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“Nature Had Once More Taken Her Part”:

Caught Between Civilization and Nature in Woolf’s *Between the Acts*

When contemplating Virginia Woolf’s final novel, her words, “Don’t bother about the plot: the plot’s nothing” dropped in the middle of the narrative, seem to be her words of advice. The very title of the novel, *Between the Acts*, points to the idea that the acts should not be the focal point – whether the actual acts of the play, or the moments of action by the characters. Instead it is the spaces between these moments that are the most important and it is significant that the spaces nearly always take place in or involve nature. Yet trying to determine how Woolf perceives nature through the novel is a much more complex issue. While nature does fulfill a necessary and even essential role, the relationship between nature and civilization and how that affects the human element of the novel is quite complicated. Cheryll Glotfelty, in her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, states that “simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). While this was printed in 1996, and the field has evolved and branched out considerably since then, this simple explanation still holds true as a basic tenet of ecocriticism. It also provides an interesting lens that helps unravel the densely woven relationships of nature and humanity in Woolf’s narrative. Glotfelty goes on to emphasize that “all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture ... As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the

human and the nonhuman” (xix). These “interconnections” are the basis of *Between the Acts* and affect the interactions of the characters in both their internal and external lives. It is not enough to simply study the places and the natural elements themselves. Martin Ryle contends that ecological critics “must attend at least as much to the natures and occupations of human subjects as to the ‘nature’ which lies outside them” (23). Without a clear view of how humans affect and are affected by their surroundings, the ecocritical perspective is not complete.

Ecocritical analysis on Woolf’s novels is a fairly new endeavor, but there is a substantial foundation of study headed by critics Bonnie Kime Scott, Louise Westling, and Charlotte Zoë Walker. Scott is particularly interested in the way that Woolf and her characters, especially women, interact with nature. In her article on “Virginia Woolf and Ecofeminism” Scott notes, Woolf’s “imaginative juxtapositions of scenes and...the boundaries between indoor and outdoor spaces” (108). In “Woolf, Barnes and the Ends of Modernism” Scott examines the contrast between nature and civilization, focusing on how this plays out in the outcast women, such as Miss La Trobe. While Scott focuses on Woolf’s characters, Louise Westling applies various ecocritical lenses to Woolf’s novels to explore their “unhuman” elements. In her article “Literature, the Environment, and the Question of the Posthuman” Westling mainly addresses the silences and gaps of *Between the Acts* and how nature moves and speaks through them. In some ways, Charlotte Zoë Walker’s criticism brings the other two together as she assesses, the way, “[b]ringing Woolf’s nature writing to the fore changes our reading of her work and gives it even greater texture, depth, and dimensionality than it had before” (“Book” 144). Both of Walker’s articles on Woolf place an emphasis on the conversation between humans and nature and the way that nature speaks in the silences. While Walker maintains a broad scope that limits her discussion on any one novel, her criticism provides a helpful perspective on the issue of

humanity and nature in *Between the Acts*. Much like Scott and Walker, Carol H. Cantrell explores the way that nature speaks in her article “‘The Locus of Compossibility’: Virginia Woolf, Modernism, and Place.” Cantrell argues that in *Between the Acts* “[t]he setting of this novel is not merely background but a complex presence – a ‘place’” and that nature, as part of the setting, is also a part of the narrative (42). Other critics, such as Harriet Blodgett and Vicki Tromanhauser, also layer the complex role of nature in *Between the Acts*. Both use Miss La Trobe to investigate the connection between human and nature in the novel, but by narrowing in mainly on one character, both leave openings for further character analysis to be done. Each critic approaches the idea of nature and place and its impact on humanity, providing helpful guidance and a sturdy foundation to build upon. However, none of them provide a solid discussion of the way each character is impacted by their setting.

Location is of primary importance in the novel as it plays a significant role in the behavior of the characters. While it might be simplistic to say that nature offers freedom, and buildings and social structures confine, this broad statement allows a space to begin examining the role of place in the novel. A significant portion of the novel is spent on the grounds. The play, put on by members of the village and led by Miss La Trobe, has nature for its stage while portraying scenes from civilization, a juxtaposition that illustrates the conflict of the characters caught between these two worlds. Before, after, and during the intervals of the play, the characters wander in and out of the gardens, the house, and the outbuildings such as the barn and the greenhouse. However, even when they are inside, nature is constantly present, vying against the social structures for voice and influence. Speaking of gardens and other manmade places of nature, Scott states that they are “places where human and animal activities, light and dark become blurred, erasing boundaries and hierarchies” (“Breaking Boundaries” 110). The

interactions of the characters vary and change as they move in and out of these spaces, shifting from civilization to nature and back again with very little transition.

Isabella Oliver embodies these shifts and the struggle between the two most clearly. When inside the house Isa is consistently reminded of her role as proper wife and mother. At the beginning of the novel Woolf has Isa note that “on the washstand, on the dressing-table, among the silver boxes and tooth-brushes, was the other love; love for her husband, the stockbroker—’The father of my children,’ she added, slipping into the cliché conveniently provided by fiction” (Woolf 14). Her very mind has been trained to follow certain thought patterns, which she slips into most easily surrounded by the walls of the ancestral home. In her article “Rooms and the Construction of the Feminine Self” Laura Penna Smith states, “Most of Woolf’s rooms recapitulate this relegation of women to domesticity because the rooms are either situated within the family house or funded by the family patriarch or his substitutes” (Smith 217).

One important way that Isa resists her societal role is through her composition of poetry. It is her expression of truth and the one thing that comes naturally. However her words often falter, particularly when she feels caught or confined. Just after ordering the fish for dinner, she begins composing a poem, musing, “‘With a feather, a blue feather ... flying mounting through the air ... there to lose what binds us here ...’” but immediately decides “[t]he words weren’t worth writing in the book bound like an account book in case Giles suspected. ‘Abortive,’ was the word that expressed her” (Woolf 15). She feels trapped and longs to fly free like the birds that saturate the world outside, but this flight is impossible within the confines of the house. In both brief intermissions of the play Isa finds a small amount of freedom in wandering the grounds. During the first interval she takes William Dodge as her companion; he is a refuge from societal constraints because of his homosexuality. Surrounded by nature and separated from her

role as mother and wife, Isa is able to speak her poetry aloud and ask William questions. They both introduce themselves by first name, becoming, according to Woolf, “conspirators, seekers after hidden faces” who are able to speak freely because, as Isa muses, “we’ve never met before, and never shall again” (Woolf 114). Society’s rules do not bind them until they return to the barn and their roles are reinstated. Complicated human relationships continually confuse and upset Isa, and at the end of the second interval, Isa comes face to face with her confusion when she inadvertently sees her husband and Mrs. Manresa returning from a romantic tryst. This overshadows the final act of the play and when it ends Isa dreads the return to the house. Back inside Isa reverts to the role she was never really able to escape according to Woolf: “sweeping her sewing from the table, [Isa] sank, her knee doubled, into the chair by the window. Within the shell of the room she overlooked the summer night” (Woolf 214). The room and the role it represents is empty. Staring out into the night, Isa continues to long for an escape from the house and the civilization it represents.

In contrast, Mr. Bartholomew Oliver, the patriarch of the family, likes being sure of where he stands and what he is supposed to do. He likes the restriction of the house, because it is comfortable and knowable. Throughout the narrative Bart returns to the house whenever he is looking for peace or affirmation. During the first interval of the play, he grows confused on the lawn. Everything is too loose, too open and unclarified, so he returns to his library where his role is defined and constrained. Lucy joins him and they sit quietly, watching nature from a safe distance. Woolf says: “As they listened and looked—out into the garden—the trees tossing and the birds swirling seemed called out of their private lives, out of their separate avocations, and made to take part” (Woolf 117). The swirling of the birds represents the chaos that Bartholomew avoids by taking refuge in the house. He does return to the play, but once it ends he immediately

muses that he “was damned glad it was over—the scurry and the scuffle, the rouge and the rings. He stooped and raised a peony that had shed its petals. Solitude had come again. And reason and the lamplit paper” (Woolf 204). He picks up a piece of nature that has been denuded and all he can think about is retreating to “reason” and the security of civilization.

Giles Oliver, however, could not be more different than his father. Throughout the novel he is irritated by the restraints of civilization. He yearns to be free from his responsibilities as a stockbroker, as a husband, as a father, and as a proper son. The strangest manifestation of this irritation is his constant anger with his Aunt Lucy. When the narrator states that “[g]iven his choice, he would have chosen to farm,” and it is also revealed that Lucy was astonished that he would want to sell to the men that worked the land rather than living on the land himself, his anger becomes a little more clear (Woolf 47). Just as his wife, Isa, feels trapped in her maternal and domestic role, so too Giles feels trapped in his job and the fact that he can only return to the country on the weekends. He is angry with Lucy because she represents the thing he wants most but cannot have. Perhaps this is why he chooses Mrs. Manresa. Her “Child of Nature” façade and repudiation of cultural conventions opens up a space for him to pretend that he too is eschewing convention by coupling with her. It is only possible for them to consummate their affair in the greenhouse because it is itself a false nature: a house designed to grow things – nature civilized. He ultimately cannot escape civilization, trapped in it even in his act of rebellion.

His erstwhile partner, Mrs. Manresa, is even more of a walking contradiction. While claiming the freedom of nature, she completely reaffirms the society she pretends to reject. She emphatically and repeatedly calls herself “a wild child of nature,” yet finds nature uncomfortable (Woolf 50). When she and William Dodge first arrive at Pointz Hall, she claims they were about to picnic, but instead ask the Olivers for shelter. As Scott points out, “She is so little attuned to

nature that she brings her picnic inside” (“Ends of Modernism” 29). When Mrs. Manresa has the option, she chooses society over nature, because she cannot present her false wildness without someone to perform for. Cantrell points out that She “is playing a role governed by the task of flaunting propriety” (Cantrell 45). Her rebellion is so exaggerated that it ends up being guided by the very rules she claims to ignore. The narrator quite harshly observes that she is “[v]ulgar...in her gestures, in her whole person, over-sexed, over-dressed for a picnic” Mrs. Manresa chortles over her own riotous behavior, asking no one in particular, “what’s the first thing I do when I come down here?...I take off my stays...and roll in the grass. Roll—you’ll believe that” (Woolf 41-42). Mrs. Manresa comes to the country to teach the village women useless skills, strolls through the garden in pajamas, and yodels in the yard, trying a bit too hard to prove she is not constrained by convention, while at the same time affirming the societal rules by fighting so blatantly against them.

In complete opposition to Mrs. Manresa stands Lucy Swithin. If there is a “child of nature” in the novel, it would have to be she. Lucy is the only character that is freed from societal conventions by her association with nature. From the beginning Lucy is intertwined with nature imagery. She is literally awakened by the birds each morning, after which she immerses herself into the natural world through reading a book on evolution, with the noise of nature around her, pouring in from the open window. When the servant Grace enters, it takes Lucy, as Woolf says, “five seconds in actual time, in mind time ever so much longer, to separate Grace herself, with blue china on a tray, from the leather-covered grunting monster who was about, as the door opened, to demolish a whole tree in the green steaming undergrowth of the primeval forest” (Woolf 9). It is because of moments like these that the servants, as well as others of her own class, consider her crazy: “‘Batty,’ Grace called her, as she felt on her face the divided

glance that was half meant for a beast in the swamp, half for a maid in a print frock and white apron” (Woolf 9). Lucy’s inability to distinguish between the proper behavior of society and the freedom she has in nature creates tension in the people around her. She, of all characters in the novel, is completely caught between the acts. Lucy does not really belong in the world of society; her constant “flights” (invoking bird imagery) of fancy distance her from society, a world she is incapable of leaving. Westling argues that Lucy’s “relationship with other creatures may seem distracted, but in fact she is a healing presence, generous to all she encounters...and hopefully suggestive of humanity’s possible reintegration into a balanced coexistence with the rest of the living world after another episode of military cataclysm” (Westling “Darwin” 37). While the other characters view her with everything from disdain to indulgence, her spirit is a calming one throughout the novel.

The only other character as connected to nature as Lucy, is Miss La Trobe. She is as rebellious and rough as Mrs. Manresa, but accepts the inspiration of nature in the same spirit as Lucy. Miss La Trobe points out that the grassy terrace is the perfect stage when she exclaims: “That’s the place for a pageant, Mr. Oliver! ...Winding in and out between the trees...There the stage; here the audience; and down there among the bushes a perfect dressing-room for the actors” (Woolf 57). Nature allows Miss La Trobe to act – to present her plays, her art, and her self. Tromanhauser states that By “placing her theater outside, La Trobe shows the distinction between human mastery and animal nature to be illusory. Gazing past the actors onto grazing cows and darting swallows, the village audience loses its stretch of cultural ‘high ground’ and encounters the prospect of humanity joining the herd” (Tromanhauser 67). Throughout the play Miss La Trobe allows nature to interpose. In fact, she provides an entire ten minute space for nature to take its course – a between time for the present. However, her audience does not react

well. As they grow restless Miss La Trobe frets, muttering, “Reality too strong,” and blames nature, longing for “a back-cloth to hang between the trees—to shut out cows, swallows, present time!” (Woolf 179-80). Even as she blames it, nature intervenes with a sudden and unexpected rain shower, which breaks the silence and then stops, leaving behind what Woolf calls “a fresh earthy smell” and leaving Miss La Trobe relieved that “[n]ature once more had taken her part” (Woolf 180-81). It is nature that moves and inspires Miss La Trobe and as the play takes up such a considerable amount of the book, it is no wonder that most critics have focused on her role in the narrative. Louise Westling states that “[t]he novel posits nonhuman forces and beings as crucial players in the human drama, both in the village pageant written by Miss La Trobe and in the world of its audience” (“Flesh” 865). Miss La Trobe does not care what people think of her, only of how they receive her work, and nature opens up a space for her to do this.

Even once the play has come to a close, nature imagery continues to surround Miss La Trobe. She is at first dejected, certain that her vision has been lost and that none have understood her expression and her purpose. She calls the play “a failure” as she gathers up the detritus left behind. Once again nature intervenes. This time not for an entire audience, but for her alone. Woolf presents it in this way:

Then suddenly the starlings attacked the tree behind which she had hidden. ...The tree became a rhapsody, a quivering cacophony, a whizz and vibrant rapture, branches, leaves, birds syllabbling discordantly life, life, life, without measure, without stop devouring the tree. Then up! Then off!... Then something rose to the surface. ‘I should group them,’ she murmured, ‘here.’ It would be midnight; there would be two figures, half concealed by a rock. The curtain would rise. What would the first words be? The words escaped her.” (Woolf 209-10)

This moment raises in her a new vision, a new idea that she can conceive and bring to fruition.

As a single woman and a lesbian, her art takes the form of her fertility, and it is conceived in the midst of nature. She is, according to Blodgett, “[r]esponsive to the birds’ energetic movement and wild sound as to something in herself” and “begins to envision her next play” (Blodgett 28).

Yet at the same time, nature is not quite enough, for the words are still unformed. She has the image, the scene, the setting, but it requires human interaction to germinate the implanted idea and bring it to full fruition. It is in the Inn, surrounded by people, filled with noise and cigarette smoke that she connects the final piece of the puzzle. Woolf notes that “[s]he no longer saw [the people], yet they upheld her, sitting arms akimbo with her glass before her. There was the high ground at midnight; there the rock; and two scarcely perceptible figures. Suddenly the tree was pelted with starlings. She set down her glass. She heard the first words” (Woolf 212). As important a role that nature plays in her creative process, she is not completely freed from society and in fact, she finds inspiration from human nature in the same way that she draws it from the rest of nature.

These tensions throughout the novel complicate and enrich the discussion of nature in *Between the Acts*. Nature certainly opens up a place for speech and action, but it does not seem to be complete without the element of human nature, which is inextricably entwined with society and civilization. Perhaps that is the way that Woolf wanted it to be. Vicki Tromanhauser concludes that in “[d]iscovering the inescapability of the animal within the domain of the human, and conversely humanity’s place in the animal’s open field, *Between the Acts* ultimately leaves its readers in an interval, suspended between the animal and the human and belonging to neither” (86). Isa and Giles return to the house, neither the better for their momentary escapes; Lucy and Bartholomew retire in peace, unruffled by the day’s events and seemingly content. Miss La

Trobe is left in the throes of creation, inspired by both nature and civilization, and Mrs. Manresa leaves on the same false note that she arrived, purring away in her automobile. The glimpse of their lives “between the acts” is one of paradoxes and interconnections in which each character struggles to find their way between the worlds of nature and society.

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