In her diary for 1903, the twenty-one year old Virginia Woolf wrote:

I read some history; it is suddenly all alive, branching forwards & backwards & connected with every kind of thing that seemed entirely remote before. I seem to feel Napoleon’s influence on our quiet evening in the garden for instance—I think I see for a moment how our minds are all threaded together—how any live mind today is <conne> of the very same stuff as Plato’s & Euripides. It is only a continuation & development of the same thing—It is this common mind that binds the whole world together; & all the world is mind... I feel as though I had grasped the central meaning of the world, & all these poets & historians & philosophers were only following out paths branching from that centre in which I stand.

There is an almost uncanny prefiguring here of Woolf’s concerns in Between the Acts, written over thirty years later. This is a telling example of the circularity of her thinking; indeed, her last novel contains several echoes from The Voyage Out, from its manuscript drafts (Melymbrosia), and from her (as yet unpublished) 1903 diary. At the opening of Between the Acts, a quiet evening in a room with windows open to the garden does feel “Napoleon’s influence,” and a sense develops throughout the novel of a “common mind.” The image of “I” at the centre, holding in synthesis a circumference of thought and event is paradigmatic in Woolf’s fiction.

Between the Acts seems to me anticipated by all Woolf’s work. The “philosophy” with which we have been concerned is expressive of a particular view of history, and of human identity as constituting that history. Although it is not “conclusive,” Between the Acts’ position and Woolf’s suicide before its publica-
tion lead us to look for final statements. The work does gather up much of what has been discussed so far, but ultimately presents further questions. The novel’s ending is an opening, an opening into silence. Having said that, I would like to read it by way of an ending here, and to read it according to that way of gathering echoes and fragments by which Woolf felt truth might be achieved.

*Between the Acts* is at once a hall of mirrors and a chamber of echoes; a fully integrated work of art in which the play between individual consciousness and cultural memory is the substance of the book. The classical, linear sequence of time—the prevailing view of history—is superseded in the act of reading, which is a performance of memory and imagination. Woolf often wrote that words by themselves have a deficiency that is overcome by their being joined together. The deficiency of singleness, perhaps, extends deeply into our lives for, she wrote, “only when we put two and two together—two pencil strokes, two written words, two bricks . . . do we overcome dissolution and set up some stake against oblivion.”

The last few years of Woolf’s life were dominated by the past perhaps even more profoundly than at any other time. More than ever, she was deeply concerned with the relationship between life and art. If, as she suggested, her novels are more properly to be called elegies, then *Between the Acts* is an elegy for herself. At the time she began to compose it she was looking back not only over her own life (to write a memoir and the biography of her old friend Roger Fry), but also to the springs of English literature for her “new criticism.” It is in those “hybrid books in which the writer talks to himself about himself for a generation yet to be born”—namely, her diary and the memoir “A Sketch of the Past”—that Woolf is found to write openly and investigatively about her feelings and beliefs over the last few years of her life.

*Between the Acts* contradicts linear expectations, responding most fruitfully to a reading that is both genetic and archaeological; it invites an erotics rather than a hermeneutics of art. The book is a journey through space-time in which the reader is required to respond to the “infection” of language. Reading *Be-
Woolf invites us to "put two and two together" and go on doing this; connections must be made not only within the work itself, but reaching back to the beginnings of the author's creativity and into her cultural memory. In *Between the Acts* and the writings contemporary with it, I find the most convincing evidence of the circularity of Woolf's creativity and the need to read her in a way sympathetic to that form.

*Between the Acts* embodies and arises from the deep concerns of the last few years of Woolf's life, concerns that can be seen to develop from the aesthetic and philosophical matters she engaged with in that middle period of her life that has so far been our primary focus. The work is a palimpsest that must be read from several different perspectives at once; it is densely layered.

It has become almost redundant now to point out that Woolf was aware throughout her life of the pressure of tradition and cultural memory on an individual voice. Long regarded by the "establishment"—particularly in her own country—as an effete soliloquist, Woolf has emerged in the last decade as a writer fully cognizant of her social context. Essential to her work is the tension between "I" and "We," a dynamic interplay between the inner voice and the world of relationships; the one and the many; ontogeny and phylogeny.

Around the time she composed *A Room of One's Own*, a change is discernible in Woolf's perspective. This is not to say a radical change came about in her world-view, but that her angle of vision altered. The pressure of the "common voice" is brought into the foreground. For example, she writes in *A Room* that "masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice" (98). In that same text, she wrote that she was "talking of the common life which is the real life and not of the little separate lives which we lead as individuals."

The shift in her perspective is evident also in *The Years*. Eleanor Pargiter, thinking of the inadequacy of life as it is, is yet enraptured by the possibility of "another life . . . not in dreams; but here and now, in this room, with living people."
importance to Woolf of writing *The Years* and *Three Guineas* cannot be overestimated: the novel and the feminist polemic should, she said, be taken as one book, and in them her very radical feminist politics is evident. In an essay of 1940, "The Learning Tower," she wrote of her younger contemporaries' concern with politics, and yet this "slimy seaweed" she felt was only part of a larger problem, part of the dialectic of a prevailing world-order the very most fundamental structures of which would have to be changed before real changes could take place. The only truly radical politics for Woolf was sexual politics, a change in the patriarchal system of values in which the attitudes of war pervade every aspect of life. The works of the last few years of her life make explicit what had always been implied in earlier works: the tyranny of men in white waistcoats; the mechanic sterility of military pomp and order; the dessicated rationalism of prevailing world-order; a sexual double standard; the arrogance of converters—all these are part of the world of even *The Voyage Out*. In *Three Guineas* she bravely stated her belief; in *Between the Acts* she mythologized it.

Writing *Three Guineas* and *The Years*, although an exhausting and often disheartening task, was important, for Woolf felt, once they were finished, that she had made a stand, stated plainly her case against the world. The sense of being an " Outsider" is prevalent in her subsequent diary entries, but also, paradoxically perhaps so is a growing sense of a collective (feminine) unconscious. This sense finds its most striking embodiment in the women of *Between the Acts*. Most interesting is that change in perspective referred to above, best understood as a shift in focus from "I" to "We":

But to amuse myself, let me note: why not Poyntzet Hall: a centre: all lit. discussed in connection with real little incongruous living humour: & anything that comes into my head: but "I" rejected: ‘We’ substituted: to whom at the end there shall be an invocation? “We” . . . the composed of many different things . . . we all life, all art, all waifs & strays—a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole—the present state of my mind? (D, 26 April 1938; dots in original)

To identify the strata present in *Between the Acts*, to recognize the play between Woolf’s personal history and the history of
the race, it is necessary to describe this "present state of my mind;" to enumerate the elements of the matrix from which her last novel arose.

Emerging from Woolf's diary from 1936 onward is a sense of freedom—albeit a hysterical freedom characteristically composed of opposing feelings that, on the one hand, nothing mattered any more because civilization was about to destroy itself, and, on the other, that in the face of this imminent apocalypse things mattered more than ever: "No, I can't get the odd incongruity of feeling intensely & at the same time knowing that there's no importance in that feeling. Or is there, as I sometimes think, more importance than ever?" (D, 13 May 1940). She felt that there was no longer anything in life to "contain" her. It has been seen that Woolf believed identity to be founded on a base of some sort: in the last few years of her life securities upon which her identities had rested began to disappear. Lytton Strachey and Roger Fry had died (1932 and 1934); people who had been part of her world began to die—Janet Case (1937), Jack Hills (1937), Ottoline Morrell (1938), Ka Cox (1938). Even if some of these were relatively unimportant to her as friends, such deaths were to Woolf an erosion of her particular world. The death in 1937 of her nephew Julian Thoby Bell may well have seemed to her a cruel repetition of the sudden death of her brother Thoby (in 1906), and also to presage the many deaths the imminent war would bring, mirroring those days before the First World War. In a memoir of Julian, Woolf wrote: "... & then I am so composed that nothing is real unless I write it. And again, I know by this time what an odd effect Time has: it does not destroy people—for instance, I still think perhaps more truly than I did, of Roger, of Thoby: but it brushes away the actual personal presence." It would seem from her diary for 1937 onward that writing was all Woolf could cling to for stability.

Having "done my share, with pen and talk, for the human race," Woolf will not write any more to "please" or to convert. She felt the encircling wall of her audience had disappeared, and so she would write now only for herself. From the silence she felt all round her came another sense, coexisting with her "freedom," of utter meaninglessness:
What's odd . . . is the severance that war seems to bring: everything becomes meaningless: can't plan: then there comes too the community feeling: all England thinking the same thing—this horror of war—at the same moment. Never felt it so strong before. Then the lull & one lapses again into private separation—(D. Apr. 15, 1939) . . . Boredom. All meaning has run out of everything . . . Yes, it's an empty meaningless world now. . . . And for the 100th time I repeat—any idea is more real than any amount of war misery. And what one's made for. And the only contribution one can make—This little pitter patter of ideas is my whiff of shot in the cause of freedom—so I tell myself, thus bolstering up a figment—a phantom—recovering that sense of something pressing from outside which consolidates the mist, the non-existent. (D, 6 Sept. 1939)

Her mood frequently tends to despair; she struggled to find something to push against in order to achieve a sense of identity, but felt often that her world, and so her life, was near its end.

Susan M. Kenney has pointed out that the general tenor of the diary did not find its way into the novel; it is, on the whole, affirmative. Although I would discern a more apocalyptic tone, it is certainly true that in Between the Acts we are shown "the effort renewed"; again and again everything seems about to grind to a halt and vacancy to prevail, but each time something rescues the scene—a lowing cow, a shower of rain, an old man's brash cry of "Bravo!"—and life lurches on. The novel is a testament of hope created in the face of despair.

Closely allied to Woolf's sense of "freedom" is what, for want of a better term, she called her "spiritual conversion" experienced in 1933 or 1934:

I must cling to my "freedom"—that mysterious hand that was reached out to me about 4 years ago. (D, 29 April 1938) . . . still I'm free. This is the actual result of that spiritual conversion (I can't bother to get the right words) in the autumn of 1933—or 4—when I rushed through London, buying, I remember, a great magnifying glass, from sheer ecstasy, near Blackfriars: when I gave the man who played the harp half a crown for talking to me about his life in the Tube station. (D, 20 May 1938)

There is nothing to be found in her writings of 1933 or 1934 that refers to a "spiritual conversion." There is, however, an entry in her diary made in the autumn of 1934 that might be read as the record of a moment in which her faith in the power of art to achieve 'reality' came home to her with force. It concerns the
funeral of Roger Fry (who had died on 9 September), which took place on "a day as it happened of extraordinary beauty" (Roger Fry, 298):

I had a notion that I could describe the tremendous feeling at R.'s funeral: but of course I can't. I mean the universal feeling: how we all fought with our brains loves & so on; & must be vanquished. Then the vanquisher, this outer force became so clear; the indifferent. & we so small fine delicate. A fear then came to me, of death. Of course I shall lie there too before that gate, & slide in; & it frightened me. But why? I mean, I felt the vainness of this perpetual fight, with our brains & loving each other against the other thing: if Roger could die. (D, 19 September 1934)

But then, next day, today which is Thursday, one week later, the other thing begins to work—the exalted sense of being above time & death which comes from being again in a writing mood. And this is not an illusion, so far as I can tell. Certainly I have a strong sense that Roger would be all on one's side in this excitement, & that whatever the invisible force does, we thus get outside it. (D, 20 September 1934)

From 1937 Woolf's world of friends who had "fought with our brains, loves and so on" seemed to disappear ever faster.13 Her houses at Mecklenburgh Square and Tavistock Square in London were both bombed, destroying books, letters, and furniture accumulated over many years. Woolf's mood may be judged from the following fragment from a sketch written in late October 1939, headed "London in War":

Everyone is on business—Their minds are made up. It is extremely sober. The streets are [ . . . ] lit. They have gone back to the 18th Century. Nature prevails. I suppose badgers & foxes wd. come back if this went on, & owls & nightingales. This is the prelude to barbarism. The city has become merely a congeries of houses lived in by people who work. There is no society. no luxury no splendour no gadding & flitting. All is serious & concentrated. [It is] as if the song had stopped—the melody, the unnecessary the voluntary. Odd if this should be the end of town life.14

Other details from this period contribute to the sense of ending: for example, in 1936 Violet Dickinson returned to Woolf all the letters she had written her—a strange gift from Woolf's adolescence (see I, 3192, 3195). The sense of ending is quite calm, but extremely strong:

Oh & I thought, as I was dressing, how interesting it would be to describe the approach of age, & the gradual coming of death. As people
describe love. To note every symptom of failure: but why failure? To treat age as an experience that is different from the others; & to detect every one of the gradual stages towards death which is a tremendous experience, & not as unconscious at least in its approaches, as birth is. (D, 7 August 1939)

Woolf could, however, still create, could still expand the bounds of the moment by the ordering of chaos that her art achieved in creating its own world. Although the usual view of the end of 1934 and beginning of 1935 is that it was a desolate time for Woolf, I suggest it may have offered her something to fight against, so strengthening in the years that followed her resolve to “squeeze the moment” and continue the effort.15

In all the novels there is a sense of yearning, a tending toward the numinous and some revelation of mystery, and this conceptual background often shares the contours of a theology. The conceptual background of Between the Acts maps those contours once again. The profoundly personal concept of ‘reality’ that Woolf had developed in her art and life, and her faith in the possibility of transcendence through art, became the necessary foreground of her thought. What may often have seemed a vaguely articulated, shadowy adumbration was confidently grasped and embodied in Between the Acts.

The memoir “A Sketch of the Past,” begun at Vanessa Bell’s suggestion in 1939, is a fascinatingly rich element of the matrix from which Between the Acts arose. “Memory,” writes Langer in Feeling and Form, “is the great organizer of consciousness” (263). Memory is the organizing principle of “A Sketch,” but it is not the memory of a linear chronology. As she proposed to do in her “new criticism,” Woolf begins with a memory of an incident and follows it wherever it leads her. The memory at work is a channel to cultural memory, that universal consciousness that informs the novel. Thus, writing of her stepbrother Gerald’s indecent fumblings, she says that her instinctive resentment “proves that Virginia Stephen was not born on 25th January 1882, but was born many thousands of years ago; and had from the first to encounter instincts already acquired by thousands of ancestresses in the past” (MOB, 69). As we will discover in Between the Acts, she is concerned with the “traces” or “scars” that strong
emotion leaves: “It is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through from the start” (MOB, 67). This seems ambiguous, referring both to individual life and the life of the race. In the pageant of Between the Acts and the text that surrounds it, just such an attempt at living our lives through from the start is presented, and in the consciousness of Isa and Lucy a sense of return to, or remembering of, the origins of their consciousness.

In Between the Acts, and elsewhere, language is seen as an “infection,” something part abstract, part physical; a medium in which all human beings are afloat; voices break in on us constantly, whether we will them or not, even in our dreams. Between the Acts is deeply concerned with voices in its attempt to render the web of language by and in which consciousness is constituted. “Gathering fragments” when reading this work requires an awareness of the matrix from which it arises, a matrix in which Woolf’s circling characteristics of repetition and descriptive homology are fully in play. Language is the medium of connection, linking past and present, “I” and “We.” Following Woolf’s guide, I would like to explore some of the connections to be made between the novel and the memoir, and, consequently, between art and life.

The heroic Rider (who makes his first appearance in Night and Day [e.g., 108]) and the withered tree (which is found, for example, in The Waves and The Years) are emblems of a longed-for romantic love cut short by death. In Between the Acts, Isa chants: “Alone, under a tree, the withered tree that keeps all day murmuring of the sea, and hears the Rider gallop” (125). The source of these emblems is explained in “A Sketch.” Writing of her mother Julia’s first husband, Herbert Duckworth, Woolf says: “Like all very handsome men who die tragically, he left not so much a character behind him as a legend. Youth and death shed a halo through which it is difficult to see a real face” (MOB, 89). To Julia, Herbert was a hero, “and also her husband; and her children’s father” (MOB, 90). These words are echoed in Between the Acts in Isa’s “convenient cliche” (19), and Mrs. Manresa regards Giles, Isa’s husband, as her “surly hero.” Hate and love conflict in Isa, as do impulses toward life and death; she is
torn between romantic longing for an ideal represented by Haines, the gentleman-farmer, and the "cliché conveniently provided by fiction" that binds her to the father of her children. The sense of loss and yearning evoked by the memoir also imbues the novel. The connection between novel and memoir is even more interesting when we recall that Herbert was a nickname for Woolf's beloved brother Thoby who, like Duckworth, died tragically young, always to be a hero in his sister's eyes.

Connected with Isa's longing for a lost romantic hero is the withered tree, a version of which is an emblem of death in *The Waves*. In the memoir the meaning is explicit when Woolf writes about the death of her stepsister, Stella, shortly after her marriage to Jack Hills: "And the tree, outside in the dark garden, was to me the emblem, the symbol, of the skeleton agony to which [Stella's] death had reduced him; and us; everything. . . . The leafless tree and Jack's agony—I always see them as if they were one and the same, when I think of that summer" (*MOB*, 121). The tragic death of promising youth had been reenacted for Woolf in 1937 when her nephew, Julian Thoby Bell, was killed in Spain. In that memoir of him referred to above, she wrote of her "legacy of pessimism, which I have decided never to analyze." That legacy is woven into her fiction, and in *Between the Acts* becomes united with an opposition between life and death that is fundamental to her entire oeuvre. The leafless winter tree in summer is a symbol of death in life; it is, essentially, the core of the ancient rituals of death and rebirth that Woolf read about in the works of Jane Ellen Harrison and in J. G. Frazer's *Golden Bough*.

In *A Sketch* Woolf also traces the fundamental polarity in her view of life to childhood experiences. She writes of three "exceptional moments" that often "came to the surface unexpectedly." Briefly, these moments were: a feeling of "hopeless sadness" during a fight with her brother, Thoby; a sense of wholeness on looking at a flower; and horror at hearing her parents mention the suicide of a man who had been staying at St. Ives (*MOB*, 71). Two of these moments find their way into her fiction: Neville, in *The Waves*, is transfixed at hearing of a suicide. The two passages describing the experience are remarkably similar:
I heard about the dead man through the swing-door last night when cook was shoving in and out the dampers. He was found with his throat cut. The apple-tree leaves became fixed in the sky; the moon glared; I was unable to lift my foot up the stair... There were the floating, pale-grey clouds; and the immittigable tree; the implacable tree with its greaved silver bark. (TW, 17)

We were waiting at dinner one night, when somehow I overheard my father or my mother say that Mr Valpy had killed himself. The next thing I remember is being in the garden at night and walking on the path by the apple tree. It seemed to me that the apple tree was connected with the horror of Mr Valpy's suicide. I could not pass it. I stood there looking at the grey-green creases of the bark—it was a moonlit night—in a trance of horror. I seemed to be dragged down, hopelessly, into some pit of absolute despair from which I could not escape. My body seemed paralysed. (MOB, 71)

The moment of "wholeness" reappears in Between the Acts, and again there is a distinct descriptive homology between novel and memoir:

I was looking at the flower bed by the front door. "That is the whole", I said. I was looking at a plant with a spread of leaves; and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower. It was a thought I put away as being likely to be very useful to me later. (MOB, 71)

George grubbed. The flower blazed between the angles of the roots. Membrane after membrane was torn. It blazed a soft yellow, a lambent light under a film of velvet; it filled the caverns behind the eyes with light. All that inner darkness became a hall, leaf smelling, earth smelling of yellow light. And the tree was beyond the flower; the grass, the flower and the tree were entire. Down on his knees grubbing he held the flower complete. (BTA, 16-17)

In her biography of Roger Fry, Woolf wrote of "moments of vision, when a new force breaks in, and the gropings of the past suddenly seem to have meaning" (Roger Fry, 160). The meaning of these moments from her own past now, in 1939, seems clear to her; they represent a "profound difference" between satisfaction and despair: "This difference I think arose from the fact that I was quite unable to deal with the pain of discovering that people hurt each other; that a man I had seen had killed himself. The sense of horror held me powerless. But in the case of the flower I found a reason; and was thus able to deal with the sensation" (MOB, 71-72).
All through her life and fiction the possibility of order, of pattern, has been intuited in the midst of uncertainty, the possibility of transcendence of the passage of time. In *Between the Acts*, this possibility is in the foreground of the work: an explicit "private vision" is set against the "scraps, orts, and fragments" of daily life. Woolf, in the last years of her life, asserted what had before been only more tentatively attested to: a 'reality' apart from actual life and yet rooted in it; not mysticism, but a coming to fruition of the potential of imagination to order the world of experience in the forms and modes of art.

It seems likely that the review of Fry's life and work she made to write his biography helped Woolf to reach this new positiveness, for he too had written of a similar perception:

But if reason must stop short, beyond reason lies reality—if nothing will make him doff his reason, nothing will make him lose his faith. The aesthetic emotion seems to him of supreme importance. But why?—he cannot say. "One can only say that those who experience it feel it to have a peculiar quality of 'reality', which makes it a matter of infinite importance in their lives. Any attempt I might make to explain this would probably land me in the depths of mysticism. On the edge of that gulf I stop." But if he stops it is in the attitude of one who looks forward. We are always left with the sense of something to come. (*Roger Fry, 229*)

That Woolf found a new certainty in her vision in the last few years of her life is borne out once more by her diary:

I lay awake so calm, so content, as if I'd stepped off the whirling world into a deep blue quiet space, & there open eyed existed, beyond harm; armed against all that can happen. I have never had this feeling before in all my life; but I have had it several times since last summer: when I reached it, in my worst depression, as if I stepped out, throwing aside a cloak, lying in bed, looking at the stars, those nights in Monk's House. (9 April 1937)

As in those records of her summer "retreats" at Rodmell, she has here drawn security from her deepest despair; descending into the depths she finds rest in 'reality'.

During the summer of 1936, she was devastated by the grind of revising *The Years* and *Three Guineas*. Of that time she wrote that she had "never been so near the precipice of my own feeling since 1913—" (*D*, 11 June 1936). It was an "extraordinary summer" in which she felt she had destroyed her writing gift. Thus, she subsequently determined to concentrate on her own
private vision, to write for herself: "I wd. like to write a dream story about the top of a mountain. Now why? About lying in the snow; about rings of colour; silence . . . & the solitude. I cant though. But shant I, one of these days, indulge myself in some short releases into that world? Short now for ever. No more long grinds: only sudden intensities" (D, 22 June 1937).

Toward the end of her life Woolf planned to write a critical history of English literature that would involve a turning inside-out of the established methods of writing literary history. Rather than a documentary, Reading at Random or Turning the Page was to be an imaginative recreation of the origins and development of English culture as embodied in its literature. The first chapter ("Anon") and a few pages of the second ("The Reader") are all that we have of this work, but they are enough to see that here again we have an important element of the matrix from which Between the Acts was born. Woolf’s concern in this critical work is with the voice of the artist, and with the original "song," inspired by the natural world, from which literature, she speculates, developed. She sees “common emotion,” a unified source of common belief, as the heart of literature.

Reading at Random is concerned to peel away the layers of influence built up over centuries, to get back to the “common emotion,” the voice of Anon, who was “sometimes man; sometimes woman. He is the common voice singing out of doors, He has no house” (382). As in “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf is concerned here with a thinking back to origins. The language of her various creations of this period is often so similar that a line quoted is hard to identify as coming from the memoir, novel, or the history. She speaks, in Reading at Random, of “ages of toil and love” lying behind the English people’s memory: “This is the world beneath our consciousness, the anonymous world to which we can still return” (385). Isa’s chants in Between the Acts reveal a buried consciousness of origins, the cultural memory that seems, in the novel, to inhere in literature and in, particularly, the consciousness of women. For example, Isa dreams of walking down a green ride to a wishing-well; “The paths that led to the well and the tree,” wrote Woolf in “Anon,” “we can no longer see.”

“Everybody shared in the emotion of Anon’s song and
supplied the story” (382). With the advent of drama the wandering voices of many singers are collected, embodied, and “one man speaks in his own person” (393). Anonymous playwrights retain some of the old “nameless vitality, something drawn from the crowd in the penny seats and not yet dead in ourselves” (398), and it is presumably in an effort to regain this vitality that the “gifted lady . . . wishes to remain anonymous” in *Between the Acts*.

The play eventually gave way to the novel and the special relation between reader and writer. The reader, says Woolf, is brought into being by the personality of the writer shaping his conception. In *Between the Acts*, we might see an attempt to restore the “common emotion,” to dissolve the distinction between writer and reader so that everybody will once again take part in the “song.” It is interesting to note that in “Anon” Woolf says the reader’s importance “can be gauged by the fact that when his attention is distracted, in times of public crisis, the writer exclaims: I can write no more” (428). The figure of the human being lying behind *Between the Acts* is more elusive than in any other of Woolf’s works: in 1940 she recorded the death of her writing “I”: “It struck me that one curious feeling is, that the writing ‘I’ has vanished. No audience. No echo. Thats part of one’s death” (*D*, 9 June 1940).

As always with Woolf, though, there is a contrasting movement. Against the death of her individual writing “I” she placed faith in art as the repository of “common emotion.” In *Between the Acts*, “common emotion” seems identified with that female consciousness that perceives pattern in the world. Her embodiment of the feminine principle in *Between the Acts* displays her profound belief in the serious need for the radical alteration of societal structures. “We must compensate the man for the loss of his gun,” she wrote in “Thoughts on Peace in an Air-Raid” (1940); “we must give him access to the creative feelings.” It is to such “creative feelings” that her last novel seeks to give access, to “common emotion,” and the potential for realization of the self in perceiving ‘reality.’

This dense web of thought and concern that constitutes the creative matrix of *Between the Acts* brings together Woolf’s
conscious memory of her own past and the cultural memory that seems to inhere in her unconscious. These gathered fragments should be borne in mind while reading the novel.

“If we could see the village as it was before Chaucer's time,” wrote Woolf in “Anon” (383), “we should see tracks across the fields joining manor house to hovel, and hovel to church.” These tracks (or scars) appear at the beginning of Between the Acts: “From an aeroplane, he said, you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house; and by the plough, when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic wars” (8). The novel links the physical scars on the land with scars in the mind, the imprint of common emotions carried over from one generation to the next. When the pageant is over and the audience has left Pointz Hall, it is seen that “the pilgrims had bruised a lane on the grass” (BTA, 235). The villagers hanging paper roses in the barn have “taken indelibly the print of some three hundred years of customary behaviour” (BTA, 36); the singing “pilgrims” “wore ruts in the grass” (BTA, 98); and Isa dreams of walking to her death in the waters of the wishing-well “down the ride that leads under the nut tree and the may tree” (BTA, 124). Scars in the mind and on the land reveal a continuity of cultural memory and might also be linked to what Woolf herself felt about her country, as she described it in a letter to Ethel Smyth in January 1941:

You never shared my passion for that great city [London]. Yet its what, in some odd corner of my dreaming mind, represents Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens. It's my only patriotism: save one vision, in Warwickshire one spring when we were driving back from Ireland and I saw a stallion being led, under the may and the beeches, along a grass ride, and I thought that is England. (L, 3,678)21

Such descriptive homologies occur throughout Woolf’s writing, setting up resonances that encourage that gathering of echoes and fragments she said was the way to achieve truth.

Scars in the mind can reach back well beyond personal histories. In the course of the June afternoon on which the novel takes place, a facility is revealed in the characters for thinking back imaginatively to a time far beyond their own. Most resonant
are the visions Lucy Swithin has of a primeval world of grunting monsters and steaming swamps, which recall the imaginings of Rachel Vinrace and other descriptions from later works. More obscure, but no less telling, are the scars in the mind of Isa, revealed in her enigmatic chanting: Lucy and Isa are driven within themselves by the sterility and arrogance of the men around them and so expand the moments of their own lives by remembering an obscured female consciousness.

Names are also scars in a way, and some of the villagers have names as old as their villages, reinforcing the link between people and land. Women’s names, however, are obscured by marriage, as that of the great lady “whose marriage with the local peer had obliterated in his trashy title a name that had been a name when there were brambles and briars where the Church now stood” (BTA, 112). In this loss of a name might be seen an image of the male’s covering over of the female principle. What cannot be covered over, though, is the secret name, the nomen numen in which inheres the very soul of a person.

*Between the Acts* is concerned with voices; memory, scars, names, and “common emotion” are concerns and functions of language. The novel gives a sense of being afloat on a sea of words. Words and phrases reverberate throughout, slipping in and out of different minds, reflected sometimes by actors, sometimes by the audience. On this particular day, words will not stay still: to Giles Oliver they rise up and become menacing (74) or scornful (174); to William Dodge they become symbolical (88). Words are substantial, rolled and thinned on the childrens’ nurses’ tongues like sweets (15), or peppering the audience at the pageant “as with a shower of hard little stones” (95). Words evidently cannot be trusted to peg down reality; they are treacherous and shifty, acting differently on the mental substance of each person who hears or utters them. Nevertheless, they are the vehicle of our emotions and in some sense the matter by and in which life moves. The echoes and fragments of *Between the Acts* bind the book together, making of it an enclosed world, a “re-created world.”

There is a definite sense in the novel of a voice behind the voices, an unconscious source of the plethora of words. The unconsciousness of artistic creation is a frequently repeated theme
of Woolf's writing; in "A Sketch" is found a passage that seems to me to relate this theme significantly to *Between the Acts*:

The lemon-coloured leaves on the elm trees, the round apples glowing red in the orchard and the rustle of the leaves make me pause to think how many other than human forces affect us. While I am writing this, the light changes; an apple becomes a vivid green. I respond—how? and then the little owl [makes] a chattering noise. Another response. St. Ives, to cut short an obscure train of thought, about the other voice or voices and their connection with art, with religion: figuratively, I could snapshot what I mean by fancying myself afloat, [in an element] which is all the time responding to things we have no words for—exposed to some invisible ray; but instead of labouring here to express this, to analyse the third voice, to discover whether "pure delights" are connected with art, or religion: whether I am telling the truth when I see myself perpetually taking the breath of these voices in my sails, and tacking this way and that, in daily life as I yield to them—instead of that, I note only this influence, suspect it to be of great importance, cannot find how to check its power on other people; and so erect a finger here, by way of signalling that here is a vein to work out later. (*MOB*, 115)

It is eloquent that this "third voice" joins art and religion; the "vein," I think, is worked out in the novel, in which the "third voice" seems to exist beyond the perceptions of actual life, connecting consciousness. "Things we have no words for" once again brings to mind the unnameable empty center of Woolf's art.

Isa and William Dodge, together in the greenhouse, hear a simple melody that is to them "another voice, a third voice . . . saying something simple" (*BTA*, 137). Bartholemew Oliver hears the same melody as "another voice speaking" (*BTA*, 139), and it inspires in him a chant that is echoed near the end of the book:

> O the winter, will fill the grate with ashes,  
> And there'll be no glow, no glow on the log  

(*BTA*, 141)

The departure of the bountiful Mrs. Manresa makes Bart once more into a stuffed man, a hollow man: "All were retreating, withdrawing and dispersing; and he was left with the ash grown cold and no glow, no glow on the log" (*BTA*, 236). The "retreating and advancing" that Dodge feels is over for all of them is part of Bart's sense of loss and is incorporated into his song; the swal-
lows fly about the trees “retreating and advancing” (*BTA*, 212), recalling Bart’s song of “sister swallow.”

Examples of the enormously complex rhyming and rhythm-ing of *Between the Acts* can be found on every page, creating a web of sound in which life is, so to speak, suspended. Language is an infection, spreading among all people, spreading to and from nature; words spill over their context, colliding with each other, infecting thought. When La Trobe’s pageant is saved by the noise of the cows, first one lows, “then the whole herd caught the infection” (*BTA*, 166); Bart catches “the infection of the language” of the pageant’s eighteenth-century scene (*BTA*, 174). Language is a saving infection, a force to join as well as to divide, and the vessel of “common emotion” as well as that which overlays it.

Language imposes over the confusion and chaos of life an order that is only apparent: as the last scene of the pageant shows, the web of language is in fact a chaos. As long as there are no gaps, no silences, the audience is happy, for silence reveals that “emptiness about the heart of life” that cannot be faced by the crowd. Acquiescence, as “Time Passes” showed, is the easy way out:

> The gramophone, while the scene was removed, gently stated certain facts which everybody knows to be perfectly true. . . .
> The view repeated in its own way what the tune was saying. The sun was sinking; the colours were merging; and the view was saying how after toil men rest from their labours; how coolness comes; reason prevails; and having unharnessed the team from the plough, neighbours dig in cottage gardens and lean over cottage gates.
> The cows, making a step forward, then standing still, were saying the same thing to perfection.
> Folded in this triple melody, the audience sat gazing. (*BTA*, 158-59)

As long as they are distracted from themselves, the audience is happy; very few of them can be at home in solitude; silence brings discomfort. If reality is not distanced, mediated somehow, it cannot be borne. Miss La Trobe’s experiment, in which she intends to douche the audience with “present-time reality,” fails because what they are exposed to is not framed. It is only when life is presented selectively that anyone notices it; for the most part we live blindly, not seeing what is right before us.
'Reality'—what was called in *To the Lighthouse* "the beauty of the world"—is a momentary experience of that special "self-awareness" that several of Woolf's female characters have shown, when the "eternal passing and flowing" of the actual world is "struck into stability" (*TTL*, 249-50).

The verbal condition of human being is, however, not the whole picture. There is the suggestion in the novel that felt influences pass between people without words. Throughout *Between the Acts* people "hear" when no words have been spoken; silence makes an "unmistakable contribution" to talk (50). Lucy twice gets up—one to show William the house (83), once to return with Bart to the pageant (141)—as if a signal had been given, though nothing was said. Isa, Giles, and William each say "without words" that they are desperately unhappy (205). "Thoughts without words," wonders Bart, the exemplar of reason; "Can that be?" (68). It would seem from the experience of Lucy Swithin and Miss La Trobe that such thoughts can not only be, but are the characteristic mode of discourse of the soul. Beyond words is a timeless medium ("that which is outside of us . . . what we are not" *TW*, 197).

'Reality'; the soul; "that which we are not"—these are a few of the many linguistic displacements Woolf employs to shape round the abstraction that is felt through all her fiction. In her diary she wrote of a "deep blue quiet space" into which she seemed to step, "off the whirling world" (4 April 1937). Lucy Swithin, like Clarissa Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay before her, is seen early in *Between the Acts* drawn to an impersonal quality felt in the sky:

There was a fecklessness, a lack of symmetry and order in the clouds, as they thinned and thickened. Was it their own law, or no law, they obeyed? Some were wisps of white hair merely. One, high up, very distant, had hardened to golden alabaster; was made of immortal marble. Beyond that was blue, pure blue, black blue; blue that had never filtered down; that had escaped registration. It never fell as sun, shadow, or rain upon the world, but disregarded the little coloured ball of earth entirely. No flower felt it; no field; no garden. (*BTA*, 30)

We might recall here Woolf's "consciousness of what I call 'reality', a thing I see before me: something abstract; but residing in
the downs or in the sky" (D, 10 September 1928). This consciousness pervades Between the Acts.

For Lucy, time as passage seems irrelevant; she is marking the approach of death. Isa longs to escape to a realm of death where "change is not" (BTA, 181). Miss La Trobe sways perpetually between despair and triumph. Only Lucy is at peace, untroubled; only she seems to have found rest.

"You don't," says William Dodge to Lucy, "believe in history." History is made by men and divides life into "periods." In her notes for Reading at Random, Woolf wrote: "Always follow the genuine scent—the idea of the moment. No 'periods' " (373). Lucy, it will be remembered, "was given to increasing the bounds of the moment" by her mental journeys through time and space. It is the history of Reading at Random that Between the Acts offers, a psychohistory in which the divisions between one "age" and the next are shown to be merely a matter of appearance (see above, p. 123): "The Victorians," Mrs. Swithin mused. "I don't believe" she said with her odd little smile, "that there ever were such people. Only you and me and William dressed differently" (BTA, 203). For Lucy the time of male history—which is primarily a catalog of armed conflicts—does not exist, in the sense of progression from one "period" to the next: "We've only the present." The "present" is lived time that cannot be fixed or named. The import of the pageant is that the audience should not see the various ages passing before them as "real" stages in a process of development along a line, but that the actors merely play different parts while the deep structures of the world remain essentially the same. The effect of the pageant is to cut adrift the audience from the easy identity afforded them by clothes and other external trappings:

Yet somehow they felt—how could one put it—a little not quite here or there. As if the play had jerked the ball out of the cup; as if what I call myself was still floating unattached, and didn't settle. Not quite themselves, they felt. (BTA 175)

They were neither one thing nor the other; neither Victorians nor themselves. They were suspended, without being, in limbo. (BTA 207)

The pageant, holding a mirror up to human nature as it quite literally does, tampers with an acquiescent sense of reality
by its stirring together of “wandering bodies and floating voices.” Real swallows skim over real grass in the scene of the Victorian “age,” and someone exclaims in the eighteenth-century scene, “What names for real people!” Our conception of reality is under question, and time is thus dislocated. This is what fiction, and in some sense all art, does. Reading is entering a time and space that is at once apart from and a part of the individual reader’s time and space. By the time the pageant, in its “historical” progress, has reached the “present day” the audience finds itself “neither one thing nor the other.” Without a spectacle, however, the audience cannot understand what is going on; they do not play their parts in the drama because they are still bound up in their own “period.”

Lucy’s time is an undivided time; she is not bound by the ticking clock that sounds throughout the novel. The earth is (in all Woolf’s novels) the symbol of the elemental changelessness of human being that the “song” expresses, and it is to the female and to children that this consciousness is particularly present, as Woolf’s fiction amply demonstrates. Isa’s young son, George, is aware of unity in the world, but his moment of vision is shattered by the intrusion of the male, Bart (BTA, 16-17). Children are seen as isolated “on a green island,” the “drone of the trees” and the “chirp of birds” in their ears; the nursery is “the cradle of our race.” Lucy, too, has the song of birds in her ears, that sound Woolf said in “Anon” first inspired people to “sing” and from which literature developed. Lucy is herself frequently likened to a bird.

The pool in Orlando was an image of the depths of the mind. In To the Lighthouse, the “pool of Time” would eventually cover all; Nancy turned a rock-pool into an entire world. The pool is Woolf’s most frequent image of human consciousness, appearing in essays and her diary as well as throughout the fiction. In Between the Acts, Lucy sees a world in the lily-pool: “Now the jagged leaf at the corner suggested, by its contours, Europe. There were other leaves. She fluttered her eye over the surface, naming leaves India, Africa, America. Islands of security, glossy and thick” (BTA, 239). As the last of the audience leaves, the pageant over, Lucy is found alone by the lily-pool. In this moment of solitude, she expresses her faith: “’Ourselves,’ she
murmured. And retrieving some glint of faith from the grey waters, hopefully, without much help from reason, she followed the fish; the speckled, streaked, and blotched; seeing in that vision beauty, power, and glory in ourselves" (BTA, 239-40). Her vision is contradicted by her brother’s unfeeling reason, but this does not trouble her. That which she apprehends through the efforts of her faith is a universal medium, surrounding all life; in the words of To the Lighthouse, Lucy hears the “voice of the beauty of the world.” Looking back to Mrs. Ramsay’s search for faith (TTL, 101), it can be seen now that the vision itself is not new in Woolf’s writing; what is new in Between the Acts is the directness with which the private vision of faith in transcendent ‘reality’ is set against the despair of actual life in time.

Silenced, she returned to her private vision; of beauty which is goodness, the sea on which we float. Mostly impervious, but surely every boat sometimes leaks?

He would carry the torch of reason till it went out in the darkness of the cave. For herself, every morning, kneeling, she protected her vision. Every night she opened the window and looked at leaves against the sky. Then she slept. Then the random ribbons of birds’ voices woke her. (BTA, 240)

The elements of her faith are these: that life is surrounded by a halo of beauty, a nameless quality inhering in the actual, but not actual and so free of the constraint and decadence of space and time; all beings are afloat on this “sea” of beauty. For the most part all people are impervious to beauty, but sometimes it is glimpsed—as manifest in the novel by the sense of unity the audience sometimes catches in music, the perception of beauty as the actors stand in fading sunlight after the pageant (BTA, 228), and the unspoken communications that seem carried by a medium other than words. To live entirely by reason, the logical terms of actual life, is to cast a light into darkness that is merely artificial, never to turn to see the light of ‘reality’. Abstract, impersonal beauty resides in the natural world (the uncivilized earth is invariably an emblem of timelessness in the novels), and can be perceived by those who recognize the emptiness at the heart of life.

The ‘reality’ Woolf felt behind and beyond actual life is the virtual property of her fiction because such creation is free from
the personal, time-bound, death-tending life of its creator to exist on its own terms in the locationless space of art. To come to a conclusion, to draw a line and give the “solution” to the abstruse philosophy of Woolf’s fiction would be to contradict everything that fiction implies. However, I have said that in the last years of her life Woolf approached the perennial questions of her art with a new boldness.

There is a long passage excised from the final typescript of *Between the Acts* that concerns the silence of “the thing that exists when we aren’t there” (*D*, 30 October 1926). Perhaps because it has the tone of philosophical speculation, Woolf deleted the passage, putting in its place the two cryptic sentences that follow the description of the pictures in the dining-room at Pointz Hall: “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” (*BTA*, 47). Behind these lines might be felt the idea that art can hold within it the timeless ‘reality’ that is the background, so to speak, against which being stands out. Art can “make of the moment something permanent” because its form transcends the modes of actual life. Some understanding of the implications of these lines from the novel might be gained from T. S. Eliot’s *Burnt Norton* (1935):

> Words move, music moves  
> Only in time; but that which is only living  
> Can only die. Words, after speech, reach  
> Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,  
> Can words or music reach  
> The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
> Moves perpetually in its stillness.

(137-43)

In her novel Woolf aspires to a poetic communication of concepts she attempted to explain in the deleted passage. That passage seems to me to embody the central concerns of this study of the novels; it reads as follows:28

> There was silence in the dining-room, for lunch delayed. The chairs were all drawn up, and the places ready; wine glasses, knives and forks, napkins, and in the centre the variegated flowers which Bartlet picked,
mixed and bunched together after a colour scheme of his own. But who observed the dining room? Who noted the silence, the emptiness? What name is to be given to that which notes that a room is empty? This presence certainly requires a name, for without a name what can exist? And how can silence or emptiness be noted by that which has no existence? Yet by what name can that be called which enters rooms when the company is still in the kitchen, or the nursery, or the library; which notes the pictures, then the flowers, and observes, though there itself, the room is empty. The great dictionary which records the names of infinitesimally small insects, has a name for grains of different sand—one is shell, the other rock—has ignored this presence, refusing to attempt to name it. Certainly it is difficult to find a name for that which is in a room, yet the room is empty, for that which perceives pictures, knife and fork, also men and women; and describes them; and not only perceives but partakes of them, and has access to the mind in its darkness. And further goes from mind to mind and surface to surface, and from body to body creating what is not mind or body, not surface or depths, but a common element in which the perishable is preserved, and the separate become one. Does it not by this means create immortality? And yet we who have named other presences equally impalpable—and called them God, for instance, or again The Holy Ghost—have no name but novelist, or poet, or sculptor, or musician, for this greatest of all preservers and creators. But this spirit, this haunter and joiner, who makes one where there are two, three, six or seven, and preserves what without it would perish, is nameless. Nameless it is yet partakes of all things named; it is rhyme and rhythm; is dressing and eating and drinking; is procreation and sensation; is love and hate and passion and adventure; partakes of the dog and the cat; of the bee and the flower and of bodies in coats and skirts.

This nameless spirit then, who is not "we" nor "I," nor the novelist either; for the novelist, all agree, must tell a story; and there are no stories for this spirit; this spirit is not concerned to follow lovers to the altar, nor to cut chapter from chapter; and write as novelists do "The End" with a flourish; since there is no end; this being, to reduce it to the shortest and simplest word, was present in the dining room at Pointz Hall, for it observed how different the room was empty from what the room was when—as now happened people [entered.]<were about to enter.>

The fictional world is created by an autonomous, impersonal presence, but this presence can nowhere actually be located—it is actually absent. The audience in the novel discovers this: "Whom could they make responsible? Whom could they thank for their entertainment? Was there no one?" (BTA, 227). By this strange mode of being, the absent presence might be said to create immortality: the world of a novel "is" actually nowhere, and yet locates itself in the world of each reader in the act of
reading, thereby becoming a valid part of the actual world. This "something/nothing" shares its mode of being with the ideas of self, or soul, and 'reality'. Thus it might be said that art (in Woolf’s sense) is a product of the soul that gives access to that medium by which all life is surrounded—'reality.' Writing fiction is creating a world that escapes the spatiotemporal horizons of actual life in the sense described above. Her surer belief in this concept may have contributed to the feeling of freedom noted in the last few years of her life. As her diary reveals, she felt there was no future: her world had disappeared. Like Lucy Swithin, perhaps, she felt "We've only the present"; the continuous present of writing.

Woolf was observing the final chaos from a tiny island of illusory security in which the villagers continued their meaningless doings as the encroaching darkness edged nearer. An apocalyptic feeling is strong in Between the Acts: "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; and the audience sat staring at the villagers, whose mouths opened, but no sound came" (BTA, 164-65). Leaning against a tree, the artist is tormented by her failure to ward off emptiness: "Illusion had failed. 'This is death,' she murmured, 'death' " (BTA, 165). Only for instants does the artist have the power of the gods to overcome time: "Ah, but she was not merely a twitcher of individual strings; she was one who seethes wandering bodies and floating voices in a cauldron, and makes rise up from its amorphous mass a recreated world. Her moment was on her—her glory" (BTA, 180). Woolf mocks the puppeteer artist in Between the Acts, allowing her only a brief triumph in the giving of her vision, as Lily Briscoe triumphs in the instant she makes her final brushstroke. "A vision imparted is relief from agony," but "she hadn't made them see" (BTA, 117). Art cannot simply give the vision; art demands creative participation; in the language of the novel, "hours of kneeling in the early morning" (BTA, 239).

Throughout her life and writings Woolf apprehended the 'reality' behind appearances that is the ignored inheritance of all humanity. Her achievement is the creation of a literary form that brings the transcendent into the actual, brings eternity into the world of time in the act of reading. Her diary and novels are full
of the records of particular, intense "moments of being" in which 'reality' came closer. In "A Sketch of the Past," for the first time in her life, she wrote in general terms directly of what she believed was the nature of the conceptual "rod" that her writing constantly held to. In the memoir she once again states that her entire life has stood upon a base formed in childhood. Writing was "what is far more necessary than anything else" (MOB, 73) because art enshrines the lineaments of 'reality', the form of the "thing itself," timeless and yet inherent in the world of time. This passage is explained by the entire effort of Woolf's life and art, which were inextricably interwoven with each other; it is with this slowly emergent "philosophy," now grasped firmly and become her own, that I have been concerned:

And I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. . . . it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. . . . From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock. (MOB, 72)