"Her Imaginative Reconstruction of the Past": Tradition and Replication in Between the Acts

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This essay was for the class "Virginia Woolf," as taught by Dr. Andrea Adolph. The assignment was to write a critical, in-depth paper about one of Virginia Woolf's novels.

In her book-length essay Three Guineas, Virginia Woolf questions the value of tradition. In doing so, she holds that traditions serve as justifications for the continuance of oppression and domination. In Between The Acts, her final novel, Woolf questions the role of history in the formation of one's national identity. The novel centers on a country pageant put on by local villagers. By working the pageant as a means to question the nature of history, Woolf investigates not only the authors of history, but also their intent. By going on to examine the role of the audience, Woolf questions our own implications in the traditions and histories which may ultimately lead to fascism and war. According to Madelyn Detloff, "Woolf is remarkably prescient in the philosophical connections she traces between historiography, nationalism, normative gender and sexuality, and the ideology of war" (405). The implications of these connections are exposed when we bow to history, and rather than resist or struggle, give in to the replication of tradition.

On page one of the novel, Mrs. Haines explains that "[h]er family . . . had lived near Liskeard for many centuries. There were the graves in the churchyard to prove it" (3). Here Mrs. Haines sets up her family history, bridging the gap between extended lineage and social privilege or power. Her appeal is to history and historical markers, the graves in the churchyard, are used to justify it. In this statement, we also see an exchange between the personal and the public. By exploiting public town history, Mrs. Haines is able to benefit as an individual. Her reiteration of historical presence affords her an air of exclusivity and privilege.

A few pages on, we see that the converse is just as true. A family, like the Olivers, which has only been in town for a hundred years, is nothing to brag about: "Only something over a hundred and twenty years the Olivers had been there" (7). Still, the family tries to manufacture appearances, hanging a portrait over the staircase. It is evident that while the Olivers' ancestors do not lie "inter-twisted, like ivy roots, beneath the churchyard wall," they do indeed privilege the same historical connections to history that Mrs. Haines makes note of.

In connecting with history, no more clear connection takes place than in Mrs. Swithin's bedroom, where she reads an Outline of History. She connects to the pre-history of the land, imaging a time when mastodons roamed the land later to be known as England (8). In this text Mrs. Swithin finds, in addition to her prehistorical fantasies, a traditional experience of English history – one that includes the British Army. Through this she connects herself to a tradition in the form of history.

This Outline of History is presented in contrast to the text first associated with Mr. Oliver – the newspaper. In Oliver's case, he is connected almost literally to it, turning the paper into a "beak" (12), a mask which frightens little George. As Karin Westman describes it, the newspaper becomes a "stage prop for the impe-
rial Bart Oliver, as a metonym for the violence it contains” (6). The newspaper, unlike Mrs. Swithin’s Outline, deals only in current events. It does not deal in history. However, newspapers increasingly had control of what became official (or traditional) history. Newspapers at that time were the documents of record, and historians, looking back, will reference these newspapers as evidence of the day to day goings on in England. While Mrs. Swithin’s book connects her to the remote past, Oliver is connected to the most recent past, likely the day before. While both texts place the reader within different time frames, they also serve as mediators between the private reader and the public history. In this sense, both texts serve as points of connection between their reader and the role of tradition.

Yet the idea of the newspaper sets up a notion that is integral to the story of Woolf’s novel. Newspapers exist solely because as readers, we know that history is not yet done being written. Implicit in newspapers is the idea that what is happening today is newsworthy, not just to those involved, but to the public as well. Furthermore, newspapers hold the promise that there was news happening yesterday, that news is happening today, and that there will be news happening tomorrow. This being the case, daily newspapers serve not as complete wholes, like a book, but as ongoing parts of some greater whole, like the links in a chain. History has already happened, yet it is also currently happening, and will continue indefinitely into the future. “In oscillating between characters and narrative modes,” writes Karin Westman, “the form of Woolf’s last novel emphasizes the political dangers of erasing the traces, the evidence, of mediation” (13). The reader, then, must remain aware that history is still being written, revised by copy editors, and accepted or rejected for publication.

This idea of history as something fluid and dynamic is exemplified by Woolf’s use of history in the pageant at Pointz Hall. The pageant Woolf imagines is a loose history of England, one that does not conform to more traditional outlines of English history. Woolf breaks down the notion of a unified and complete history by presenting the pageant as a collection of “orts, scraps, and fragments” (188). This phrase, I believe, is not meant to be derogatory, nor is it seen as a negative. According to Catherine Wiley, “[t]he non-realistic, non-representational form of the pageant makes it a tool for escaping the constricting mirror of man-made human history” (13). Woolf’s description of the pageant makes us question the validity of more traditional, more seemingly “complete” histories, such as Outline of History. By setting up this contrast, Woolf allows the reader to consider the two histories side by side and rate the merits and claims of each. What are the implications of an Outline, or of some ors, scraps, and fragments? Is consent to incompleteness necessarily a bad thing, or is the veneer of a total or complete history little more than a facade? By shifting characters between these competing modes of history, Woolf forces the reader into comparisons.

Furthermore, by extending the scope of the history presented to include the “[p]resent time. Ourselves” (177), the pageant highlights the notion that history is ongoing. In one scene, the actors hold up mirrors, making the audience aware of themselves. This part of the pageant forces the audience (and again, we as readers are implicated as well) to recognize their parts in history, both as its subjects and as its interpreters. For if history is ongoing, then we have our own parts to play in shaping it. But if history is also something malleable, then we have a responsibility for what forms and traditions we have accepted and for those which we have rejected. Serving to better illustrate this point, Col. Mayhew muses “Why leave out the British Army? What’s history without the Army, eh?” (157).

The idea that history is not yet over extends towards the end of the novel, written in several ways. There is the constant “tick tick tick” of the machine behind the bush. Perhaps this machine, rather than being a metaphor for imminent war or the ticking time bomb of Hitlerism, is really more a clock documenting the forward motion of time. That the audience hears time passing accents their own self-aware participation in history. Moreover, there is the reiteration of the phrase “scrap, ors, and fragments.”
Referring to the audience, but perhaps also a description of the pageant they just watched, this phrase could also refer to the reader, and to the book he or she just read. As noted earlier, the "scaps, orts, and fragments" represent the ways in which people are not complete or whole units, and the same description is true of history. This issue is pressed by the voice on the gramophone, repeating "Unity – Disparsity" over and over (201). This simple binary presents the central tension in Between the Acts. Are we a part of something complete and whole, like the Outline of History, or are we "scaps, orts, and fragments," like articles in a newspaper? Of the two choices, which do we prefer?

Perhaps the title of the book, changed only near the end by Woolf (Whittier-Ferguson 301), provides a clue, or at least one way of reading the difficulty of "Unity – Disparsity." To be "between the acts" is to be between two points. It recognizes at least two points of reference (the acts), although does not rule out the possibility of their being more than two. Yet in acknowledging this binary, it also recognizes the space between the acts, the gradations between the binaries. To be between the acts is to be defined by them, but not actually be a part of the acts. It also recognizes something recurrent, maybe something patterned. There was one act, and another will follow. What is to say this pattern will not continue indefinitely?

An obvious symbolic reading of this title would suggest that Woolf is referencing the two World Wars. Could she be suggesting that one version of history records an unending chain of wars, while there are other histories, more complex and beautiful ones, that unfold between those acts of violence? I take Woolf's title as a suggestion that history itself is unending, that while we as individuals may be complete and self contained, we are only the "scaps, orts, and fragments" of a much larger whole, and that this is true of any given time period as well. In this sense I see history as a sort of chain with each scrap and fragment comprising another link. This idea is carried through to the end of the novel, when Isa, responding to a comment about the weather this year, murmurs "This year, last year, next year, never" (217). It is the end of the day, light is failing, and Isa is murmuring, not speaking. The somber mood of reflection adds a pessimistic note to her words, as she realizes her place within the un-ending chain of history. Still sleeping, Bartholomew responds, "Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor" (217), another unending chain of people, jobs, and militarism. Isa recognizes that her life, as a scrap, ort, and fragment of history, has not resisted or reacted all that much to the things she would want to see changed. Her life has been a passive one, one of replication. She married Giles, not out of passion, but for security. She notes the difference in loves: "Inner love was in the eyes; outer love on the dressing table" (14). Rather than break out of history's chain, she creates new links for it, without alterations.

In the final scene with Isa and Giles, the narration notes that "[b]efore they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace" (219). Here again we have a chain of events, unbroken, unquestioned. Is the personal relationship between Isa and Giles a metaphor for international relations? Must Europe fight, then sleep, and embrace? And must Isa be a passive character, or can she choose not to fight? In this scene, she reaches back to a scrap of history: "Prehistoric man . . . half-human, half-ape, roused himself from his semi-crouching position and raised great stones" (218). This ort, at once optimistic, does not answer the question of what modern man, completely human, has the capacity to build.

The narration confirms Isa's place in the chain of history, and it is one of replication. "From that embrace another life might be born," we are told (219). That Woolf ends on such a heteronormative note raises questions. Is she critiquing the place of Isa and the role she plays, or is Woolf accepting of her? By continuing to do the traditional thing, Isa is replicating that tradition. In doing so, she continues the pattern of the chain, adding another link to it herself. And yet, what options are available to her?
Throughout *Three Guineas*, Woolf describes the role of women as “Outsiders” outside of the universities, outside the military, outside of history. As such, women's influence “can only be of the most indirect sort” (36). The sphere of influence for women is much smaller than it is for men. Yet in *Between the Acts*, Woolf recognizes the current moment as something women can have influence on. She recognizes that choices are not passive or independent of one another, but rather that they are orts, scraps, and fragments of the whole. Madelyn Detloff writes that *Between the Acts* is “Woolf's attempt to understand, on a minute and daily level, how it is that human beings come to accept the extreme forms of nationalism and supremacist ideology that are overtly expressed in fascism” (407).

The pageant, with its “imaginative reconstruction” (9) of English history, shows a way of active interpretation which stands in stark contrast to the sort of replication that is bred by unquestioningly reading something as uniform and traditional as an *Outline of History*. By contrasting this *Outline* with the newspaper, we see history not as something finished, but as something continuing. And through the pageant, we see not only how we can actively read history, but how we have our own active roles as players within such history.

Woolf holds in contempt the histories and traditions which have led to war and fascism, and offers a rebuke of those who would passively replicate such a system. For when we add more links to such a chain of events, history becomes ever more weighted down and harder to shrug off. In this sense, Woolf links the dominance and oppressiveness of fascism to our own domination by history and tradition. By becoming a slave to the latter, we may as well become a slave to the former: “A tyrant, remember, is half a slave” (187).

**Works Cited**


