

It Is Time for Voices in Between the Acts

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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by

Maureen F. Curtin

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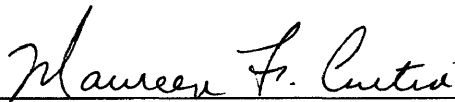
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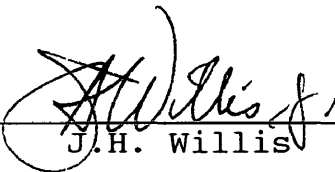
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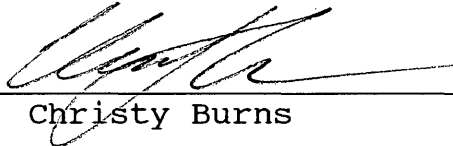
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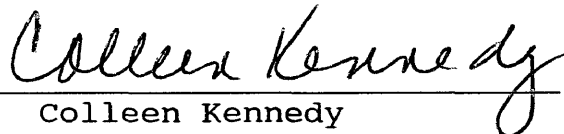
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J.H. Willis



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Christy Burns



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Colleen Kennedy

DEDICATION

For my family and friends who ask only that I resist the  
path of least resistance.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Professor J.H. Willis for his direction, patience, and counsel. Thanks to Professor Colleen Kennedy and Professor Christy Burns for thorough and insightful reading. Thanks to Professor Lydia Panaro, of Manhattan College, without whom I would still linger. Thanks, not least of all, to my classmates and colleagues who have read, listened, commented, and encouraged during these last two years.

## ABSTRACT

Critics of Virginia Woolf's last novel, Between the Acts, have failed to recognize her interrogation of the binary opposition, "Unity--Dispersity." Too often, critics premise their interpretations on the inevitability of the dash that bridges the two terms and implies their equivalence. Yet, throughout the novel, Woolf reveals the incommensurability of the two terms and exposes the opposition as fallacious. She portrays unity as a coercive process that abstracts particulars and assimilates differences into a prior, non-contingent, monolithic system. Refraining from addressing the problem in merely philosophical terms, Woolf illuminates unity's processes in great detail, simultaneously demonstrating unity's movement from specificity to abstraction. It is this movement which "dispersity" resists and which Woolf understands. To theorize dispersity would be to make it vanish. That is to say, dispersity functions as "value" does in Frederic Jameson's discussion of Lord Jim: "value . . . becomes visible as abstraction and as a strange afterimage on the retina, only at the moment in which it has ceased to exist as such" (qtd. in Richter 625). The critical neglect of dispersity in Between the Acts, then, comes as no surprise: dispersity disappears when conceptualized in the binary opposition. Conversely, dispersity seems most in evidence when particularized and materialized in the characters' voices which persist between, during, and after the acts of Miss La Trobe's pageant. Ultimately, the voices' resistance to unity displaces, rather than reinstates, the initial opposition.

It Is Time for Voices in Between the Acts

## It Is Time for Voices in Between the Acts

While it is no longer fashionable to interpret literature in terms of binary oppositions, Virginia Woolf's last novel, Between the Acts, forces the reader to confront one, as the words "Unity--Dispersity" drift from a record playing on a gramophone. The repetition of the words demands attention even as their intractability discourages the attempt. Careless of, or perhaps in spite of, this recalcitrance, critics tend to focus exclusively on the first half of the pair--on unity--in their attempt to salvage the novel from criticisms like those of F.R. Leavis and D.S. Savage for whom, respectively, Between the Acts demonstrates "'an extraordinary vacancy and pointlessness'" and a "'disintegration of form.'"<sup>1</sup> Disputing both criticisms as well as that of Melvin Friedman for whom the novel has no "unifying principle,"<sup>2</sup> Ann Wilkinson writes: "That principle [of unity] is to be found in the simultaneity, the identity of form and statement" (Wilkinson 145-46). Yet, Wilkinson devotes little time or space to analyzing the novel's "statement," the novel's thematic development of unity. Thus, she sees the particulars of both pageant and novel recuperated in the novel's form so that "every gesture, every thought, every thing . . . its relationship to every other thing is implied simply within the dramatic form by which the novelist symbolizes the continuous dramatic conflict she sees as the condition of

life" (152). Ironically, Wilkinson reproduces a paradigm of unity not unlike that which Lucy Swithin formulates in Between the Acts and of which Woolf is critical. Among others reading the novel for unity, the poststructuralist J. Hillis Miller is a notable example; he asserts in Fiction and Repetition that the "proper work of art" has "an intrinsic unity" (Miller 207). As Patricia Laurence in The Reading of Silence observes, such "narrative expectations" reveal the "critic's desire for unity" (Laurence 192).<sup>3</sup> Neglecting Woolf's skeptical analysis of unity, Wilkinson and Miller become trapped by a standard that is thematically in question. In their haste, others too have failed to recognize Woolf's interrogation of unity, basing their interpretations on the inevitability of the dash that bridges the term to its "opposite," dispersity.

Physically linking the two terms, the dash implies an equivalence that reinforces the validity of the binary opposition. In Between the Acts, however, Woolf reveals the incommensurability of the two terms and thereby exposes the opposition as fallacious. First, she portrays unity as a coercive process that abstracts particulars and assimilates differences into a prior, non-contingent, monolithic system. Refraining from addressing the problem in merely philosophical terms, Woolf illuminates unity's processes in great detail, simultaneously demonstrating unity's movement from specificity to abstraction. It is this movement which "dispersity" resists and which Woolf understands. To

theorize dispersity would be to make it vanish. That is to say, dispersity functions as "value" does in Frederic Jameson's discussion of Lord Jim:<sup>4</sup> "value . . . becomes visible as abstraction and as a strange afterimage on the retina, only at the moment in which it has ceased to exist as such." The critical neglect of dispersity in Between the Acts, then, comes as no surprise: dispersity disappears when conceptualized in the binary opposition. Conversely, dispersity seems most in evidence when particularized and materialized in the characters' voices which persist between and often during the acts of Miss La Trobe's pageant. Thus, the voices' resistance to unity displaces, rather than reinstates, the initial binary opposition.

Woolf addresses unity formally and thematically throughout all of her novels; however, she studies it extensively in Between the Acts, submitting the idea to intense scrutiny. Methodically disclosing the results of her examination, Woolf exposes unity and its limitations in a culminating, ironic depiction of Lucy Swithin, one of unity's more overt advocates in the novel. Though too rich to fully detail in a summary, the portrait of Lucy "one-making" exhibits a tone that provides immediate access to this discussion. Undertaken as a "circular tour of the imagination," Lucy's "one-making" is an intriguing enterprise foiled from the outset because, as the narrator reports, "She was off" (108). Colloquial for "She began," the phrase also implies a host of pejorative possibilities,

among them: Lucy is physically off-balance; in intellectual error; remote, as at a distance, and therefore unfit to see clearly; and, most popularly, odd or eccentric. The literal and metaphoric converge to reveal Lucy's attempt at "one-making" a delusion. Woolf expects that the reader will recognize the simplicity of Lucy's subsequent formulation: "[s]heep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves--all are one" (108). But because Woolf is less explicit about the assumptions that Lucy's simplicity disguises and because Woolf's sense of unity's limitations is still more subtle, I will try to render both more accessible. To accomplish the latter, I will chart the links Woolf forges between unity, truth, writing, music, and death and those between dispersity, voices, and life. To illustrate the role unity plays in conceptions of truth and writing and to prepare for the alternative to unity that Woolf proposes, the essay also includes an analysis of "Monday or Tuesday," one of the author's early short stories.

Woolf sets the scene of "one-making" with Lucy's responses to questions Miss La Trobe poses about history and time throughout her pageant. Reflecting on Miss La Trobe's staging of the "Victorians," Lucy repudiates the concept of change: "'I don't believe . . . that there ever were such people. Only you [Isa] and me and William dressed differently'" (108). Blankly, perhaps because incredulous, William Dodge rejoins, "'You don't believe in history'" (108). Earlier, in response to her brother Bart's

description of the gramophone as "'Marking time,'" Lucy declared, "'Which don't exist for us. . . . We've only the present'" (51). Lucy's repeated espousal of timelessness and essentialism provides a context for interpreting her sense of unity:

She was off, they guessed, on a circular tour of the imagination--one-making. Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves--all are one. If discordant, producing harmony--if not to us, to a gigantic ear attached to a gigantic head. And thus--she was smiling benignly--the agony of the particular sheep, cow, or human being is necessary; and so--she was beaming seraphically at the gilt vane in the distance--we reach the conclusion that all is harmony, could we hear it. And we shall. Her eyes now rested on the white summit of a cloud. Well, if the thought gave her comfort, William and Isa smiled across her, let her think it. (108)

Determining the narrator or point-of-view in this passage is a difficult task. Though William and Isa "guess" that Lucy is "off," Lucy's indirectly reported thoughts are much too idiosyncratic for either William or Isa to reproduce. The idiosyncrasy, together with a mixture of first person reflections and third person observations, suggests that the narrator is at work trying to convey Lucy's thoughts.

The narrator succeeds in conveying not only Lucy's thoughts but their jumbled form, reproducing her vague sense of unity. That vagueness is present even in the seeming precision of "Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves--all are one" (108). According to the summation, "all are one," the preceding series of items belong to a single category, the universe. The items, in fact, also belong to a single

grammatical category: a series of plural nouns unrelated by conjunctions, undistinguished except by commas, and neither subjectified nor objectified by verbs, the items do not derive significance or meaning from their order in the series. Rather, the items form a catalogue of what Lucy sees before her and, in their grammatical uniformity, become interchangeable. The consequence, a one-to-one correlation between the five items, coincides with an effacing of differences that is essential to the construction of unity. The use of a dash to mechanically connect the sentence's two halves signals a further equivalence whereby any or all of the items in the series equals "one" (108). The dash supplies an arbitrary connection in much the same way the divine operates in Lucy's expanding vision: both preclude explanation and relation. Finally, the elliptical statement, culminating in the word "one," reflects how, for Lucy, unity is a matter of identity; for the narrator, and for Woolf, the paradigmatic sentence exemplifies both how and why Lucy's conception of unity excludes processes.

While Lucy hurries on from "unity" to "harmony," the reader might pause to consider the motivations for Lucy's reticence and haste. What is it about the process of unity that Lucy cannot examine or, rather, refuses to acknowledge? The question might best be answered with another question: how, for instance, do "Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves" become "one"? While formal sameness blunts surface distinctions, some further, unidentified refinement seems to

erase more integral variations. Thus refined, the items in the initial series can coalesce and, from plurality, melt into a single entity, reduced into "one." Of course, my diction--"blunts," "erases," "refinement," "coalesce," and "melt"--proves how easy it is to mask the violence implicit in the eradication of differences and the compulsion of uniformity. Words such as "deadens," "obliterates," "cleanses," "purifies," and "concentrates" might reflect more accurately the violence unity enacts. Despite acknowledging discord, Lucy fails to see unity's violence nor does she recognize that what she deems "discordant" emerges from resistance to that violence; she is instead concerned with converting the discord into a higher "harmony" no human can apprehend (108). She elaborates on this "harmony" with an extended gloss, as she marshals the discordant to a divine sphere--to "a gigantic ear attached to a gigantic head"--where it undergoes further standardization and assimilation (108). To be more explicit, this harmony becomes possible because a divine ear, cupped to the earth's atmosphere, imports the discordant into the contours of a unity that exists already, if not always.

The belief that unity exists a priori constitutes Lucy's foremost assumption about the world. Her belief that divinity informs unity further buttresses her sense of unity as benevolent and pervasive while insulating her from its violence. All-encompassing and absolute, unity modifies

concepts as diverse as time and truth and governs modes of expression ranging from writing to music. Hence, Lucy's contention that "[time] don't exist for us" (51) does not contradict her simultaneous assertion that "we've only the present" (51), for she conceives the present as eternal; the "present" is not a measure of time but an avowal of timelessness. Lucy's investment in unity further demands that she reject history and time because unity cannot accommodate--that is, dissolve--the processes that inhere, fundamentally, in each. Throughout Between the Acts, Woolf records this tension between unity and time.

Though unity is not merely a matter of identity, or of coincidence, as Lucy would have us believe, congruence is one of its characteristics. The stages of unity that Woolf makes visible all indicate a movement toward congruence, a condition whereby two entities "coincid[e] at all points when superimposed" (Random House Webster's College Dictionary 287). It is a telling sign of unity's hegemony that truth is defined as "conformity with fact or reality; ideal of fundamental reality apart from and transcending perceived experience; agreement with a standard or original" (Random House Webster's College Dictionary 1432). Like unity, truth requires "conformity" to, or "agreement" with, an "ideal," "original," or "standard." Indeed, in her early short story "Monday or Tuesday," Woolf used "truth" as she would "unity" twenty-five years later in Between the Acts. An analysis of truth in this story will help illuminate how

Woolf will use unity in her final novel.

In "Monday or Tuesday," a five paragraph, single page story, the word "truth" appears five times. Woolf prefaces its first two occurrences with the word "desiring," a participial that takes "truth" as its grammatical object. At the level of semantics, meanwhile, the word "desire" denotes a present lack or absence that might be supplied or filled in the future; in this passage, desire seeks truth, making "it" its conclusion, its presence, its end:

Desiring truth, awaiting it, laboriously distilling a few words, for ever desiring--(a cry starts to the left, another to the right. Wheels strike divergently. Omnibuses conglomerate in conflict)--for ever desiring--(the clock asseverates with twelve distinct strokes that it is midday; light sheds gold scales; children swarm)--for ever desiring truth. Red is the dome; coins hang on trees; smoke trails from the chimneys; bark, shout, cry 'Iron for sale'--and truth? (131)

Woolf's use of the singular nominative pronoun, "it," represents truth as single and essential, much like Lucy's later use of the pronoun "one." Unlike in Between the Acts, however, Woolf does not attach the desire for truth to an individual, subject, or agent. And yet, she makes desire animate, perhaps deeming it a feature of the human condition. Playing on this universal desire, Woolf uses dashes and parentheses to set off the thematically unrelated and, thereby, secure articulation from the reader who tries vocally to derive meaning from an impossible reconciliation. That is, the reader first expects that the parenthetical is

related, if only subordinately, to the sentence enclosing it and then expects that that relationship is congruent, a prerequisite to truth. When articulated, the parenthetical details may sound mellifluous or lyrical, but the sounds represented--human cries, wheels sparking and screeching, bus horns honking, swarming children--are dissonant and unorchestrated. The paragraph ends on that note, with random, minute, everyday details freed from their parenthetical subordination, so that "truth" idles at sentence's end, marginalized and punctuated by a dash and a question mark: "Red is the dome; coins hang on the trees; smoke trails from the chimneys; bark, shout, cry 'Iron for sale'--and truth?" (131). Throughout, Woolf satirizes the desire for a single truth as a futile drive to achieve, as Lucy's reductive "one-making," a congruence or conformity that admits no deviation.<sup>5</sup> Diffuse and expanding, the quotidian resists this "distill[ation]" into truth (131).

Woolf's critique of the desire for truth extends to the act of writing, which she describes as an act of "laboriously distilling a few words" (131). A distiller literally submits a substance to intense heat so that impurities evaporate, leaving a concentrated essence. Employed in the service of truth and unity, writing likewise produces essential matter. In "Monday or Tuesday," for example, "truth" becomes "it," reduced to a generic state similar to Lucy's "one." In fact, the novel's depiction of "one-making" and the story's investigation of writing share

a vital link: both allude to and critique a Romantic preoccupation with unity in writing. For example, Lucy embarks on a "circular tour of the imagination," a phrase that recalls the Romantic poets' Lake District and Swiss Alp ramblings that provided canvasses for the imagination. In her more metaphorical tour, meanwhile, Lucy tries to construct unity, that mark of a poet's "genius," according to Coleridge for whom "[images] become proof only as far as they . . . have the effect of reducing multitude to unity, or succession to an instant" (Coleridge qtd. in Perkins 457). Less interesting than Coleridge's criteria for genius is his juxtaposition of "unity" and "an instant," a correlation that implies a problematic if not paradoxical relationship between unity and "succession," or time. Romanticism's privileging of unity and the "instant" seems germane to Lucy's blind "one-making."

Whereas many of the Romantic poets toured to stimulate the imagination, Wordsworth, for one, did not advocate instantaneous transcription; rather, he propounded an aesthetic whereby "[poetry] takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquility" (Wordsworth qtd. in Richter 295). In the penultimate paragraph of "Monday or Tuesday," Woolf provides an intriguing parody of Wordsworth's decree: "Now to recollect by the fireside on the white square of marble" (131).<sup>6</sup> The scene might be read literally as someone ensconced in a chair that sits on a white floor or, perhaps, on marble, at the mouth of the hearth. Inverting

the prepositional phrases and reading less literally, the reader may discover a writer busy recollecting emotions on a "white square"--perhaps a tablet--of paper, while a fire blazes nearby. Having already described writing as a process of distilling, Woolf provides the fire as a metaphor for the intense labor with which the writer burns away dross, "vaporizing" or eliminating anything irrelevant that might clutter poetry's economy. The Wordsworthian writer records only the essential in "marble," a medium that provides permanence and immutability. Meanwhile, Woolf implies that, rigid and recalcitrant, "white marble" is incompatible with life's every day dispersion. She instead proposes liberating the quotidian from its graphic imprisonment: "From ivory depths words rising shed their blackness, blossom and penetrate" (131). If the proposal seems somewhat enigmatic, the subsequent action is not: the book falls into a "flame." Woolf contends that when excessively distilled, writing risks consumption, not by a reader, but by the same flame that gives it its potency. Twenty-five years later, in Between the Acts, Woolf would recycle the metaphor of consumption and, propose, explicitly, that voices breathe life into words.

The motif of consumption recurs in Between the Acts, though furnished in a new form. Through the novel's first third, with otherwise baffling repetition, Woolf alludes to "fish" to fuse images of capture, death, and consumption.<sup>7</sup> In one of the novel's final scenes, occurring after Lucy's

"one-making," those early images inform a provocative simile:

[Candish, the butler, brings Lucy's family] the second post on a silver salver. There were letters; bills; and the morning paper--the paper that obliterated the day before. Like a fish rising to a crumb of biscuit, Bartholomew snapped at the paper. (134)

The paper and other print materials are served on a "silver salver" as a meal--as was, perhaps, Giles' meal earlier in the day. The paper has "obliterated the day before," a description that suggests a newspaper, the nature of which demands distilling the events of a day into a "few words" ("Monday or Tuesday" 131). Thus consuming, the newspaper is in turn consumed: "like a fish rising to a crumb of biscuit," Bartholomew prepares to swallow the paper. Not to be lost in this process is Woolf's indictment of writing for erasing "the day before," or time (134). The paper, like Lucy, posits an eternal present.

In Between the Acts, music functions like the written word to imply timelessness. Woolf establishes their affinity early and often. Initially, in the passage following Lucy's childhood fishing memory, Woolf uses music to describe language: "words were like the first peal of a chime of bells. As the first peals, you hear the second; as the second peals, you hear the third" (12). The passage refers specifically to Isa's accurate forecast of an exchange between her husband's aunt and uncle who, each year

for seven years, repeat an identical dialogue. The analogy between language and music is possible because the elder Olivers' words, like the chime of bells, occur in a repetitive pattern, "for the seventh time in succession," facilitating anticipation (13). Isa thus hears the future in the present based on her memory of the past, all in a moment during which she perhaps transcends time.

The future, however, is not generally so predictable; as Woolf suggests, the "future shadowed their present, like the sun coming through the many-veined transparent vine leaf; a criss-cross of lines making no pattern" (90). Woolf's metaphor operates on at least two levels apart from the literal, most obviously suggesting that the future follows the present. But the transitive verb "shadowed" also functions to describe the future as amorphous and unknown. The subsequent simile, however, creates an apparent contradiction as Woolf likens the future to the sun illuminating a leaf--the present--so that its "lines mak[e] no pattern" (71). Together the metaphor and simile illustrate how the present, like the future, is without pattern. That these two time dimensions have no pattern means more than that time is simply random. Defined as a "complex of integrated parts functioning as a whole" (American Heritage 863), pattern is close kin to Lucy Swithin's concept of unity. By definition, pattern requires the subordination of multiplicity to unity or, rather, the absorption of plurality in the service of unity. If time

has no pattern, then time is not subject to unity.

If not subject to unity and if essential to music, time would seem to exempt music from unity's influence. And yet, as Woolf demonstrates, music emerges from repeated patterns that allow a listener to hear the future in the present, just as the habitual conversation between Bart and Lucy allows Isa to transcend time. Woolf juxtaposes her ruminations on the present and pattern with this meditation on music:

They [Isa and William Dodge] had left the greenhouse door open, and now music came through it. A.B.C., A.B.C., A.B.C.--someone was practising scales. C.A.T. C.A.T. C.A.T. . . . Then the separate letters made one word 'Cat'. Other words followed. It was a simple tune, like a nursery rhyme-- (71)

Whereas earlier in the novel Woolf described language in terms of music, she now casts music in terms of language, calling attention to music's use of the first seven letters of the alphabet to name and distinguish its tones.

Scripting preserves music for transmission and replay at later intervals; scripting makes the ephemeral material which, in turn, allows music to withstand time's passage.

And yet, when we think of music, we think of time. In identifying silence as "what was before time was," Woolf implies that time and sound are indeed correlative:

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. (22)

However, the word "distilled" resonates particularly: in "Monday or Tuesday," Woolf used the word unfavorably to characterize writing that eliminates the irrelevant or the incongruent. Occurring prior to time and existing in both "emptiness" and "silence," the "distilled essence" of the vase seems consistent with that which remains when writing has been consumed by its own metaphorical "flame."

Meanwhile, metaphorically a "shell," the room functions as a musical instrument that "sing[s]" a song that remains paradoxically "silent," according to the apposition. Having previously linked language and music through writing or "scripting," Woolf again identifies the two, suggesting that despite its dependence on time, music sings "of what was before time was." Voices, on the contrary, produce sounds that are intimately bound up with time, witnessed in the novel by their disorganization and diffusion.

These voices distract Miss La Trobe, the director of the novel's pageant or play:

'They're not ready . . . I hear 'em laughing'  
(they were saying.) ' . . . Dressing up. That's  
the great thing, dressing up. And it's pleasant  
now, the sun's not so hot . . . That's one good  
the war brought us--longer days . . . Where did  
we leave off? D'you remember? The  
Elizabethans . . . Perhaps she'll reach the  
present, if she skips. . . . 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?'

'No, I don't go by politicians. I've a

friend who's been to Russia. He says . . . And my daughter, just back from Rome, says the common people, in the cafes, hate Dictators. . . .' (75)

The lack of a dominant, anchoring point of view reflects the novel's preoccupation with the lack of a "centre. Something to bring us all together" (123), as one of the characters later puts it. Sensitive to their digressiveness and, perhaps, to their questions regarding change, Miss La Trobe becomes intensely anxious: "She crushed her manuscript. The actors delayed. Every moment the audience slipped the noose; split up into scraps and fragments. 'Music!' she signalled. 'Music!'" (76). Hoping to silence the voices because they threaten to disrupt the play, La Trobe calls for music to sustain the unity of her fiction and the fiction of unity. But in characterizing the audience as "slipp[ing] the noose," La Trobe unwittingly links "split[ting] up into scraps and fragments" to escaping a "noose," to avoiding capture if not death (76). Unity, then, is the noose and music the cinch, providing refuge from fragmentation, from time's dispersive sprawl. Death serves as refuge just as, on the novel's first page, death "prove[s]" continuity, permanence, and timelessness: "Her [Mrs. Haines'] family, she told the old man in the arm-chair, had lived near Liskeard for many centuries. There were the graves in the churchyard to prove it" (1).

Other evidence, meanwhile, exists to substantiate the relationship between unity and music. For example, moments

after Lucy identifies herself as belonging to the "unifiers," she and Bart are drawn back to the pageant with the others: "The audience was assembling. The music was summoning them" (74). Moments later, people "pushing from behind . . . hear music." An unidentified narrator interposes and interprets for them: "Music wakes us. Music makes us see the hidden, join the broken" (75). According to J. Hillis Miller, music is a "figurative expression of this unifying drive in Between the Acts . . . especially the music which punctuates Miss La Trobe's play, scraped out on the gramophone hidden in the bushes" (Miller 219). While critics and readers deem music's capacity to "join the broken" and to assemble the dispersed laudable, Woolf realizes that music and unity are galvanized by a common resistance to time's forces of dispersion and change. As one half of the novel's dominant binary opposition, unity finds representation in writing, music, and death.

Meanwhile, the connection between time and music persists:

The ticking stopped. A dance tune was put on the machine. In time to it, Isa hummed: 'What do I ask? To fly away from night and day, and issue where--no partings are--but eye meets eye--' (51)

Mrs Manresa began beating her foot and humming in time to it. (53)

Old Bartholomew tapped his fingers on his knee in time to the tune. (73)

'I remember . . .' she [Mrs. Lynn Jones] nodded in time to the tune. (98)

Yet, each of the tunes comes from a gramophone which, when not supplying music, ticks as though "'Marking time,'" in Bartholomew's words (51). Indeed, the machine's ticking suggests an alternative to musical time as the first of the above excerpts attests. The "ticking"--or time--stops because music begins, introducing its own "time" to which Isa hums her desire to "fly away from night and day" (51), to be free from time. The transition into musical time leads Isa into an exploration of timelessness that ends abruptly with the appearance of "Queen Elizabeth" who startles Isa from her reverie. Isa does not recommence the exploration until a later interval in which Miss La Trobe spies her "sauntering solitary far away by the flower beds . . . escaping" (95). At this later juncture, Miss La Trobe commands "'The tune!' . . . 'Hurry up! The tune! The next tune! Number Ten!'" expecting music to reverse the audience's dispersion (95). The scene duplicates La Trobe's earlier call for "Music" in response to the audience's "splitting" into "scraps and fragments."

However, the object of Isa's escape complicates this otherwise distinct echo. Isa seems to want to escape the "[t]ick, tick, tick" of the machine which signals that "[t]ime was passing" (95). If ticking represents time, then "the tick tick of the gramophone held them together" (95) may seem to disrupt the connection between time and fragmentation. But before discarding the connection, one must question how time functions to hold "people together,"

how time unites these people. According to Ann Wilkinson, time's passage, even between the acts, belongs to the pageant, which "crystallizes, gives stasis to the flow of time which the members of the audience sense but cannot make stand still" (Wilkinson 58). Not quite an interval between acts, the following passage describes a prolonged pause as La Trobe's history segues from "England in the time of Chaucer" to Queen Elizabeth's England:

Chuff, chuff, chuff went the machine. Could they talk? Could they move? No, for the play was going on. Yet the stage was empty; only the cows moved in the meadows; only the tick of the gramophone needle was heard. The tick, tick, tick seemed to hold them together, tranced. (51)

Evidently, the audience's paralysis occurs as a consequence of waiting and not as a result of time ticking away; the pageant, itself, suspends time and holds the audience, unmoving and entranced. In fact, typically defined as "a state of partly suspended animation or inability to function," and as "a somnolent state (as of deep hypnosis)" (Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary 1252), the word "trance" suggests a suspension of consciousness, perhaps of life. That the trance coincides with the audience's being held "together" further substantiates the relationship between unity and death (51).

Contrary to La Trobe's notion, Isa does not try to escape while the play is suspended; in her stroll, she continues an exploration of timelessness. Earlier, before

being interrupted by Queen Elizabeth, she hummed about a place "where no partings are . . . but eye meets eye" (51). Reproducing the first phrase but inverting the second, Isa retrieves these previous musings in her answer to the question, "'Where do I wander?'"

'Down what draughty tunnels? Where the eyeless wind blows? And there grows nothing for the eye. No rose. To issue where? In some harvestless dim field where no evening lets fall her mantle; nor sun rises. All's equal there. Unblowing, ungrowing are the roses there. Change is not; nor the mutable and lovable; nor greetings nor partings; nor furtive findings and feelings, where hand seeks hand and eye seeks shelter from the eye.' (96)

She discovers that timelessness is a place where the sun neither rises nor sets, where all is equal and therefore indistinct, where change is not, where people neither come nor go. It is a place of no harvest, no love, and no bloom because all three witness mutability, a condition incompatible with the changelessness of death.

The pageant-induced suspension of time becomes most conspicuous during Miss La Trobe's orchestration of "The present time. Ourselves." Woolf's characters experience distress as a result of the unexpected transition that turns them into La Trobe's characters:

All their nerves were on edge. They sat exposed. The machine ticked. There was no music. . . . They were neither one thing nor the other; neither Victorians nor themselves. They were suspended, without being, in limbo. Tick, tick, tick, went the machine. (110)

Having suspended their disbelief in viewing England's history prior to this moment, the members of the audience must now "suspend" themselves. "[I]n limbo," the audience has been incorporated into art's timelessness but, painfully, permitted sight of the parallel realm in which "real" time advances relentlessly. Miss La Trobe, meanwhile, deplores both the audience and the experiment. Wanting to expose them to "present-time reality"--emphasis on "reality"--La Trobe equates the audience's fidgeting with "death, death, death" (111). She then attributes the experiment's failure to the failure of "illusion" (111).

Yet the nature of that illusion remains obscure, especially since the phrase, "when illusion failed," can suggest either the collapse of fiction as an apparatus or the failure of fiction to represent satisfactorily the artist's ideas. In the first instance, the collapse of fiction or illusion means the failure of the staged to engage the spectator's belief. In the latter, failed illusion might entail the failure of the staged to represent satisfactorily one of the artist's values which, in this case, she recognizes as a fiction. However, the scene does not rely on illusion or a fiction, as La Trobe borrows characters from "reality"--that is, from the audience.

Thus the death of "illusion," which Miss La Trobe so fervently mourns, seems the loss of an effect not the failure of a dramatic mechanism. La Trobe works exhaustively throughout the pageant to ensure unity, that

effect or value which she desires. Casting her audience as the scene's characters, however, she unwittingly provides them an internal position from which to subvert her highly valued unity. The subversion occurs as the audience once more slips "the noose" (111), a phrase that recalls the audience's dispersion and distraction. La Trobe's refrain announces a resurgence of fragmentation and dispersion, a tendency she simultaneously identifies with life. Insensible to the paradox, she proclaims fragmentation and dispersion "death." She refers, of course, to the subversion of unity, an illusion she has heretofore sustained using music. But she has since "forbidden music," a prohibition that facilitates both audience fragmentation and her own finger "[g]rating" and "[p]anic" (111). For La Trobe, life in all of its fragmentation and diffusion means "death," the failure of her illusion that all is unity.

Skeptical that unity serves as the novel's prevailing theme, Alex Zwerdling, in Virginia Woolf and the Real World, observes that two of unity's principal champions--Lucy Swithin and the Reverend Streatfield--possess but flimsy authority (Zwerdling 320). Detailing their lack of legitimacy, Zwerdling asserts that the novel instead privileges fragmentation. He meanwhile insists on Miss La Trobe as the author's knowing surrogate, commissioned, as it were, to "trace the pervasive sense of fragmentation and isolation in the modern world to its historical roots" (Zwerdling 317). Not surprisingly, he does not endow her

with such an active role during subsequent discussion. Indeed, he even modifies the extravagance of his initial statement to: "Miss La Trobe traces the gradual triumph of individualism over communal identity" (Zwerdling 320). One could infer that Zwerdling shifts the terms of the discussion--from fragmentation to individualism and from unity to communal identity--because to suggest that La Trobe endorses fragmentation makes him uncomfortable. As he points out, quoting the novel, the artist "'for one moment . . . held them together'" (Zwerdling 320).

What Zwerdling fails to see is that when La Trobe finally gestures toward fragmentation, she frames the exercise with bitter irony. Deploying a retinue of mirrors, she provides the audience an opportunity to observe their fragmentation and to experience the discomfort she feels in its face. They respond with affront: "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" (114). La Trobe's disappearance at this juncture makes it difficult to discern her thoughts or feelings about the audience's response. The audience's unsympathetic complaining may tempt the reader to dismiss them altogether, except that the complaints filter through a narrator who initially indulges audience indignation but then tenders increasingly detached observations: ".So that was her little game! To show us up, as we are, here and now. All shifted, preened, minced;

hands were raised, legs shifted. . . . The mirror bearers squatted; malicious, observant; expectant; expository" (115). Including herself initially in "us" and "we," the narrator next proceeds to a third person description-- "malicious, observant"--before finally inferring this dialogue between members of the audience:

'That's them,' the back rows were tittering. 'Must we submit passively to this malignant indignity?' the front row demanded. Each turned ostensibly to say--O whatever came handy--to his neighbour. Each tried to shift an inch or two beyond the inquisitive insulting eye. Some made as if to go. (115)

Using quotation and then third person description, the narrator creates distance and detachment, which in turn lends authority to the audience response. Consequently, La Trobe seems far more derisive than disinterested on the subject of fragmentation.

Zwerdling, who suggests La Trobe's disinterest, is partially correct in observing that the audience enjoys "no unity of response, no coherence of interpretation" (Zwerdling 321). Unfortunately, he translates the lack of coherence as "trivial, unconnected chatter" (Zwerdling 321). While "unconnected" bears no pejorative, "trivial" is evaluative and unfounded. The audience's "trivial chatter" includes reflections on and provocative questions about the play's content and form, religion, science, the war, the unconscious and sex, and technology (122-24). Furthermore, Zwerdling's conclusion, "The audience is unchanged"

(Zwerdling 321), assumes knowledge of its members both before and after. But what does the reader know about the audience other than that they are a collection of individuals united to watch the play? Given just that much, the reader knows only that the audience grows splintered, which movement itself marks change.<sup>8</sup> The dispersed audience witnesses Colonel Mayhew's observation that "'The play's over,'" its implied order ended because "'It's time'" (115).

For Mrs. Lynn Jones, as for Colonel Mayhew, time means "Change" (107). She muses, "when things were perfect . . . they resisted Time," so that only "Heaven was changeless" (108). A religious concept, "Heaven" may be attained at the end of one's life--that is, upon death. While one may distinguish "Heaven" from death, the faithful Mrs. Jones attributes timelessness to both. Musing, she ponders the paradox that death entails: all change ends because of one final change "or there'd have been yards and yards of Papa's beard, of Mama's knitting" (107). She subsequently associates change with things "'unhygienic,'" "sour," and "wrong," so that finally, if nonsensically, change becomes a metonymy for death, much as it has for Miss La Trobe who perceives change as fatal (107). Mrs. Jones' thoughts acquire added significance as they precede Lucy Swithin's exercise in "one-making," providing a context whereby Lucy's desire for unity emerges as a fear of change and time. Even as William and Isa try to humor Lucy, time ticks on to haunt her "seraphic" vision: "Tick, tick, tick, the machine

reiterated" (108). Not surprisingly, many of the characters join together again immediately for church service, about which Isa observes,

The church bells always stopped, leaving you to ask: Won't there be another note? Isa, half-way across the lawn, listened. . . . Ding, dong, ding . . . There was not going to be another note. The congregation was assembled, on their knees, in the church. The service was beginning. The play was over. (128)

The service partakes of ritual as does any drama or pageant and, though the congregation unites for worship, the congregants are attracted and assembled by "bells," by music. Music, like ritual, operates via the repetition of patterns that evoke timelessness.

Whereas music often effects a sense of timelessness, voices more effectively avert the silence that "was before time was" (22). In fact, in the episode after the description of the "empty, silent" room, Woolf reveals that the Olivers' progenitor--Lucy's forefather--was a "talk producer," as are his progeny whom she describes thus:

Across the hall a door opened. One voice, another voice, a third voice came wimpling and warbling; gruff--Bart's voice; quavering--Lucy's voice; middle-toned--Isa's voice. Their voices impetuously, impatiently, protestingly came across the hall saying: 'The train's late'; saying: 'Keep it hot'; saying: 'We won't, no Candish, we won't wait.'

Coming out from the library the voices stopped in the hall. They encountered an obstacle evidently; a rock. Utterly impossible was it . . . to be alone? That was the shock. . . . After that, the rock was raced round, embraced. If it was painful, it was essential. There must

be society. (22)

Described both texturally and tonally, the Olivers' voices release energy as the aspirated "p" in the refrain "impetuously, impatiently, protestingly" suggests. However, when that energy encounters an "obstacle," specifically a "rock," the voices cease--"stopped" when that aspirated "p" meets the voiced bilabial "b" in "obstacle." The double "p" in "stopped" mutes the earlier plosiveness created in the refrain, calling attention to the now muted voices. The dynamic between the "rock," or "society," and the voices resembles that between "unity" and "dispersity": an opposition that invariably concludes with the latter subdued. Woolf thus sets the scene for differing individual voices to resist unity. La Trobe's fear seems justified as the novel's voices begin to constitute a diffuse, decentralizing force, the more powerful because their temporality facilitates elusiveness and change.

In addition to the voices that distract La Trobe and disrupt her play, the pageant includes voices that are its agents. In fact, despite the music and her attempts at effecting unity, La Trobe's words "shed their blackness"<sup>9</sup> and drift "away," lost when voiced by the village actors:

The words died away. Only a few great names--  
 Babylon, Nineveh, Clytemnestra, Agamemnon, Troy--  
 floated across the open space. Then the wind  
 rose, and in the rustle of the leaves even  
 the great words became inaudible. (87)

Once again, during the play's Victorian era, the "voices of the pilgrims singing . . . could be heard," though their "words were inaudible" (101). In these moments, Woolf seems to invoke "Monday or Tuesday" and her proposition that words be freed from writing. She acknowledges that, as a result, words may "die away" even before meaning can be attached to them, but she also challenges the assumption that words are inherently "great" and, moreover, that words function transparently to render meaning. The latter challenge becomes evident when Reverend Streatfield struggles to provide an interpretation of the play, to construct meaning. His own words, ironically, are subject to the same wind as the play's script and are "audible" rather than "comprehensible":

His first words (the breeze had risen the leaves were rustling) were lost. Then he was heard saying: 'What.' To that word he added another 'Message' and at last a whole sentence emerged; not comprehensible; say rather audible. 'What message,' it seemed he was asking, 'was our pageant meant to convey?' (118)

The Reverend's words are merely "audible" because he proposes a question rather than the answer the audience awaits. Indeed, the audience anticipates the answer with hands "folded in the traditional manner as if they were seated in church" (118). They seem slightly surprised that "the words were repeated" a second time, asking "If he didn't know, calling himself Reverend, also M.A., who after all could?" However, as soon as he begins to supply an

interpretation of the play, "(words . . . put on meaning)" (118). It is as if the audience clothes the words with meaning when they clothe the Reverend with the authority to dispense that knowledge in words. He ends his analysis speaking in "another capacity," as "Treasurer of the Fund," a transition indicated by the word "'But'" which, according to Woolf, "marked a new paragraph" (119). Though voiced without reference to a prepared text, the word "But" inexplicably takes on the qualities of the written word: structure, order, authority, and permanence. Not surprisingly, the Reverend finishes his "speech" consulting "a sheet of paper" (119).

Because writing often has discernible origins that make the tendency to privilege writing strong, Woolf chooses not to identify or isolate the novel's voices but only to convey their chatter and dialogue. Woolf calls attention to these voices through repetition, as evidenced by fifteen occasions in the four passages cited below:

Over the tops of the bushes came stray voices, voices without bodies, symbolical voices they seemed to her, half hearing, seeing nothing, but still, over the bushes, feeling invisible threads connecting the bodiless voices. (94)

Voices interrupted. People passed the stable yard, talking. 'It's a good day, some say, the day we are stripped naked. Others, it's the end of the day. They see the Inn and the Inn's keeper. But none speaks with a single voice. None with a voice free from the old vibrations. Always I hear corrupt murmurs; the chink of gold and metal. Mad music. . . .' More voices sounded. (97)

Music began--A.B.C.--A.B.C. The tune was as simple as could be. But now that the shower had fallen, it was the other voice speaking, the voice that was no one's voice. And the voice that wept for human pain unending said:

The King is in his counting house,  
Counting out his money,  
The Queen is in her parlor . . . (112)

But before they had come to any common conclusion, a voice asserted itself. Whose voice it was no one knew. It came from the bushes--a megaphonic, anonymous, loudspeaking affirmation. The voice said: Before we part, ladies and gentlemen, before we go . . . (Those who had risen sat down) . . . let's talk in words of one syllable, without larding, stuffing or cant. Let's break the rhythm and forget the rhyme. (115) [All ellipses are Woolf's]

Consistently portrayed as mysterious if not mystical, the voices further contribute to that impression in their resistance to interpretation. Aside from the madness and sorrow that attends the music pulsing beneath the voices in the second and third passages, little connects these voices. In fact, the only common denominator is a lack of sharing, of unity, or of solidarity. For though plural, the voices do not possess a group identity as do the Olivers and the audience. But then neither the Olivers nor the audience speak as though unified, a feature they share with the voice that dissents from the "common conclusion" (115), and with the voices described as "stray" (94), as not "single" (97), and as not "one" (112). Not surprisingly, La Trobe determines that "invisible threads" connect "the bodiless voices," a conclusion that betrays a tendency appropriate to her vocation--as artist she labors to conduct unity. The

voices, meanwhile, exhibit no affiliation and instead imply that La Trobe labors under illusion.

Yet an "inner voice" has spoken with a message of harmony that seems to belie that implication. Interpreting this inner voice requires the reader's caution:

Feet crunched the gravel. Voices chattered. The inner voice, the other voice was saying: How can we deny that this brave music, wafted from the bushes, is expressive of some inner harmony? 'When we wake' (some were thinking) 'the day breaks us with its hard mallet blows.' 'The office' (some were thinking) 'compels disparity. Scattered, shattered, hither thither summoned by the bell. "Ping-ping-ping" that's the phone. "Forward!" "Serving!"--that's the shop.' So we answer to the infernal, agelong, and eternal order issued from on high. And obey. 'Working, serving, pushing, striving, earning wages--to be spent--here? Oh dear no. Now? No, by and by. When ears are deaf and the heart is dry' (74-75)

Set in contrast to the "[v]oices" that "chattered," the inner voice first dares the reader to "deny" that "music . . . is expressive of some inner harmony?"

Formulated as a question, the dare is less assertive than it is manipulative. Then, purporting to possess insight into the minds of those chattering, the voice attributes disparity and dispersion to the activities of daily life. But how to reconcile this attribution with the juxtaposed statement, "So we answer to the infernal, agelong, and eternal order issued from on high"? If the word "So" means "thus," the voice implies that the "scattering" or dispersion occurs in response to a commercial stimulus that is also a supernal "order." The voice continues, explaining

the dispersal as a consequence of efforts to earn wages--perhaps the Protestant capitalist ethic--that might be converted in the hereafter when "ears are deaf and the heart is dry.'" Thus, for all that the passage seems a denunciation of capitalism, Woolf ironizes the inner voice's insistence on transcendent order and its preoccupation with displacing the human in favor of the divine. Similar to Lucy's simple, singleminded version of the universe as harmonious, the voice here adopts a philosophy of "one-making."

The inner voice assumes, furthermore, that chatter is superficial, meaningless, and learned behavior, just as dispersity is a socio-economic phenomenon, a condition of "fallen" humanity. While she admits that voices and chatter are indices of dispersity, Woolf characterizes dispersity--not negatively, but neutrally--as a natural tendency or condition, an effect of time's passage. Beyond linking voices to dispersity and dispersity to time, however, Woolf refuses to codify what she means by dispersity, a word, incidentally, that appears in dictionaries neither of Woolf's time nor our own. Thus, when introducing Miss La Trobe's play at the end of Between the Acts, Woolf refuses to inscribe words and instead accedes to voices in accordance with her own proposition in "Monday or Tuesday": "The curtain rose. They spoke" (Between the Acts 136). Unauthorized, voices free words from "ivory depths" and "blackness" as they have all afternoon: "[words] rose,

became menacing and shook their fists at you" (Between the Acts 37). Even as voices free words from writing, Woolf frees voices from the page.

These voices serve to destabilize the novel's binary opposition, "Unity--Dispersion," and, consequently, the standard by which the novel has been judged. However, it is not enough to argue as Pamela Caughie does in her book, Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism: Literature in Quest and Question of Itself,

If we read this novel with unity as our standard, then we will interpret the many strategies used to frustrate our unifying impulse as a despair of or a threat to such harmony. But if we read it with a sense of the various relations that make up the artistic event, then we will look for the effect of nature as evidence of such disruptive strategies. (54)

Caughie senses that Woolf has made a shift from unity, but she is unwilling to abandon the notion of an "artistic event" comprised of "various relations"--her language continues to suggest formal unity to some extent.<sup>10</sup>

Likewise, J. Hillis Miller prefaces a daring insight with qualifications, "It seems as though Woolf may be putting in question . . . the ability of art to create an other than factitious stay against fragmentation" (Miller 221). The phrase, "It seems as though Woolf may be," deprives the possibility of much of its subversive threat. Such critical tentativeness stems, no doubt, from an attachment to the kind of epiphanic unities or "moments of being" Woolf

cultivates in most of her work. Hermione Lee, in The Novels of Virginia Woolf, best exemplifies the attachment: "Some creative and harmonizing personality is still required; as ever, human attempts to find momentary order over chaos must still continue" (Lee 224). She virtually attributes her insistence on unity to Lucy's "heroic . . . vision [which] is presented in a sympathetic tone" (Lee 225); in fact, Lee's external standard of unity informs her reading of this passage such that she becomes blind to the irony and absurdity of Lucy's "one-making." Of the same passage, Pamela Caughie writes, "Whether that 'gigantic ear' is Lucy's God or some universal aesthetic value, in either case it is a bit absurd" (Caughie 54). While Woolf does not preclude the validity of moments of being, she does caution against reading those moments in isolation and extrapolating from them to unity as an universal aesthetic ideal. Indeed, Woolf's artist, as Pamela Caughie observes, "is no longer a spokesperson for a culture or a constituency, for Woolf's concept of art is no longer unifying and her concept of culture is no longer one of consensus" (Caughie 57).<sup>11</sup> The artist must recognize the fictiveness of unity and listen for voices to articulate dispersity, a phenomenon the critic can no longer ignore.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> F.R. Leavis, in Scrutiny, and D.S. Savage, in Kenyon Review, as quoted in Ann Wilkinson (53).

<sup>2</sup> The Friedman work to which Wilkinson refers is Stream of Consciousness: A Study in Literary Method. New Haven: UP Yale, 1955. 208.

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Laurence refers explicitly to "Hartman and Miller" as "certainly incisive [though] there is something amiss in their narrative expectations and models. The narrative model for Woolf should be one based on her practices of alternation in theme and style . . . without 'fitting' the critic's desire for unity, continuity, and harmony in traditional terms" (192).

<sup>4</sup> For Jameson's discussion see his essay, "Romance and Reification: Lord Jim," published in The Political Unconscious and excerpted in David Richter's The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends (625).

<sup>5</sup> Shuli Barzilai, in "Virginia Woolf's Pursuit of Truth," argues for a dialectic reading of "truth" in these stories. She considers that truth "is presented both as independent of the perceiver and as a result of a mental process" (203). She then asks, "Or would it be more accurate to say: truth and unity emanate from the dialectical interaction between the poles of consciousness and things?" (203). Here Barzilai implies that "truth" and "unity" are closely affiliated.

<sup>6</sup> Barzilai, in "Virginia Woolf's Pursuit of Truth," makes a similar observation: "The story closes with echoes of William Wordsworth's 'emotion recollected in tranquility'" (203).

<sup>7</sup> The reader knows, for instance, that Bartholomew Oliver fished as a child and, according to his sister Lucy, once "made her take the fish off the hook herself [when] the gills were full of blood" (12). The day's dinner will be fish once Isa determines, with the help of her aunt and uncle--Lucy and Bart--its freshness (17-18). Giles Oliver, Isa's husband, feels life's pressures "held [him] fast, like a fish in water" (29); Isa, meanwhile, remembers they "had met first in Scotland fishing. . . . she . . . had watched him . . . casting, casting--until, like a thick ingot of silver bent in the middle, the salmon had leapt, had been caught, and she had loved him" (29).

<sup>8</sup> While Zwerdling is reluctant to view La Trobe, the artist, engaged in contriving anything but unity, he does think it "a distortion to read Between the Acts as an essentially celebratory work affirming unity and continuity, [as] a book that moves, like Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, and The Waves, toward the resolution of the conflict" (Zwerdling 312). Likewise, Pamela Caughie in her book Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism: Literature in Quest and Question of Itself, observes that the "cacophonies of Woolf's novel and La Trobe's play may well be the sounds of a unified

and univocal audience dispersing" (57).

<sup>9</sup> I borrow the phrase "shed their blackness" from "Monday or Tuesday" to characterize the words drifting away.

<sup>10</sup> Notice how much Caughie's language resembles that of Ann Wilkinson who abstracts the novel's particulars into a "drama" which "is able by its nature to deal with an enormously complex group of relationships. The form of the drama itself does away with the beast-of-burden work of arranging, explaining and describing these relationships: they all occur within the pattern of the dramatic conflict, worked out as the 'play' proceeds" (Wilkinson 56).

<sup>11</sup> Woolf's shift, no doubt, was related to her and Leonard's fears of a German invasion. While critics have established that during this time Woolf felt shattered, not much has been written about how these experiences and her despair affected the writing of her last, unrevised novel, Between the Acts.

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## VITA

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