The Fables of Anon* [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1980], p. 234.)
- 8 Brenda R. Silver, "Virginia Woolf and the Concept of Community: The Elizabethan Playhouse," *Women's Studies* IV (1977), pp. 291–98.
- 9 The influence of Egyptian myth is discussed in Evelyn Haller, "Isis Unveiled: Virginia Woolf's Use of Egyptian Myth," *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant*, ed. Jane Marcus (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1983), pp. 109–31; Madeline Moore, *The Short Season between Two Silences: The Mystical and the Political in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1984), pp. 156–64. Rosenman thinks that Greek myth fits the book more closely (*The Invisible Presence*, pp. 116–17). Another impressive essay in which the book is discussed as a "festive comedy" (and especially a feminist comedy in Woolf's case) is Judy Little, "Festive Comedy in Woolf's *Between the Acts*," *Women and Literature* V (1977), pp. 26–37; later incorporated in *Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark, and Feminism* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1983).
- 10 Sandra D. Shattuck, "The Stage of Scholarship: Crossing the Bridge from Harrison to Woolf," *Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury: A Centenary Celebration*, ed. Jane Marcus (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 279, p. 286.
- 11 One passage in the book seems to me to express Woolf's attitude concerning the art of the past that may have served as a model: "The Barn . . . that had been built over seven hundred years ago and reminded some people of a Greek temple, others of the middle ages, most people of an age before their own, scarcely anybody of the present moment, was empty." Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (London: Hogarth Press, 1976), p. 119. Hereafter, all page references to this book will be given in the text.
- 12 E. K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage* (1903; rpt. London: Muston, 1925), vol. 1, p. 111.
- 13 Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, pp. 232–33. According to Turner, people such as shamans, diviners, mediums, priests, hippies, gypsies, etc. are included in this category. Turner also says that these "outsiders" or "marginals" often show

- ambivalent attitudes toward the social structure; they may want to belong to it, but sometimes they may be radical critics of the structure.
- 14 The significance of the metaphor of the lily pool is discussed by Stephen D. Fox in his "The Fish Pond as Symbolic Center in *Between the Acts*," *Modern Fiction Studies* XVIII (1972), pp. 467–74, and by Ai Tanji, "Bunmei no Shūmatsuron" (Eschatology in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*), *The Rising Generation* CXXXII (1987), pp. 578–82.
- 15 Woolf writes, for example, in her memoir: "It proves that Virginia Stephen was not born on the 25th January 1882, but was born many thousands of years ago; and had from the very first to encounter instincts already acquired by thousands of ancestresses in the past." (*Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind [London: Hogarth Press, 1978], p. 69); ". . . the present when backed by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it presses so close that you can feel nothing else . . ." (*Moments of Being*, p. 98). Maybe *Orlando* can be said to be a fantasy in which the unacted parts are embodied to a great extent in one person.
- 16 Minao Shibata, *Seiyō Ongakushi—Inshō-ha Igo—* (The History of Western Music: After Impressionism) (Tokyo: Ongaku no Tomo-sha, 1967), p. 187. Sally Sears discusses La Trobe's experiments in connection with experimental music and happenings. Sears, "Theater of War: Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*," *A Feminist Slant*, pp. 225–26.
- 17 David Kunzle, in his study of the "World Upside Down" motifs in the broadsheet types produced in European countries in the 16–18th century, tells us that the reversal of the relationship between man and beast was one of the chief motifs of "World Upside Down." Kunzle, "World Upside Down: The Iconography of a European Broadsheet Type," *The Reversible World*, pp. 39–94.
- 18 In the book, this romantic view of savages is allotted to Lucy, who marvels that savages wish "most oddly" to dress and live like English, thinking, "were they not beautiful naked?" (59). Giles, who lives in the business world, naturally resents this "frivolous" statement, but later her view seems to be mildly bantered by the narrator, too; the apricots which Lucy leaves naked because "they were so beautiful, naked," are burrowed into by the wasps (65).
- 19 Masao Yamaguchi, *Bunka to Ryōgisei*, pp. 66–141; Babcock, *The Reversible World*, pp. 13–36.

- 20 So far I have stressed the symbolic and cultural aspects of the ritual form and festivity, my aim being chiefly to investigate the relevance such a concept of drama may have had to Woolf's imagination. This does not mean, however, that the social function of the festive form can be ignored, or should be considered to be a mere "safety valve" of the social structure. On the contrary, La Trobe's play should be regarded as an attempt at "changing" the norms of the society, instead of reinforcing them, as Judy Little says (*Comedy and the Woman Writer*, pp. 4-6). For an elucidating discussion of the social function of festivity, see Michael D. Bristol, *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York: Methuen, 1985), pp. 26-39.
- 21 It is pointed out by many critics that the feminist-pacifist themes of *Three Guineas* and *A Room of One's Own* are struck again in this book.
- 22 As for the significance of the fool in culture, see Masao Yamaguchi, *Doke no Minzokugaku* (Folklore of the Fool) (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1985), pp. 29-143. In *Between the Acts*, one of the audience hits upon the symbolic role of the idiot, but his/her response is dismissive: "No, I thought it [the pageant] much too scrappy. Take the idiot. Did she [La Trobe] mean, so to speak, something hidden, the unconscious as they call it? But why always drag in sex. . . ." (232-33).
- 23 Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1986), pp. 315-16; J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), p. 221.
- 24 James Hafley, *The Glass Roof: Virginia Woolf as Novelist* (1954; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), p. 149.
- 25 It would require another paper to explicate Woolf's dramaturgy used in this book. I find Yūjirō Nakamura's discussion on Chekhov, in which his play is conceived as a play of ensemble *pathos*, of nonsense, as opposed to a play of hero and *dialogos*, illuminating also in considering some characteristics of the "play" here (Yūjirō Nakamura, pp. 108-20). Akiko Kimura, in her essay on *The Years*, observes (citing a similar remark of Hermione Lee) that Woolf's work bears certain resemblance to a Chekhovian play. Akiko Kimura, "The Language and Silence in the World of *The Years*," *Virginia Woolf Review*, No. 2 (1985), p. 34.
- 26 See, for example, J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (abridged edition; London: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 139-42.



- 27 Sally Sears interprets this scene as “a scene that both initiates and symbolizes the work’s vision of a collective return to the savagery of the past” (Sears, p. 215), but I think the world of darkness and chaos opened here is more ambivalent.
- 28 Robert Kiely discusses the tendency toward drama in the fiction of James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf, from a different viewpoint than mine. Kiely, *Beyond Egotism: The Fiction of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and D. H. Lawrence* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 187–236.